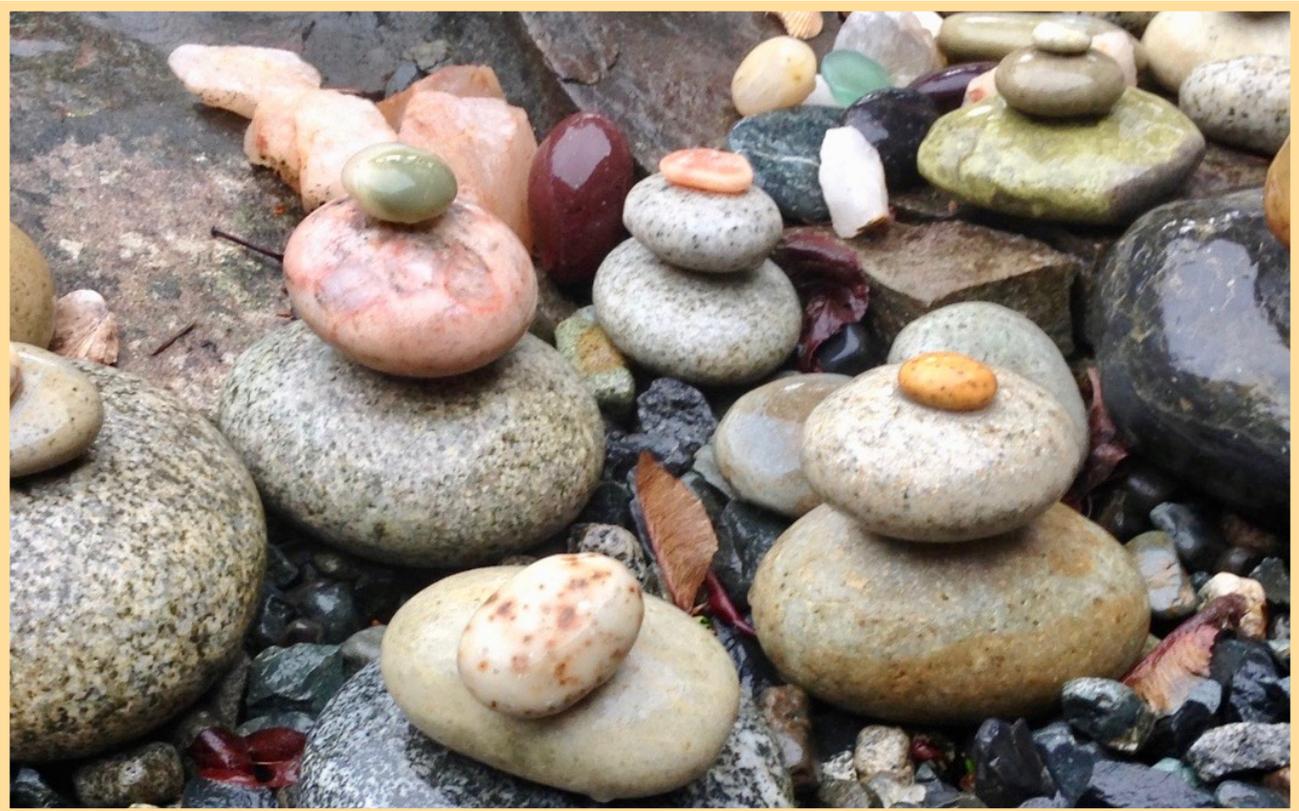


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# Attention, Mindfulness, Active Imagination: Skills Of Life

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# Experience The Benefits Of Attention, Mindfulness And Active Imagination

*Attention, Mindfulness, and Active Imagination changes our brain, changes our thoughts and changes our feelings.*

*Many would like to experience less anxiety, less frustration, less depression and less confusion. Mindfulness practices can assist you to experience greater calm, ease, energy, purpose and joy.*

*By reading this 'primer' and integrating some of the practices you will begin to identify what no longer serves you and you will understand what resonates deep within you.*

*You may also begin making new choices and learning new habits.*

*Just by reading through the book you will identify areas you see thriving in you life and areas that you want to change. You will also experience a calming and learn skills as you read.*

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# What is Attention, Mindfulness & Active Imagination?

Attention is required for mindfulness. We have to decide something is important; more important than distraction, more important than being right, more important than the past.

When we talk about mindfulness we are talking about taking coming home to ourselves. We regain control of our mind. We are talking about taking control of our thoughts, our emotions and our feelings. We are the ones taking control. The people outside of us won't change necessarily. We will be the ones learning skills and making changes. These changes will impact how we feel and respond.

Why should we make these changes? Will this make our workplace better, our spouse more compliant, or our children listen?

How we respond in our thoughts, feelings and emotions will undoubtedly impact the behavior of people outside of us. But that's not why we learn these skills. We learn these skills because we want to have the experience of greater inner freedom, authenticity and control of our reactions and responses. This is skill born out of self knowledge rather than control that seeks to manage the world around us.

All of us want to be making choices from the depths of our knowing and the depth of our own integrity, rather than reacting to the external 'weather conditions' of others. To do this, to feel we are living authentically, to feel satisfied, we need the skills to choose our thoughts and feelings - to express our creative nature - rather than be subject to thoughts and feelings. To access an understanding of this direction we often need another tool, active imagination.

*Active imagination* has long been used as a 'tool', expanding our considerations towards understanding, meaning and depth. In the west, Carl Jung popularized active imagination as a means of exploring unconscious material and soulful material. Throughout history philosophic and spiritual traditions have made use of this tool. Our scientific inquiry follows a similar pattern. Stretching our imagination is how we grow.

# Learning Any New Skill Is A Process

There are techniques to learn. There are skills to learn. Learning any new skill is a process. At first we are slow at the new skill and uncomfortable. In this stage it serves us not to judge ourselves harshly or give up on the process. We are our own worst judges most of the time.

## *Meeting Resistance*

We intellectually understand a new skill and ‘think’ that integration is complete with understanding. This is not so. Whenever we learn something new there is resistance. Resistance shows up in many forms. Resistance often appears as judging ourselves or judging the process. Resistance is pushing us to give up on the change. Our safety is associated with stability, even unhealthy stability, so part of our inner survival mechanism will resist learning new skills. This is natural. Homeostasis is the word describing the body/mind auto-regulating mechanism. Stability is considered safe. Operating outside the bounds of the norm triggers the impulse to return to whatever was normal, even when the ‘norm’ was unhealthy.

## *Persistent Commitment Is Essential*

This is where we make a deeper commitment. This is where we reconnect to ourselves; just to ourselves. Other people can't make this commitment for us. We have to be the ones making the commitment.

If you want more control over how you feel, how you think and the emotional energy swirling through you, then ask yourself if you are willing to learn some new skills? If the answer is yes, then be prepared to recommit to this process multiple times until you've achieved a level of mastery. Once we've achieved a modicum of mastery, the benefits are profound. The benefits alone reinforce our choice to stay with a new discipline, to stay with continuing the learning and the re-training process. In time a new level of homeostasis is set. It will be easier to stay here, easier to maintain the new habits. So decide if you are willing to commit energy and time to change.

# Pay Attention - Accept Things As They Are

## *A Baseline - Accepting What Is*

The first steps in any change process include identifying where we currently are. What's currently happening? This is the time to be honest. This is the time to pay attention to what thoughts we think in the morning, how we feel and what thoughts we think throughout the day. How do we feel in the morning? How do we think and feel at the end of the day? How do we talk about our work and our life?

## *Response*

We pay attention to how we react and respond interpersonally. What triggers us? What is easy? What is not easy? Identifying these patterns is research. Often paying attention to how things really are NOW can be painful. We want to deny what is obvious.

## *Research*

With research we identify our habitual thoughts, feelings and emotions. We see the behaviors that we wish we did not have; wish we did not live. We have turned the mirror around. We are looking at ourselves, inside and out. To do this well, we stop blaming all the others in our environment and the situations around us for 'the problem'. We look at our own behaviors and responses. We look at what we really can do to shift things. Inevitably there are uncomfortable moments. Used correctly, these uncomfortable moments deepen our commitment to master skills that help us to navigate both internally and externally.

# Getting Out Of The Inner Prison With Skill

Now we can start to learn some skills. We can start to ‘name’ the times when we are distracted, controlling, judgmental and overly attached. Just seeing these moments will release many of them. Others habits of thought, feeling and behavior need to be untangled using greater skill than simple observation.

Seeing our own habits, where are we avoiding, where we judge, where we make excuses, where we feel impotent, where we overreact; all of this stirs the winds of change. We loosen the grip of existing habits and attachments through observation and inquiry. We start to shift to a process of witnessing and release, witnessing and release. We start to break out of the inner prison that is controlled by reflexive response in thought, emotion and behavior. There are many tools from various traditions which can help us untangle habitual responses. Often it requires a trained professional to assist you.

## *Attention Is A Skill*

Attention breaks up the habitual spiral that our thoughts, feelings and emotions take. Attention stops the reflexive response. We have more space. We are gaining some freedom. We avoid flying off on an emotional or mental journey that we may not want to go on. Practice, learn to pay attention to your breathing and to how your body feels.

## *Persistence Is A Skill*

The witnessing and the release process is often emotionally intense. We learn to breathe through this. We learn to go for a walk in nature and ground ourselves. We learn to sweat and exercise the ‘angst’ and the ‘somatic imprint’ out of the physical body.

*We learn to understand the complexities of our life thus far, as well as understand the collective-consciousness of the society we live in and the specific micro collective-consciousness of our home and work environment.*

Just naming stories, just seeing habits for what they are detaches us from being overly identified with them. In a small way this is releasing. We have started to create more inner space, we are acting, not just reacting with unconscious reflex. We have integrated useful skills.

## *Breathing Is A Skill*

Basic breathing techniques help us further detach ourselves from thoughts and feelings. There are many specific breathing techniques which achieve specific outcomes. A basic breathing technique is to simply slow down our exhale and inhale. Most people in fast paced environments have a short incomplete exhale. Notice your own breath. Can you lengthen the breath on both the inhale and the exhale? Are they about equal? Can you count to 5, 6, 7, or 8 as you slowly breath in and then again as you slowly breathe out? Use the breath to soften the addiction to 'knowing the answer'. Practice.

## *Somatic Awareness Is A Skill*

After breathing, we learn to pay attention to our body. What is the body feeling and where? Anytime we are constraining our body we are also constraining our mind. Learn how to pay attention. Use the breath to soften the relationship with your physical pain or tension.

We can, in a simple way, pay attention and notice how we feel in our jaw, shoulders, belly, hips, legs and feet. We can learn to breathe, pay attention to the breath, then start to expand our attention to the body. To start all we need to do is be attentive for five or 10 breaths. This helps.

Feeling our physical body also lets us know in what part of the body we feel angst or pleasure. Perhaps one particular person starts to speak and our belly gets tight. What would it be like to breathe through the tightness, let the belly relax and not react physically? We'd have more mental

capacity to choose how to respond both internally and externally. Pay attention to what it feels like to be exhausted, to be overwhelmed and to be frustrated.

Perhaps you start tensing the shoulders and feel afraid when working on a particular project or in discussion with a certain person. Maybe every time you have to make a presentation your head starts to swirl. This is the perfect time to feel your feet. Take that energy right out of the head and pull it down to the feet. It's amazing how quickly this can clear a swirling head.

Pay attention to what it feels like to be competent. Pay attention to what it feels like to be strong. These are important feelings to know and understand. How do you feel when you are confident? Likely your body feels stronger and your mind feels clearer.

## *Relaxations Is A Skill*

The relaxation response is our friend. Our nature is to engage stress and then release to relaxation. Fast paced society expectation retrained most of us away from this natural rhythm. At its best the cycle of tension release, tension release increases our capacity and brilliance. Chronic tension limits our thinking and limits our ability to understand others. Anxiety is magnified.

## *Choosing Authenticity Is A Skill*

Pay attention to what it feels like to be fully aligned. When we are true to ourselves there is a grounded sense of personal power and satisfaction. This feeling increases over time as we commit to greater mindfulness. We may or may not agree with the preference of another. Pay attention to what it feels like to be clear. Pay attention to what it feels like to experience true joy. Authentic joy has a strong feeling.

## *Active Imagination Is A Skill*

Engaging active imagination, we escape from our own biased tendencies. Consciously asking questions, we gather profoundly valuable information and may get a more accurate read on a current situation. When engaging in active imagination, have a set of questions you cycle through to glean perspective. Also, let your imagination and imaginative conversations shift in the direction intuition or whimsy leads you. You may be pleasantly surprised.

## *Enjoy The Benefits - Be Brilliant!*

Basic breathing and simple attention help us to step out of the habitual reaction. The moment we're not feeling our body we have reduced our capacity for brilliance. Science is showing this now. We have greater access to both the left and right hemisphere of the brain when we're fully embodied. Thinking and feeling - jaw, shoulders, hips, belly, legs and feet. This attention makes us smarter, gives us access to an increased range of responses. Eventually we can simply cut and paste - replace the unwanted feelings with the felt experience of a wanted feeling. We learn to memorize the empowered joyful feelings, the ones that give us access to our ability to choose wisely.

# Ask Questions, Active Imagination

## *New Choices*

Blame, judgment, avoidance and the need for control all arise out of an assessment our body has made about safety and survival. We can fix the habitual aspect of this. The response is a learned reflex. To be free to live our adult lives, we do the work of paying attention rather than outsourcing our responses to decades of conditioning. We make new choices today.

Thoughts often arise because of feelings. This is our brains answer. We often take the fastest answer we can get. We take the answers that our four year old self might have decided on the first time she or he had a similar experience. Our four year old is choosing our thoughts today. That's not how we want to live.

## *Question Assumptions*

Inquire, ask questions and create space. This is the time when suspending assessment is useful. Just suspend having to know the answer. Ask more questions. Ask the questions internally and externally. Asking questions creates space. Space accommodates new information and insight.

Asking questions is part of the mindfulness process. Asking questions is one of the most important things we can ever do. Once we have enough space created, by attending to our breath, attending to our body, attending to our thoughts, our feelings and emotions, then we add asking questions.

All assumptions from the past can be questioned. Most often assumptions need, at a minimum, tweaking, perhaps even changing entirely. The step of questioning assumptions alone can build bridges where before there were walls. Questioning also clarifies areas that truly need fast and strong action now, not sometime in the future. Learn to ask questions. Make asking questions dominant, relative to stating or assuming answers.

# Inner Freedom

Skill building and questioning stirs up our inner world and begins to free us from the grapples of an outmoded paradigm that has held us imprisoned. We are now grown up. We can be free and yet most of us are imprisoned in a room far too small for our nature, potential and being. We feel frustrated, sometimes hopeless. We've tried so many times to break out of the prison with no success. Yet there is a way. Mindfulness, attention, active imagination are profoundly useful beginning points as we claim our freedom and explore our actual potential.

## *Maintaining Discipline*

The next steps involve learning the specific skills required to maintain our new inner perspective. New habits are essential. Discipline is essential. We have created a new identity and now must claim this, each day, each moment, to the best of our ability. This leads to a new stable foundation.

Once we have stability in the inner domain it is easier to change our behavior in the outer domain; it's easier to show up more authentically, more joyfully, powerfully and honestly. It is easier to gain trust, cooperation and understanding when we have already stepped over the inner hurdles. These inner hurdles are usually infinitely greater than the outer challenges.

# Outer Change

We are now able to explain ourselves and share ideas rather than debate. This takes practice. Like the steps before, authentic expression often requires learning new skills, new ways of behaving in our environments. Some of these new ways will emerge naturally. We evolve as we pay attention and start to make small shifts. These first steps alone can change our world.

Change doesn't take time in the classic sense of a process requiring many repetitions to succeed, rather it takes time so that the homeostasis in our body, mind and emotions has shifted to accept the new behavior as safe and normal. Our physical body has a 'set-point'. Our emotional body also has a 'set-point'. Stable ground, even unhappy stable ground, helps us feel safe and normal. In order for us not to go into a state of panic due to change, we need repetition in the area of mindfulness. We need to shift our 'set-point' to a new mental and emotional location. It is not necessarily a matter of time; yet it takes time.

## *Change Takes Attention*

Change takes attention. Attention to feeling comfortable with new awareness and new behavior is a key. It's not just practice. Our emotions and our mind need to settle into a new location and see the evidence that this new, happier location is safe. Be persistent and practice, don't just practice by rote, practice with attention. It's the only way any change happens. This is a big change supported by new inner habits and discipline. Change in the outer experience is infinitely easier once we have established a solid inner foundation.

## *Keep Engaging Active Imagination*

How we use our imagination, insight and generative skills is important. Do we develop control over our attention in such a way that we can stay with the brilliance we have accessed? Can we recognize moments of essential understanding? Do we act on insights?

When we extend our realm of question, our perspective, our imagination, we cultivate new possibility. The resources we each have access to, are by definition, much greater than our current understanding. The world is continually birthing and shifting. Newness happens through each of us. Our task is one of aligning and attending. Then imaginative solutions, breakthroughs and radically new ideas change an old paradigm of frustration to a new experience of ease.

## *Coherence Of Head And Heart*

Mindfulness practice, mindful living, naturally brings us to behaviors that are coherent. That is, as we pay attention, release attachment to repetitive thoughts and behaviors and begin to act in ways that are genuine, we feel more ourselves. We feel more natural joy. We are in touch with our true nature, we are comfortable with ourselves and we are acting rather than reacting. The long term commitment to more mindful living results in greater genuine peace. This does not mean that all the challenges of life dissipate, but our perception and response has changed. We are no longer triggered in old ways. We express authentic selves and this is profoundly nurturing.