THE OPRAH MAGAZINE
September 2010

What Would It Take for You to Be Still?

by Catherine Price

How can you learn to slow down time, quiet the mental chatter, and savor life's breezes? With mindfulness, one snowcapped mountain meditation at a time.

When I decided to take up meditation, it seemed so easy - slip on a pair of yoga pants, force your legs into half lotus, and "om" your way to serenity and bliss. Forget that my hips are too tight for even a quarter of a lotus, or that the last time I felt truly serene, prescription drugs were involved. I had to try it - I needed to find a way to slow things down.

Lately it's felt like my life is on warp speed. Weekends blur into months; months blur into seasons. I eat fast, I talk fast, I walk fast - I swear I even sleep fast. And I find it almost impossible to sit still. All that research showing that fidgeting burns tons of calories is good news for me. I may get a lot done, but smell the roses? I'm not even getting a passing whiff.

We've all had the experience of sensing time decelerate naturally when we're not so thrilled about what we're doing (think torturous spinning class or hour-long "synergy workshop" at the office). As my dear grandmother would have said, it takes only one colonoscopy to prove that time is relative. But what about the more enjoyable times in life? I hoped that practicing the popular and proven type of meditation called mindfulness - which focuses on bringing awareness to the present moment - might help me slow those times down as well.

Ready to begin, I went straight to the source: Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, the founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn is the creator of an eight-week course called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which he began teaching in 1979 and which is now the largest and oldest meditation-based clinical program in the world. (Kabat-Zinn's program is taught at the University of Massachusetts, but you can find other MBSR courses around the country.)

There are many types of meditation, so why did I opt for MBSR? Two reasons. First, I liked that it's taught in a secular context; even though it's based on some core principles of Buddhism, I didn't need any background knowledge to begin. Second, as someone who wants to understand why I'm doing something - especially when that thing is challenging - I liked the idea that there was scientific proof of its effectiveness. (Because its curriculum is so consistent, it's one of the most studied forms of meditation in the world.)

Kabat-Zinn suggested I start at home by practicing one or two guided 20- to 45-minute exercises six days a week (yes, even meditators need a day off). After we talked about my reason for wanting to meditate - Kabat-Zinn says it's important to identify your motivation before you begin, or you'll be tempted to give up - he recommended that I kick off my practice with what he thought would be an easy starting point: a visualization called the mountain meditation. I loaded my iPod with the 20-minute exercise, which requires you to sit erect on the floor or a chair, close your eyes, and observe your breathing as you imagine a mountain. First, you notice small details - the trees that cover its slopes, perhaps a dollop of snow at the peak - and eventually you try to imagine becoming the mountain itself, feeling its strength and solidity and noticing that even when it's battered by the wind or drenched with rain,

its rock-hard interior remains stable and calm. (Meditation teachers love metaphors.)

The goal of the mountain meditation is the same as with every other mindfulness technique - whether you're focusing on an image, your breath, or sensations in your body, you're trying to coax your mind into what Kabat-Zinn calls a state of nondoing. That's not the same as doing nothing. Rather, it means you're not thinking about your grocery list or the conversation you had with a friend last night or the unfinished report sitting on your desk at work. Nor are you trying to force your mind to go blank or conjure up any special feelings. You're concentrating on just one thing, experiencing each moment as it happens, and trying to be - if I might quote Van Halen - right here, right now.

What does experiencing the moment have to do with imagining yourself as a mountain? Think of it as strength training. By learning to quiet your mind's chatter and concentrate solely on your mental Rockies, you're gaining the focus necessary to stay present when you're not actively meditating. The point is to avoid cruising through life on autopilot, so wrapped up in your daily routine that you don't notice the world around you. "Mindfulness is about living your life as if it really mattered," says Kabat-Zinn. "If you're not mentally present in the small moments, you could be missing half your life."

If this nondoing sounds easy, take 20 minutes and try the mountain exercise yourself. It won't be long before your mountain - which in my case was less Mount Everest and more like the label on an Evian bottle - drifts away and is replaced by a game of free association: A mountain reminds you of skiing, which reminds you of a family vacation, which reminds you of the weekend, which reminds you that a friend invited you to dinner on Saturday, which reminds you that you never got back to her and that maybe you should be writing her an e-mail instead of sitting on the floor pretending you're a mountain - which reminds you that you're supposed to be sitting on the floor pretending you're a mountain, which makes you mad at yourself for letting your mind wander. And then - bam. Not only are you no longer cultivating intimacy with the present moment, you're committing one of mindfulness's biggest faux pas: beating yourself up for getting distracted. (As soon as you start making judgments, you're out of the moment.) Kabat-Zinn didn't say this explicitly, but I'm pretty sure that mindfulness exercises should not include obscenities.

After a few days pretending to be a mountain (and, in a different exercise, a lake), it became clear that I am not a visual person. Unable to picture a mountain in the first place, let alone concentrate on it for 20 minutes, I compensated by imagining my breath flowing up my body and rushing out the top of my head - which worked better, until I realized I'd turned my calm snowy peak into a volcano. So with Kabat-Zinn's blessing, I moved on to a meditation that I hoped might come more naturally to me: the body scan. One of the key exercises in the MBSR course, it's 45 minutes of carefully guiding your attention up and down your body, trying to home in on the sensations in each isolated part. The exercise begins with your left big toe and, unfortunately in my case, it often ends there - as Kabat-Zinn likes to point out, while it's very difficult to learn to "fall awake" (become connected to the present moment), it's quite easy, when meditating, to fall asleep.

Still, I stuck with it. I liked the challenge of trying to harness my mind, and I was intrigued by studies showing that MBSR does even more than that. In 2003, for example, scientists from the University of Wisconsin-Madison examined a group that included alumni of Kabat-Zinn's eight-week course, and found that when they received flu shots, the meditators' immune systems produced more antibodies in response to the vaccine than did the non-meditators'. In a 1998 University of Massachusetts study, patients with psoriasis who meditated while receiving ultraviolet treatments for their skin healed four times faster than the control group - regardless of whether they had any previous meditation training. Researchers don't yet understand all the details of why changes like these occur, but one possible explanation is that this type of meditation reduces stress and helps people develop a more positive outlook, both of which have been shown to strengthen the body's immune system.

What's more, according to researcher Norman Farb, who studies meditation and experimental psychology at the University of Toronto, such mindfulness-based meditation can actually change the way you use your brain. As Farb explains it, most of the time, we (by which I mean your average nonmeditating American) respond to new stimuli and experiences automatically, based on how we think they'll affect us. A traffic jam isn't just cars; it's a problem that will make us late for dinner - so when we see a red wall of taillights in front of us, we become stressed-out. A pair of sneakers strewn in the doorway aren't just discarded shoes; they're an

annoying obstacle. So when we trip over them, we (by which I mean your average non-meditating Catherine) get irritated with our husbands. In other words, we don't just experience, we evaluate - and then respond without thinking (clogged highway = extra minutes stuck in the car = misery).

Typically this type of narrative processing takes place in the medial prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain behind the center of your forehead that coordinates complex behaviors and thoughts. (It's also the part of the brain that's being used when your mind starts to wander.) While it's possible to stifle this default way of thinking, trying to do so is like forcing yourself to go to the gym after years of inactivity - sure, you could fight your way through a step aerobics class if you had to, but wouldn't it be nicer to just eat Doritos on the couch?

Farb has found that people who have completed the eight-week MBSR training, on the other hand, are able to activate an entirely different part of the brain - the insula. Located deep inside your gray matter, the insula informs you of what's happening in the present moment without connecting the experience to a specific emotion. When you're thinking this way, a traffic jam doesn't seem like a problem; it's simply a bunch of cars on the road.

The point of meditation is not to stop you from having an emotional response to what's happening in your life - it's to avoid responding purely out of habit. Every situation, if you think about it, is an invitation for you to react in a certain way, but being mindful gives you the chance to decide how to RSVP. Does the sight of bumper-to-bumper traffic mean you have to get stressed-out? Or could you think of those extra 20 minutes as a chance to listen to a favorite CD? (Judging from the increase in my heart rate just from typing "bumper-to-bumper," I've got work to do.) Is it really worth getting angry at my husband over those misplaced sneakers? Or would I rather be thankful for the fact that he folded the laundry? On the flip side, if it turns out you do want to say yes to the invitation - by feeling happy about a new promotion, for example - you can use mindfulness to savor the moment more fully. It doesn't matter whether the experience is good or bad; mindfulness reminds you that when it comes to your reactions, you're the one in charge.

Still, Kabat-Zinn had warned me not to expect that anything magical would happen while I was meditating, or even that it would always feel enjoyable - a caveat that I appreciated whenever I grew irritable or uncomfortable, or found myself counting down the seconds during my daily practice. He also pointed out that meditation is not a quick fix; becoming - and staying - mindful is a lifelong process.

But as I continued experimenting each day with the guided exercises, I was happy to find that they did become easier. I developed some tricks for everyday life, too - like taking a few slow, conscious breaths to bring my attention back to the present moment, or choosing a particular sense to focus on. And I tried not to get annoyed when my mind wandered. As Kabat-Zinn says, stopping your brain from thinking would be like stopping the ocean's waves. It's more productive to simply observe the thoughts without getting carried away by them - and try to tap into the calm that exists beneath the surface.

By training myself to stay focused during the exercises, I've also gotten better at staying present when I'm not actively meditating. As a result, I've discovered that each day is dense with experiences - the breeze against my skin, the play of light on the grass, the sound of my husband's laugh - and if I want to stretch out time, all I need to do is notice them. When I find my mind racing ahead or am tempted to skip my daily practice, I remember another of Kabat-Zinn's sayings that affirms why this is an experiment I want to continue: Both figuratively and literally, we only have moments to live.

For a guide on how to cultivate mindfulness and suggestions for daily practice, download these meditation exercises. To buy Jon Kabat-Zinn's series of practice CDs, go to JonKabat-Zinn.com. To find a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program near you, go to the UMass Center for Mindfulness.

Catherine Price is a freelance journalist and author of *101 Places Not to See Before You Die* (Harper Paperbacks).