



BREATHING IN AND BREATHING OUT

"Toby, what the hell is mindfulness?" asks an old friend and classmate who had wandered into the wrong workshop at a recent convention. It is a good question with many answers.

Scott Rogers, a dedicated lawyer who is trying to bring more balance into the lives of law students writes, *"Mindfulness is all about cultivating awareness. Awareness of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Awareness of your life in the present moment."* I prefer "awareness" to "mindfulness" because "awareness" is a word that has a common, understood, and clear meaning. Also it escaped ever becoming a buzzword or morphing into a cliché.

The point is to find ways of reminding ourselves that we are humans living with other humans — and also living in a community of other beings and things.

Awareness is very much what my 84+ year present life is all about! And, it seems to get simpler and simpler — both in my mental capacity and my spiritual practice!

FOR EXAMPLE:

At least twice a day I walk from my room up a little hill to our chapel where we gather to pray, sing, contemplate and the like. What was going on in my head was usually thinking about what I had been doing or planning what I needed to do after leaving the chapel. And since I was usually in danger of being late, there was a sense of rushing. Then I developed some mobility issues and started using a walker. Life slowed down! I began to find ways of getting outside of my head and focusing on what was around me.

How? Nothing very profound. First, I borrowed a phrase from the Zen teacher and activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–) —“*Breathing in I calm myself...*” Next, when I exhale I simply tell myself, “*Look around!*”

That's it and yet it makes an enormous difference in my life. I'm able to get outside the little world that preoccupies me and go home to the bigger world in which I really exist. Now I am fully aware that this practice will never be collected in some book on “Great Contemplative Exercises” but it sure works for me.

Today the first thing I see is the gravel on the path. It seems to me there is a great story in the little pieces of gravel. Where did they come from? Where are they going? Almost too soon comes the apple tree. An apple lays on the path. The old tree has seen many seasons. Someday it will be blown over but for now it lives. Sort of like each of us. Looking up I see the redwood trees, the hills around me, the horizon which always seems to call me to what is to come. From a tall tree a towhee sings her beautiful trill advising me that this is her territory. At my feet are little lizards playing among the pansies. Overhead raptors fly looking for a meal. But in this instant, this now-moment, the lizards are alive and joyful. Again almost too soon, I'm on the chapel ramp I have walked for 40 years or so. Then there before me is the patch of earth where I am privileged to live and, with the help of others, to protect. And inside are the people who have made this loving adventure of life possible for me.

Now, do I really have to keep saying to myself "*Look around*" every time I exhale? I sure do. Otherwise I'll jump right into thinking about "big" things that I convince myself are important and miss all the "little" things that really are important. I have come to realize that the mystery I label "God" is in those little things. And at times of pain and stress the comfort and strength I need somehow, in ways I do not understand, help me move from breath to breath.

You most likely have something simple that works well for you. Just do it!

Brother Toby