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Mindfulness 101: To Be or Not to Be? That Is Not the Question

By Scott L. Rogers


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A popular and poignant mindfulness insight is that “we’re human beings, not human doings.” The takeaway is that we spend most of our time doing, and not enough time being. This line has been attributed to many remarkable people, and I was pleased to learn its source, as he was a favorite author of mine in college, and maybe one of yours, too. More on this later.

The realization that we might spend too much time on the treadmill of achievement, chipping away at to-do lists, and not enough time simply being present for our life is an important one. The question, however, is not “to be or to do?” but rather is how to live both at the same time without trying so hard.

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The contemporary mindset that doing and being move in different directions leads to the belief that the goal is to balance hard work with relaxation. Given our hyper-busy world, we can struggle to find time to relax and, when we finally do, feel compelled to hop back on the treadmill. An experience many of us know all too well is being on vacation looking for something to do.

Living both at the same time speaks to an important truth—that getting things done and being present are never separable. This is more readily intuited toward the end of life, when there tends to be less striving to speed into the next moment and a more natural capacity to be present and grateful for whatever is arising. The lines between doing and being also fade in flow states, when we are completely absorbed in our experience. Might we find a way to harmonize doing and being without needing to wait for the rare flow state or until we approach the end of our days? This understanding is embedded in the Taoist consideration of yin-yang, which, to the surprise of many, does not parse out yin and yang; it’s yin-yang, they are inseparable—one dynamic process.

In *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment—and Your Life* (Sounds True, 2012), Jon Kabat-Zinn writes:

Mindfulness reminds us that it is possible to shift from a doing mode to a being mode through the application of attention and awareness. Then our doing can come out of our being and be much

more integrated and effective. What is more, we cease exhausting ourselves so much and we learn to inhabit our own body and the only moment we are alive—this one.

Kabat-Zinn reminds us that the path forward is revealed through awareness. Rather than making an effort to shift from doing to being mode, which is merely a disguised form of doing, the mindfulness key is to bring greater awareness to moments in your life when you are resisting what is happening. Of course, that's easier said than done . . . because it's not something *to do*. This month's mindfulness practice is a simple one. Notice and befriend moments of resistance.

There will be moments when we resist the doing (working late at night wondering why we ever signed up to be a lawyer, regretting having said yes as a favor to a friend, fighting traffic on our way to work), just as there will be moments when we resist the being (meditating while brainstorming what to do next, enjoying a hike and reaching for the cell phone, reading a bedtime story thinking about a glass of wine). The more awareness and compassion for ourselves we bring to these moments, the more naturally the doing-being balance falls into place. For when we move from the perspective that resistance is futile to the perspective that [resistance is fertile](#), we turn the sour lemons of wishing for a different moment into the sweet lemonade of honoring this moment, as it is.

The insight that we are human beings, not human doings—which was coined by Kurt Vonnegut—may have been inspired when Vonnegut was spending time with his uncle on a hot summer day while drinking a cool glass of lemonade. As he shared at many graduation ceremonies, every now and again his uncle, in the midst of an enjoyable moment, would exclaim, “If this isn't nice, I don't know what is.”

We all have the gift of being alive. The last 18 months taught us, if we didn't already know it, that life is a precious gift. And we will continue to receive daily reminders of the tenuousness of the moments of our life and of those we love, those with whom we work, those in our community—of those who went to sleep one night in a building that no longer stands.

What is it about a hot summer day and a glass of lemonade that wakes us up to the beauty of the moment and of being together? Yes, it might be that there is nothing to do. It might also be that *in that sweet moment we are not wanting things to be different*, we are not resisting the moment as it is.

This summer, when the moment is not quite right, allow its sour taste to remind you to look for the sweetness in your life. You may not have to look far. And when you find it, be careful not to throw away the lemons. How else will you ever enjoy lemonade?

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