

Three Simple Mindfulness Practices For Making Surprisingly Visionary Decisions

Can we improve our decision making?

What's a decision you are proud of?

Think about it for a moment.

Large or small, it doesn't matter.

You married the right person...or broke up with the wrong one. You engaged with a project that inspired and stretched you beyond your limits. You stood up for something you believe in, or made a bold, insightful business decision.

Or perhaps you just turned the tv off during a Netflix binge and went to bed. Or you restrained yourself from hitting "send" on that career / relationship damaging message. You stayed calm with the kids. You had a juice instead of a cigarette.

These are the decisions, when we look back on them, that we recognise as high quality. We could easily have chosen differently. Often it was really tempting to choose a lesser option. But somehow we made wise decisions.

And we know it was wise, because it played out well. We have the benefit of hindsight. 20-20 retrospective vision.

Unfortunately, we've also all made some stupid, short sighted decisions. We did hit "send". We did lose our temper. We did chase a quick sale. We did have that third piece of chocolate. Hindsight has proven them unwise too.

This raises the question:

If we make choices now, but only find out later if they were wise or not, how are we supposed to make good ones?

We need a way of seeing into the future. We need a way to make visionary decisions.

Seeing into the future? That sounds hard. And yet we know that some people consistently make more visionary decisions than others.

There must be a way to improve our chances of making decisions that lead to reward and not regret.

There is. It's called Mindfulness.

And what is Mindfulness?

It is a way of seeing beyond the demands of our feelings and our logic. Beyond our unseen biases. Because we can't trust feelings and logic to make visionary decisions. They get it wrong more often than they get it right.

It was our feelings that told us that third beer was a good idea. And look where that ended up.

It was logic that persuaded Blockbuster video there was no future in subscription tv. How did that work out for Blockbuster?

Through Mindfulness we can see beyond our biases, and so, see deeper into the future.

What follows are three simple Mindfulness practices that can guide us through the minefield of tempting but regrettable choices and towards a future brighter than we thought possible.

But first, let's set the right mindset for respecting these practices correctly.

Don't do Mindfulness. Become Mindful.

Why do we put training wheels on a child's bicycle? Is it to stop the kid falling over?

Not really.

Their real purpose is to allow the child to become so familiar with the experience of balance, that they no longer need the training wheels.

The practices that follow are like those training wheels.

They can be used to get a quick result. But their real purpose is for us to become so familiar with them, that the practice of Mindfulness becomes habitual.

That is, it is far better to think of them as practices on the path to mastery, than techniques used to get a result.

More about this later.

OK?

Great! Let's get started.

1. The Pause

I said simple, and this one is about as simple as it gets. But, as it so often is, the simplicity is deceptive.

The Pause is – simply – to stop whatever you are doing, and pay attention to one breath.

That's it.

OK. Let me elaborate.

In the famous fairy-tale of the Emperor's New Clothes – the Emperor and (almost) all his subjects continued to double down on the most ridiculous decisions – because they couldn't see through their biases. They made idiotic choices, but convinced themselves that they were great ones.

In that story, do you remember who saw through those delusions and finally saw things clearly?

It was a child. A simple, innocent child.

The Pause works, because it makes us more like a child. More innocent. Less opinionated. More free of nonsense. More clear seeing.

When to do it

The Pause is a defence against blindly following our opinions, so it works well when we're going down a rabbit hole, caught in rumination, or in an argument – with ourselves or someone else.

It can be used like that as a circuit breaker, but a great practice is to do it between activities throughout the day. Finish a meeting, a report, a break: Pause.

Then we go through the day with clearer perspective on what's important.

How to do it

To do it - ideally, you will be sitting. Ideally, it will be quiet.

You can close your eyes.

Deliberately stop what you are doing and tell yourself you are preparing for a Pause. Notice that you're sitting. Notice what you can hear.

Then pay attention to your breath as you take one deep breath in, and one deep breath out. All the way from the very start, to the very end.

Be curious about the breath. Be engaged, not passive. You're not just getting it over with. You're not just being vaguely aware that there's a breath going on somewhere.

Be interested. Watch it closely. What can you notice?

Easy, right?

Now here's the catch.

The catch

Very often, the mind will not want to do it. Very often.

The busier you are, the more stressed you are (i.e. the more likely you are to make bad decisions) the more your thinking will not want to Pause.

Be warned!

Your thinking will tell you there's no time. It will want you to go back to what it was you were thinking about before. It will tell you that this isn't working. Or that you don't need it. Or that it's already worked, and half a breath is enough. It will ridicule you. It will be convincing.

Like a tv infomercial desperate to convince you to buy a useless product, it will appeal to the logic and feelings that you have always succumbed to. Until now.

And this is exactly the point.

The mind will want reasons. It will offer rewards. But you will ignore these and pay attention to that breath *just for its own sake*. Not because you're trying to relax. Not because you want to make a visionary decision. Not because you want to feel good.

Just because you've decided to pay attention to this one full in-breath, and this one full out-breath. And that's it.

So there, O Wayward Mind!

Show that mind of yours who is boss!

The result

Really do this, and then the strangest thing happens...

The mind becomes quieter. Even after one, disciplined breath, you notice the difference. It feels better. You might feel inspired to take another such breath, or two...

And then, to give the mind its due, it will thank you. It will admit you were right. It will be relieved that you didn't buy whatever junk that infomercial was pushing.

And then, without even trying, you will make more visionary decisions.

Before the Pause, maybe you felt compelled to rush to the next meeting, go deeper into an unending spiral of analysis, or strangle your colleague. Following the Pause, you suddenly realise where you can really add value in the meeting. Or maybe you don't need to go at all.

You'll never know what surprising, but eminently sensible, decisions will bubble to the surface of your priorities, when you free yourself from those seductive infomercials. But it is much more likely to be high leverage. Visionary.

Conclusion

You know how people often have good ideas going for an enjoyable walk, having a relaxing shower, or after a good night's sleep? The Pause is part of that family. And it's always available.

Be disciplined with it. Respect it. Do it fully and correctly. And each time you do it, notice the change in the state of your mind that arises. Become familiar with it. Enjoy it.

Again, the Pause is like all these practices. Although they work in isolation, they work much better when they're done often, and ultimately when they become a habit.

They're not so much places to visit, as neighbourhoods to live in...or near.

2. "What would a wise person do?"

There's a process, called "caging" where Nightingales are trained to sing by being progressively caged with other more skilled nightingales – each one a better singer than the last.

Simply by witnessing what is possible, the trainee nightingale is magnetically drawn towards a standard of singing that was initially beyond them.

They have an innate ability to recognise superior singing, even when they have never experienced it before. The ability to recognise that beauty is in their DNA.

It is our nature to grow – physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually - we are constantly seeking a better future. That's what we do. All the time. The extent to which we get there is dependent on how visionary are our choices.

Because of this, like Nightingales, we were born with the wonderful capacity to recognise, or imagine, a skill *before we actually have it*. That's how we learn. We borrow skill from the future.

In the same way, we have access to wisdom that we don't yet possess ourselves. We can make more visionary decisions than we have ever made before. We can outdo ourselves. We can surprise ourselves.

Because we have the innate ability to recognise wisdom. It's in our DNA.

How to do it

A very simple question we can ask ourselves to access this visionary thinking, is:

“What would a wise person do?”

It’s best to do this when we are feeling centred. When we believe in ourselves - even if we’re facing a dilemma or an uncertain situation. The question really needs to be asked to a happy mind.

(Practice #1 (“The Pause”) will help with this, but Practice #3 is vital for it. Stay tuned!)

When we ask this question in a genuine, humble way, two things happen.

- 1) It cuts through our logic and feeling opinions. Because, in asking this question, it’s not about us. It’s not asking what we “should” do. We can put aside our prejudices. We don’t have to defend them.
- 2) It taps into our innate modelling ability.
We have all met, read, read about, seen, or heard about people who have qualities we admire. Because we recognise those qualities, we can imitate them. If it’s easier you can swap “wise person” for a specific wise person you feel close to: Jesus, your grandmother,...Yoda.

So, again, it is a very simple technique.

And again the simplicity is deceptive.

The catch

The catch is that we only ever do what we think is wise.

We never deliberately make mistakes.

This means that if we want a piece of chocolate, but *really believe* it’s not wise to have it – we can never have it. We will *never* act against our beliefs.

So, like ingenious children, very often we get to work proving that what we want is the wise choice. We deceive ourselves about what is wise, so we can do what we want to do.

“Oh, I’ve been pretty good – I deserve this chocolate. It’s only one...”

Most of our inner and outer chatter about our choices is simply justifying what we want. And we are incredibly good at it. Very convincing.

The choice that leads to a lapse in our diet, or to a corporate scandal, or to an international war – only happens because we can convince ourselves that what we want to do is the wise thing to do.

So, it’s good to remember, we are not asking “What do I think is wise?”.

We’re asking, “What would a wise person do?”

Notice the difference.

Would a wise person really roll into the next episode of a Netflix binge? Would they get caught up in gossip? Would they manipulate and judge? Would they get stressed in this situation?

Take advantage of the blessing of these people’s example, and of your gift to recognise it.

Of course, the more contact we have with wise people, the easier they are to model. So there are few more visionary decisions we can make than to make friends with wise people.

3. What I love about...is...

Do you know the story about the tourist lost in the countryside, who approaches a local for directions to the capital city?

The local, who was not the brightest spark, ponders it long and hard,...seeking a visionary response. Clearly it's a difficult problem.

Finally, he emerges from his deep reflection, and replies:

"Well, I wouldn't start from here."

The one inescapable fact about any decision we make is that we have to start from where we are.

And yet, in so many of our silly decisions – so many of our regrets – we were rushing or procrastinating. We were needy, or wanted to avoid our present situation. We were not happy where we were.

This is a recipe for short sighted decisions, and regret. In fact, our discontent is the main obstacle to making visionary decisions.

When we are discontent, our focus is riveted to what we don't like. What's wrong. What's not possible.

It's only when we love our situation that it reveals its potential. It's only then that we see what's possible. It's only then we have clear vision.

Look at any visionary breakthrough – yours or someone else's – and you'll see this is the case. Visionary decisions are made by people who are fascinated by their situation. They yearn to see what's possible.

This is the essential soil from which visionary decisions emerge.

So, how can we pull ourselves out of discontent, and love being where we are – so that we can see the potential in the situation?

How to do it

We can lead ourselves into this more present, loving mindset, with the prompt:

"What I love about...is..."

Just filling in the blanks here can be pleasantly revealing. Things and situations that you may have felt indifferent towards, or even disliked, suddenly reveal a more pleasing aspect. And even with the things we already love, that appreciation can become surprisingly deeper.

It's really nice.

What I love about:

- being stuck in traffic is... that I can actually appreciate my surroundings when I'm driving.
- the project I'm procrastinating about...is that moment when I realise it's not as bad as I thought.

- my controlling boss is...the way he really does his best. He really has high standards.
- my computer mouse is...it's actually quite elegantly designed. I'd never noticed!
- my son is...he's courageous and willing to be vulnerable. And, actually, just adorable.

As if enhancing our mood, and our relationships wasn't enough, this practice also has the remarkable ability to make the invisible visible.

When we deepen our admiration in a relationship, we automatically see more of its potential. It just happens. No effort required.

Suddenly we recognise ways to enjoy our commute. The desire to procrastinate is dissolved. The idea of authentically expressing our admiration for our boss comes to mind.

Where we could only see problems, possibilities for more visionary choices appear before our eyes.

And because of this, as an added bonus, loving where we are also dissolves our stress.

So this practice is a great preparation for Practice #2. When we start to see what is possible and then ask what a wise person would do...well, it's a fantastic combination.

The beauty of this practice is that, through it, we become happier. We begin to love where we are.

And look around you and you'll see that happy people make wiser choices.

When to do it

Of course, being more loving all the time is ideal. But let's face it, if we're in the middle of a screaming match with our colleague – it's tough to summon up our love for them. (But, even then, it's worth a try!)

But realistically, practice this in the calmer moments. Before work. Between activities. At the end of the day. And, as mentioned, before making that request for advice from the wise person in your mind.

Do this as much as possible, because it's the most generous of practices. It keeps on giving. Cultivate love each morning and the possibilities for more positive experiences open up from it. It snowballs. It builds its own momentum.

And then, gradually, unimagined but outstanding possibilities become apparent, and more and more within your reach.

Conclusion

We often think of Mindfulness as a tool we can use to get an effect. To relax. To clear our minds. To make visionary decisions. We think "I'll just do some Mindfulness, and then things will be better."

Wanting to "do some Mindfulness" is like wanting to hold a box of headache pills to your temple because you have a headache. The pressure might marginally soften the pain, but taking the pill will resolve it.

We think Mindfulness is a cause. But really it is an effect. It is a result of being loving. Be loving and we are mindful, by default.

Which decisions matter?

Feelings and Logic are wonderful servants, but terrible masters.

They are vital in giving structure and energy to the pursuit of a goal, but pretty useless in choosing a goal worth pursuing. Because they just can't see very far. They can only see as far as the goal we give them. They have no deep visionary capacity.

Relying on Feelings and Logic puts us on the path to "how did I end up here?" A visionless path. These are the choices we regret.

And one of the best examples of how we are lead astray by Feelings and Logic is that they tell us that some decisions don't matter.

It doesn't matter if I hit snooze,... just this once. Watching one more show won't make any difference. It's ok to ignore that person because they aren't important. Clean up my desk? I have more important things to do.

Small things matter

But the "small" decisions do matter. They really matter.

Why?

Think of something you are good at. Anything.

It could be being a mother, or playing Assassin's Creed. It could be analysing a spreadsheet, or choosing the right shoes for a dress.

Now, what is the difference between your mastery in that area and the skill of an average person like me?

The difference is in the small things. The details. The things that you notice, that I don't. The things that I think are not important.

I could give your child three meals a day, but would I know what really inspires them? I would be clueless. I could keep them alive, but could never guide them towards a visionary future.

Mastery is always mastery of the "small" decisions. And its only the master that can be visionary.

I was watching a game of football on tv. One of the teams was the reigning champion.

It was the end of the half time break. The tv station showed cctv as that team's players left the change rooms to return to the field.

Last to leave was the captain. Before he left the room, he noticed that a single empty drink bottle was lying on the floor in the corner of an otherwise clean and orderly room. No-one else was there. No-one else was watching (except everyone watching on tv!). A cleaner would certainly pick it up.

But, before leaving, the captain went and disposed of the bottle and left the room in perfect condition.

Was that a waste of time? Or a visionary decision?

Putting it all together

So that's it.

Be happy where you are. Even if you want to move towards somewhere else. I know this sounds like a contradiction, but it's not (for reasons I'll explain in a moment). Love where you are, warts and all.

Then free the mind from the clamour of demands that your habitual thinking and biases are begging you to respond to. Pause. Breathe. Enjoy it.

And in the space that arises as the clamour subsides, pose the question to your inner wisdom about what is the most visionary decision you can make.

You'll be surprised at what comes back. You may not like it. You may not want to do it. And yet, at the same time, you'll know it's right.

Because whether it was Jesus or Yoda that you asked for help, in reality it is the Future Self you aspire to be that is sending that wise advice back to you.

And this is why we don't regret our visionary decisions. Because they have come from the future. They already have the benefit of hindsight.

They come from your best, wisest self who is calling you. They are calling you to be them. To become who you can be.

This is the test of a visionary decision.

Would the person, team or organisation, that you really aspire to be, make this decision?

The test of a visionary decision is not what you get from it. It's who you become through it.

Final thought

Have you ever heard someone say they wished they hadn't given up smoking? Or that they wished they still had a bad temper? Or they wished they hadn't learned to value themselves more?

No-one has ever regretted giving up an addiction, or a bad habit.

In the same way, everyone who has ever committed to becoming more mindful – to growing into their aspired Future Self - has been grateful for that choice.

This is the most visionary decision we can make. To start and continue on our journey towards becoming our best.

It's really valuable to have good friends on this journey.

Valuable?

Actually, it's vital.

The courses we run at Inner Lantern connect you with a deeper vision of who you long to be. They teach you skills for being more at your best, more of the time. They help you manage life's challenges and feel more in control of your life. And they help you make more visionary decisions.

And through all of this, you connect with other people forging their own unique journey.

Contact me at brendan@inner-lantern.com to arrange for you, your team, or your organisation to join a program that supports this visionary journey.