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Moment meditation

By Caroline Robertson

Many great thinkers and spiritual traditions prescribe the practice of being in the present as a path to enlightenment. Though being mindful of the moment seems simple, it's actually very difficult to maintain for more than a minute. So if present consciousness is the portal to liberation why do we habitually resist it, choosing to be absent while life passes us by? *Moment Meditation* helps us to break free from our preoccupation from the present, offering practical ways to experience the perfection of now.

PRESS PAUSE

Right now a moment of time is passing by!.. We must become that moment

-Paul Cezanne

Gurdjieff subjected his students to a technique called the "stop exercise" to develop their present awareness. At unexpected times he would spontaneously call out "stop" and students would freeze, focussing their full attention on their current thoughts and actions. A similar idea was explored in Aldous Huxley's last novel "Island." In his utopian paradise parrots would constantly sing out "Stop pay attention" to remind inhabitants to be totally conscious.

Try pausing now. Focus your attention on your thoughts. Where are you now? Are you in the future wondering.. how long is this article? Do I have time to read it?... what else is coming up?...Or are you pondering the past thinking...I've encountered this topic before...I should've done more today...That previous article was interesting...Alternatively you may be totally in the moment.

Now relax, let go of any extraneous thoughts and surrender your full awareness to now. Sense your body, breath, surroundings and the act of reading. Imagine time is standing still so you have nowhere to go, nothing to do and nothing to think. Release all tension from your body. Can you feel your awareness shift to a new level of perception? This intense focus creates the clarity to experience things as they really are. Reality blossoms under the light of our attention so we view everything from a fresh, child-like perspective. However it is challenging to maintain this focus for long, as within seconds the mind strays to future or past concerns. In fact, NLP experts estimate that we spend only about 1% of our time in present consciousness.

Ascertaining whether we drift to the past or future indicates our psychological tendency. To determine whether we are inclined to lag in the past or flee to the future try the following exercise. Carry around a small note pad and pen. Over 4 hours be aware of your thoughts and dialogue. Whenever you are aware of your thoughts, categorise whether you were thinking of the past, moment or future. Write down a P for past, M for moment and F for future. At the end of the 4 hours tally up the results.

Though there's a positive and productive side to our time-travelling inclination, it can influence and perpetuate negative patterns. For example, if you counted mostly F's you may have excessive future consciousness. Though far from a fixed rule, future-based people can be more prone to feel anxiety, frustration, restlessness, agitation, anger, irritability, impatience, worry, fear and dissatisfaction. Those with a majority of P's are more attached to past concerns and experiences. The downside of this can be a predisposition to depression, regret, guilt, resentment, bitterness, hopelessness, self-pity and a judgemental outlook.

Many of these feelings will dissipate when we come to the party of the present. Through life I've observed that predominantly happy people have the uncanny ability to spend the majority of their time in the moment. Their total presence allows them to be comfortable with others and themselves. They've made friends with the moment and don't allow pressures of time to impinge on present pleasures. When we live in the present we experience pleasure with our full presence. We step into a state of "in-joyment" that only comes with complete awareness. When we mentally remove ourselves from the present we are unable to appreciate the fullness of now and become dissatisfied with life.

Though it is necessary and even enjoyable to think of the past and future our awareness should remain anchored in the only true reality-now. After all, there literally is no time like the present. The past has passed and the future is not yet born, only this minute bears the rich potential of ongoing creation. As the saying goes "yesterday is a cancelled check, tomorrow a promissory note. The only cash on hand is today." Also the best investment for the future is to be fully present now as then we make the right choices for the best consequences.

When we disproportionately ponder the past or fret over the future we lose our present power, creating confusion about present decisions. It drains us to dwell on what was or what may be, robbing us of energy and appreciation of the present. A secret to empowerment is to focus on what we can influence rather than worrying about what we can't. To manage life we must process the past and project into the future to an extent but this can only be done efficiently when we are in present consciousness. However people tend to get trapped in the time machine of fast forward or rewind, needlessly investing their emotions in things that have either passed or may never even happen. When the causes of stress were assessed in a recent study it was found that 30% was caused by thinking about painful past memories and reliving them, 8% thinking about legitimate future worries, 50% worrying about things that never happened, and 12% worrying about things one couldn't possibly have any control over. As Sir Winston Churchill said "It is a mistake to try to look too far ahead. The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time"

Most of us live with filters created by past or future beliefs that distort our perception of reality. When life is concentrated on now we release impressions or reactivity from the past and expectations of the future and are free to create a fresh reality from a reborn consciousness. Liberated from limiting influences of past preconceptions and future expectations one is receptive to the possibilities of the unfolding present, free from negative patterns rooted in past conditioning or future concerns.

Appreciating the fresh flow of life's experiences we are able to receive and respond to things without the bias of past or future conditioning, instead making choices from present moment clarity and awareness. When we pause the usual autopilot mode we slip into the gap between stimulus/ response and are able to create a whole new experience, Through this observation we realise that transformation takes place in the flicker of an intention. To live in this timeless reality we can follow HG Wells advice to-"not allow the clock or calendar to blind us to the fact that each moment of life is a miracle and a mystery."

TIME MACHINE

A memorable Twilight Zone episode told the tale of a man who felt the constant pressure of time scarcity. He loved to read but due to long work hours never got the chance. His longing for more time miraculously manifested one day when the whole world paused except for him. Scaling the library steps his face shone with gleeful anticipation at all the books that awaited his eager eyes. In his rush however, tragedy struck. His glasses fell to the stone ground and smashed.

This story highlights a common dilemma in modern society. We may be more affluent today but an epidemic of time poverty has stretched levels of stress to breaking point. Many live by time beliefs such as they are running out of time, they have no time, there's never enough time or they are wasting time. These tense strings of time constraints bind us from the freedom of the present as Alan Cohen observed-"if you are a servant of time rather than letting time serve you, you are a prisoner." When we live under the pressure of future worries whilst carrying the burden of past baggage we are too overloaded to relax in the present. We can't live as Rabindranath Tagore advised - "to lightly dance on the edges of Time like dew on the tip of a leaf." Goldie Hawn experienced the joy this attitude brings in a recent anecdote -"The other day a great song came on the radio, so I pulled the car over, got out and started dancing. Why not just live in the moment, especially if it has a good beat?"Feeling that time is on our side helps us relax and accept that everything happens in its own good time. Viewing time not as a quantity we must keep track of but as a quality we can be aware of helps us to squeeze the most from every moment. When we understand that time is a man-made illusion and all we have is the timeless moment then we can let go and enjoy the passing cosmic play. Being flexible with our concept of time we then live in multi-dimensional time frame where the past, present and future in a mosaic of clarity.

NOT NOW!

Why do we habitually avoid what's happening now? Mental time travel is a way to divert our attention from present pain and also to stimulate the pleasure-seeking mind. We do it both consciously as a form of escapism and coping mechanism as well as an unconscious mental habit. When we resist or reject what is going on in the moment our mind deals with it by distracting us with thoughts about the past or future. Ironically this may perpetuate and even compound pain and negativity as our absent awareness is immobilised from shifting our present state towards conscious change.

Our bodies may be in the moment but our minds are absent in another time, creating physical unco-ordination and a disconnection with ourselves, others and our environment. Preoccupation from the past stops us from occupying our bodies and as we are off time travelling others sense our absence where 'the lights are on but nobody's home.' Life can pass us by while we're stuck in a moment of the past or future, just like the saying "life is what happens to us when we're busy making other plans." The trick to remain grounded in the present while still processing the past or making future plans is to maintain awareness of your present sensations and surroundings. By remaining calm in the moment you can objectively see the past and future for what they are- simply mental projections based on conditioned responses and judgements. We can also avoid a lot of unnecessary anguish about the past or future by detaching from the results of our endeavours with the understanding that we ultimately have no control over the outcome only over our present input. As Mata Amritanandamayi elucidates "it's not the planning nor the hoping that creates problems for us but our attachment to those plans and hopes. Let go of attachment and appreciate the present."

PERFECT TIMING

A compulsion to think of the past and future indicates rejection of the present. To check our tendency to escape the present we must face reality as it is. Rama Dass, author of "Be Here Now" gives a useful mantra in this regard- "I accept the here and now fully. As..it..is..right at this moment" With the clarity of present-centred consciousness we can make the right choices, responding and adapting appropriately for a positive future, For as CG Jung's believed "we cannot change anything until we accept it." If we don't see things as they are or resist them, they will persist. When we embrace what is, our feelings and experiences, we can learn from them, appreciate them and let them go, breaking the repetitive cycle of destructive unconscious patterns. It is only our biased judgement that categorises something as good or bad, instead accept 'this is not good or bad, it just is.'" Unless we are fully conscious of what we are doing or feeling in the moment we are doomed to repeat it. "Be in the present. If you are happy now, the past will not torment you. If you live life now, tomorrow will take care of itself" said Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

Though things may appear to be negative now we can't predict the ultimate outcome of a situation. Cultivate faith that everything is governed by a universal intelligence orchestrating everything according to a divine order that benefits everyone in the grand scheme of life. Everything happens for a good reason, though we often only realise this in hindsight. Even calamities however painful can be pregnant with meaning that enrich our evolution.

"Accept whatever comes to you woven in the pattern of your destiny, for what could be more aptly fit your needs" as Marcus Aurelius said.

When we accept this we trust in the moment, perceiving its perfection. Surrendering to what is helps us to relax and sense the divinity present in everything, everywhere. Then we sense Henry Miller's truth that "every moment is a golden one for him who has the vision to recognise it as such." Say yes to the present moment and feel peaceful knowing that everything is as it should be, even uncertainty. We can surrender our need to control the future and past attachments when we accept the Course in Miracles lesson that "Heaven is now. There is no other time."

PLAN BE

It always provoked laughter when exasperated Frank from Seinfeld screamed "Serenity Now!" We all desire a tranquil life yet often lack the everyday tools to create it. Though the path to peace can be found through simple non-sectarian solutions, our complex minds often seek more complicated methods. Perhaps we feel the more difficult and sophisticated the process, the greater the result. Actually the answer to happiness is so simple it seems unbelievable. Whilst we theoretically understand the benefits of present awareness, philosophy is mere mental speculation until we put it into practice. We all know at some level what we need to do but resist doing what we know as habits pull us back.

Moment meditation draws from awareness techniques espoused by the Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Sufi and Christian faiths, and especially Indian Tantric texts, Zen and Taoist scriptures. The common thread weaving through all these philosophies is agreeance with Rabbi Jeff Roth's words that "the present moment is the only place the Divine can be accessed" and in Rumi's assertion that "past and future veil God from our sight."

Experiencing moment meditation techniques gives us an authentic appreciation of the value of present consciousness. Initially we lay the foundation of mindfulness through formal practices but then we must integrate the methods into everyday life. In this way we can summon the state whenever we remember, particularly in times of crises when it will prove most helpful. It can be very difficult to maintain moment

awareness and for months or even years one may only get transient flashes of insight, known as Sartori in Zen Buddhism, However, with consistent perseverance and patience one will be able to sustain present awareness for progressively longer time periods.

Though a concerted effort is required to succeed in this process, excessive strain or striving will ironically block progress. Instead adopt a feeling of inner non-resistance and intense alertness. Develop a relaxed receptivity that utilises maximum awareness with minimal superfluous strain. At all times the body is relaxed, the breathing smooth and the mind carefree. Approach the exercises with the mood of childlike play rather than as a serious adult chore. Let go of any façades or pretences that cover your true self.

Reality can be confronting and painful but by facing it with a detached and light heart we can often see the divine humour behind the transient film of events. Just as Hermann Hesse mused that, "eternity is a mere moment, just long enough for a joke."

When the flickering mind strays from the moment, as it inevitably will, don't berate yourself, rather congratulate yourself on observing the shift and gently bring it back to the present. Be happy that the instant you realise your absence you are present again. Maintain this consciousness by pausing, breathing and asking yourself the following two questions suggested by Ram Dass.

Where am I? Answer, "Here"

What time is it? Response, "Now"

Let go of anything that is not happening here and now.

This immediately grounds us in reality so we can sense our real self and surroundings. For as monk Thich Nhat Hahn teaches "if we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life."

ONE-DAY MOMENT MEDITATION

The goal of these one day and seven day moment meditations is in Ram Dass' words to "create in yourself an absolutely calm centre where it's always right here and now." This will lead to greater peace and contentment. For the one day retreat select a day when you have minimal external pressures and obligations. On this day you are going to reconnect with the beauty of the moment by quietening the mind and settling the senses.

Ideally on this day you can minimise sensual input in order to clear out accumulated sensory overload. Support this by taking a vow of silence, reducing food intake to main meals without snacks and cutting down on television, music and computers. You may also find that closing your eyes at appropriate times will create a greater inner connection. Only look at the time when absolutely necessary in order to promote a timeless, time-free space to relax in.

Throughout the day you are going to focus on four main things:

- 1) Your breath
- 2) Your actions
- 3) Your senses
- 4) Your thoughts

1) Breath.

During the day be aware of your inhalation and exhalation.

Ways to magnify this focus is to breathe into the belly and to sense the movement of air in the throat and nostrils. Called *anapanasati* in Sanskrit this is the main practice to promote a centred and quiet mind. Breath awareness settles a scattered mind, reconsolidates dispersed energy and acts as a bridge between body and mind.

2) Actions

When was the last time you invested all of yourself in what you were doing? We often do things absentmindedly thinking of the next task or rushing to get it over with. Lord Buddha advised- "As you walk and eat and travel, be where you are, otherwise you will miss most of your life."

On this day attempt to bring your full presence to the activity at hand. Try to enjoy the process rather than thinking of the result of the activity. You can do this by focussing on one thing at a time, known as *eka grata* or *pratyahara* in yoga, one-pointed awareness. Do things slowly at half your normal pace to aid intense mindfulness. People watching you might think you've lost your mind whereas in reality this is one of the best ways to find your mind.

Do everything calmly and slowly with a faint smile on your face. Reduce the number of things you do at a time and you will soon discover the paradox that when you attempt to do less, more slowly you actually achieve more, faster.

3) Senses

Open up your senses to the stimuli of the moment. Be aware of subtle smells, tactile sensations, sights and tastes. Listen to the sounds between the sounds. See things anew, free from comparisons or judgements which relate them to the past or future. Being around others who are present in the moment such as animals or children playing can really enhance this state of mine.

4) Thoughts

Observe your mental wanderings and internal dialogue. Don't judge yourself, just become aware of your mental tendencies. Feel and accept things as they are without trying to change or suppress them. In this way as thoughts come to the surface we can honour them and let them go so they no longer have an unconscious hold on us. Whenever you can bring your thoughts back to the present, think of what you are experiencing now. Focus on the blessings and positive things in your life at this moment.

Writing a list or reciting them to yourself will help this consciousness of present centred gratitude. As Charles Dickens reminds us "reflect on your present blessings, of which every man has many, not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some."

SEVEN DAY MOMENT MEDITATION

This seven day training will reawaken your senses and remind you how wonderful it feels to be fully in the moment.

Over a week put aside fifteen minutes daily to practice moment meditation. Each day you will take a fifteen minute walk by yourself, preferably choosing the same route. Do not take music, a book or mobile phone with you. During these fifteen minutes you will focus on a different aspect of the present.

- Day 1- Focus on breath
- Day 2- Focus on body posture, movement, sensations
- Day 3- Focus on sounds
- Day 4 - Focus on smells
- Day 5 - Focus on touch
- Day 6 - Focus on sights
- Day 7 - Integration of all senses

Day one- Go for a fifteen minute walk and focus completely on your breath.

As you inhale think "I am breathing in" and as you exhale "I am breathing out." You can also say to yourself "mo" on the in breath and "ment" on the out breath. Or simply "Now" on the inhalation and exhalation.

Avoid looking around, talking or touching things unnecessarily. Try to bring your awareness to your breath more frequently from now on.

Day two- Repeat your fifteen minute walk, this time being aware of your body posture, movement and sensations. Feel areas of tension and ease, asymmetry and alignment, heat and cold, pains and pleasurable sensations in the body. Don't strain to adjust anything, your awareness will initiate shifts on a deep and effortless level naturally. After the walk continue to be aware of your breath and body when you remember.

Day three- On this fifteen minute walk attune your hearing to every subtle sound. Listening to the near and distant sounds. Hear your footsteps, birds, cars, the movement of your cloth. You will be surprised at how acute your hearing becomes by the end of the walk, even picking up the sound of air flowing past your ear. Continue to focus on just your breath and body until your next walk.

Day four- Proceed for your fifteen minute walk concentrating on the smells you encounter. This can be a subtle experience that also brings awareness to the breath flowing in and out of the nostrils. You may spontaneously stop to smell things also. Continue to focus on just your breath and body until your next walk.

Day five- Today's walk will focus on the sensation of touch.

Feel your feet as they touch the ground, clothes brushing against your skin, the weight of clothes, air flowing over your body, the vibration of sounds and your body brushing against itself. Continue to focus on your breath and body until your next walk.

Day six- Concentrate on the sights on your walk today. To broaden your visual screen you can practice a Hawaiian technique called Hokalau., also employed by NLP practitioners. Look up and allow the left eye to drift to the left side and the right to the right side, you can wiggle your fingers at the peripheral field of vision to aid this expansion. This opens up your perspective and tends to reveal deeper layers of reality.

Avoid looking around, simply look straight ahead and take in the visual feast while maintaining breath and body awareness.

Day seven- Before your walk pause for 5 minutes, standing still and silent.

Be aware of your breath for 10 slow inhalations and exhalations.

Next concentrate on your body posture and physical sensations for a few minutes. Then listen to the sounds, smell the air and perceive the tactile sense of your feet and the ground, the air and cloth on your skin, and the body touching itself. Expand your peripheral vision, relaxing your eyes yet seeing everything clearly.

Now proceed for a slow fifteen minute walk. Maintain awareness of your body posture and breath. Let your senses drift from smells, to sights, sounds and sensations. Soak up the essence of the moment, relish the feeling of being alive in the present. When you maintain this appreciation of the moment your life may appear to be the same from an outsiders perspective but though you are doing the same things your full awareness transmutes everything into a spiritual experience. Just as the Zen phrase goes- "Before enlightenment chopping wood, after enlightenment, chopping wood," it is the change in consciousness that makes the difference.

OPENING THE PRESENT

Stepping into the moment you enter a magic realm that transforms every aspect of your life. You will feel a lightness, ease and connection with everything. Liberated from past impressions you will see people and things from a fresh, enlightened perspective. As the shadow of the past and present lifts, the light of reality reveals the true nature of creation. By truly being with others you will be able to understand them and communicate with them on a deeper level. Consequently, your mindful presence will radiate a tranquillity and healing that sparks awareness in others, bringing them greater appreciation and mindfulness of the present. In this way the Buddha's aura was said to bestow peace on beings for miles around him.

By connecting with our inner essence we see things with a fresh innocence that makes even the simplest pleasures blissful. Our mind, emptied of past and future concerns, has space to absorb present impressions fully.

On a practical level, intense mindfulness enables greater efficiency in planning, action and interrelating. With our consciousness attuned to the finest cues from the universe we are able to make instinctual decisions that support the highest good. Our body also blooms in this state of heightened awareness as cells thrive on attention and harmony is supported. When we silence the noise of the past and future we are able to listen to the body's messages, responding to its needs in the most appropriate way. Everything comes into balance through this one practice of moment meditation as monk Thich Nhat Hahn agrees "mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves."

To attain this divine connection with the moment is the pinnacle of all spiritual goals. As yoga means to yoke or connect and religion comes from the latin *ligare* or to link, their main message is that this peak state of divine union is within our grasp. The beauty of this union is that it is already present, we don't have to do anything, go anywhere or attain something new.

Just by tuning our perception to the moment we will perceive the perfect interconnectedness of everything. Yogi Sri Sri Ravi Shankar explains -"The moment you keep all your senses open you experience the whole creation as vibrant, lively consciousness-not dead objects around you-you are already united with the entire creation. Union has happened."

By taking life moment by moment rather than day by day we can develop this constant present awareness and merge with the moment. Whether it happens in an instant or a lifetime it may be the key to a happy and peaceful life. Try it and find out for yourself.