

## Mindfulness for Wellness

Most health care professionals are aware of the literature, programs and benefits derived from the practice of mindfulness for stress relief. Academics such as Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn - *Where Ever You Go There You Are - Mindfulness Meditation in Daily Life* and Dr. Steven Hick, Director of Mindfulness Based Stress Relief (MBSR) Ottawa have done substantial research and published many books and produced on line CD's with guided meditation which are easily accessible. In addition, extraordinary true life experiences documented by authors such as, Eckhart Tolle – *A New Earth Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* and Noah Levine - *Dharma Punks* have inspired many to adopt the practice of mindfulness.

Programs are now available nationwide where mindfulness is used for stress reduction. Many of these are based on a training program developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, 20 years ago, at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. These programs have successfully used mindfulness meditation to reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and pain. Patients are usually referred from clinics where they have been unsuccessfully treated for these symptoms for several years. The benefits of mindfulness for wellness are now proven and the instructional material is readily available. All you need to do is to search the Web for “Mindfulness and Stress Relief” and over 10 pages of literature and programs are available to the interested!

What you may not be aware of is the fact that mindfulness meditation is a 2500 year old practice taught by the Gotama Buddha and that the goal of the Buddha's teachings is freedom from stress, mental anguish and suffering (*dukkha*).

The most well know discourse of the Buddha used for practice of mindfulness is “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness” (*Satipattana Sutta*). In this discourse the Buddha taught the detailed practice of mindfulness meditation which leads to freedom from stress, mental anguish and suffering. The four practices advocated in the discourse are mindfulness of the body (*kaynupassana*), its feelings (*vedananupassana*), the mind and it's emotions (*cittanupassana*) and it's insights to Truth (*Dhammanupassana*). These forms of meditation are also collectively known as Insight Meditation or *Vipassana Meditation* as it leads to insight or seeing things as they really are (Right View).

While many such programs are available in Winnipeg, I had the opportunity to participate and observe a lunch hour program of mindfulness and stress relief conducted by Kurt Schwarz at the Health Science Centre. Using breathing awareness and the body scan as taught by the Buddha, Kurt has very successfully organized a lunch hour program for health care workers. This program, which was initiated by the Spiritual Health Services Department of the Health Science Centre six years ago, has been facilitated by Kurt in the last five years.

The room where the classes were conducted was small and cozy and prepared for meditation with dim lights and chairs set out in a circle. A small table in the centre held a beautiful carving of the “circle of friends” and a flickering candle in the centre had a

soothing and calming effect. Kurt began by reading a quotation that relates to mindfulness and wellness from Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Mindfulness in Daily Life*. This was followed by about 30 minutes of mindfulness meditation on Awareness of Breath.

In addition to participating in the program I had the opportunity to interview the participants on a voluntary basis. I asked the participants as to why they kept coming back to this meditation class and how it had helped them in their daily life. These were some of their responses. "It helps to keep me balanced and centered." "It assists me with my patient care as I am in the presence with patients." "I had an incident with my 16 year old son today and it helped me to deal with the situation with calm." "I have used it in my daily life and with my patients. I am an observer. I have learnt to observe and not react". A participant also acknowledged that the benefits were even greater when she had a daily practice. "Having experienced the benefits of a daily practice I am aware that I should meditate daily. However circumstances at present do not make it possible. And yet, I see the benefits of the weekly lunch hour class. This is important to me." A new participant informed me that it was so relaxing that she fell asleep.

Mindfulness meditation based on the Buddha's teaching of Breathing Awareness and Mindfulness of the body/mind and its feelings and emotions is a two-step training.

- Breathing awareness leads to tranquility, concentration and being in the present moment. Our mind tends to run to the past and to the future both of which are often haunted with despair, distress or desire. Being in the presence or present moment gives relief from this distress that the mind keeps dwelling on and leads to tranquility and calmness.
- Mindfulness of one's sensations and emotions without reacting to negative or painful feelings and pleasant feelings leads to Right View, balance, being centered and equanimity. Participants do not strive for any attainment. Instead they just observe and let the current reality unfold. As they view the arising and passing away of all things and just observe with no judgment or reaction the benefits of meditation are experienced and transferred into their daily life.

Mindfulness meditation as taught by the Buddha leads to freedom from stress, mental anguish and suffering. The benefits cross all man made boundaries of religion, gender, nationality, class and age. It is a prime example of spirituality for wellness that can be used by persons of any faith. The benefits of mindfulness are universal and available to all who are committed to the practice.

*Radhika Abeysekera*