



FLORIDA BAR NEWS

MINDFULNESS, METAPHORS, AND MORE

 By Scott Rogers ▶ [Special to the News](#)  [Columns](#)

November 23, 2020



The practicing of mindfulness is fairly straightforward. You likely know a standard mindfulness practice that involves focusing attention on the sensations of the breath and when you notice mind wandering, returning attention to the breath. The instruction is simple, it's easy to get started, the benefits are robust, and yet the practice can be challenging. Two common reasons are that settling down for a few minutes to pay attention to the breath can be . . . *unsettling*, or boring.

This month's column begins with a riddle: What does a snow globe, puppy dog, toothbrush, and hurricane have in common? As you might have guessed, the answer is mindfulness. Each is a popular metaphor that offers mindfulness insights. You may recall those television ads that entice the viewer with the tagline, "But wait, there's more." Below is a basic insight for each metaphor followed by a "But wait, there's more" deeper level of insight you may find helpful for establishing or developing your mindfulness practice. While mindfulness has become a bit of a commodity these days, the practice remains free and its benefits self-realized. "But wait, there's more" is a reminder that with a little patience, the practice may offer even more than you think.

SNOW GLOBE

Much interest in mindfulness resides around its potential to help reduce stress. A popular metaphor for helping to understand this is a snow globe. The idea is that a shaken snow globe is like a busy and agitated mind. Take a few slower breaths, place the snow globe on a steady surface, and the snow begins to settle.

But Wait, There's More: It is generally assumed that the settling of the snow is caused by putting it down and taking a few deep breaths. Can you think of another reason the snow might settle? Might it be that the very act of *observing the snow globe* precipitates the change. We often assume that someone or something is doing the shaking, such as an annoying person or unwanted news, and we need to do

something to get them/it to stop. The mindfulness insight is that we are doing the shaking ourselves by resisting the unpleasant experience. This is where the counterintuitive mindfulness insight of embracing the discomfort comes into play, for it is difficult to be both observing one's experience and resisting it at the same time. With time, the swirling snow of thoughts and feelings becomes less of a problem and more of something to become curious about, even something beautiful to watch. It can be liberating to observe the resistance. But, of course, that comes with a little training.

PUPPY DOG

As a training of attention, mindfulness practice can, in an apt and humorous manner, be likened to the training of a puppy dog. Our minds, like the untrained puppy can be all over the place, distracted by a stimulating, unpredictable, and enticing environment. With a little discipline and patience, the mind, like a puppy dog, can be trained. It begins by placing attention on an object like the breath or placing the puppy down on a patch of ground with the instruction to “stay.” When attention wanders or the puppy runs off, it is returned to the original spot with the reminder to “stay.” With consistent training, sooner than later both learn to follow the simple instruction. This practice can be very helpful for developing a more stable attention and greater emotional balance.

But Wait, There's More: Anyone who understands a puppy's nature knows that in the beginning it will wander off. The mindfulness practice helps us appreciate that it is the same with the mind. The puppy learns by being reinforced each time it wanders off. So too, mind wandering is part of the mindfulness training process — it is not an impediment. And just as shouting “bad dog” is not helpful, neither is “bad me!” To the contrary, both are a compassionate practice of patience and reliable and consistent feedback. And to provide that feedback — whether to the puppy or the mind, it is necessary that the wandering is realized. This is where things get interesting.

The puppy relies on us to provide it with feedback. But with ourselves, just who is providing the feedback? We are both the wandering puppy and the attentive master. Placing attention on an object like the breath is akin to walking the puppy on a leash. When one feels the tug of the leash, it knows the puppy is wandering away. With a little mindfulness practice, one begins to feel the tug of the mind. Of course, this begs the question of what is really being trained, the wandering attention or the attentive master. It is this capacity—to notice mind wandering—that is key, and it can be liberating to appreciate that the objective

of practice is not to stop the mind from wandering but to observe its activity and detect mind wandering. For then a choice emerges of whether to follow the thought or return to the breath.

BRUSHING TEETH

There was a time when people did not brush their teeth. Today, brushing teeth is a regular occurrence, with few giving it any thought. Just as we care about our dental hygiene, we are learning the importance of caring for our mental hygiene. Brushing teeth becomes effortless through a general understanding that it is beneficial coupled with daily repetition, and the same can come about with short periods of daily mindfulness practice.

But Wait, There's More: You likely brush your teeth every day for two reasons. An initial motivator is to freshen the breath. The other is to protect teeth and gums. The first is instantly achieved and short lived, while the second is initially imperceptible and realized over a period of months and the course of a lifetime. The mindfulness equivalent to fresh breath is feeling less stressed. And mindfulness practices can indeed be relaxing. But, unlike brushing, relaxation is not guaranteed. For while brushing with a refreshing toothpaste is intended to change the state of the breath, mindfully attending to the breath is not intended to change anything. Rather, the intention is to become more aware of what one is experiencing, which at times may be unpleasant. While mindfulness practice may bring about a more relaxed state from time to time, its larger purpose is to cultivate greater resilience amid life's ups and downs; to see things more clearly, to cultivate greater wisdom (teeth). It is likely that were you given a toothpaste to use that did not freshen breath, you would still brush because you know the larger reason for doing so. You might enjoy this short article that looks to a 1974 SNL skit with Gilda Radner, Dan Ackroyd, and Chevy Chase and explores mindfulness practice as a dessert topping and a floor wax.

THE HURRICANE

Hurricane season is coming to a close. One of a hurricane's links to mindfulness is the eye of the hurricane — the place of calm in the midst of raging tumult. Just as with hurricane winds, there are times when thoughts, feelings, and body sensations can be intense, unpleasant and unpredictable. To think we can find a place of refuge in the midst of all that intensity and drama can be a great relief. The practice of mindfulness may offer you this place of refuge.

But Wait, There's More: It is common to think in terms of polarities — hope/fear; happy/sad; pleasant/unpleasant — and to spend a great deal of time bouncing back and forth between them, seeking one and resisting the other. We might think it's either caught in the hurricane winds or experiencing the calm of the eye. In fact, the eye is a continuously moving target and the most dangerous aspect of the hurricane is not the intense wind and rain, but the eye wall. The desperately sought place of calm is, by the very laws of nature, fragile and transient. The key is to realize that we are neither merely the hurricane force winds nor the eye. We are both at the same time, and more. We are the totality of the whole thing. As Whitman writes, "I am large, I contain multitudes." The mindfulness invitation is to find a deep-seated okay-ness with that reality, for then there is nothing to resist, nothing that is not okay. Here are links to two articles that elaborate on this metaphor [Hurricanes of our True Nature](#), and [Mindfulness, Compassion and Hurricanes in our Midst](#) that you may find interesting.

The above four metaphors offer various insights. You might have also noticed the shared insights among them. The most valuable insight, of course, comes from your own direct experience and we hope that in addition to the above being interesting and informative, it may inspire a little practice. Below are a few short practices you might find useful.

PRACTICE TIPS AND INSIGHTS

Snow Globe Practice: Each time you breathe in, your snow globe becomes a little more active. Each time you breathe out, it settles a bit. The next time you begin to feel agitated, close your eyes and inhabit your snow globe with your imagination. After all, you are the snow person sitting in the center and the observer watching from above. Begin by taking a few slower, deeper breaths and imagine the snow settling. Then sit for a few minutes with your natural breath. Imagine a slight lift of snow on the in-breath and a greater settling of the snow on the out-breath.

Walking the Mind Practice: Mindfulness can be practiced in any position as well as while moving. Mindful walking is a popular practice that many enjoy because it can be done outside and while in between projects and meetings. Instead of placing your puppy on a leash, you tether your attention to an object like the sensations or sounds of your footsteps. You could also tether your attention to a thought or question you're pondering. Then, when you realize that your mind has wandered away from

the sensation, sound, question, or other chosen object of attention — when you feel the tug of the leash — redirect your attention back to the chosen object.

Tooth Brushing Practice: The Focused-Attention practice is largely a concentration practice in which attention is anchored to an object, e.g., breath, sounds, candle, the count, an image. To engage in a little mental flossing, you can close your eyes and imagine, with each passing breath, mentally moving from one tooth to another, as you work your way across the lower and then upper jaw. Be creative. When your mind wanders, simply redirect attention and continue on.

Hurricane Practice: Here is a link to a [guided audio recording](#) of a 12-minute mindfulness practice that draws on the metaphor of the hurricane.



*Scott Rogers, M.S., J.D., is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness in law and founded and directs the University of Miami School of Law's Mindfulness in Law Program where he teaches mindful ethics, mindful leadership, mindfulness and negotiation, and mindfulness in law. He is the creator of Jurisight, one of the first CLE programs in the country to integrate mindfulness and neuroscience and conducts workshops and presentations on the role of mindfulness in legal education and across the legal profession. He is author of the recently released, "**The Mindful Law Student: A Mindfulness in Law Practice Guide**," written for all audiences.*