

Schooled in the Moment

Introducing Mindfulness to High School Students and Teachers

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. *Independent School, Vol. 64, No. 1, 82-87 (2004)*

I grew up on Chicago's Northshore, the area, I later learned, that had the highest teenage suicide rate in the country at the time. My own high school years were uneventful, but my younger brother's were very troubled. I suspect this was a major reason for my choosing to devote my life to working with teenagers. After teaching high school mathematics for 30 years, I realized that there was something more I needed to be doing with my life. I took a year off from teaching to explore the possibilities. But it only took a few weeks to find out. A friend called to tell me about the tensions students and teachers were experiencing in schools in her area. "Someone should teach them meditation", I heard myself reply. Immediately it dawned on me: I was that someone.

During the last three years I have been given a number of opportunities to introduce mindfulness practice to students and teachers in my Quaker high school as well as to student and faculty groups in other private and public high schools. I usually advertise my presentations under the banner of "stress reduction," since this is a fairly widespread issue for both high school students and faculty. There are several major premises that underlie these presentations: high school students and teachers are seldom aware of how their minds work; when given the opportunity to see how their minds work, they enjoy doing so; the experience will, in many cases, reveal sources of stress that meditation can alleviate.

The Stage of Awareness

I have presented mindfulness workshops to students and high school teachers. In each case, I have begun by suggesting that our minds play a significant role in our wellbeing. I then lead an experience to give people an understanding of how this may be. When I talk about mind, I am talking about *awareness*. It helps people to think of their awareness as a "stage." On that stage a succession of things make an appearance: thoughts, feelings, perceptions, physical sensations. I tell the group that we will conduct a short experiment so that we can watch what is playing on our personal stages. After the students or teachers get comfortable in their seats, I ask them to close their eyes and tune in to whatever may be on their stages of awareness. I ask them simply to try to watch whatever thoughts, feelings, perceptions and sensations arise during the next few minutes, observing them, but not getting carried away by them.

After five minutes we slowly open our eyes. Then I ask a series of questions. How many were aware of physical sensations - sounds, smells, tastes, your contact with the seat, their heartbeat, their breathing, their feet, etc.? How many were aware of their emotions or thoughts? How many saw a thought arise? A thought end? Regarding feelings, I ask how many people experienced negative, neutral, or positive feelings? Of the negative feelings, how many had to do with things that have already happened, things

they're feeling upset or guilty about? Usually quite a few relate to this question. I then ask how many negative thoughts and feelings had to do with the future, things they are anxious about? This also gets a good response. Finally, I ask how many negative thoughts and feelings had to do with the present?

Ultimately, I point out that what our minds do during this particular five-minute interval of our waking life is repeated about 70,000 times each year. If we multiply the number of negative thoughts and feelings we observed by 70,000, we might understand why the mind plays such a significant role in creating stress. However, if we are able to become more aware of the negative thoughts and feelings that enter our minds and develop ways to replace them with positive ones, we will be able to live happier, less stressful lives – in school and beyond. And meditation is one way to help our minds turn more readily to healthy thoughts.

Learning to Meditate

I meditate daily now – and think it has improved my teaching and my life. But I didn't always meditate. When I started reading *The Miracle of Mindfulness* 15 years ago, I found the teaching of the author Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, so compelling that I began each math class with a short reading from the book. The students greatly appreciated these readings. I went on to read from his book *The Sun My Heart*. It all sounded great. However, the way of living portrayed by Thich Nhat Hanh in these books felt so different from my own, and it seemed to me that I could not get there from where I was.

As fate would have it, near the end of that school year, when the seniors returned from three weeks off campus working on senior projects, I noticed a presentation by one of the seniors – a boy named Chris - about his project at the Zen Center of Washington, DC. Chris began his presentation by telling us that a classmate and he had been reading Eastern religion and philosophy since seventh grade. Recently, he had discovered the local Zen center, and “decided to put my body where my mind was.” I felt Chris talking directly to me.

He spoke of his experience with tremendous enthusiasm, he showed pictures and recounted some dramatic experiences during the three-day intensive meditation retreat he attended as part of his project. At the conclusion of his talk, another student asked Chris whether his life was different in any way besides doing a lot of sitting on cushions now. Chris responded by saying that meditation had many affects on him. “However,” he added, “most are so subtle I can't put them into words.” After a pause, he went on, “I *can* tell you that I am less angry.” Chris's presentation, especially this last statement, was very moving to me. I thanked him and made a promise to him and to myself that I would try to meditate.

During the following six years I met Thich Nhat Hanh, began a daily meditation practice, helped establish the Washington Mindfulness Community, which supported this practice, and attended two retreats in Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh's monastic community in southwestern France. On returning from my second retreat to Plum Village, I gave an assembly at my high school about my experiences, which included stories about Plum Village life and a slide show. At the close of the assembly I led a brief meditation focused on the breath.

A few days after the Plum Village assembly, as our high school sat in its weekly Quaker meeting, a senior named Audrey spontaneously rose and spoke out. She told the students how closing her eyes and focusing on her breath had dispelled her feelings of stress late the previous night. She concluded, “The action is so little, but the reward is tremendous”.

A Guided Meditation

When I give presentations now, I include this last story because it provides a good opportunity for me to invite the participants to move, as I did, from learning about meditation to practicing it. I then lead the group in a 10-minute guided meditation, using Thich Nhat Hanh’s gatha (or mindfulness verse):

In/Out
Deep/Slow
Calm/Ease
Smile/Release
Present Moment/Wonderful Moment

I prepare the group for the meditation by having them sit erect, shoulders relaxed, both feet on the floor. Then I ask them to focus on their breath and to coordinate their in and out breaths with the phrases of the meditation verse. I use a bell to begin and end the meditation and to signal each transition. At the conclusion of the meditation, I ask the participants to turn to a neighbor and share their experience. Sometimes this involves waking up a fellow student or teacher.

This short introduction seems to be effective in getting across the importance of awareness of the mind and using this awareness to tune the mind to healthy channels. I’ve encountered a variety of reactions. In one faculty workshop, a teacher told me, “I could not even begin to focus on my breath and the words you gave me because I’m so riled up about an encounter I just had with a student.” This is one of many possible meditations, I replied. The breath can also assist us in being with strong emotions, helping us hold them in our awareness without getting lost in them. However, our meditation practice needs to be strong in order to do this. If we are able to embrace our emotions with our breath, we may learn some valuable things about ourselves and relate to our emotions in a less stressful way in the process.

Other Teaching Opportunities

The members of the Physical Education Department at my school were not able to come to my meditation assembly. Subsequently they invited me to run a special workshop for them. I started in a similar fashion, inviting them to observe their minds. Then, since the group was interested in developing concentration in their sports teams and it was lunchtime, I invited them to do eating meditation with raisins. Later the boys’ varsity basketball coach asked if there might be something I could do with his team members to improve their foul shooting. A week later, I was with the team as they stood in a row facing a basket, each with a basketball in hand. I explained that we would do a meditation that could help them focus on the shot they were about to make and not be distracted by the noise fans. I then asked the players to assume comfortable positions

with eyes closed. When I blew the coach's whistle, they began watching whatever was passing through their awareness and continued doing this until I blew the whistle a second time (after five minutes). I didn't have the opportunity to get the players' reactions, but I heard later that the team's foul shooting did improve.

Several years ago an invitation to share mindfulness practice with a 12th grade class studying the Holocaust came to me from a religion teacher at another Quaker school. The class had been focusing on events leading up to the Holocaust and would soon be reading disturbing, graphic accounts of the Holocaust. To help prepare the students to be open to the suffering they would be encountering, I told them that mindfulness practice could provide a way to be with suffering without being overwhelmed by it. I described the process of holding emotions in one's awareness like a mother cradling a crying infant, holding the emotions with great tenderness. Class members then chose personal experiences of "suffering" out of their own lives, something they could relate to, such as an argument with a friend or a low test grade. After leading a guided meditation, which helped them focus awareness on their breath, I asked them to bring their "suffering" into their awareness and held it gently for five minutes. Afterwards, some students responded to my invitation to share their experiences with the class.

I took a different approach in working with two other classes - an 11th/12th-grade Peace Studies class and a 9th grade English class. I began both classes by telling the students that I taught high school math and also taught meditation to students and teachers. I asked the students, "What reasons does your teacher have had for inviting me to teach meditation to your class?"

In both classes a number of hands immediately shot up. I took notes on all the students had to say and used the students' answers to shape my remarks and, to some extent, my choice of meditations. One student suggested I had been invited because the class tended to be restless. This gave me a great opportunity to lead a short meditation on restlessness.

Outcomes and Personal Changes

I know a little about the effects my teaching has had on students and teachers, a bit more about the effects it has had on me. Following my meditation assembly I offered a 12-week introductory mindfulness course, which a ninth-grader from my school and two faculty members took. Like Chris 14 years before, this ninth-grader is a young man who needs to deal with his anger. Mindfulness practice has provided him a much-needed tool for doing so. My two teacher friends report that meditation, when they take the time to do it, gives them relief from stress they experience at work and at home. A few other students, who have not pursued meditation in a formal way, have mentioned using it to reduce their anxiety before tests. All of the students and teachers have experienced meditation as an inner resource, a resource which they might recall and draw upon at some future time.

Over the last few years my teaching of mindfulness to students and teachers has changed as my own understanding and practice of mindfulness has been affected by it. I began using the "stage" metaphor for consciousness as a way of helping students be better able to step back and observe their minds. The more often I use this image, the more real it becomes for me. These days, I find it easier to get some distance from the goings-on on my own stage. My teaching has deepened my own meditation experience.

I first approached students with the notion that negative thoughts and feelings not only lead to stress, but they were intrinsically bad. Watching negativity was part of my sales pitch for the guided meditation to follow, which had the potential for changing the mind's channel. Now I find sitting back and just watching whatever is on stage important in and of itself. Personally I see it as a valuable skill to develop and employ though I continue to describe it "an experiment" in my presentations. To the extent that I am able to watch "my stage" without engaging, I have less need to tune in to a different show. I can see both negative and positive scenes as transitory products of mind and simply be with them, understanding that their primary significance lies in what I make of them. I no longer think or present the guided relaxation meditation as a means of escaping negative mind states. Rather, it is a form of enrichment, a pick-me-up, to use at any time.

My foremost goal in teaching meditation and mathematics is the same: to offer my students opportunities to be mindful of their minds, of their breath, of mathematics and math problems, of other students, and of their own ways of learning. If I create opportunities for mindfulness, students will discover the meaning and value their experiences have for them.