

Working with Zen

Karen Sivan tells you how to be mindful, even in the midst of a busy day at work

All too often what we have is a full mind. A mind full of lists of daily tasks to be completed, worries and anxieties, wish lists and dreams. We spin around in our own worlds, driven by these demands and desires, perhaps feeling somewhat lost, disconnected and overwhelmed. Multitasking is perceived as talent; we feel we're so clever to be able to do three or four jobs at the same time. At the home we rush through the daily chores so as to not be late for work, and at work, we rush through our work load so that we can leave for home on time.

Perhaps you have a practice that helps you bring some sense and balance to your life—such as yoga, meditation, chanting. But this is confined to a specific time. Once you step out of the yoga class or conclude your meditation for the day, the marathon of your thoughts begins again. Indeed, one cannot be meditating or practising yoga *asanas* all day. However, the home and workplace itself provides us with ample opportunities to be 'mindful.'

For many of us, daily chores become an opportunity to think about other things while doing them. We're so accustomed to doing these activities that we no longer need to be aware while doing them. So the key is to bring mindfulness to the most basic things that you do.

As you wake-up

When you start the day, with brushing your teeth, pay attention! How does the toothpaste taste? What temperature is the water? What sensations are you expe-



riencing in your mouth? Notice your body posture; are you tensed over the sink? Experiment each day; with different aspects of your morning. Take those few moments of doing something ordinary and let it become something extraordinary. Even to appreciate the ease with which we do miraculous things like breathing, can assist us to take a short break from the constant chatter of our minds.

Off to the office

If you walk to work, try changing it into a walking meditation. Be sure your back is straight and your shoulders relaxed. Then, as you walk, turn your attention to your breath and notice if your breath is coming from high up in your lungs or from lower down in your abdomen. Good breathing comes from our abdomen. When shoulders are slouched the breath is restricted and the body does not receive enough oxygen. Once you are breathing and walking comfortably, turn your attention to your body. Notice how one foot goes up as the other comes down. Feel the weight of your foot. Walk faster... does your breathing change?

Notice your surroundings

What temperature is the air and where do you feel it contacting your body? Can you hear birds singing or is the traffic noise too loud. If traffic is bothersome, consider the people in the cars, also hurriedly rushing around. Maybe try to feel a sense of connection with them; ultimately we are not so different from one another.

The working day starts

Depending on your job, there may be many you interact with or only a few. Either way, develop more consideration for your colleagues. Be mindful of how you affect them. Have consideration for others and do not let yourself be too self-absorbed in your own duties. The work place can be a breeding ground for conflicts, politics and misunderstandings. If you usually find yourself reacting immediately, take a moment to recognise that and try a different response. Take a deep breath, notice where the tension is in your body, breath it out; smile! A very easy thus very difficult response; it takes practice.

Zen is very simple and hence a very difficult practice. It begins with watching our breath; nothing more. The practice is to keep coming back to this breath awareness, over and over and over again. It is a life practice. Do not be despondent if it takes time to bring mindfulness into your working day. Try small things; take it one step at a time.



Karen Sivan is a aromatherapist trained from the Tisserand Institute in London. For five years she lived at a Zen Centre; Bodhi Zendo near Kodaikanal where she compiled and edited *The Tale of Self*, 173 Zen stories. She now runs a meditation centre in Kerala. www.kinhinzenecentre.com

Eventually mindfulness will feel natural and 'normal.'

If we can observe ourselves with a degree of honesty we can learn to take ourselves less seriously. Some humour in the workplace can help alleviate stressful deadlines. I am not suggesting we laugh about such matters, but perhaps become able to laugh at our reactions to them.

You're having to deal with a difficult customer or a complaint? Take that deep breath first. Then, as I said earlier notice where the tension is in your body, breathe it out and smile! Our bodily posture can affect our mind and the state of our mind is reflected in our body posture. Stay alert to both. What you are aiming for is to stay calm and balanced.

Attention to work aids can be the most helpful tool. If your desk is cluttered and you can never find what you want when you want it, re-organise it. Being able to instantly reach for a report or a pen when you need it helps the mind remain calm and balanced. All easier said than done I know, but take heart; here's a famous Zen story that will reassure you.

Zen students are with their masters at least ten years before they presume to teach others. Nan-in was visited by Tenno, who, having passed his apprenticeship had become a teacher. The day happened to be rainy, so Tenno wore wooden clogs and carried an umbrella. After greeting him Nan-in remarked: "I suppose you left your wooden clogs in the vestibule. I want to know if your umbrella is on the right or left side of the clogs."

Tenno, confused, could not immediately answer. He realised that he was unable to carry his Zen every minute. He became Nan-in's pupil, and he studied six more years to accomplish his every-minute Zen.

Make time for silence

Something else you may like to consider is having a period of silence in your working day. If you have group tea breaks, ask your colleagues if they would like to see how it feels to have that time in silence. Initially this is difficult for many people as we are so used to making 'chitchat' to fill up silence. View it as a time to rebalance, to silently watch your breath while allowing your mind to settle down too. In the long run this helps improve our concentration and creativity. In a still mind, ideas can more readily surface. Lunch time is also an ideal time to utilise mindfulness. Eat in silence and as you eat, taste each mouthful; distinguish different flavours and become aware of chewing and swallowing your food. Enjoy it!

Mindfulness and bodily awareness are tools that you can use anywhere to regain a sense of calm and balance. The beauty is that no one even knows you are employing this technique unless you want them too.

To subscribe to *Complete Wellbeing*, send MOCO CW GET to 58888 or visit <http://store.completewellbeing.com>