

## **Basic Mindfulness - Shinzen Young's Modern Synthesis of Mindfulness**

Dr. Bob Doering, Ph.D., C.Psych., Registered Psychologist

Basic Mindfulness is a systematic approach to learning and teaching mindfulness created by Shinzen Young (SY). Some people might want to begin learning about the Basic Mindfulness system by reading an abridged print description, and it is hoped that the present document can serve this purpose.

Much of the present document draws directly from “Five Ways to Know Yourself” -- the carefully crafted manual written by SY as a user’s guide to this system. This lengthy and meaty document is sometimes initially daunting for newcomers, but serious students of Basic Mindfulness will soon discover its value. It is freely available on the web (see *Shinzen.org*; *basicmindfulness.org*; and *mindfulwaterloo.org*).

Several excellent scholarly books provide reviews of some of the larger conversations about the convergence of psychology and mindfulness. The present document will focus on Basic Mindfulness, which provides one particular access point to this larger conversation. Being a clinical psychologist myself as well as a facilitator/teacher of Basic Mindfulness, I have added a few of my own preliminary reflections from one psychologist’s perspective.

### **What is Mindfulness?**

Mindfulness has gained widespread acceptance in many different settings and the influence of mindfulness-based approaches is widespread in psychological and medical clinics and even in schools. People joke about our society entering the age of “mindfulness-based everything”. But what are we really talking about when we talk about mindfulness?

New books and articles about mindfulness are being published almost continually, and some of these describe cutting-edge scientific research on the topic. In reading this growing literature you will soon discover that there are many distinct approaches to mindfulness practice with the term mindfulness taking on a variety of different meanings within them.

Some definitions of mindfulness are very broad and encompassing while others are quite narrow and specific. The phrase “mindful awareness practice” (and its acronym “MAP”) is useful for those inclined toward broader definitions of mindfulness. Some types of MAPs fit the stereotypical image of a seated person in a state of high concentration, but other MAPs may look quite different. For example, yoga is generally considered to be a “MAP” – indeed, yoga is

included as a component of the most widely known version of mindfulness training in North America, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

Having a generalized concept like “MAP” is useful for many purposes, but it does not really get to the crux of the matter. What is it exactly that is special or different when people are in a heightened state of mindful awareness, as compared to when they are less mindful?

In the Basic Mindfulness system, Shinzen Young offers a working definition of mindfulness that is concise, versatile and practical. The definition is useful for individual practitioners and teachers of mindfulness, and is also useful to scholars and scientists wanting to systematically delve into the many aspects and benefits of mindfulness (very recently, it has been used in cutting-edge scientific research with advanced technologies providing high resolution images of what exactly is happening in the brains of people using Basic Mindfulness techniques, published in the Annals of New York Academy of Sciences).

Mindful awareness is described in the Basic Mindfulness system as a special way to pay attention to sensory events, including sensory experiences that arise inwardly. The specific characteristics of this “special way to pay attention” will be discussed in detail below. Mindful awareness leads to processing sensory events in a special way and also to responding to sensory events in a highly desirable way. Basic Mindfulness has a lot to say about how this happens.

### **What is Basic Mindfulness?**

Basic Mindfulness is a carefully considered and systematic way to “think about, practice, and teach mindful awareness” -- and to do so with clarity and precision. It integrates several different mindfulness approaches into a comprehensive system with many desirable features. It is a modern and secular reworking of many concepts, techniques and practices from a number of mindfulness traditions.

The comprehensiveness of Basic Mindfulness makes it quite easy for anyone – even those entirely new to this approach - to find at least one MAP within Basic Mindfulness that works well for them. However, there is quite a bit to learn for those wanting to understand the entire system.

For practically-minded people wanting to keep matters simple, the comprehensiveness of the system is not a problem. There is no requirement to learn the entire system or use any parts of it that are not of interest to the user.

The Basic Mindfulness system includes distinctive mindfulness practices, organized around five themes, referred to as the Five Ways. These “Five Ways” of Basic Mindfulness are intended to strongly contrast with each other, and each one can be a self-contained practice.

Broader training in the Basic Mindfulness system leads to having more options, allowing you to choose what seems like the best technique for a given situation. Having learned a range of possible mindfulness techniques, you can skillfully select techniques according to particular interests or needs.

It is also possible, during a single period of mindfulness practice, to use all five of the main themes of the Basic Mindfulness system. When the Five Ways are used collectively in this manner, they provide what SY calls “a complete sensory workout routine that trains all your psychological and spiritual muscles”.

The range of techniques included in Basic Mindfulness makes it possible for a practitioner to take advantage of opportunities to advance their practice that may arise either “on the cushion” (i.e., practice in stillness”) or when facing a particular problems and dilemmas from their ordinary life. Training with Basic Mindfulness leads to the development of skills that are readily transferable. Basic Mindfulness techniques can be used as psychological coping strategies in challenging life circumstances (for example, when facing physical pain or emotional distress).

### **So What is Mindful Awareness?**

In the Five Ways Manual, SY refers to mindful awareness as:

*A skillset, a collection of skills. [Each skill]... can be improved with practice. Most skills involve some sort of external performance but mindfulness skills are “internal.” Mindfulness skills are a way to process your sensory experience. By sensory experiences, I mean not just outer physical experience like sights and sounds but also your inner experience of thoughts and emotions. So, Mindful Awareness is a certain way to pay attention to what is happening around you and within you. It involves three core skills. Each skill is distinct from the others, and they work together to reinforce each other.*

What are these skills? Shinzen Young offers a distinctive and intriguing definition of mindful awareness as “three attentional skills working together: concentration power, sensory clarity and equanimity”. **Concentration** refers to the ability to stay focused on what is deemed relevant at a given time. **Equanimity** is a kind of inner balance, “a third possibility between pushing the senses down (suppressing) and being pulled away by the senses (grasping)”.

Sensory **Clarity** results from “untangling the strands of sensory experience” and might be experienced as “brightness”, “high resolution”, or “richness” of sensory experience. The full meaning of each these three terms is discussed at length in the “Five-Ways” manual and other writings by SY.

### **The CCE Paradigm:**

Shinzen’s way of talking, thinking about and teaching mindful awareness has been referred to as “the CCE Paradigm”. This paradigm provides a strong framework for teaching and learning mindfulness, and gives us useful ways of evaluating our own progress and the progress of others.

When one begins to think about mindful awareness in this way, a wealth of possibilities open up, pointing us to the exact skills needed in increase our level of mindful awareness. For example, at a given time or in a given situation, we might want some indication of our baseline level of mindful awareness (that is, how mindful we are without *trying* to be mindful). With the CCE paradigm, this baseline can be understood as a function of the development of our capacity for concentration, sensory clarity and equanimity.

### **What are the five ways?**

The five ways are five different ways to focus awareness: (1) **Focus in** involves ways of focusing on subjective inner experience (i.e., on the experience of thoughts and emotions). (2) **Focus out** puts the emphasis on external senses (sights and sounds) and on ordinary physical body sensations. (3) **Focus on rest** puts the emphasis on restful, relaxed, or tranquil aspects of either subjective experiences or physical sensations. (4) **Focus on flow** puts the emphasis on impermanent, dynamic, and changing aspects of either subjective experiences or physical sensations. (5) **Nurture positive** is somewhat different from the first four and offers a means of strengthening positive aspects of intentionality (for example, in cultivating or strengthening virtues such as compassion, gratitude, and kindness).

Four of the Five Ways are explored through a basic focusing technique called **Noting**. Noting typically consists of two parts which are referred to as (1) “acknowledging” and (2) “penetrating”. The “acknowledging” component of noting involves attending to a specific sensory event (i.e., bringing your awareness to the event, focusing intentionally on it). The second “penetrating” aspect of noting refers to holding your attention on the sensory event long enough to process the sensory information more completely. This is sometimes described as “letting your awareness soak in” to the sensory event.

Using some common psychological terminology, the first part of “noting” appears to correspond to “selective attention”. The “penetrating” aspect of noting is difficult to describe. It involves “sensory processing” and perhaps “absorption”, but goes beyond these terms.

Labeling is another important concept from Basic Mindfulness. It is an optional way of holding concentration during noting. To label means to think or say a word or phrase that describes the sensory event being noted. During the acknowledging phase of noting, you have the option to use a phrase to label the event you have acknowledged. Standard two-word labeling phrases are available in Basic Mindfulness, but you are not required to use labels when noting. The relationship between mindfulness, noting, and labeling is as follows: labeling is designed to facilitate noting, while noting is designed to facilitate mindfulness.

**Why practice mindfulness?** There are many possible answers. We will make no attempt here to summarize the extensive empirical evidence that is now available (for example, see [mindfulexperience.org](http://mindfulexperience.org)).

It is worth mentioning that after having acquired a “taste” for mindfulness, many people discover that being mindful is self-reinforcing – they notice that it is inherently rewarding to be in a state of mindful awareness. They also tend to notice that when they are less mindful, their experiences seem less satisfactory (this “unsatisfactoriness” may be subtle or dramatic, but even the subtle variety of unsatisfactoriness may be quite significant over time).

Many specific aspects of improved psychological wellbeing are associated with mindfulness, especially becoming more resilient to stresses and other potentially negative experiences such as physical pain and emotional difficulties. Other reported benefits include: becoming more engaged with positive experiences and more deeply satisfied and fulfilled by them; positive emotional states tend to become more accessible and negative ones less “gripping”; more insights are reported, including psychological insights (e.g., cognitive shifts that allow us to think and behave more rationally, ethically and effectively) and “ultimate insights” (illuminating something transformative, boundless and sacred at the deepest levels of consciousness).

And how can we know from our own experience whether a mindfulness practice is “working” for us? According to SY, a practice is said to “work” if, in a reasonable time frame, it delivers at least one of the following: *reduction of your physical or emotional suffering; elevation of your physical or emotional fulfillment; deeper knowledge of who you are; positive changes in your objective behavior; a spirit of love and service towards others.*

### **Mindful Awareness of Sensory Experience:**

What is so important about sensory experience in mindfulness? One of the ways that Shinzen answers this question is quoted below:

*All day, every day, we experience sensory states. Some of those states are big and some are small. Some are simple and some are complex. Some are fully conscious and some are partially conscious. Some are pleasant, some are unpleasant, some are both pleasant and unpleasant, and some are neutral. Some lead to confusion while some lead to clarity. Some are the result of your own doing, some are the result of the doing of others, [and] some are due to random chance.*

*There are millions of possibilities and it is impossible to fully control or predict what a given day will bring. Is there any way to analyze your sensory states into simpler natural building blocks, to isolate the atoms of experience?*

*Can sensory elements be organized into rows and columns like the Periodic Table of Chemical Elements? If so, that might allow us to better understand our sensory experience and to better deal with it. Moreover, our behaviors are controlled by our sensory states. So getting a handle on your sensory states will help you to get a handle on your objective behaviors.*

Basic Mindfulness offers a rough but workable experiential equivalent – or if “equivalent” is too strong a word, it is at the very least an exceedingly useful analogy -- to the Periodic Table of the Elements. In Basic Mindfulness, it is generally referred to as “the grid”.

### **What is “The Grid”?**

The Sensory grid is a simple 3X 4 table that has many uses. It provides an overview of much of the Basic Mindfulness system. By looking at the columns, one sees the four of the five main techniques (Focus In, Focus Out, Focus on Rest, and Focus on Flow). In the three rows, one finds the three sensory modalities included in Basic Mindfulness. In each of the 12 cells, one finds a significant area of sensory experience to focus on.

The Sensory grid is also an organizational tool for selecting a technique or techniques during a period of formal sitting practice. Outside of formal practice sessions, once a person has internalized the categories included in the grid so they are available on “automatic pilot”, they can be used “on the fly” in daily life, whenever you choose to do so.

The Sensory grid comes in two versions. One uses phrases that are explicit and descriptive—good for discussing experiences. The other uses phrases that are short and rhythmic—good for labeling experiences. So each category may be referred to using descriptive language (e.g., mental image); or label language (e.g., “see in”); or technical language (e.g., “inner visual activity”). These are compared in the two tables below). [Note: a sensory grid combining the descriptive phrases with label language is available at [mindfulwaterloo.org](http://mindfulwaterloo.org)].

Descriptive language used to discuss experiences:

	<b>Inwardly Arising</b>	<b>Outwardly Arising</b>	<b>Restful</b>	<b>Flowing</b>
Visual	Mental images	Sights	Blank screen, soft focus	Dynamic aspects of inner or outer visual experience
Auditory	Mental talk	Sounds	Silence; Inner quiet	Dynamic aspects of inner or outer auditory experience
Somatic	Emotional body sensations	Ordinary body sensations	Relaxation; tranquility	Dynamic aspects of inner or outer somatic experience

Label language, for the option of labeling experiences:

	<b>Focus IN</b>	<b>Focus OUT</b>	<b>Focus on REST</b>	<b>Focus on FLOW</b>
<b>SEE</b>	See in	See out	See rest	See flow
<b>HEAR</b>	Hear in	Hear out	Hear rest	Hear flow
<b>FEEL</b>	Feel in	Feel out	Feel rest	Feel flow

### **Basic Mindfulness and Psychology:**

All of the five ways of Basic Mindfulness have aspects that seem “psychological” and other aspects that go beyond psychology, perhaps requiring us to use words like “spiritual” or “psychospiritual”. It is important to note that the perspectives of psychology and mindfulness are not always congruent. Although the word “psychology” refers to a very large domain of human experience, “mindful awareness” refers to a much larger domain – perhaps a “boundless” domain. We can certainly bring mindful awareness to anything and everything that can be said to be psychological (sensations, perceptions, cognitions, emotions, and behaviour).

A few obvious areas of overlap between psychology and Basic Mindfulness are discussed below.

**Focus in** sounds “psychological”, since it deals with thoughts and emotions - core human experiences of primary interest to psychologists. However, to call **Focus in** a “psychological” technique would be very misleading. The **Focus in** technique directs

awareness to sensory experience and not to the cognitive level or conceptual domains most familiar to psychology and psychotherapy. Nevertheless, **Focus in** can lead to experiences that are similar to the concept of **exposure**, which is of major relevance to many psychological therapies.

In the Five Ways manual, SY has this to say about **Focus in** as a psychological practice:

*This Way involves tracking your subjective experience in terms of visual thoughts (mental images), internal conversations (mental talk), and emotional body sensations. It's about appreciating yourself just as you are.*

*As a psychological practice, this Way allows you to break negative states into small manageable pieces, thus loosening their power over you. By "negative states" I mean things like difficult emotions, limiting beliefs, judgments, urges leading to unproductive behaviors, and so forth. By "manageable pieces" I mean individual images, individual self-talk phrases, and specific body locations where the emotional sensations are arising. Learning to focus on just one of these at a given moment will reduce your sense of overwhelm. You stop being like a ping-pong ball pummeled about by words in your head, emotions in your body and pictures on your mental screen.*

*As a psychological practice, this Path can also be helpful in that it allows you to keep contact with who you are even in the presence of an impactful other, i.e., it strengthens psychological boundaries in a healthy way. This contrasts with and complements its effect as a spiritual practice.*

**Focus out** techniques also have parallels in psychological therapies. For example, **sensory grounding** or **distraction** are psychotherapeutic strategies that can be very helpful for those prone to intense anxiety states, especially when there is a tendency to dissociate.

**Focus on rest** includes a focus on physical relaxation. Methods for training people in relaxation techniques are widely used in psychological therapies. Focus on rest also includes the possibility of focusing on restful states within auditory and visual experience. These sensory phenomena have not yet been systemically explored for possible relevance to clinical psychology, but it requires no great leap to do so.

**Nurture positive** also overlaps with many concerns of applied or clinical psychology. Notably, there is a huge overlap between Nurture positive and cognitive behaviour therapy. Similar to many psychological endeavors, Nurture Positive techniques can promote positive behaviour change as well as positive changes to cognitive and affective states.



And how can we compare the effects of psychological therapies to the way SY addresses the question of whether or not our mindfulness practice is “working”? Recall that according to SY, a practice is said to “work” if, in a reasonable time frame, it delivers at least one of the following: *reduction of your physical or emotional suffering; elevation of your physical or emotional fulfillment; deeper knowledge of who you are; positive changes in your objective behavior; a spirit of love and service towards others.*

Some of the items on the list mentioned above are also considered to be goals of clinical psychological therapies. For example, “reduction of physical or emotional suffering” is a basic, implicit aspect of all medical and psychological treatments (so much so that it hardly seems necessary to make it explicit). Many psychological therapies are intended to promote insight as well as positive changes in behavior and cognition. These overlap with two other items on the list: “deeper knowledge of who you are” and “positive changes in your objective behavior”.

What about “Elevation of physical or emotional fulfillment”? Clinical psychology tends to focus more on rectifying conditions associated with unhappiness than on improving conditions that might lead more directly to happiness, although some clinical psychologist might contest this point. In any case, both Basic Mindfulness and the relative new branch of psychology called “positive psychology” have explicit aspirations to be “a science of human happiness”.

And what about that last item on the list: *a spirit of love and service towards others*? Is this something that clinical psychologists aspire to, and do they seek to influence their clients in this direction? I cannot speak for all psychologists on this point, but my personal answer to both questions is certainly a resounding yes.

As well, this seems to go to the deepest levels of motivation for the helping professions and indeed to basic questions such as: “Why do people so often choose to help others?” and “Why does one person care so deeply that another person is suffering?”

Every clinical psychologist is a person who at some stage of career planning chose to undertake a long training to be able to do difficult work in the service of others. Individuals with a mindfulness practice have many opportunities to reflect on their most fundamental source of motivation for this choice.