

The Mindfulness of Pure Experience

Dropping any story or narrative in your head about what's happening right now ... what are the sensations you're feeling at this moment?

What are you smelling, tasting, feeling, hearing, seeing? What colors, textures, qualities of light can you perceive? What does it feel like where your body makes contact with your clothing, with your chair, with the earth?

This is your pure sensory experience, and it is rare that most of us let ourselves just stay in this place.

Usually, we're caught up in a narrative about ourselves, our lives, our current situation, other people. We might notice the pure experience, but almost immediately we start judging it, wishing it were different, getting upset at it, or wishing it didn't have to change.

Now, there's nothing *wrong* with having thoughts about our experience — it's natural. But it can be the cause of anxiety, fear, unhappiness, frustration.

Dropping into the mindfulness of pure experience is a way we can deal with those problems, in any moment.

Actually, this is what meditation is, for the most part — dropping into pure experience. Many people misunderstand, and think, "I shouldn't be thinking! I'm screwing this up because I keep having thoughts." This is not a problem. When you meditate, thoughts will come up. You will get lost in a train of thought.

What you want to do, in meditation, is get better at *noticing* when you're lost in a train of thought. Then, after noticing, simply return the immediate sensations of your breath and the rest of your current experience. It's like waking up from a dream. Meditation is training to wake up more often and stay awake longer.

Let's talk about dropping out of thought and into pure experience.

What Pure Experience Is

So what do I mean by "pure experience"? Isn't everything parts of our experience, including thoughts? Yes, that's technically correct (the best kind of correct), but it's useful to distinguish between our train of thoughts (what I like to call our "story" or "narrative" about our experience) and the actual sensations of what's happening right now.

A couple examples of the difference between the two:

- You feel coldness on your skin (sensation). You immediately think, “This sucks, I don’t like the cold, I need to get warmer.” This is your narrative about the situation, your interpretation, your judgment. It makes you unhappy. The pure experience of cold, without judgment or narrative, is just a sensation.
- You’re in an airport, and there are noises from people talking all around you, smells from the pretzel shop, light and colors and shapes and visual textures, and more. These are your sensory experience. Your story about how irritating the people are, or how you need to get a cinnamon pretzel in your belly right now, are your thoughts, judgments, narrative. The story can cause you to be unhappy with the situation, but the sensations are just sensations.

So right now, you can notice your sensory experience:

1. What can you hear? Take a moment to pay attention to all auditory sensations you are receiving.
2. What light can you see? What is its quality?
3. What colors and shapes can you see? Soak in the visual sensory information you’re receiving.
4. What touch sensations can you notice in your body right now? Can you feel your feet, your butt on a chair, your jaw, your chest?

What do you notice? Can you be curious about these sensations, and stay with them?

Noticing Thoughts, and Returning to Pure Experience

What happens when you (inevitably) start *thinking* about the sensations instead of staying with them?

Well, this can lead to an extended daydream as you get lost in the narrative about your experience. Now you’re not actually experiencing the moment, but caught in your story and judgments.

These judgments usually aren’t helpful — they say some version of, “I don’t like this situation (or other person, or something about myself) and I want it to be different.” Or, “I love this so much and I never want it to end, but it will, oh why does it have to end?” Either way, we can be unhappy, frustrated, clinging to what we don’t want to lose or rejecting what we don’t want to experience.

Instead, we can let go of the story, let go of the judgment, and return to the sensations.

We can practice getting better at noticing whether we’re “in our head” or “in our body.” That means noticing whether you’re lost in thoughts or present with your experience.

Once we notice being lost in thoughts, we don't have to judge that. We can just notice, non-judgmentally, and then make it a habit of returning to sensation. What sensations can you notice right now?

Don't judge the sensations, just pay attention to them. Don't push them away and wish they were different, just be curious about them. Don't cling to them if you like them, but notice with gratitude and let them flow past you lightly.

This is returning to pure experience, with mindfulness and gratitude.

This is the joyful mindfulness of the present moment. Practice now!