**Mindfulness during uncertain times: How can we feel free while being grounded?**

We have heard claims that mindfulness is the solution to all our challenges. But is it?

Regular mindfulness meditation equips us with the resilience and flexibility to face difficulties and allows us to live a more meaningful and fulfilled life. But it is not the magic bullet that we fire when feeling under pressure. It requires effort, dedication and – crucially – regular practice. It is a mental exercise that cultivates three components in a balanced way:

**Intention – attitude – attention**

**Intention** is the most important one. Without a clear intention to meditate, we simply won’t do it. And why should we? Intention also infuses our whole meditation practice. We meet the current moment with full resolve: here I am right now; let’s make it count.

**Attitude** is the most profound one. This is where the real juice of mindfulness is. We observe the moment of experience without judgement, whatever it brings: the good, the bad and the ugly. We are aware that we *do* experience and we meet the content of this experience with an open, curious, accepting and kind attitude. Whether pleasant or unpleasant, we just stay with whatever arises in mind.

**Attention** is the most obvious of the three. Attention means non-distraction. It means maintaining focused clear awareness of momentary experience, whatever it is. Over time, a more stable focus will develop. We will concentrate better for longer.

But if we forget to balance our attention with a mindful attitude, everything can spiral out of control. If our emotions pull us in, we may suddenly find ourselves entangled in worries and ruminations.

No one should take up mindfulness practice without heading this advice: practice being attentive and aware but combine it with non-engagement. Keep an open and kind attitude and do not indulge in the content of what arises in mind. And if you do indulge, recognise it and step out.

This ability to refrain from mental indulgence is called de-centring. It means that we become able to step out of the centre of our emotions: Rather than being an emotion (“I am frustrated”) we observe the emotion (“Oh, that’s what people call frustration. How interesting!”).

Mentally stepping out and stepping in again, flexibly as fits to our intentions, makes mindfulness meditation such a powerful tool. This is how we gain the freedom to stay level-headed when it gets turbulent, and fully inspired and engaged when something meaningful can be achieved.

During the current lock-down paying attention with a mindful attitude becomes even more important: When it is more difficult to distract ourselves from unpleasant experiences, being able to let emotions come and go like waves on the shore offers stability and perspective.

The first step into mindfulness meditation practice consist of focusing our attention on an object, such as the sensation of breathing or a speckle on the carpet. While we practice to maintain the focus of attention on this object, we are also aware of our inner chatter or our tendency to evaluate or change the object: “Should I breathe deeper?”, “Someone has to hoover the carpet.”, etc. Whenever we get entangled in any of these mental habits, we recognise this, let the chatter go, and return to the object. In the moment we let go in this way, the chatter vanishes by itself. Nothing more is needed. Don’t give it extra energy by fighting it or pushing it away. And don’t worry if you have to run through this process again and again. Each time you do, you strengthen the pathways in the brain that support your concentration. Each time you recognise that your mind wandered off, pat yourself on the back: your mindfulness skills improved again.

This is neither a magic bullet nor a quick fix, but you also don’t need a lifetime. In a whole series of neuroscientific studies we confirmed that just practicing mindful breath awareness for ten minutes a day, for three weeks or more, will lead to positive changes in attention and in the related brain activity. Over time, our ability to de-centre will grow and we will be able to understand that, rather than being an emotion, we actually have an emotion. And that’s what I call inner freedom.