



Julie Forbes, PhD

Julie began practicing meditation in 1985, focusing specifically on Vipassana as a student of Gil Fronsdal in 1993. She has completed professional training in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. and through the Stress Reduction Clinic at El Camino Hospital. Julie has been teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs since 1997 to corporate and community organizations, groups and individuals. Currently, she is teaching at locations including El Camino Hospital, Kaiser Permanente, and Palo Alto Medical Foundation. She leads a weekly sitting group that meets at Avenidas Senior Center in Palo Alto. Julie has worked in the computer industry since 1982 and received a doctorate in psychology in 1999.

The following notes were provided by Julie Forbes with minor additions by Dave Barnet..

Taming the Monsters

Thoughts, whether they be preoccupations about the past, the future or merely stories that we create, tend to be the part of our experience that keeps us caught in suffering the most – pulling us into ruminations or worries, draining our energy in directions where we have little influence or control.

A common misconception about meditation is that through it, we are attempting to stop the busyness of our mind, to explicitly “quiet” our thoughts. The practice of mindfulness is actually something quite different. Through mindfulness, our intention is to see more clearly our **direct** experience in each moment, including our thoughts and emotions (the mental objects); rather than be driven by (unconsciously reacting to) the thoughts that reside just below the surface of our awareness. Therefore, actually becoming more familiar with our thoughts, thought patterns, reactions and reaction patterns is a positive evolution in our mindfulness practice. Our ability notice our experience in the moment – to see our thoughts and reactions more clearly – gives us choices that we never had before.

Imagine that your mind is like a pond full of water. If you stir up the water in a pond, it becomes muddy, cloudy and opaque; likewise, your constantly agitated mind becomes busy and murky. However, if you stop stirring up the water in the pond and let it sit idle, the sediment will sink to the bottom, leaving the water clear. Through this clear water, you can begin to see what is

actually in the pond: rocks, fish, plants, etc. In the same way, if you sit for a period without agitating your mind, your thoughts will settle down, allowing you to see more clearly what your experience truly is. You will have the opportunity to notice what is underneath all of the busyness of your life so that you can respond to it more effectively.

<http://mindingyourstress.com/2008/04/06/seeing-more-clearly/>)

So instead of seeking a quiet mind, we are doing the work of mindfulness when we notice how busy our mind is, and become more familiar with its true nature. When our difficult thoughts and emotions aren't acknowledged, they have a tendency to return. Ironically, by looking more closely at the nature of our busy mind, we often do find that it becomes calmer, or at least we learn to be less reactive to our thoughts and therefore, we feel calmer amidst the busyness of our mind.

Recent research confirms this claim. Brain scans in Goldin's studies show a surprising pattern: "after mindfulness [practice], participants have greater activity in a brain network associated with processing information when they reflect on negative self-statements. In other words, they pay more attention to the negative statements than they did before the [mindfulness training]. And yet, they also show decreased activation in the amygdala—a region associated with stress and anxiety." "Goldin's interpretation of the findings is that mindfulness meditation teaches people with anxiety how to handle distressing thoughts and emotions without being overpowered by them. Most people either push away unpleasant thoughts or obsess over them—both of which give anxiety more power. 'The goal of meditation is not to get rid of thoughts or emotions. The goal is to become more aware of your thoughts and emotions and learn how to move through them without getting stuck.'" Another study showed decreases in gray matter in the density of the amygdala after mindfulness practice suggesting that the amygdala has become more resistant to reactivity. Kelly McGonigal teaches yoga, meditation, and psychology at Stanford University and is the author of *Yoga for Pain Relief* (New Harbinger, 2009); kellymcgonigal.com.
<http://www.yogajournal.com/health/2601>

Much to many practitioners' dismay, along the path of mindfulness, it is inevitable that we will see things in our own mind that we find uncomfortable (unpleasant); or that we don't want to experience: fear, fear, and more fear, sadness, anger, etc. Instead of denying or resisting these experiences, our challenge in mindfulness is to take a closer look at even these more difficult aspects of ourselves, to become more familiar with them rather than reacting out of them. Honestly, the only way out is through them ... meeting and acknowledging these difficult aspects of ourselves. Although it takes courage to turn into these experiences, doing so is perhaps the best way to disarm the power they have over you.



TAMING THE MONSTERS

In facing these monsters lurking inside us with the courage of a warrior, we find that they are not as horrible as we had thought. As Rilke put it:

*Perhaps the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage.
Perhaps everything terrible is, in its deepest essence, something that feels helpless and needs our love.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Our monsters are only masks worn by those parts of us that feel powerless or unlovable. They want, most of all, to be met and seen through.

Going to the edge of that which makes us vulnerable rather than pulling back from it to where we feel more comfortable. (Welwood).

Predisposition for negative thoughts since our brain has evolved to look for threats to keep us surviving. Two options that awareness brings us:

- 1) Using techniques to turn on the parasympathetic nervous system so that we can minimize the stress reactivity.
- 2) Making a choice as to what we are going to give our energy to:
Tale of two wolves – being able to choose the thoughts that we feed.

Two Wolves Story:

An elderly Cherokee Native American was teaching his grandchildren about life .

He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me, it is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf is evil---he is fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, competition, superiority, and ego.



The other is good ---he is joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.

This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too."

They thought about it for a minute, and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win, Grandfather?"

The Elder simply replied, "The one you feed."

- 3) Learning how to sit at the edge of our vulnerability rather than pulling away to regain comfort (see John Welwood, "Vulnerability, Power and the Healing Relationship" (Chapter 10) in *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, Boston: Shambala, 2002)

Another misconception of meditation is that it is an attempt to achieve some specific state of mind or altered state of consciousness. It is true that through concentration, people are capable of achieving various levels of altered states of consciousness (i.e. jhanas). And some of these are very seductive. As beneficial as deep concentration may be, however, our intention in mindfulness is not to achieve, nor to maintain, any particular state of mind – instead, it is to experience what is true for us in each moment. The attainment of a state of consciousness or enlightenment is merely sidestepping our intention. Each of these states is impermanent; although they can be part of our moment to moment experience, they may come and they go; we cannot hold onto them. Getting caught in the attainment or reproduction of a state of consciousness is a form of attachment. Different states of consciousness, insights and even moments of enlightenment are possible for everyone. Still, it is not our goal to desire or attain them. And, attainment of these states is not a measure of success for us on our mindfulness path.

The Guest-House

By Jelaluddin Rumi

This being human is a guest-house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture.

Still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Still, boundaries are important in this endeavor:

On Hospitality: A Reply to Rumi

*Welcome all the visitors, you say.
Do not put bars on the windows
or locks on the doors. Do not close up
the chimney flue. Duct tape and plastic
sheeting will not keep visitors at bay.
They'll pound on the doors, they'll break
your windows, they'll breach the barricades
they'll storm the beach, swarm in like ants
through cracks. They'll leak like water through
the walls, and creep like mice, and curl like smoke
and crack like ice against the window glass.
Keep them out? It can't be done, don't try.*

Welcome all the visitors.

*Fine. There's all kinds
of welcoming, however.*

*I do not have to throw a house party.
I will not post flyers.
There will be no open bar.
No one will get drunk
and lock themselves in the bathroom.
No one will break furniture, grind chips
into the rug, throw anyone else in the pool
or lose an earring in the couch.*

*I do not have to run a guest house, either.
There will be no crackling fire.
And no easy chairs. I will not serve
tea to the visitors. I will not dispense
ginger snaps and ask my guests
about themselves:
"Did my mother send you?"
"Why must you plague me?"
"Why not stay awhile longer?"
"Who are you, really?"*

*If I must welcome-- and I am convinced I must--
Let me build a great hall to receive my guests.
Like a Greek temple, let it be open on all sides.
Let it be wide, and bright, and empty.
Let it have a marble floor:
beautiful--and cold, and hard.*

*Let there be no sofas, no benches, no dark corners,
no anterooms and no coat closets.
No walls, not even a ledge to lean against.*

*I'll welcome anyone who comes,
I'll show them my enormous empty hall.
Come in, come in, I'll say. I'll even smile,
perhaps make a conversation for awhile.*

*And if someone settles on the floor, as if to stay,
or circles round and round, as if they've lost their way
I'll be kind, extend my hand,
and gently show them out again.*

--Amy Newell

*As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not
make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and
again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of
thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.*

[Henry David Thoreau](#)