

Basic Terms and Definitions

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. It is one of many forms of meditation, if you think of meditation as any way in which we engage in (1) systematically regulating our attention and energy, (2) thereby influencing and possibly transforming the quality of our experience (3) in the service of realizing the full range of our humanity and of (4) our relationships to others and the world.

–Jon Kabat-Zinn

Mindfulness is the practice of being fully present and alive, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment. I drink water and I know that I am drinking the water. Drinking the water is what is happening.

Mindfulness brings concentration. When we drink water mindfully, we concentrate on drinking. If we are concentrated, life is deep, and we have more joy and stability. We can drive mindfully, we can cut carrots mindfully, we can shower mindfully. When we do things this way, concentration grows. When concentration grows, we gain insight into our lives.

–Thich Nhat Hanh

Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment.

Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them—without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what we’re sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future.

–Greater Good Science Center

Traditionally called Sati-Sampajenna, or “mindfulness and clarity of purpose,” mindfulness has two aspects: receptive and active. Mindfulness is first a spacious, kind, non-judging awareness of the present. Second, as sampajenna, mindfulness includes an appropriate response to the present situation.

–Jack Kornfield

Mindfulness as Natural Presence Presence is not some exotic state that we need to search for or manufacture. In the simplest terms, it is the felt sense of wakefulness, openness, and tenderness that arises when we are fully here and now with our experience. You’ve surely tasted presence, even if you didn’t call it that. Perhaps you’ve felt it lying awake in bed and listening to crickets on a hot summer night. You might have sensed presence while walking alone in the woods. You might have arrived in full presence as you witnessed someone dying or being born. Presence is the awareness that is intrinsic to our nature. It is immediate and embodied, perceived through our senses.

–Tara Brach

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

1. Contemplation of the body
2. Contemplation of feelings
3. Contemplation of thoughts
4. Contemplation of mind states and relation to experience

MEDITATION

Meditation is a deliberate training of attention that awakens us beyond the conditioned mind and habitual thinking, and reveals the nature of reality. There are many forms of meditation—a variety of skillful means to quiet the mind and open the heart. There are countless contemplative practices, devotional practices, concentration subjects, mantras, visualizations, energy trainings, and inner listening practices to foster awakening, understanding, and love.

Insight Meditation or Vipassana

Insight meditation is at the heart of the teachings of awakening. Its purpose is to strengthen our capacity to experience “things as they are” directly, without the filter of discursive thinking, evaluation or habitual reactivity. It consists of bringing a natural and clear attention to whatever occurs in the present moment. Some traditional definitions of mindfulness include “wakefulness of mind,” “lucidity of mind,” “alertness,” and “undistracted attention.”

As we learn to be alertly and calmly present with our meditation, a deeper intimacy with ourselves and with the world will arise. As we cultivate our ability to remain mindful without interfering, judging, avoiding, or clinging to our direct experience, wellsprings of insight and wisdom have a chance to surface. We see the ever-changing, impersonal, ungraspable nature of all things and our wisdom grows. At some point, we joyfully realize that our unobstructed awareness of this very moment is our freedom. Delightfully, mindfulness becomes both the means and the end of insight.

There are many forms of Vipassana. Each style focuses on some aspect of the ever changing experience of body and mind. Some forms, like that of Goenka, focus primarily on bodily sensations. Some, like Mogok Sayadaw, focus on mind directly. Others, like Ajahn Naeb, focus on suffering. Yet others, like Mahasi Sayadaw, note all experiences moment by moment.

CONSCIOUSNESS

The knowing or cognizant faculty—that which receives and knows experience. By nature, consciousness is clear, transparent, timeless—containing all things yet not limited by them.

AWARENESS

When used as a synonym for mindfulness, awareness means a mindful recognition of what is present here and now.

When used as a synonym for consciousness, awareness means the simple knowing of what experience is happening.