

Real Change

What's in it for me? A crash course in practical meditation for social good.

Climate change. Institutional racism. Online harassment. Pervasive poverty and rampant bigotry. There are so many issues in this world that can only be solved with our effort and our action. But, stepping up to all these challenges is a challenge of its own. How can we stay calm, centered, and clear-headed when so many stresses demand our attention? Meditation may hold the key. These blinks delve into the practice of meditation and show how it can lay the groundwork for sustained social action. Drawing on the expert advice of Sharon Salzberg, this guide reveals the mindfulness strategies that will keep you grounded and engaged, no matter what your personal struggle. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to handle broken toys; why the Statue of Liberty is walking; and when you should eat a banana.

Practicing mindfulness can help you build the strength to fight for a better world.

Fight, flight, or freeze. These were the choices Sari Kaufman faced one fateful morning in February 2018. You see, Sari was a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida, and that morning, a shooter opened fire at her school. Luckily, Sari managed to escape the carnage – she chose flight. Yet, in the following months, Sari had to decide how to process the trauma. This time, running wasn't the right choice and neither was freezing and doing nothing. This time Sari chose to fight. She joined her classmates in organizing a nationwide campaign to end gun violence. Of course, her struggle continues. But, she stays engaged despite the adversity. Sari's dedication shows that working for a better world is possible, even under the most awful circumstances. The key message here is: Practicing mindfulness can help you build the strength to fight for a better world. Today, many people are weighed down by feelings of despair and hopelessness. And how could you blame them? Our society is rife with seemingly insurmountable problems: from climate change to an increasingly turbulent political atmosphere. In troubled times, there is always a temptation to turn away and disconnect. But, if we want to build a better society, fleeing and freezing won't work; we must gather the strength to push for change. It isn't easy, but mindfulness, and what's known as lovingkindness meditation, can provide crucial support. Contrary to popular belief, practices like meditation aren't about retreating from the world or pushing reality away – instead, they can build a solid foundation from which to tackle long-term struggles. For one thing, meditation helps your mind become more resilient against the stress that comes with political activism. Establishing a regular meditation practice supports you to clearly picture your goals and recover from setbacks. It refocuses your energy on positive actions like building community, connecting with others, and seeing beyond any immediate roadblocks. Try it for yourself. Take a moment to close your eyes and focus on your breath. As you feel the air move in and out of your nose, and your diaphragm expanding and contracting, observe the sensations in your body. Perhaps there is tension in your neck or unpleasant thoughts at the back of your mind. Simply

note these and continue breathing. After some time, you will feel them begin to melt away.

Real change is possible if you embrace the full power of your agency.

The Statue of Liberty is a monument brimming with symbolism. With her tall, defiant posture, she projects a sense of pride and determination. With her torch held high, she is a beacon of hope. And, with her inscription welcoming the world's "huddled masses," she invites immigrants with open arms. But, one detail is often overlooked: her back foot, with the heel slightly raised, as if she's about to take a bold step forward. She is in motion, and the message is clear - Lady Liberty isn't about empty words, she is about action. Here is the monument's real lesson: in our own lives, we should strive to match our principles and ideals with our acts. The key message is: Real change is possible if you embrace the full power of your agency. Often, our visions of a better world remain just that - visions. We see which problems need fixing, or the numerous ways in which society could be improved, but merely note these issues, never act on them. This passivity can be toxic and it leaves us feeling powerless. A better approach is to create a sense of agency - that is, to recognize that we are capable of affecting the world around us. Ady Barkan is a prominent lawyer who fought against New York City's discriminatory stop-and-frisk policing. But, at just 32 years old, he was diagnosed with ALS, a degenerative disease that leads to paralysis and eventually death. Rather than letting the disease end his career, Ady has used it as a springboard. He has redoubled his efforts and begun campaigning for more accessible healthcare for all. Even as his body fails, he recognizes that he can act. There will always be obstacles that get in the way and stop you from embracing the full power of your agency. Low self-esteem can make you feel powerless. Fear will tell you that you may fail. And social prejudices like racial bias or the patriarchy may leave you thinking you're not worthy or are incapable of creating better conditions for you and your community. But, the truth is everyone has something to offer. Consider the Recovery Café, run by and for people struggling with homelessness. Through collaboration and support, the people at the cafe lift each other up, and more importantly, learn that they have more skills, power, and agency than they realize. Today, nearly 20 Recovery Cafés are thriving across North America all thanks to the agency and actions of their members.

Facing negative emotions will help reveal your inner strength.

A soldier returning from war with PTSD. A couple struggling with a rough divorce. An environmental activist watching as report after report shows the melting of the polar ice caps. Their problems might seem different but each of these individuals shares the same pain, suffering, and grief. Each person is struggling with loss - loss of stability, loss of a partnership, and the loss of a world they deeply love. Yet, this loss needn't be the end. While it can be unpleasant, if you learn to face loss the right way, it can become a chance to build yourself back stronger than ever before. The key message here is: Facing negative emotions will help reveal your inner strength. In the West, the standard approach to pain and suffering is avoidance. We steer clear of discomfort at all costs - and when we can't, we push it away as soon as possible. But, if approached correctly,

pain can be valuable. If you accept your pain, observe it, and try to understand it, you can learn to deal with it in healthy ways. You can also learn more compassion for others experiencing hardship. The ability to bounce back after a difficult experience is called resilience. Resilience involves acknowledging your hurt while recognizing that you have the inner strength to overcome it. For instance, a soldier struggling with PTSD may experience panic attacks, hyper-vigilance, and trust issues. But, by understanding the triggers and learning strategies to calm down when necessary, he can begin to gain control over his symptoms. Think of emotional pain as a physical condition. Let's say you damage your ankle in an accident – the injury is so severe that walking is agonizing. If you simply stop using your foot, it won't heal properly, but if you work with a physical therapist, you'll practice small exercises to ease your ankle back into shape. It may hurt a little at first, but over time, you'll regain your strength and have more understanding of how your body functions. One way to begin this process is lovingkindness meditation. This meditation opens space to recognize your inner strengths. When you're stressed, close your eyes, breathe deeply, and think of words that offer compassion. Try mantras like "I may be safe" or "I may live with ease." Visualize yourself moving beyond your pain – afterward, you may find you feel more confident about your future.

Build long-term success by caring for yourself and finding joy in your work.

Imagine a dedicated human rights activist. Each day, she tirelessly advocates for the issues she cares about – issues like gender equality, fairer wages, and better access to healthcare. Now, suppose that one day, this activist forgets her lunch. By noon, she's hungry; by afternoon, she's starving. But, the only food in the office is a bunch of bananas. Unfortunately, each time she glances at the fruit, she faces a moral dilemma: she's worried about the exploitative conditions in banana fields and the environmental cost of banana production. The activist wants to keep working, yet she's feeling faint. What should she do? Obviously, she should just eat the banana already! The key message here is: Build long-term success by caring for yourself and finding joy in your work. Activism, care work, and other service-oriented callings require a phenomenal degree of passion and dedication. But, even the most determined and steadfast people can't give 100 percent of themselves, 100 percent of the time. In fact, attempting to do so is a recipe for breakdown and burnout. So, when it comes to managing your time and effort, it's crucial to build in space for rest, recovery, and recuperation. Making a habit of taking care of yourself both mentally and physically will leave you better able to work toward your goals in the long run. Sometimes, this practice is called self-care or building a coping bank. Self-care comes in many forms. For instance, Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School, combated burnout by taking time to rest and reflect in the natural world around his workplace. Shantel Walker, an organizer in the Fight for 15 minimum wage movement, blows off steam by going on long, leisurely bike rides. In both cases, taking a break from the stress of work makes each person more effective when they return to their tasks. But, self-care can also take place on the job. All too often, we assume that serious work must be accompanied by a serious demeanor. But, the opposite is true. It's entirely possible to find joy in your labor. During the 1960s protest marches, participants didn't cry and mourn. Instead, they joined their voices together and sang joyful tunes. Buddhists call this practice gladdening the mind and it can make even the most difficult struggles more manageable.

We must recognize the interconnectedness of all things.

What is a tree? It sounds like a simple question. Obviously, a tree is a large plant with a trunk, branches, leaves, and bark. Yet, if we expand our vision and understanding, a tree reveals itself to be more than a solitary organism. For one, a tree is part of a rich and complex ecosystem. It relies on the sun in the sky, the water in the clouds, and the nutrients in the soil. More than that, a tree interacts with numerous other organisms. It hosts the birds nesting in its foliage and is nourished by the fungi entangled in its roots. In this way, a tree never stands alone – it is always connected to a larger web of life. Humans are similarly interconnected, even if we don't always remember. The key message here is: We must recognize the interconnectedness of all things. The great Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh often speaks of a concept he calls interbeing. Interbeing refers to the idea that everything in the universe, both human and nonhuman, is deeply and inextricably linked. Because of this mutual dependence, everything and everyone matters and is worthy of respect, care, and compassion. Unfortunately, our contemporary world often obscures this reality. Think of how many homeless people you come across in a day. If you saw your neighbors in their situation, you'd surely stop and help, but since they are strangers, you walk by without a second thought. But, if you expand your idea of what community means, you'll find you're connected in another way. This person in need could be your neighbor's brother, a distant member of your church, or a former classmate. Seeing how connections can cut across differences is also hugely important. Take the story of Rob Tibbetts. Back in 2018, Rob's daughter Mollie was killed by a Mexican immigrant. The event unleashed a torrent of racial hatred. But, rather than give in to his anger, Rob resisted it. At Mollie's funeral, he declared that the Hispanic community was part of his community and he was part of theirs. He said that everyone shared the pain of Mollie's death and no one should be targeted for surface-level differences. Meditation can help highlight life's interconnected nature. Next time you practice lovingkindness meditation, conjure an image of someone you met during the day. Think of how their well-being impacts your well-being, and vice versa. Send positive thoughts toward them and notice how it improves your mood as well – after all, you two are connected.

Eliminate cognitive bias through deep, introspective thinking.

Here's a simple riddle for you: A man and his son are involved in a horrible car accident. Tragically, the man dies and the boy is rushed to the hospital. On arriving, the chief surgeon is aghast, declaring, "I can't operate on this child, he's my son!" So, here's the question – who is the surgeon? The answer often stumps even the most astute minds. After all, the father died, so he can't be the attending physician. But, take a moment to think and the answer is obvious: the doctor is the boy's mother. Oddly, people overlook this solution nearly 80 percent of the time. It's a powerful demonstration of how easily old biases can cloud our perception of reality. The key message here is: Eliminate cognitive bias through deep, introspective thinking. Our minds don't perceive the world with perfect accuracy. In fact, in order to process reality efficiently, our brains constantly take mental shortcuts, leaps of logic, and make unconscious adjustments to how we understand what's happening around us. In some

cases, these cognitive biases help us navigate life more smoothly, but just as often they cloud our judgment. One common cognitive bias is the fundamental attribution error. This is the tendency to understand human behaviors differently based on group affiliation. For instance, if a close friend is curt and rude, you'll chalk up their behavior as no big deal – you'll think "She's just having a bad day." But, if a stranger from an outside group is acting gruffly, you may unconsciously think, "Well, people like that are just inherently impolite." Such biases are dangerous because they stop us from seeing others as truly complex individuals. And habitually succumbing to these types of bias can warp our understanding of reality so deeply, that we may foster racist, sexist, or discriminatory beliefs. According to the author, despite usually being very socially aware, doctors often prescribe Black patients fewer painkillers than white patients because of outmoded ideas about racial differences. You can begin grappling with your own unconscious bias with awareness meditation. This form of meditation encourages you to investigate your identity and background and how they may influence your view of the world. To practice, simply enter a calm, meditative state, and consider your own experiences and thought processes – you may be surprised at the hidden biases lurking in your psyche.

Maintain internal balance by never following your emotions to the extreme.

Let's say you're watching a child happily playing with her toys. Suddenly a problem – she treats a toy too roughly and it breaks. Shocked and saddened, she begins to cry. What do you do? Well, you could embrace the girl's pain and sob right there on the floor with her. Or, you could go the opposite way and sternly tell her that a broken toy doesn't matter compared to the horrors of cancer or the ravages of war. But both of these options are a little extreme. A better path lies somewhere in the middle: to empathize with the child's sadness but use your adult perspective to reassure her. Playtime isn't ruined and there's still fun to be had. The key message here is: Maintain internal balance by never following your emotions to the extreme. Most people will readily profess their desire to live a balanced life. But, what do they mean by balance, exactly? For some, it means having all things in equal measure – equal time working and playing; equal energy given over to joy and sorrow. But, this view of balance is a bit artificial. It relies on the world to always provide perfectly equal conditions. A better form of balance is equanimity. Equanimity, sometimes called *upekkha* by Buddhists, is about finding a sense of balance within. It means emotions like anger, sadness, joy, and fear are all still felt, but never completely given into. Instead, an equanimous person will acknowledge emotions, and experience sensations, but then slowly return to a place of calm. Like a spinning gyroscope, they can be nudged by outside forces, but always return to balance. Developing equanimity is especially helpful for people fighting to make the world a better place. For example, if you're engaged in activism about climate change or racism it can be easy to fall into despair – after all when the problems are so serious and entrenched, how can things ever improve? In these cases, it's important to hold two thoughts. First, to acknowledge the dire reality; while second, simultaneously imagining a better future, even if it's just in a few small ways. It can also help to take the long view. When a master teaches a student, he can't possibly deliver all his knowledge in one lesson, or even a hundred lessons. Yet, over time, the student learns and grows. One day, long after the teacher is gone, that student is ready to truly change the world for the better.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

The world can often feel like a harsh place that's only getting worse. Yet, many people still find the strength to fight for a better future. Mindfulness and meditation can provide excellent tools to keep up the struggle even in the face of adversity. Bolster your own activist spirit by acknowledging negative emotions, creating space for self-care and joy, and always approaching difficult feelings with a sense of equanimity and an eye on the long-term.

Actionable advice: Remember that your emotions are temporary. Even the most grounded individual will sometimes experience difficult emotions like anger or hatred. When this happens, remind yourself that these unpleasant moments are just fleeting. A session of mindfulness meditation will help reveal the calmer bedrock of feeling that lies underneath.