Mindfulness

What’s in it for me? Discover the mindful path to liberation.

When the Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama, taught the practice of mindfulness to his followers about 2,500 years ago, he called it the path to liberation. In his classic discourse, the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha said that through mindfulness, people can ease their attachment to the self and its endless cravings, and by doing so, they can banish pain and find lasting peace and freedom. Thirteen hundred years later, the West is finally catching on. Mindfulness has transformed schools, businesses, medicine, psychology, neuroscience, and more. These blinks marry the past to this present, showing how the Buddha’s teachings can help you embrace the moment, develop awareness, and perhaps even catch a glimpse of inner freedom. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how to develop mindfulness not only of the body, but of the mind itself; how to balance the world of appearances against deep reality; and the path to extinguishing the self, and with it, sorrow.

The unmindful life is characterized by a suffering caused by the self’s endless craving.

Siddhartha Gotama famously sat under a tree. For three decades, he had lived as a young prince, full of craving for the delights of the world, until, dissatisfied, he left his palace home to study under a series of spiritual teachers. Each teacher directed Gotama toward an ever-more-austere life, and for six years, he lived in poverty, hunger, and often, in a pain he inflicted on his own flesh. But the dissatisfaction that had driven him from the palace remained. It was then that Gotama came to the tree in Bodh Gaya, a village in northern India. The story goes that he meditated beneath the tree for 49 days. His concept of self vanished. And with it the dissatisfaction that had plagued him. The key message here is: The unmindful life is characterized by a suffering caused by the self’s endless craving. When Gotama rose, he was the Buddha, the awakened one. He walked on for several days, to another village, where he would share with friends the truth he had discovered. He told them that life is suffering; caused by things like war, hunger, injustice, sickness, and aging, yes, but also fear, hatred, envy, grief, and loneliness. The suffering the Buddha spoke of included people’s longing for pleasure and the knowledge that one day everyone will be parted from their loved ones. It included the fact that the wonders of life end in death. The Buddha called this suffering dukkha. Human beings are like a dog, he said, tied to a post and unable to escape, forever pulling at the rope. He called this trap of suffering the wheel of samsara, or the cycle of life and death. He went on to say that the cause of people’s suffering is desire. Everyone is consumed by a craving that cannot be satisfied. They seek it in food, alcohol, power, sex, and drugs, saying “I want, I need, I must have!” And that craving makes fools of them all, as they take on debt, fill their lives with stress, and scrape to get ahead. They crave being someone else, a future self that is happy, successful, and powerful. At times, when it gets too much, they may even crave nothingness – to stop existing entirely. But there is a way to end the suffering. The Buddha teaches that when

you let go of your self, the craving goes with it, and you can at last find refuge in the highest happiness of all: nibbana.

The path to self-liberation requires work and inner strength to help you stay the course.

Joseph Goldstein was first drawn to Buddhism in the 1960s, while serving in the Peace Corp in Thailand. He traveled to the Himalayas in search of teachers and found himself in Bodh Gaya, the same village where Gotama became the Buddha. The man who would become Goldstein's teacher told him, "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it." Goldstein had come far in his quest, but here was the true beginning: the moment he turned inward. This journey would be no less challenging than going from Thailand to the Himalayas. But by turning to the Satipatthana Sutta, Goldstein found the inner qualities he would need to make it. The key message here is: The path to self-liberation requires work and inner strength to help you stay the course. If, like Goldstein, you are on a path toward mindfulness, then the Buddha has some advice for you. In the Satipatthana Sutta, he told his followers that they would need the quality of ardency on their journey, meaning the ability to sustain their efforts over the long haul. To help them in this, he told them to reflect on impermanence. In Buddhism, all things change except for nibbana – that highest form of happiness. Emotions and thoughts come and go, and the world we live in is one of birth, growth, decay, and death. By reflecting on impermanence, you can ease your attachment to appearances and possessions and develop a deeper sense of purpose. When you accept that suffering comes from the self and its desires, you realize that renouncing the self not only ends your suffering, but also the suffering you cause others. The Buddha called this sense of purpose clear comprehension. The final quality you need on your journey is mindfulness. Mindfulness carries several meanings in today's world, but in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha meant it as attentiveness to the moment. In other words, the ability to be present and open to the subtleties of life that many people are often too distracted to observe. The mindfulness that we'll explore in the following blinks was once described by Mother Teresa during an exchange with a reporter. When the reporter asked her what she said to God in her prayers, she replied, "Nothing. I just listen." The reporter then asked what God said to her. "Nothing," she said. "He just listens."

Mindfulness of the body can guide you to the point where your sense of self disappears.

When the Buddha died, 499 of his followers gathered to record all that he had taught them. One of these was Ananda, a beloved and close follower of the Buddha. Ananda had a legendary memory and knew the lessons of the Buddha, called the Dhamma, better than anyone. And yet, to his embarrassment, Ananda had never achieved enlightenment. It had always eluded him. Then, finally, it happened. One day, after hours reciting the Dhamma to the Buddha's followers, Ananda retired to bed. He had

nothing left in him, nothing but the sensations of his own body as he moved down the hall into the bedroom and lay on the bed. His powerful mind had emptied, and he was pure sensation. In the moment before his head hit the pillow, he at last attained enlightenment. The key message here is: Mindfulness of the body can guide you to the point where your sense of self disappears. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha takes joy in telling his students how the body can lead the way to enlightenment. Begin, he advises, by sitting on the floor with your back straight and your legs crossed. Focus on your breath. Start by simply noting what is happening: I am breathing in. I am breathing out. Then take note of whether the breath is short or long. Eventually, you'll become aware of where you are in the breath – the beginning, middle, or end. As you go on, you'll notice that you don't just breathe with your nose and your mouth, or your chest, abdomen or even lungs. Breath occurs through the whole body. When you feel your body producing and experiencing breath, that can lead to a mindfulness of the whole body and an experience of three great Buddhist truths. The first is impermanence. Feel your nerves spark with micro-sensations, and note that these always pass. Second, witness the driving force of suffering. See how you shift positions to counter an ache in your tailbone or stretch to ease a cramp. Let it remind you that discomfort, even pain, compels much of what you do. Third and last, see how mindfulness of the body reveals the absence of the self. You are skin, bone, sinew, organs, bile, snot, and tears. You are an interdependent system of things. There is no bigger you behind it. In this context, "you" – as the entity directing the system – are a fiction.

Use mindfulness to interrupt the thoughts and feelings that trap you in suffering.

Ajahn Chaa, a 20th century teacher of a form of Buddhism known as the Thai Forest tradition, once traveled into the woods to spend a few days in solitude in a hut. On the first night, as he was settling into the stillness, a sound came blasting through the trees. Nearby, villagers were partying, playing music through loudspeakers. At first, Ajahn Chaa was annoyed. Didn't the villagers know that a celebrated monk was in the woods contemplating nibbana? He feared his retreat was ruined, but then he caught himself. The key message here is: Use mindfulness to interrupt the thoughts and feelings that trap you in suffering. For a moment, Ajahn Chaa had allowed himself to suffer what Buddha called "the same dart twice." He suffered the shock of the noise, and then suffered a graver injury: the noise of his own discontent. When you fail to be mindful of your feelings, a pleasant feeling can awaken greed, an unpleasant one can awaken distaste or even hatred, and when a feeling is neutral, you may fail to recognize it at all. Then ignorance grows. Worse, these unhelpful states reinforce your sense of selfhood and lead to suffering. Greed urges the feeding of the self, which leads to addiction, self importance, and longing for more. Distaste and hatred build the self in opposition to and against the world. And ignorance thickens the veil of your delusions. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha instructs his followers to interrupt this cycle with mindfulness. Note the tone of your thoughts and feelings, he said. Ask yourself, "What's the attitude of my mind right now?" or simply, "What is happening?" In response, avoid attaching yourself to the thought or feeling. So instead of saying, for example, "I am angry," try "The angry mind is like this." Don't judge yourself harshly for ugly thoughts and feelings. Shame only digs you further into yourself. An ugly thought or feeling is

just a visitor. Note it, let it be independent, and let it pass. Of course, not all thoughts and feelings are traps made of misery. Soon, you'll learn how mindfulness of goodwill, generosity, and compassion can cultivate a liberating mindset. But before you get there, it's time to explore how your mind itself may hinder you on the path to self-liberation.

Certain states of mind get in the way of your liberation, but they also provide an opportunity to hone your perception.

Think of the mind as a pool. When you're mindful, the pool is clear and calm. It faithfully reflects the reality of its surroundings. But certain states of mind can trouble the water. Greed is like a dye, discoloring your perceptions. Distaste and hatred heat the water to a boil. Laziness is like algae growing across the surface, restlessness is like ripples caused by the wind, and doubt and indecision are a thick mud that blocks the light. Mindfulness, the Buddha said, is the key to clearing away these hindrances. The key message here is: Certain states of mind get in the way of your liberation, but they also provide an opportunity to hone your perception. As natural and as numerous as these hindrances to perception are, repeated diligent, mindful examination of their presence will bring you back to a central truth: they are not you, and you are not them. They'll pass, and when they do, you'll better appreciate what you are, and that's pure potential: specifically, the potential for clear, calm, and brilliant reflection. But it isn't just mindfulness that will help you on your journey to awakening. You have some other natural capacities to help you on the way. First, the capacity for discernment, or a knack for testing ideas and digging for the truth. Second, you have energy to drive you toward accomplishment. Third is rapture, or pure joy – something that, when you experience it, leaves no room for malice or greed. Fourth is true calm, a serenity that quiets the mind. Fifth are the stores of concentration you're capable of, and last, you carry the potential for goodwill and generosity. To cultivate these capacities, you should use a mindfulness practice to note them and contemplate their nature. When you find yourself being instinctively skeptical about something, say to yourself, "This is discernment." On the other hand, when you catch yourself having swallowed someone's argument whole observe that "Discernment was absent." When calm occurs, consider what triggered the feeling. Was it the presence of a loved one, perhaps? If it lingers, contemplate why, and when it fades, note its passing. If you practice being mindful of these natural capacities that you already have, you can intelligently work to increase their presence within you. Used together, they're like the arm, the hand, the handle, the blade, and the sheath that in unison allow a warrior to wield a sword.

A Buddhist mindset wishes happiness for all and extends compassion to those in suffering.

Here's something to try. The next time you walk down the street, silently send every person that passes the following wish: may you be happy. Send it to the man waiting for the bus, the woman sweeping the sidewalk in front of her store, the kid on the skateboard, and the teenage girl walking her dog. May you be happy. This sending of

good will is what the Buddha called metta, and what contemporary Buddhists often call lovingkindness. The key message here is: A Buddhist mindset wishes happiness for all and extends compassion to those in suffering. Let's say you try this experiment of lovingkindness for a few days, and you find yourself wondering, "Are these passersby appreciating my lovingkindness?" Or maybe you find yourself wishing of passersby, "May you be less annoying to me." If you catch these moments, well done! Congratulations are in order. You're being mindful of your thoughts. Even better, you've snagged some unwholesome intruders. As always, make a habit of mindfully noting them, without judgment. Now feel the beneficial transformation that comes from letting the visitor pass. But you may run into another challenge in your practice of lovingkindness. Let's say that on the street, you pass a homeless person, someone in dire straits. How should you regard someone who is suffering? Here, the Buddha urges compassion. Show empathy. Try to feel what is going on for those in pain. This can be difficult. The mind often withdraws or defends against the pain of others, but mindful habits will tell you that this tendency is a hindrance to true perception because it shows attachment to the self. Instead, be courageous and open your heart. In situations where you can end the suffering, you must do so. When you can't, a gesture of friendship or generousity may do more than you think. Keep in mind that those who are suffering may not appear to be victims. Abusers and bullies are suffering, and they too deserve your compassion. Take the example of Dr. Tenzin Choedak, a Tibetan physician and follower of the Dalai Lama. Chinese authorities imprisoned Choedak and tortured him for almost two decades. By Choedak's account, it was his compassion for his torturers and their suffering hearts that allowed him to survive.

Buddhist ethics rely on a continuous and mindful effort to align with the underlying truth of existence.

Let's say that after reading or listening to these blinks, you're ready to take the plunge. You grab yourself a copy of the Satipatthana Sutta and develop what the Buddha called right view and right thought. You cultivate discernment, energy, calm, concentration, rapture, and equanimity, and you extend generosity and compassion. But what does a good Buddhist actually do? How does one speak, act, and make a living in this world? The key message here is: Buddhist ethics rely on a continuous and mindful effort to align with the underlying truth of existence. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha outlined his rules for living in the world: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. In right speech, you must always tell the truth, avoid gossip, speak with love, and listen mindfully. In right action, you must not kill, steal, or harm. You must not, for example, take more than you need. You must abstain from sexual misconduct. As for right livelihood, a good Buddhist may not trade weapons, intoxicants, or meat. But, to be frank, the Satipatthana Sutta doesn't go into much more detail than this. Instead, it concludes with a discussion of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration – which is to say that the Buddha leaves the ball of moral action in your court. It's up to you to exert the effort to be mindful of people's interconnectedness, and it's up to you to concentrate, discern the action that's needed, and take that action. You mustn't, for instance, intentionally kill insects simply because they give you the willies. But what do you do if you're in an area rife with Lyme disease and you come across a tick? Or you're in a malarial region and have been asked to spray a mosquito insecticide. What would a good Buddhist do? That's for you and your mindfulness to discern. By relying on

mindfulness, the Buddha teaches that rules are not as important as the truth that animates them, namely, that the world of appearances is a shallow reality, and that deep reality is selfless and without separation. Live with awareness of that truth, and not only will right action follow, but that truth will become ever more real to you. You'll glimpse it. You'll see a refuge from suffering and a state of unsurpassable freedom. You'll see nibbana.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Without true awareness, humanity is trapped in a cycle of suffering caused by attachment to the self and its endless cravings. But, with awareness developed and honed into mindfulness, you can break loose. You can become vigilant of the inner phenomena that hold you back, and work on the inner strengths that liberate you. The path to peace and freedom is simple yet challenging, and it begins wherever you are. Actionable advice: Summon lovingkindness in the style of the Dalai Lama. As you move through the day, harried and lost in your own concerns, it may seem difficult to give the people you meet the good wishes they deserve. Fortunately none other than the Dalai Lama himself can help with this shorthand method of tapping into your lovingkindness: "Treat whomever you meet," he says, "as an old friend."