

Friends Fabric Art

Artful Mindfulness

By Sonja Lee-Austin

I have something special for living a creative life that I'd like to share with you. It's called mindfulness practice. It may sound odd, but don't underestimate it. If you are feeling "blocked" or just wish you had more energy to make art then mindfulness practice may be the perfect answer. It definitely has been amazingly helpful for me. I do not profess to be an expert or anything like that, but as far as I know, no one has written about mindfulness practice from an artist's point of view. I'll give you some background and introduce you to my artist's take on mindfulness. Then I'll be sure to recommend a few sources to learn more from to "the experts" who can take you into a deeper understanding of what mindfulness is.

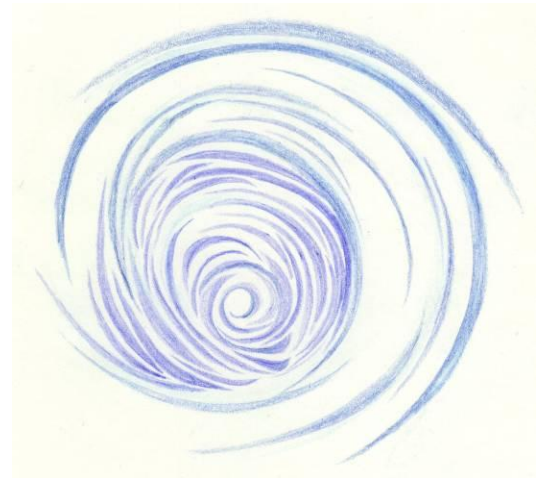
Mindfulness is one of those amorphous things that is hard to describe. Here is the way it is described at the source, University of Massachusetts (UMass) Medical School's Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care & Society:

"Mindfulness is a way of learning to relate directly to whatever is happening in your life, a way of taking charge of your life, a way of doing something for yourself that no one else can do for you – consciously and systematically working with your own stress, pain, illness, and the challenges and demands of everyday life."¹

I think of it as trying to fully experience each moment without judging it in light of the past or worrying about the future. A series of meditations and yoga exercises help you learn to do this.

I don't exactly remember when I first learned about mindfulness. At some point several years ago, I learned about the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction courses that were originally started by Jon Kabat-Zin at UMass Medical. Since I couldn't take the class at the time, I bought and read Jon Kabat-Zinn's book "Full-Catastrophe Living" which covers everything that the course covers.

The hard part about approaching mindfulness from reading the book is that it is really hard to make a commitment to the practice of mindfulness on a regular basis all on your own. I practiced the suggested meditations and yoga exercises on my own for a while but there was always the thought in the back of my mind that I didn't really know what I was doing and why I was doing it. My mindfulness practice was erratic at best and after a while almost non-existent. I was still intrigued by the idea of taking the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course so I decided to take the course offered at Lowell General Hospital when I got the chance. I have always been tense and anxious. I have created stress for myself



¹ <http://www.umassmed.edu/Content.aspx?id=41254&LinkIdentifier=id>
Main site: <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/>

from worrying which has even led to depression. I had read that the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MSRB) Course had helped others with similar problems. It never even occurred to me that the course would have such a positive influence on my artwork.

I did find the course invaluable. Learning about mindfulness and having the strong practice regime set up in the course has given me a good grounding for continuing to practice mindfulness. It was wonderful to hear the experiences of the instructor and the other students in the course. I was completely immersed in the study and practice of mindfulness for eight weeks. The mindfulness practices definitely helped me to overcome my anxious tendencies in a healthy, positive way that has no side effects. Without the weekly guidance that I got during the course, I need to constantly remind myself what a difference taking time to practice mindfulness makes in my life. I feel more alive and experience my own life more deeply and this in turn influences my creativity. I was rather surprised by how mindfulness practice led to greater creative energy for me. Energy that I might have wasted worrying seems to be redirected to creating artwork.

Having an artist's take on my mindfulness practice helps me to remember to practice. Sometimes I feel drawn to practice, but I still I wish I was doing it more regularly like when I was taking the course. It can be so easy to forget even when I know it is good for me. It can be hard to believe sometimes that something so simple that may seem like a passing fad and like new-age fluff can be so grounded in science and so beneficial to so many people including me. In its most basic form, meditation can simply be awareness of your own breath. You'll have to take the MSRB course or read a book or two by an expert such as Jon Kabat-Zinn to really get at the essence of meditation, but here I will share with you my artist's approach.



Artful Mindfulness Meditation

Get out some watercolor crayons, pencils, or other favorite drawing supplies and some paper. Focus on feeling your breath—feel it coming in through your nose and down into your lungs. Close your eyes for a bit if it helps to focus. Notice whether you are taking deep breaths or almost holding your breath. When you feel focused, pick up your crayon and draw whatever comes to you. If you start to wonder what to draw or to analyze your drawing judging it as “bad” or “good”, then go back to just watching your breath. The intention here is not to create a brilliant drawing, but to fully experience your breath and the creative process. Your mind may resist this process, thinking “This is silly, why am I doing this.” Let the thoughts go by and bring your attention back to watching your breath. You cannot force your creative process. Trying to force your creativity isn't likely to be helpful. Thoughts can also block our creativity so just notice the thoughts and then bring your focus back to your breath. Let the drawing float out when it's ready.

Sometimes thoughts and emotions can be too strong a distraction. In this case you may not draw anything. This doesn't mean that your time is wasted. Your thoughts may tell you it is a waste, but the more you practice focusing on your breath, the more likely you will be drawn

to pick up the crayon and draw. The more you approach your art with awareness that comes from meditation practice, the more creative energy you will have. This may sound goofy and new-age-y, but if you give it a chance you will see how utterly wonderful, useful, and real it is. You may not always feel this way since sometimes there is too much hard stuff that comes up with mindfulness practice, but to feel the bliss that can come with mindfulness even once in a while will make you want to keep practicing.

So watch the breath when you start to create. Watch the creation happen. Be totally involved in it. If you have a studio, shut the door and put up a “do not disturb” sign or let the family or roommates know not to bug you while you are in front of your art supplies. They need to know that even if the crayon isn’t in your hand you are still busy taking time for yourself.

Watch your breath and creation will happen. If you hit a wall and stop creating, go back to watching your breath. The need to create again will happen, maybe not right away again like you want it to, but it will happen. So go to your studio and just breathe!

[Learn more](#)

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness by Jon Kabat Zinn

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life by Jon Kabat Zinn



Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness by Jon Kabat Zinn

Jon Kabat Zinn’s Mindfulness Meditation CDs
<http://www.mindfulnesscds.com/index.html>

Series 1 is used in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course

University of Massachusetts Medical School’s Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care & Society
<http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/>

Find a Mindfulness Based Stress Reductions courses World wide:
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Many thanks to Glenn Szegedy for giving me some direction with my ideas for this article!