

Living with Mindfulness

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Increasingly we have been hearing about the benefits of mindfulness, but what exactly is mindfulness, and is there any relationship to what has been called the Modern Mindfulness Movement and Jain Dharma?

The dictionary definition of *mindfulness* is “watchfulness” or “alertness.” Spiritualists define it as “living in the present.” Both definitions characterize the same experience since living in the present entails that our mind is alert and actively aware of where we are, of what is around us, and of what we are feeling. In simple words, mindfulness implies that the mind is under control and is not wandering around. But that is easier said than done.

The mind is a virtual faculty living beings possess that engages their capacity to think and to reflect consciously. By interfacing life experiences and sensory observations, the mind commands and governs a variety of contemplative faculties such as reflection, pondering, remembrance, strategizing, loving, hating, and yearning. Through these faculties it can awaken one’s feelings of love, attachment, animosity, jealousy, and so on.

The mind may have extraordinary powers of beguilement, but mindfulness, the capacity to direct one's mental awareness, is innate in all living beings. Therefore, the mind can be brought under control with proper spiritual practices.

According to Jain doctrine mindfulness is an innate capacity of the soul, which is endowed with infinite consciousness, bliss, and vigor (*caitanya*, *sukha*, and *vīrya*). Jain principles teach us that the soul is blemished for eternity by our bodily actions, and since the mind works in unison with the soul, it also has been affected in the same manner. Thus, when human beings strive for mindfulness, they endeavor to connect their minds with the innate nature of their souls — the conscious essence that is the source of power and happiness — thereby harmonizing both the mind and soul toward honorable living (*samyag-cāritra* and *nītiśāstra*)¹.

Meditation is commonly thought to be the spiritual practice that helps us return back to our own innate nature of mindfulness. Meditation is that state of consciousness in which all experiences and perceptions come together and merge into one. With meditation, human beings start attaining peace and spiritual strength by inwardly focusing their minds. It is an abstract state that evolves from the concentration of mind where all mental inclinations, which are normally wandering, become focused.²

Since mindfulness is the cornerstone of spiritual progression it has been studied to a great extent by Jain thinkers. They teach us that for a spiritual seeker to discipline the mind for lasting restraint, they need to practice penance and austerity in addition to meditation, in order to limit or minimize the mental inclinations.³ Lord Mahavira rigorously practiced all three in his quest for enlightenment.

The practice of meditation connects one's mind with the essence of one's soul and thereby with nature and divinity.⁴ Penance and austerities help curb our mental wanderings and avert the effects of distracting sensory observations that are constantly bombarding our minds and feeding into the mind's incessant fixations. When practiced together, meditation, penance, and austerities help practitioners maximize the benefits derived from the efforts in pursuit of achieving a fixed and steady state of mindfulness.

The practices of penance and austerities, somewhat unique to Jains, are effective in pacifying human desires, which are the main instigators of mental apprehensions. The pursuit to fulfill material and sensory desires results in spiritually unfavorable feelings irrespective of the

outcome of the pursuit itself, given that even if we get the object of our desire we eventually lose it or the satisfaction itself is fleeting. Without proper restraints, when a desire is fulfilled it tends to trigger the desire for more of the same or to instigate new desires. When a desire is unfulfilled, it leads to unfavorable passions such as fear, anger, anguish, deceit, etc. In either case such feelings are harmful to one's mental disposition.

Penance and austerity play important roles in molding one's conduct toward righteousness by subduing one's desires. Right conduct (*samyag-cāritra*), with vows such as nonviolence (*ahimsā*), leads to the inner peace that is critical to achieving mindfulness. There are multiple ways to exercise penance and austerities by effortlessly integrating them into one's way of life. Some illustrations are discussed below.

The penance of fasting (*paṣadha-vrata*) has always been an important practice among Jains. Food is one of the basic necessities in life along with air and water. While air and water have minimum influence on the sense of taste and the pursuit of sensory desires, food has much more influence. That is why, if not controlled effectively, the temptation of food may become a major distraction for the mind, and can even result in gluttony. We are always longing for sumptuous meals and go to great lengths to get one. In this quest, the quality of the food is often sacrificed in favor of its taste, and this is unhealthy from both physical and spiritual perspectives. That is why Jain thinkers emphasize nutrition over taste, and advise limiting consumption to only that which is essential for the body. Furthermore, the body can be trained to survive on limited intake of food, and that is why voluntary fasting is very common among Jains. The basic idea of fasting is to achieve control over one of the senses, taste, and its key distraction, the desire for taste, which is one of the hardest desires to control. Once we are successful in this endeavor, we can extend our learning to controlling other enticing desires.

One of the most detrimental acts of the mind is worrying, or, in its more intensified state, anxiety. Worry and anxiety consume the mind with deliberations of self-doubt, fear, or even dread, and almost always results in irrational actions committed by the individual engaged in fear-based worrying. Contrary to our more positive contemplations, worrying is a form of thinking that is contaminated with fear. It has the capacity to completely devour the mental facilities with an all-consuming sense of anxiety. The sentiments of fear occur mostly when one is concerned about losing something, such as wealth, fame, position, or other similar tangible and

intangible possessions. This extends even to all sorts of relationships, for instance the guru-disciple relationship. For a guru who is not spiritually enlightened and has attachment towards a disciple, the thought of losing the disciple may generate the feelings of fear or anxiety. This fear on the part of an unqualified guru can then affect the spiritual progress of the disciple. Hence the importance of selecting a guru carefully. The same is true when a guru accepts someone as a disciple.

According to the Jain doctrine, the root cause of worry, anxiety, and other related fear-based emotional feelings are our attachments to worldly possessions such as our material possessions, achievements, relationships, etc. For one to become mindful, one's attachments need to be diminished, although their complete elimination is not practically possible for ordinary human beings. When one is living a life with minimum attachments, one's concerns about losing things are minimized, and so is the corresponding fearfulness. The weakening of attachments takes tremendous spiritual effort comprising austere living, contentment, and nonpossession — which are fundamental tenets of Jain doctrine.

One may think that the observance of penance and austerities, partly discussed above, would be hampered by regular householder life. However, the Jain way of life, practiced for millennia by the householders, has proved to the contrary. Ordinarily for householders, penance and austerities should not warrant shunning regular personal or civic duties. For example, when one is holding a political office and is discharging all the responsibilities dispassionately to the best of one's abilities, one would not concoct irrational schemes to win the next election. Such a person has the inner satisfaction of having done their best while being objective and worthy. When one is objective and is not attached to the position being held, one will not be fearful of losing that position. With no such fear, one's actions and plans will be honorable. That person would be exercising mindfulness.

In summary, the practice of meditation, penance, and austerities are key to mindfulness and each wonderfully supplements the other in the endeavor to achieve the goal of mindfulness. We can see that although the concept of mindfulness has only recently become current in the West and in Western discourse, the theoretical underpinnings and masterful refinement of these principles have very deep roots for millennia in Jain Dharma.

- 1 For more information, see chapter 12, “Right Conduct and Doctrine of Ethics,” in [*An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*](#), 2019
- 2 [*An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*](#), chap. 9, “Jain Yoga: Meditation and Union with Divinity.”
- 3 [*An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*](#), chap. 12.
- 4 [*An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*](#), chap. 9.