

# MINDFULNESS FOR THE SENIOR EXECUTIVE BRAIN



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## **Bill George**

### **Harvard Business School**

*Ever since the financial crisis of 2008, I have sensed from many leaders that they want to do a better job of leading in accordance with their personal values. The crisis exposed the fallacies of measuring success in monetary terms and left many leaders with a deep feeling of unease that they were being pulled away from what I call their True North.*

*At Harvard Business School, we are challenging students to think hard about their definition of success and what's important in their lives. Instead of viewing success as reaching a certain position or achieving a certain net worth, we encourage these future leaders to see success as making a positive difference in the lives of their colleagues, their organizations, their families, and society as a whole.*

#### **The aims for all our work is to enable leaders to:**

- be fully present in any moment: equally those of joy, celebration, success, as those of sadness, loss or failure
- fully be who you can be, living a life that is truly aligned with authentic values that you have healthily chosen
- be energetically intelligent: not just the shorthand of IQ, but emotionally, physically, spiritually and creatively
- be passionate and compassionate, filled with drive and love
- be reflective, able to stop, be silent, be with yourself to reflect and learn from thought, word and deed
- know yourself: where you have come from, what has formed and informed who you are and how you think about yourself, others and the world, how you feel and behave and why
- be informed about and engaged with the world
- be alert and alive to connection
- be open and flexible
- be still and active
- be keen to find a meaning and narrative, for yourself, for what happens, for others, for the world
- be sustainable, using your own and the world's resources wisely and with compassionate, tender loving care
- be ethical and empathic
- have a psychological understanding and acceptance of yourself and others
- desire a better, fairer world where all can be fully themselves
- © Duncan Fraser



## SO HOW DO WE GET FROM HERE TO THERE?

You guessed it -

## PRACTICE IN MINDFULNESS

### WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness involves bringing one's **complete attention to the present experience** on a moment-to-moment basis, where each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is.

A two component model of mindfulness:

1. **The self-regulation of attention.**
2. Adopting a particular **orientation toward one's experiences** that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

## LADDER OF COMPETENCE



### WHY MINDFULNESS BEGINS WITH BREATH AWARENESS

Conscious breathing builds the connections between the limbic system and the neocortex.

Our breath is mainly **automatic and unconscious** and regulated by the instinctive and primitive involuntary or autonomic nervous system.

By practicing conscious breathing we gradually strengthen the connections between our unconscious, autonomic reactions and our voluntary or consciously chosen responses.

This strong bridge between the primitive "lower" mind and the "higher" mind enables us to mend the split between raw reactions, and wiser responses.

Observing the breath allows us to take a deep look at the nature of mental formations such as fear, anger and anxiety.

*There are two approaches:*

1. **Breath awareness**, where you simply observe the breath.
2. **Breath control**.

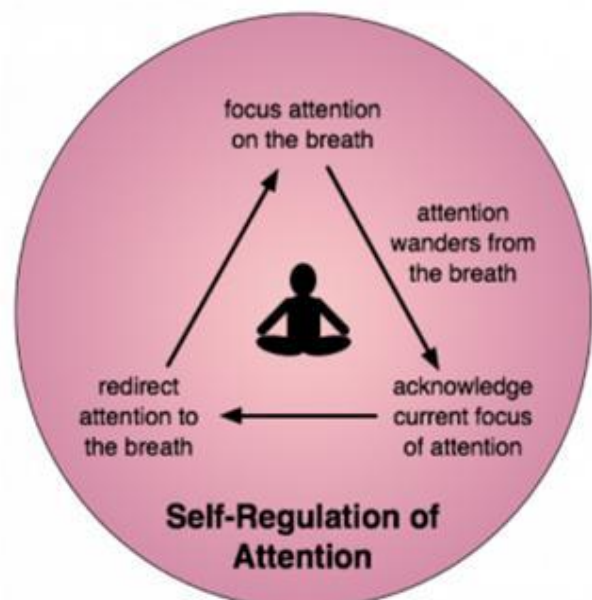
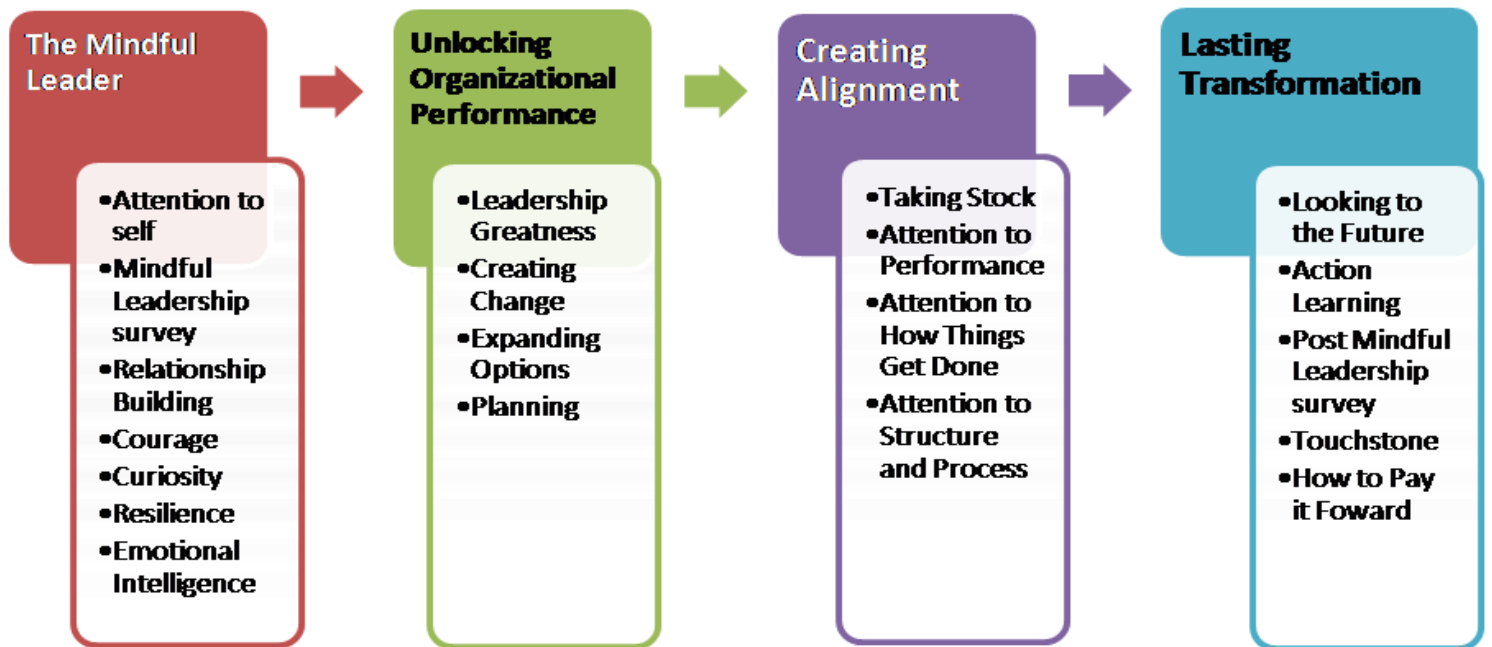


Figure 1: Mindfulness Meditation Process (Source: Daniel Siegel; <http://www.ithou.org/node/2730>)



## LOVINGKINDNESS - AN ESSENTIAL COMPANION OF MINDFULNESS

The non-judgmental quality of mindfulness is very important. However, the absence of judgment toward unwanted experiences is necessary but not sufficient.

We also need to cultivate the **presence of kindness** – toward ourselves, toward others, and toward the unwanted and painful experiences in life.

## CHRISTIAN MINDFULNESS

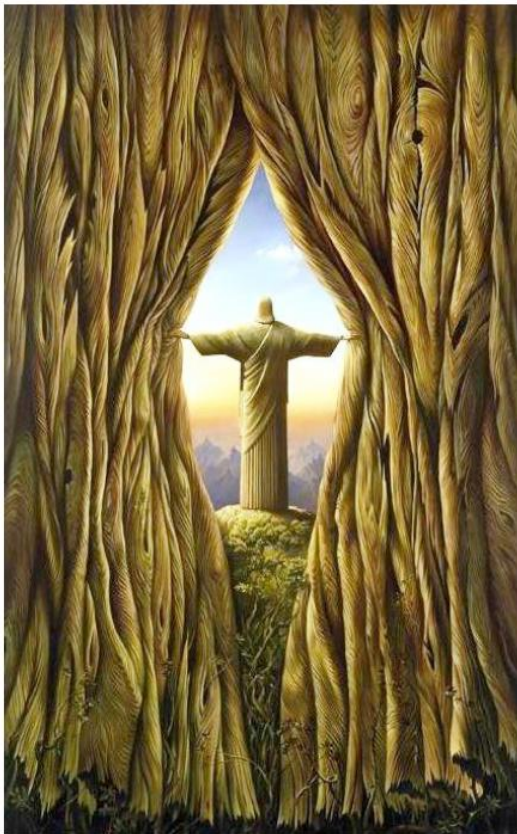
Mindfulness has a bad press in Christian circles. However, Phil Monroe writes that it is important to point out that Buddhism is not the only religion that espouses meditational practices. **Christianity, from the beginning of the Church, has promoted the concept of meditation.**

We are all looking for relief from the chaos and violence in our own minds. Most people don't know that we Christians have inherited many spiritual tools to help us break through the cloud of gnats and mosquitoes in our minds that we call obsessive thinking, worry, anxiety and habitual fear.

For example, one of the Christian Desert Fathers, the monk **Evagrius Ponticus** (345-399 A.D.), taught a form of **hesychasm (Greek: quiet)** in which one comes to see the conditioned links between thoughts and emotions, and then, through meditation and prayer, finds a deep calm called **apatheia**.

In apatheia the mind is integrated and purified of its naturally tumultuous activity, allowing one to simply **“be” in God’s presence** or to pray without distraction.

Some other Christian contemplatives would describe this emptying of the mind as a kind of on-going **detachment from chaotic thoughts**. It’s not that thinking goes away - sometimes our thoughts may bring blessings or healings! - but that we **experience an inward spaciousness** so that we are not so caught up in our own thoughts and worries. When we have this kind of detachment, we are less likely to mistake our thoughts and opinions for our present reality.



The methods by which one trains and purifies the mind were codified by Evagrius’s student, **St. John Cassian** (360-435) in his Conferences, and taken up by **St. Benedict**, Eastern Orthodox theologians such as Symeon the New Theologian, the German friar **Meister Eckhart**, the anonymous author of the medieval Cloud of Unknowing, **St. John of the Cross** and, most famously, in the works of 20th century’s **Thomas Merton**.

In Philippians (2:5ff), **St. Paul writes that Jesus “emptied himself” (Greek: kenosis)**, taking the form of a servant. Jesus’s many acts of service and healing did not come

from a mind that was thinking and analysing about what to do or say, but rather from a mind that had emptied itself into God.

**In his “emptiness,” God’s infinite love could shine through** Jesus’s human form unencumbered. Through him, the invisible could become visible. In this way, the purified Christian mind is analogous to Tibetan Buddhist emptiness and to Zen’s “no-thought-ness” (Jap. munen).

The medieval Dominican friar Meister Eckhart taught that detachment (emptying ourselves) from every selfcentered affinity and fear is such an important spiritual practice that he, with tongue in cheek, put it **above**

**love.** Even our ideas about God can lead us away from God, so we must walk lightly among them too. This discipline requires effort and love, a careful cultivation of the spiritual life, and a watchful, honest, active oversight of all one's mental attitudes toward things and people.

One must learn **an inner solitude**, wherever or with whomsoever he may be. Trusting in God's invisible presence one's mind comes to a **still point of presence** he called **Gelassenheit, a complete letting-be.**

From the Desert Fathers and from the Greek philosophers before them, Eckhart inherited the insight that **our eyes must be without any color in order to be able to register all colors.** Dwelling in this detachment from our personal ideas about reality, we come to a consciousness that St. Paul described when he declared, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Christ has colorless eyes. We too can have the "empty" or "detached" mind and heart of Christ that sees all colors and registers all suffering and joy. Eckhart describes the Christ-mind's way of knowing as **"daybreak knowledge" in which all things are perceived without distinction as coming forth from, and going to, the light of God.** Similarly, in the 16th century, St. John of the Cross counsels that we Christians must also occasionally enter a dark night of the senses and soul, emptying ourselves of our self-centered preferences and ideas about God and everything else. We must become **inwardly detached in an ambience of love that continuously connects us to others and to creation.**

Our contemplative tradition tells us that when we open ourselves to the Divine movement within, **the Holy Spirit will help us** do this work. We do the work of creating a space within us for God, and then trust that the Holy Spirit will do the work in us: as we flow out of ourselves, the Holy Spirit flows in.

St. John of the Cross tells us that this emptying is a kind of "darkening" whereby **we become naked before God and with God.** Paradoxically, it is **a darkening that brings Light.** In this dark night of the mind the invisible God of love transforms us, freeing us from our cocoons of fear, anxiety and blame. St. Ignatius of Loyola, called this Christian practice **Indiferencia or "holy indifference"**. In this view, one stops trying to control God. One trains one's mind to **seek God in all things evenly**, to have no personal preference for where God will show up.

## Christian Blessing for Lovingkindness Practice

### Numbers 6:24-26

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

### Psalm 121:7-8

"The LORD will keep you from all harm - he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore."

### Romans 15:33

"The God of peace be with you all. Amen."

### 1 Corinthians 1:3

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

### Galatians 6:18

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, sisters and brothers. Amen."

## ATTENTION AND NEUROPLASTICITY

If you engage in certain kinds of exercise on a regular basis you can strengthen certain muscle groups in predictable ways.

**Strengthening neural systems** is not fundamentally different. It's basically replacing certain habits of mind with other habits.

The brain anatomy we inherit from our parents determines the **original landscape** upon which our brain's "empire" will be built.

These are like the natural resources and the weather patterns.

The landscape-anatomy of our brain determines **which skills we perform best, and which habits become automatic**, but there's a twist to this story.

Contemplative neuroscience has discovered that where we direct our **attention** determines which areas we develop. Attention changes anatomy; it is the land developer and construction crew all in one.



This ability to change the landscape of our brains and augment how our minds operate is called **neuroplasticity**.

We are constantly **changing the structure of our brain** as we move our attention here and there.

Mindfulness meditation works **on similar brain centers as those affected by anti-depressants**.

**Mindfulness meditation works the brain the way a good workout regimen works the body - minus the buckets of sweat.**

## HOW MINDFULNESS CHANGES THE BRAIN

There is a beefing up of the **middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC)**, that plays an important role in integrating higher, "intellectual" brain areas with those in the more raw, "emotional" areas.

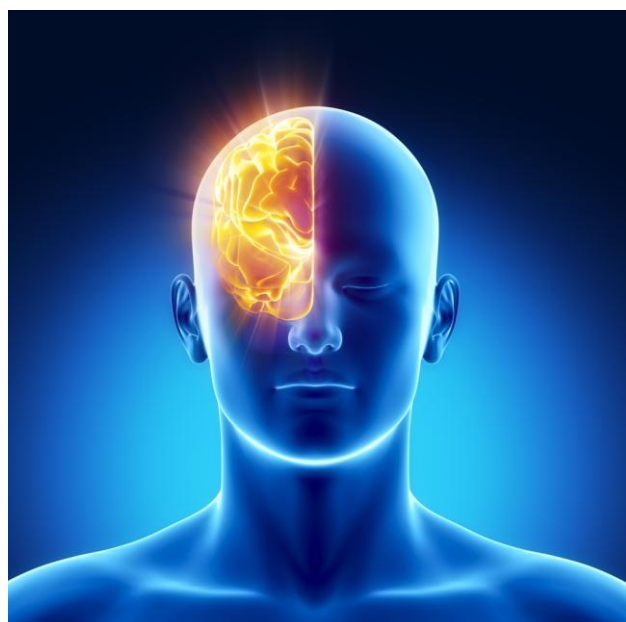
The brain becomes **thicker**. It builds synapses, synaptic networks, and layers of capillaries, which become thicker in **two major regions** of the brain.

One is in the **pre-frontal cortex**, involved in the executive control of attention – of deliberately paying attention to something.

This change makes sense because that's what you're doing when you meditate.

The second brain area that gets bigger is the **insula**, enabling people to become more **self-aware and empathic**.

Mindfulness stimulates the activation of brain regions associated with **self-monitoring and cognitive control**.



It decreases grey-matter density in the amygdala, which plays an important role in anxiety and stress.

Mindfulness promotes stronger activation in the **temporal parietal junctures**, another part of the brain tied to **empathy**.

Increases **grey-matter** in the **hippocampus**, important for **self-awareness, compassion** and for memory led learning.

There is a ramped-up activation of a brain region responsible for generating positive emotions - the left anterior region.

**Left prefrontal** asymmetry is associated with **eudaimonic** well-being - autonomy, positive relationships, self-acceptance, and meaning and purpose in life.

This left anterior activity is correlated with **resilience**, the capacity to **rebound after negative experiences**.

It stimulates large amounts of **synchronized gamma activity**, that plays a significant role in binding disparate information into **coherent perception**.

This develops the capacity for **unifying sensory information** into coherent patterns that support both personal and interpersonal connection.

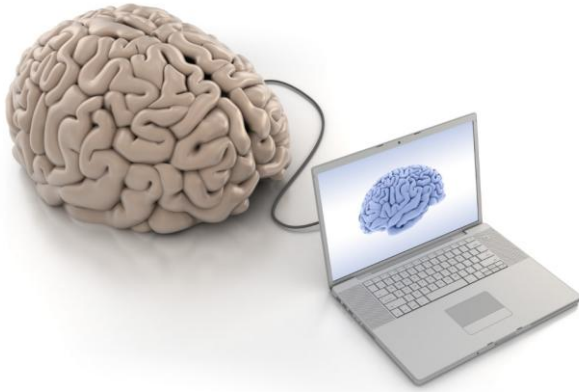
Mindfulness develops **simultaneous activation of the caudate and putamen**, which in addition to the gamma synchrony between the frontal and parietal lobes, enables higher-level cognitive habits.

The high levels of **alpha and theta wave activity** during meditation are stably integrated into the brain's neural circuitry, promoting states of **inner calm and stability**.

Affect regulation disorders are linked **with faulty wiring** in the default mode network.

Mindfulness **decreases activity** in the **default mode network** - like the screen saver on your computer. This is a region that is active when the mind **wanders**.

A wandering mind is an unhappy one. When the mind wanders, most of us are worrying rather than living in the moment.



Mindfulness can help us shift towards **right brain mode**. This activates the **parasympathetic nervous system** (as opposed to the adrenaline releasing sympathetic system).

More parasympathetic activity means less stress and therefore better health.