



MINDFULNESS OF TEA DRINKING - ED HALLIWELL

Bringing mindfulness to simple activities like drinking tea trains us to direct attention consciously. By deliberately choosing to attend to an activity, we slow things down and let ourselves become aware of the process of paying attention and perhaps how little control we have of mind wandering.

By coming back repeatedly to the various aspects of tea-drinking, we are cultivating the capacity to focus. We practice this with gentleness, without judging ourselves or striving to reach some goal (even the goal of becoming better at paying attention).

Mindfulness means paying attention with the senses, in the body—feeling, touching, seeing, hearing, and tasting. Sensing always happens within the body and in the present moment, so this tuning in to sensing helps to bring us into the reality of here and now. Sensing mindfully allows us to experience what is actually happening, rather than what we think should happen. It's a chance to practice resting the analytical mind that habitually searches for solutions.

We are also practicing conscious choice. By watching how we make simple decisions—pouring water, disposing of a teabag, swallowing—we are bringing a deliberate awareness to activities that are often performed half-asleep, on automatic pilot.

Below are a few suggestions on how to practice mindful tea-drinking. Obviously, you can make and drink the tea in any way you like, or you can replace it with another drink or regular activity. The important thing is to let go into seeing, feeling, tasting, touching, and hearing, and to return gently to the senses whenever you notice the mind straying into thought.

1. Pay attention to the sound of the water heating and boiling in the kettle. Can you see wisps of steam coming from the spout? Does the kettle subtly shake from the movement of the water inside? Be open to your senses, rather than try to analyze what's happening.
2. Notice the feeling of being in your environment: your bottom's contact with the chair or the floor, if you're sitting down; the weight of your feet on the ground, if you're standing.

3. Pouring the tea, watch the colour of the water change as it meets the teabag. Be interested in the transformation from clear water to tea. When your mind wanders into thought, as it probably will, gently return your attention to sensing.
4. Lifting the teabag out with a spoon, feel the touch of the handle against your fingers, and the weight of the bag dropping away as you tip it into the bin. Let yourself hear any related sounds, such as the opening and closing of the bin lid. Notice any tendency to do this on autopilot, and come back to present-moment sensing when you find you've drifted to distraction.
5. If you take milk and sugar, be interested in how you feel as you reach for and add these ingredients to the brew.
6. Notice the warming of the cup. How do your hands feel as you hold it?
7. Now, bring the cup to your lips. Be interested in how your hand and arm know how to move in this direction without you having to tell them consciously what to do.
8. Take a sip of tea. Rather than gulping it down, see if you can let the taste tickle your tongue. Perhaps gently move the liquid around your mouth. Savor the taste—is it pleasant? Or perhaps you'd prefer it stronger or weaker? Just be aware of your sensations and the liking or disliking of them. If there are thoughts, let them enter into and then pass through your mind without following them. Try to stay with the tasting. Notice without judgement any desire to rush the drinking, and any impatience that comes.
9. When you decide to swallow the tea, notice how that decision is made. Is it a conscious choice, or does it happen automatically? Stay present to the swallowing, the reflex movements in the back of the mouth and the throat, the trickle of liquid down into the stomach. How does it feel to be swallowing?
10. Notice how the liquid seems to disappear. Is there a point when the tea stops being separate from you? When and how do you recognize that moment?
11. Pause now, noticing any feelings of irritation, or thoughts such as: Hurry up, I've got better things to do. Or perhaps a sense of peace or stillness enters you. If so, where do you feel it? Is it changing from moment to moment, or staying the same? Maybe there's something else going on in your mind and body, perhaps unrelated to the tea-drinking, pulling you into thoughts of the past or the future. If so, just notice it. Whatever comes up in your experience is okay —there's no right or wrong thing to notice.
12. Take a look around you, opening your eyes to your surroundings without buying into evaluations about them. Just be aware of any thoughts or feelings that come up.

13. Now, return your attention to the cup of tea in your hand. (Has the temperature dropped?) Watch as you decide when to begin the process of taking another sip. Continue drinking the tea until the cup is empty, or you decide to stop drinking. If the latter, be curious about what is prompting that decision. Whatever you choose to do in each moment, try to watch the experience from an engaged observer's perspective.

You don't have to follow these steps like a strict to-do list. The key is to open yourself to the spirit of the practice, sensing with gentle precision what's happening, moment by moment, and coming back to sensing whenever you notice you've drifted into thought.