

## This Very Moment

*Doug Carnine*

*"Time flies quicker than an arrow and life passes with greater transience than dew."*

Great Master Dogen, "Shushogi"

I used to think that time was like a stage, where I moved through the past into the present getting ready to enter the future. I'm learning that this is not true. My entire life takes place in this moment. My past (much that I have done and much that has been done to me) is part of me and, in this way, is part of this present moment. Similarly what I fear, expect, anticipate, or dread about the future is part of me in this present moment. Everything occurs in this moment. So I often ask myself, "This moment is my entire life. How do I want my life to be? Do I want to relive the past? Dwell in the future?" Recognizing that this moment is all there is to my life underscores the importance of whether I am present with what is in front of me or caught up in unhelpful thoughts and emotions.

When I treat the present moment as my entire life, I am more likely to be mindful. For example, I think of myself as a good listener. Five days after I turned 65, my wife, Linda, was talking about a concern she had with World Wildlife Fund. I disagreed with her and was about to make several points, when I paused to consider what would be good to do in this present moment. I let my comments about World Wildlife go; I listened carefully and came to realize that making those points would not be helpful. So at 65 I realized that maybe I was not as good a listener as I had thought. Being present in the moment allows me to learn more about myself and those around me.

Sometimes it is appropriate and even necessary to be thinking about the past and future in the present moment; for example, planning, which means I evaluate relevant experiences from the past and project how my options might play out in the future. Generally, when I think about the future, it is in ways that are not helpful. Eager anticipation of pleasant events can undermine the value of the present moment. Jan Frazer, in *When Fear Falls Away*, wrote, "I used to look forward to Fridays.... The reason I don't look forward to them any longer is that I don't look forward to anything. Why do we *look forward*? It is because whatever we are doing now feels like less than *that will be*" (p. 62). We all have the choice of whether to acknowledge the feeling of anticipation, enjoy the feeling, and then return to what is in front of us, or to hold on to the anticipation, trying to make it last and become even more pleasurable. I believe it is the holding on, the attachment to the anticipation that can to some degree devalue the present moment. For example, instead of eating mindfully, I might think about our upcoming trip to visit our daughters. I miss the opportunity to enjoy the food with mindfulness.

I am even more likely to anticipate unpleasant events. Linda and I were to fly to Seattle and then pick up a rental car to go to a wedding. I was dreading the trip, in part because of upsetting experiences with airlines and more specifically because we were not comfortable with how to find the places we had to drive to in Seattle. As it ends up, there was some basis for dread; we left the Seattle airport in our rental car and could not figure out how to work the GPS. I want to point out, though, that dreading the trip was not helpful; it did not prevent the GPS fiasco. The dread was merely an unpleasant emotion in anticipation of the future, an anticipation that diminished the present moment.

The habit of thinking about the future in the present moment activates both eager anticipation and dread. As in other aspects of mindfulness practice, I am not able to hang on to happy thoughts of anticipation and let go of unhappy emotions of dread. If I have a habit of thinking about the future, I am likely to hang on to emotions of joy and also to emotions of sadness. Attachments to gain and loss are similar; a typical sports fan cannot indulge victories and ignore defeats. Fans spend many moments with thoughts and emotions about wins and losses in the past or future. When we are caught up in thoughts and emotions we miss opportunities to practice mindfulness in the present moment.

Fortunately, we have the opportunity to let go of “un-mindfulness” (being un-balanced) and return to mindfulness (balance) every time we step into a new moment. Ueshiba, who founded the martial art Aikido, purportedly said that his goal is not to always keep his balance, but rather to learn to come back to balance quickly. Science now recognizes that it is impossible to keep our balance when we walk. In speaking to BBC News, Professor Florentine Worgotter said, “About half of the time during a gait cycle [a single step when walking] we are not doing anything, just falling forward.”

(Robot Unravels Mystery of Walking, *BBC News*, 11-14-11, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6291746.stm>).

As we walk, we lose and regain balance without ever realizing we lost it. Similarly, our mind is never mindful in every moment. Our mind frequently has moments of un-mindfulness. The challenge, in this moment, is to return to mindfulness quickly. It is easier to return to mindfulness early in the process of being un-mindful; e.g., when I first start to worry. In contrast, the longer I cling to my attachments with tormenting un-mindfulness, the less I am aware of my external world, the heavier my mood becomes with dissatisfaction and irritation, and the more difficult it is for me to return to mindfulness in the present moment. It would be like stepping out and extending my foot very, very slowly, causing me to fall forward and land heavily on the extended foot. Walking in such a fashion would be burdensome and unpleasant. Being un-mindful in such a fashion can make each moment unpleasant, at times even disturbing.

*The challenge is not to always be mindful, but to return to mindfulness quickly so as to be mindful in this present moment.*

Sometimes practicing in the moment is easy and feels natural. Sometimes it is quite difficult. If I spent considerable time urging myself to do a better job and felt guilty about how badly I was doing staying in the present moment, my practice could become a grind. Instead, my mindfulness practice is simply paying attention to what I feel, think, say, and do in the present moment—a healthy challenge, often enjoyable, a ‘*gentle, patient intensity*’ of sorts. And every moment offers a fresh start. In fact, my only opportunity to practice mindfulness is with a fresh start in the present moment. Life passes with greater transience than dew **because** our life consists of only this present moment. I ask myself, **“This moment is my entire life. How do I want my life to be?”**