

Be Still and Listen

Mindfulness for Lawyers

By Nancy A. Werner

Joe, a trial attorney, attends a neighborhood block party on a sunny Sunday afternoon. He sits in a circle of lawn chairs with five of his neighbors who chat about their children in Little League, books they've read, and landscaping projects around their homes. Joe's contribution to the conversation consists of discussing his cases.

Jane, a nonprofit attorney working with a domestic abuse shelter, invites friends over for an impromptu dinner. During dinner while everyone is chatting amiably, Jane becomes enraged for no apparent reason and leaves the room in a huff. Her friends are stunned. She reappears a few moments later, agitated and speaking with an angry voice.

Balancing professional and personal lives can be difficult for lawyers and judges. Often, we are unaware when our lives fall out of balance until it is brought to our attention by loved ones or unwelcome medical challenges.

Just as we train our minds to remember phone numbers or the rule against perpetuities, so too can we train our minds to be present. Being present is being fully aware of what is happening in the moment and not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. By stripping away guilt or fear, the present can be enjoyed and accepted for what it is.

Driving back from court to his office, Bob is talking on his cell phone to his assistant to reschedule a client appointment. Bob unknowingly runs a stop sign.

Dave is videotaping his six-year-old son's soccer game. He is more concerned with "getting this right" than enjoying the game.

For centuries, people have used the Buddhist tradition known as *vipassana*, also known as insight meditation or mindfulness training, to gain this awareness. Mindfulness has been used over the past few decades in Western culture to assist with mental and physical well-being and stress reduction. It can also be used to improve work performance by increasing clarity, focus, and calmness. Having the ability to reduce mental clutter and chatter to focus on the task at hand is especially helpful for attorneys.

There are many avenues that lead to developing mindfulness. Meditation can come in various physical forms including yoga, tai chi, drumming, knitting or crocheting, gardening, labyrinth walking, or chanting. Other examples of meditation include inspirational reading, watching a body of water, visualizing a place of serenity and calm, or silence.

"When we pause, allow a gap and breathe deeply, we can experience instant refreshment. Suddenly, we slow down, and there's the world."

—Pema Chodron

Here's a simple meditation technique to get started. You can do this anywhere for as little as a few moments or as long as several hours. There is no right or wrong, but whatever feels comfortable to you.

- Get comfortable in your chair.
- Sit in silence or have soft, instrumental music playing in the background.
- Put aside items in your hands or lap. Keep your legs and arms uncrossed, feet flat on the floor, and hands in lap.

- If you'd like, close your eyes.
- Take three deep breaths, pausing momentarily between each one.
- Allow the chair to hold the weight of your body.
- Empty your mind. Temporarily set aside all those things you have to do, negative thoughts, fears, anxieties, and concerns.
- Starting at your feet, slowly release all tension from the body. Move upward through your extremities, limbs, and organs toward your head. Allow your muscles to relax.
- Imagine there is a hole on the top of your head that opens; release all negativity and worry into space.
- Sit quietly and listen. If your mind tends to wander (and it will), go back to focusing on your breath.
- To combat mind chatter (that voice in your head that talks to you, or a bombardment of thoughts), do not judge it, but also don't indulge it. Pay attention to what comes up, notice it, then let the thought pass.

Following are a few simple ways to incorporate aspects of mindfulness into daily life. These ideas may be expanded based on how comfortable you feel with the process of letting go of old thoughts and behaviors that no longer suit who you are or wish to be.

Do Something Nonlegal for Another Person Without Expectation of Reward

Lawyers do pro bono work all the time. However, separate your lawyer self from

your human self to allow balance. Humans are warm and giving by nature. Allow yourself to feel these emotions daily. Embrace your humanity. Let your staff leave work an hour early. Let someone merge into traffic ahead of you. Leave an extra big tip for your server at a restaurant. Open the door for someone else. Help someone struggling with heavy grocery bags. Compliment a stranger. Call your local animal shelter and find out if it needs donations. Be a friend to a co-worker or neighbor.

Slow Down

Remember the man spinning plates on high sticks on *The Ed Sullivan Show*? Do you sometimes feel like that man, trying to keep all those plates spinning without allowing them to fall? If we speed through life unconsciously, we may miss important details and beautiful moments. Life is a series of choices we control, and it is perfectly acceptable to say no. Take a walk. Play a game with a child. Get away from technology and allow your head to clear. Smartphones, iPads, Wi-Fi, and the ability to be reached any place any time can be time savers, but can also foster technology addiction. Try to simplify your life one step at a time.

Allow for Unstructured Time in Your Day

Pressures of the practice of law take every spare minute of our time if we allow it. Force yourself to walk away from your desk or office for a brief respite. Taking a few minutes to meditate can be as simple as closing the office door, quietly playing calming music, closing your eyes, and taking a few deep breaths. A break from your routine and stress will pay dividends. Pressing on relentlessly can ultimately result in unconsciously speeding toward crashing and burning rather than heading toward vibrancy and growth.

Preserve the Body Temple

The human gate to the sacred is our own body. Take deep breaths. Give attention to what you put into your body. Avoid introducing substances that negatively react with

the balance of your system, such as alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine. Is your diet balanced? How much sugar do you ingest daily? How much water do you drink? Do you get enough sleep? You will be amazed to see how simple changes can lead to feeling better.

Suspend Judgment

As lawyers, judgment and discernment are part of our training. Try suspending preconceived notions about yourself, your relationships, and others. By not seeing situations with fresh eyes, we get caught up in past experiences and rob ourselves of the current experience. Take an inventory of the baggage you carry and lighten your load. Do old ideas limit your ability to enjoy today and be the person you wish to be now?

Mindfulness is not quite as simple as these suggestions imply; however, progress is possible through daily practice. Incorporating awareness, observation, and peace into our professional and private lives is encouraged. Books by Jack Kornfeld, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Lama Surya Das, Pema Chodron, and especially Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness in Everyday Life* can shine light on our awareness of the human experience so we may live more fully and happily.

By opening our eyes to the present moment as it occurs, we become more aware of the richness of life. By letting go of our expectations for the future and comparisons with the past, we achieve a freedom to act without limitation in the present. Creativity awakens, self-knowledge deepens, and we gain direction and focus by stopping to be still and listen. ■

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