

MINDFULNESS AND AUTHENTIC CREATIVITY:  
DEVELOPING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Humanities  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2011

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## **ABSTRACT**

The contemporary society of the United States of America is becoming an increasingly stressful environment to live in. Our rapid advances and developments in virtual, electronic, and high-speed technology have led us to a lifestyle that operates more quickly. However, our attachment to such a face-paced lifestyle has unfortunately led us towards an increasingly stressful lifestyle. This research focuses on identifying our current society's perceptual outlook and illustrating how the practice of mindfulness can help reduce the anxieties, struggles, and mental flaws which cloud our perception.

The intent of this thesis is to show how the practice of mindfulness is beneficial towards our mental health. The practice of mindfulness originated within the Buddhist tradition and has evolved into a new area of interest in the fields of mental health, psychology, philosophy, and humanities. Also, the connection between the practice of mindfulness, and the practice of authentic creativity, as demonstrated in playing the piano, is illuminated within this research. Authentic creativity thus serves as an enlightening metaphor for the elusive practice of mindfulness, and creates a more vivid understanding of the concept of mindfulness.

For this thesis I have conducted a literature review in the areas of philosophy, religion, aesthetics and cognitive science. Also, I am actively participating in my research by personally practicing mindfulness and piano. Part of my methodology involves critical thinking on the personal level as I am writing journal entries about my views and thoughts concerning these processes.

## DEDICATION

To both of my loving parents:

Daddy, you are more than just a Dad, you are a friend who makes me laugh, you are my biggest supporter and fan; you give me strength when I feel down, and you give me inspiration to stay strong and confident. Thank you for always loving and believing in me, you will always be my hero, and I will always be your little darlin'.

Mama, you are my best friend, you are always there for me when I need to talk or speak my mind, and because of that, we share everything together, whether it be good, bad, or just plain petty; you've helped me to become an open-minded and understanding person towards others and to myself, and that is because of your contagious loving energy.

And also, to my brother Steven, you have been the most constant character in my life, a great influence, a great friend, a great inspiration, and an amazing person. I have and always will look up to you; thanks for being such a cool brother.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all of those who made my thesis possible. Thank you Dr. Congdon for sharing your wisdom; your interest and excitement towards academics is inviting, encouraging, and inspirational. Thank you Dr. Compson for introducing the practice of mindfulness into my life, it has changed my life perspective and helped me build my character. Thank you Dr. Mouloua for helping me with my research and being open to talking and working on my thesis with me. Thank you to both of my parents for loving and supporting me my entire life; thank you for always being my foundation, thank you for always listening to me, caring for me, and believing in me. Thank you Mike Main for being my thesis buddy; I am glad that we helped each other through this process, and I could not have done it without you. Thank you to all of my friends, family members, and professors for all of your encouragement and support that you have all provided me over these past four years at the University of Central Florida.

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## INTRODUCTION

Human beings perceive the world from the physical sensations offered to us through vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Our sensory organs allow us to experience the world around us, and thus serve as our primary tools for achieving awareness. We utilize our sensory input to form mental judgments concerning the reality of the present moment, and we arrive at, create, and mentally form the present moment based on our past, or all the moments which precede *now*. We form personal beliefs about life and attribute qualities to people and situations based on our everyday experiences. Our life is a continuous phenomenological process of self-discovery. As we grow older we begin to see life from a larger perspective, we become aware of our own will, our own existence, our own judgments and beliefs towards life choices and values, and from this we create the narrative of our self. We understand the external world through our unique internal world, our mind. As we mature we begin to realize that we are a part of the external world. Every fleeting moment of the *present* grants us a fresh opportunity to perceive life in a new way, yet often we do not use this great potential which resides in every tiny moment of our everyday lives. The moment we call “now” seems to be the most real aspect of our lives, while it is “giving birth to what swiftly becomes the past it is simultaneously conceiving the future. It is the matrix of all that was and will be. And all is always now” (Guggenheimer *Creative Vision* 7). Yet it seems that one of the greatest failures of our contemporary society is the inability to grasp entire implications, meanings, and consequences of situations or events. We fail to see the big picture because we become entrapped within narrow thinking patterns. We understand *what* we perceive about life and our self, but we neglect to understand *how* and *why*

we arrive at these perceptions. When we understand the world around us and even our self as a solid idea we neglect the true nature of the world around us, a world that is fluid and not stagnant. Therefore the thoughts, actions, and words we use to understand our own personal world can often become limited, misconstrued, or biased because we fail to recognize the element of change inherent in every present moment. I believe that contemporary society in the United States is becoming increasingly entrapped within a mental state of mindlessness, an unconscious mentality which can show up as the “direct cause of human error in complex situations, of prejudice and stereotyping, and of the sensation of alternating between anxiety and boredom” (Langer Moldoveanu 6).

The problematic mentality of mindlessness increases our cognitive vulnerability towards internal and emotional distress. As our mode of living has grown in complexity we find ourselves becoming anxiously occupied with difficult tasks of preserving our poise and security from moment to moment, and therefore we often fail in the more important obligation of maintaining a breadth of vision embracing interest and values beyond our narrow selves (Guggenheimer 9). When we spend most of our time lost in memories of the past and fantasies concerning the future, we begin to operate our lives in an “autopilot” mode, where our minds are in one place and our bodies are in another. From this mindlessness the clarity of our perception becomes jaded. When our minds operate on “autopilot” mode we become derailed from the present moment. Sometimes our derailment from life is merely a drift into a world of daydreaming, or possibly a drift into our internal file cabinet of happy memories. Yet at other times we fly off the tracks of the present moment, zooming into a turbulent, frightening flight of anxiety, self-doubt, depression, and worry. This all too common and often unnoticed state of

mindlessness threatens our ability to experience the diversity, richness, and exciting aspects of everyday life, and from this handicapped and limited mentality our society falls subject to developing the mentality of what Bhante Henepola Gunaratana describes as “monkey mind”, also described as the “mad astronaut” perspective of life, as coined by Jerry Mander.

“Monkey mind” is the shocking realization that you are completely crazy; your mind is a “shrieking, gibbering madhouse on wheels barreling pell-mell down the hill, utterly out of control and helpless” (Gunaratana 75). It is the mind’s tendency to wander off constantly, “darting around like a bumblebee and zooming off on wild tangents” (Gunaratana 75). The “monkey mind” is constantly racing with erratic thoughts: “*Did I pay the electric bill for this month?*,” “*What time do I have to wake up tomorrow so I am not late for work and not stuck in traffic?*,” “*Should I have re-read that report I sent my colleague or was it fine as is?*,” “*Why is my roommate so upset with me, did I do something wrong?*” Our ability to interpret reality becomes clouded by the worries, questions, doubts, regrets, and stresses which race through our minds, leaving our perception of the moment, what is *now*, opaque and convoluted. I believe that our society has adopted an anxiety-driven mindset with excessive worry and care about the future and overwhelming unease and doubt concerning the past, leaving an insufficient and only momentary sense of security within the present. “Monkey mind” can be thought of as a condition brought on by mindlessness; it is a perspective which not only produces angst, worry, and stress within an individual but also creates tension within a community, often resulting in “misunderstandings, misconstruals, and misperceptions among communicators who are individually under the impression that they are engaged with one another in meaningful dialogue” (Langer Moldoveanu 7). How can we communicate clearly and meaningfully with one



another in the present moment if our minds are full of racing thoughts, worrisome memories, and never-ending anticipations? We are usually so preoccupied with shaping our future and reexamining our past, that we do not realize how much our behavior and thinking revolve around that preoccupation. How can we engage in authentic, creative, and shared experiences with one another if we are unable to harness our awareness genuinely? If we are experiencing life mindlessly, unable to focus and be aware of the miracle of every moment which we call *now*, will we be entrapped within judgments, memories, values, and perspectives of the past? Is there any way we can integrate the *past*, the *future*, and the *now*? Is there any way we can quiet, or even escape, the madhouse of our minds? How is it possible to gain a true awareness to the totality of life?

Our awareness of the present moment often becomes fogged by our memories of the past. We easily become consumed by these past memories and sometimes fall into states of apprehension, regret, or longing for that which once was. However, we also yearn eagerly to “progress” in to the future, once again neglecting the present moment in anticipation for what is to come. Sometimes this anticipation mentally freezes us and we yearn to escape, to go back to sleep, to live in our dream worlds in our comfy beds away from the calamity and stress of the real world. Have you ever felt the Sunday blues? Have you ever felt that uneasy feeling of anxiety, of almost panic, where your mind races with thoughts concerning the deadlines, appointments, meetings, and obligations of next week’s responsibilities and your body becomes frozen and lost in thought? When we become completely overwhelmed by anxiety about the future, we cannot help but desire an escape, and like a frightened turtle we retract into our shells.

Our minds race with thoughts of worry, panic, and doubt; our minds become our turtle shells and we miss out on the inspiring world around.

Media critic Jerry Mander proclaims that our entire society has begun to suffer from the “mad astronaut” syndrome; “uprooted, floating in space, encased in our metal worlds, with automated systems neatly at hand, communicating mainly with machines, following machine logic, disconnected from the earth and all organic reality, without contact with a multidimensional, biologically diverse world and with the nuances of world views entirely unlike our own” ((63). Our individual and personal experiences have become less personal and more virtual. It seems as though the real world is becoming increasingly intertwined and suffocated by our dependence upon the virtual world. Our day to day lives have become flooded by the constant stream of virtual stimuli offered to us by the internet, computers, and our cell phones. Our reality continues to be increasingly encompassed and interrupted by the virtual world. How often do we push pause in our daily experience, aborting whatever task at hand, in order to respond to our beeping and ringing phones? How often do we stop to check our never ending e-mails? How often do we send texts and tweets instead of engaging in one-on-one conversation? Are we spending too much time creating our virtual identities and not enough time creating our true character?

“The actual happening of things is characterized by flow, by something more perfect than consecutiveness- a sort of incessant flowering. When this flowering process becomes ‘forgotten’ and then is resurrected in adumbrated episodes, the integrity of the true process is compromised” (Guggenheimer *Creative Vision* 36). Our experiences and perceptions in life exist within “the

flow” of reality. Yet often times we box the flow of reality into static and unchanging moments. Often times we leave the flow of reality in order to engage in our obligations to the virtual world, and so our flow of reality is perceived only in segments. We become absent to the world around us because we become entrapped on the chair in front of our computer screen. We become absent to the world around us because our cell phones seduce our attention elsewhere. We become absent to the world around us because we become lost in daydreaming desires and haunting anxieties. We misinterpret the world around us because we become too caught up in our own personal beliefs, in our own little turtle shell of concrete values, interests, goals, and schedules. It seems as though we must always be doing or thinking something at all times. Can we ever enjoy a calm moments of contemplation or are we doomed to a life of restlessness?

As our patterns of thought grow ever mindless our society faces new and profound challenges to learning, focusing, and authentic “one-on-one” communication. According to the November 2010 *New York Times* article “Growing up Digital, Wired for Distraction,” researchers argue that the overwhelming lure of computer and cell phone technologies within our culture is creating a particularly powerful effect on the brains of young people and developing brains within our society. The risk, they say, is that “developing brains can become more easily habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks-- and less able to sustain attention”

(A1). Michael Rich, associate professor at Harvard Medical School and executive director of the Center on Media and Child Health in Boston, argues that young adults and students “brains are rewarded not for staying on task but for jumping to the next thing” and that “the worry is we’re raising a generation of kids in front of screens whose brains are going to be wired differently”

(A1). As the aversion of our attention becomes increasingly common, our methods of

intelligence employed for practical living form certain habits of behavior. When we succumb to mindless habitual behavior our perception exists as a mere illusion and we miss out on modes of creative and mindful thinking. Our mindless thought processes are resistant to the ever-changing flow that characterizes the world around us, and this kind of thought pattern inevitably traps us in a life cycle characterized by desire, anxiety, and suffering.

How can we heal a society which continues to grow increasingly mindless and disconnected, afflicted with the “monkey mind,” and crazed by mentality of the “mad astronaut”? I believe that through the practice of “mindfulness” and “authentic creativity” we can rediscover and get in touch with what Zen master, scholar, and peacemaker Thich Nhat Hanh calls the “true mind,” the wellspring of understanding and compassion (Interbeing 3), in order to achieve a richer and deeper life perspective in the present moment. Creative and mindful modes of thinking adjust to change and can therefore experience the flow or flowering of life. In this thesis I draw connections between the traits required and produced by the practice of mindfulness in relation to the practice of “authentic creativity” as demonstrated in the art of playing piano. Mindfulness is an elusive but central aspect of the 2,500-year-old tradition of Buddhist philosophy. “Mindfulness” as used in ancient Buddhist texts, is an English translation of the Pali word, *sati*, which connotes *awareness*, *attention*, and *remembering* (Siegal, Germer, and Olendzki 18). In its ancient context, the purpose of mindfulness aimed to “eliminate needless suffering by cultivating insight into the workings of the mind and the nature of the material world” (18). Much modern confusion and struggle is attributable to the short sighted perspective, to minds which fly off at tangents or become obfuscated by incomplete impressions and preconceived beliefs (Guggenheimer *Creative Vision* 46). However, the mindful practitioner is

actively working with states of mind in order to abide peacefully in the midst of whatever happens rather than resisting it.

By understanding that we have the power of redirecting our attention, rather than trying to control or suppress intense emotions, we can gain control of our mental states of mind and regulate how we feel. We can become aware of and in control of our own personal will. This control can give us a new sense of security and contentment, and we can harness this security through moments of true contemplation. As we harness our awareness we gain a new insight and wisdom towards life. As waves of insecurity, stress, angst, anger, and desire inevitably creep back into our lives we can choose to transmit these feelings rather than cling to them or ignore them. In this sense, authentic creativity can serve as a means of mental catharsis. Mindfulness can bring one to realize the power of feelings and sensations as they arise and cease within the body, but authentic creativity can allow one to express these feelings intuitively to others and themselves, in ways that words, language, and strict intellect simply could not. These two practices are temporary and will end once the practical effort or creative process ends, but it is important to note that these brief experiences will change one's life and that they are stepping stones towards a liberating insight.

Russian philosopher Leo Tolstoy explains “art, like speech, is a means of communication, and therefore of progress, i.e., of the movement of humanity forward toward perfection” (Tolstoy 240). Tolstoy believes that a real work of art “destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself [or herself] and the artist” and that “in this freeing of our personality from its separation and isolation, in this uniting with others, lies the chief

characteristic and great attractive force of art” (Tolstoy 239). According to philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer music rises above all the other arts by the mere fact that it is not a copy of a phenomenon, but rather a direct copy of the will itself (Schopenhauer 158). Music, to Schopenhauer, exists in another realm, a realm where meaning is expressed through the language of music, a world where tones, rhythm, melodies, harmonies, and intuition replace words, sentences, and ordinary modes of thinking and perceiving. The world of music is understood by us all, it recreates actual emotions in both the players and listeners, and it expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world. The world of music is the true utopia we can safely escape to when life becomes overwhelming and unmanageable.

As I become increasingly mindful through practice, I realize that my piano playing continues to grow to new heights of authentic creativity. I can transmit the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of my mind in new ways, through music instead of words. I can play the same piece of music again and again, but it is never the same because I am never the same. When I find I have reached a level of intellectual perfection within a piece of music, I play it again but allow myself to loose myself within the piece. The practice of authentic creativity requires a state of personal honesty, to allow one’s intuition to take control of the mind thus permitting the possibility of the body to create and express a means of union and communication with fellow human beings. Instead of writing mental insights down, changing them from pure feeling to uniform language, I can allow these feelings to flow freely from my mind to the keys of my piano. In this way I believe I am capable of transmitting more honest, accurate, and true feelings through my fingers playing the piano keys than through my fingers typing on a computer keyboard.

The practice of mindfulness and the practice of authentic creativity are processes; there is no definite goal, endpoint, or timeline to follow. There is no angst about the past and no stress about the future, but rather acceptance and insight into the present. Both of these practices involve honest experience, effort, participation, dedication, and discipline, which in turn will allow one to dig deeper and deeper through internal layers of illusion towards a realization of the supreme truth of existence, ultimately creating a fascinating, fulfilling and richer life perspective. In his book *Sight and Insight*, Richard Guggenheimer explains that art and humans can and must ascend toward the maturity of total communion and until this occurs, both are constrained to relative frustration. Guggenheimer argues that the modern human has lost sight of the miracle that is inherent in every instant of being, and that the individuals of our society have “grown so familiar with the materials of his [or her] little island of life, to which he [or she] drifted but a few wispy years ago out of eternity and infinity, that he [or she] is blind to the incessant wonder of it” (vii). I believe there exists a great need for our society to practice both mindfulness and authentic creativity. What effects do these two practices produce? How can the integration of these effects benefit one’s perception and experience? In this thesis will illustrate how these traits and perceptive changes are both beneficial and difficult for the disconnected, “monkey-mind” and “mad astronaut” mindset characteristic of the Western-Modern American society.

In order to explain the concepts outlined within this introduction, I have conducted a literature review in the areas of philosophy, religion, aesthetics, and cognitive science. Mindfulness is a Buddhist concept therefore a majority of the information presented in my thesis involves a literary investigation into the Buddhist religion from the authors Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Steve Hagen, Thich Nhat Hanh, Phillip Novak, Huston Smith, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and

Walpola Rahula. In addition to these writers I have also researched several academic institutions and programs which study the practice of mindfulness including UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC), the Center of Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and also the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, which is the global leader in mind-body based medicine, directed by Saki F. Santorelli, EdD, MA, and founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. In addition, I have focused on the research of Ellen J. Langer, Shelley H. Carson, and Daniel J. Siegel for a recent understanding of mindfulness practice in Western contemporary society. From this research I will present readers with an accurate definition of what I am explaining as the practice of mindfulness. In order to explain the concept and process of "authentic creativity" I have researched into the aesthetic and philosophical writings of Gary Peters, Ellen J. Langer, Leo Tolstoy, Richard Guggenheimer, Arthur Schopenhauer, Peter Kivy and Susan Langer. After explaining these two practices I will discuss the benefits and difficulties our society will face in the application and integration of these two practices. In order to present these problems, issues, and solutions accurately I have researched the authors Berry Wendell, Riane Eisler, Roger Gottlieb and Jerry Mander who have all written in the global anthology "Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment." In addition, I have also researched newspaper articles in the New York Times, and also articles from the academic journals "Harvard Magazine", "Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience", and "Thinking Skills and Creativity" to illustrate specific examples, studies, and theories concerning the effects required and produced by the implication of the practice of mindfulness and authentic creativity. Finally, I will ground this research in my own personal practice of being mindful and in playing piano.



## THE MONSTER OF MINDLESSNESS

Is it possible to illustrate an accurate portrait of the “mindless perspective” adopted by our contemporary society? It won’t be easy, but by understanding what constitutes a “mindless perspective,” and specifically understanding what constitutes your own personal “mindless” perception, you have already reached the halfway point towards achieving a tangible description. By investigating, explaining, and becoming aware of the shortcomings of our thinking procedures we can recognize and correct our established problematic thought patterns so we can more truly envisage new designs and apprehend fuller meanings of our experience of life (Guggenheimer *Creative Vision 2*). So what exactly is the problem that faces our contemporary American society? “Because you are human... you find yourself heir to an inherent unsatisfactoriness in life that simply will not go away. So what is wrong with you? Are you a freak? No. You are just human. And you suffer from the same malady that infects every human being” (Gunaratana 8). Bhante Henepola Gunaratana explains that human suffering and restlessness is caused by the inner manifestation of the monster inside all of us, a monster that has many arms: “chronic tension, lack of genuine compassion for others, including the people closest to you, blocked up feelings and emotional deadness” (Gunaratana 8). This internal monster and the infecting mental rapture which accompanies it is the source to our feelings of jealousy, suffering, discontent, stress, boredom, and anxiety. Gunaratana states that:

We build a whole culture around hiding from it, pretending it is not there, and distracting ourselves with goals, projects, and concerns about status. But it never goes away. It is a constant undercurrent in

every thought and every perception, a little voice in the back, of the mind the keeps saying, 'Not good enough yet. Need to have more. Have to make it better. Have to be better. It is a monster, a monster that manifests everywhere in subtle forms' (Gunaratana 8)

As humans, we have the responsibility of simultaneously controlling both our bodies and minds so we can act, speak, interpret, and experience life as an integrated whole. Richard Guggenheimer describes this process: "To see soundly is to see whole. Most of us see fragmentarily, and act ineffectually relative to our fullest possibilities. Fragmentary seeing and thinking is focusing on details and parts without properly relating them to the greater form to which they belong. Life itself is probably a great form, not perceptible to our young intellects but already surmised by our intuition" (Guggenheimer *Creative Vision* 1). If life is a forest, then mindlessness is the monster which hides deep in the woods. We miss out on the totality of possibilities, resources, and truths available to us in the forest because the monster which lurks deep inside constricts us to only explore fragments of the forest. What our society needs is liberation from this monster inside. We shouldn't run, hide, suppress, or dismiss the existence of this metaphorical monster, we shouldn't allow it to run wild and dictate our perception of life. We should rather become aware of its monstrous nature so we can tame it and live peacefully in its looming presence.

The mind is filled with beliefs, attitudes, worries, intentions, and memories, all of which influence our behavior, thought patterns, and perception of reality. However, when we are mindless we are unaware of the of the causes or paths which form these elements and because

we are only aware of their existence and not their roots, we allow our inner monster to take over our perception, showing up in our prejudices, anger, frustration, and contempt towards others, and also in our anxiety, worry, guilt, and regret concerning our own actions and thoughts. “In our personal lives, many of us have found this societal whirlwind deeply dissatisfying. We can adjust, responding to the drive to do, but often we cannot thrive in such a frenetic world” (Siegel, *Reflections on the Mindful State*, 2007). Allowing the monster of mindlessness to manifest our mind consumes our mental energy, clouding our self-worth and self-judgment, and distorting our interpersonal connection with others. When our inner monster takes control, our mind is then experienced as an “amalgam of busy thoughts and feelings and automatic reactivity and habitual responses” (Siegel, *Mindfulness training and neural integration*, 2007). Are you in control of your own destiny or have you surrendered your power to your inner monster? What happens when mindlessness affects a group of people, a society, or even an entire culture? What kind of world is created when the inner monsters take over? Daniel Siegel explains that mindless behavior and thought patterns are the source for history’s worst humanitarian evils: “Wars can be initiated and mass destruction and genocide planned and executed by humans filled with top-down forces that keep them from considering the whole of their actions on others. With such mindless behavior people are able to destructively enact their impulses and ideas without consideration of the larger good” (Siegel, *Reflections on the Mindful State*, 2007).

### The Monkey-Minded Mentality

Think of what you are doing right now. As you read these words, are you engaging in a silent, one way conversation within your head, internally dictating my thoughts? Or are

skimming through these words and softly mumbling my sentences under your breath as if you were ever so quietly speaking my mind for me? Are you thinking about your eyes blinking or their continuous shifting of focus, from the left side of the page to the right and then back? Are you thinking about what time it is, how long it'll take you to read this paper, or where the closest beverage is to quench your sudden thirst? Have you become aware of the multi-tasking nature of your mind, reading my words, hearing your voice, thinking about the subject at hand, but also daydreaming, allowing your mind to fly off on random tangents, possibly envisioning the endless "to-do" list of activities you plan on accomplishing once you finish reading? One notable symptom of mindlessness is the trouble which arises with the "monkey mind". As mentioned earlier, "monkey mind" is the shocking realization that you are completely crazy; your mind is a "shrieking, gibbering madhouse on wheels barreling pell-mell down the hill, utterly out of control and helpless" (Gunaratana 75). It is the mind's tendency to wander off constantly, "darting around like a bumblebee and zooming off on wild tangents" (Gunaratana 75). The monkey-minded mentality is often an unconscious process but it is also illustrates our "*deliberate* efforts to escape the present moment" where our focus is not aimed towards the task at hand but rather the "good stuff" which we restlessly await. (Siegal, Germer, Olendzki 20).

Do you ever find yourself rushing through the dishes your roommates or family left carelessly behind so you can start cooking your own dinner to ease your hunger craving? Do you *mindlessly* wash the dishes while daydreaming? Do you think about how angry you are that you are the only one that actually cleans the kitchen? Do you notice the warm water on your hands or are you focused on the faint headache building in your head? "When we reflect honestly, we notice that we're rushing through, or trying to get rid of, much of our life experience" (Siegal,

Germer, Olendzki 21). The first step towards liberation from the “monkey-minded” mentality is simply noticing the erratic, never-ending, craziness within our racing minds, a noticing which will inevitably require the effort of our attention and awareness. Noticing the monkey-minded nature of your thoughts requires turning back to the present moment, thus escaping from the fantasy madhouse encased within the mind. “We see life through a screen of thoughts and concepts, and we mistake those mental objects for reality. We get so caught up in this endless thought-stream that reality flows by unnoticed. We spend our time engrossed in activity, caught up in an eternal pursuit of pleasure and gratification and eternal flight from pain and unpleasantness” (Gunaratana 33). The affliction of the monkey-mind consumes our mental energy allowing the world of real experience to flow by untouched and untasted.

For many of us, our minds begin to dominate our perceptual experience, daydreaming, classifying, and compartmentalizing facts about life, leaving our bodies in a state of *mindless* auto-pilot where our focus and conception of the present moment is cluttered by our mind’s frenzy of racing thoughts, questions, and worries. Why do we always fall subject to the pitfalls of angst, stress, and doubt? Why do we dwell upon the past and the future incessantly? Richard Guggenheimer argues that one of the greatest failures in our perceptual experience is our inability to understand “entire implications, meanings, and consequences of situations or events. As our mode of living has grown in complexity and subtlety we find ourselves less able to comprehend all that happens, threatens, or promises” (Guggenheimer *Creative Vision* 2). If life was a book, then, according to Guggenheimer, we would read a few pages and then skip a page or two. Since the complexity of our life has become so face-paced, we would feel the need to skim through a majority of the book just so we could be done and move on. However, because

we failed to truly pay attention to every page, we would miss out on some of the meaning and nuances hidden within the novel. Part of what makes us human is the capacity to be fully conscious and aware, however, we unfortunately only live in this state for “brief periods of time and are soon reabsorbed into familiar daydreams and personal narratives” (Siegal, Germer, Olendzki 17), a state of mind which we call “mindlessness”. When we try to skip and skim through the pages, or moments, or our life we miss out on the entire meaning, and because we are unable to see the entire novel of our life, we often become confused, misinformed, or jaded by delusion. “The capacity for *sustained* moment-to-moment awareness, especially in the midst of emotional turmoil, is a special skill. Fortunately, it is a skill that can be learned” (Siegal, Germer, Olendzki 17), and this skill and solution to our problem is mindfulness.

### The Mad Astronaut Perspective

Our world is continuously changing and our environment is constantly offering grand opportunities and unavoidable setbacks, and therefore the world also continuously “demands reformulation and change of present categories of how the world is” (Carson and Langer 38). The universe is characterized by a natural flow, but human culture has taught us some odd responses to this endless flowering. “We categorize experiences. We try to stick each perception, every mental change in this endless flow, into one of three mental pigeon holds: it is good, bad, or neutral” (Gunaratana 10). We grasp onto those memories we consider to be good, reject those we see as bad, and spend most of our time ignoring the plethora of neutral experiences we have daily. Conforming to these rigid categories limits our ability to grasp entire meanings and forms, and therefore our conception of life is minimal. We fail to notice the interconnectedness of our

existence and often fail to recognize how our personal thoughts, actions, worries, and behaviors affect others and the natural world around us. We synchronize our anticipated scheduled lives in order to arrive timely for future obligations, and all the while we remain subject to life's spontaneous surprises. When things don't go 'as planned' our worlds turn upside-down, and we are forced to do things in a manner that was unforeseen. The unexpected nature of reality can leave us enthusiastic and delighted at some moments and bewildered or anxious at others; the monkey-minded mentality binds us within the madhouse of our own mind, and because our focus is mainly directed inwards, towards our self, we become subject to adopting the 'mad astronaut' perspective.

Media critic Jerry Mander proclaims that our entire society has begun to suffer from the "mad astronaut" syndrome; "uprooted, floating in space, encased in our metal worlds, with automated systems neatly at hand, communicating mainly with machines, following machine logic, disconnected from the earth and all organic reality, without contact with a multidimensional, biologically diverse world and with the nuances of world views entirely unlike our own" (Mander 63). Our awareness, understanding, and compassion towards other living beings is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain; our focus towards connecting with other humans diminishes as we battle the calamity within our own minds and the constant stimuli of distractions offered to us by the virtual world. The virtual world has stolen a large part of the real world, one-on-one conversations are being diluted to text messaging conversations and in turn, our social relationships are being diluted and less personal. What our society needs is a greater sense of interbeing, of connectedness to not only other human beings but to the miracle of nature and environment around us. Jerry Mander argues that "each level of technical invention has

taken us further away from the source” of our problems and that “each invention has spawned others, placing us ever deeper within technical consciousness and further away from organic reality, to the point where we can seriously consider abandoning the planet, abandoning nature, abandoning our bodies” (Mander 63).

We no longer believe that fruit comes from the ground, we rely on the fact that it may or may not be genetically produced, processed, packaged, and sold; it doesn't come from the ground, it comes from the grocery store. We no longer think that our bodies should be subject to old age and decay; we can produce artificial limbs, organs, and pharmaceuticals to replace our cherished youth. We no longer believe that we must share experiences in the company of others; we play online card games instead of playing with our friends or families around the dinner table. We accept the technological revolution as inherent ‘progress’ and in general we have no control over what technology is introduced and accepted, we just want to be the first ones to own the latest gadget.

Over the last twenty years our society has evolved to be an extremely technology-driven culture, a culture “that consumes our attention” and often “produces a multi-tasking frenzy of activity that leaves people constantly doing, with no space to breathe and just ‘be’” (Siegel, *Reflections on the Mindful State*, 2007). It seems that our society's obsession with virtual and technological progress has worsened our mindlessness, specifically intensifying our affliction of the monkey mind. Our obsession with digital communication is greatly changing how people relate to one another and construct their own inner lives, as explained by Sherry Turkle, clinical psychologist and professor of the social studies of science and technology at the Massachusetts



Institute of Technology. In an article she wrote published on February 22, 2011 in the *New York Times*, Turkle explains the downfalls of our culture's reliance on virtual technology and how this 'mad astronaut' perspective is changing the way we relate, communicate, and express ourselves to others. Through her research, Turkle found that many adolescents prefer to text over talking in person or even talking on the phone. Turkle explains: "Texts...offer more control—and the ability to keep one's feelings at a distance. Many young people prefer to deal with strong feelings from the safe haven of the Net.... It gives them an alternative to processing emotions in real time" (C4). As Ms. Turkle sees it, "online life tends to promote more superficial, emotionally lazy relationships, as people are drawn to connections that seem low risk and always at hand" (C4).

We have become desensitized to our actions, reliance, and involvement with technology, and our unawareness is manifesting a society of mindless acceptance. Mander proclaims that as the "interlocking and interweaving and spawning of new technologies takes place, the weave of technology becomes ever tighter and more difficult to separate" (Mander 64). We can't imagine living without our cell phones and internet connection and therefore we also agree that we cannot live on an Earth that is not encompassed by a ring of orbiting satellites and foreign debris. "And the awful sacrifices that the planet has made to satisfy the cravings of the technological thrust are now becoming visible in oil spills, global warming, ozone depletion, toxic pollution, and deforestation, all of which affect our sense of well-being in everyday life"(Mander 65).

The experiences of our daily lives' have become increasingly complicated; we not only deal with our own stresses but also worldly concerns. When we watch the news, go on the web,

or discuss current events a feelings of desperation, shame, and depression overwhelm us. We feel pain, sorrow, and guilt when we see our world suffering because of our actions, we wince at the news when stories concerning the BP oil catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, and feel remorse for the environment when we hear stories of deforestation and climate change that were created for the name of ‘technological progress’. The truth of the matter is that unless we understand what our lifestyles are and are becoming we will continue to mindlessly accept this lifestyle without considering alternatives paths towards a more admirable notion of ‘progress’. Is this a pessimistic view of our society, an anti-technological view, or does it sound like a rant preaching a technological conspiracy theory? Mindlessness is not just a personal problem anymore, mindless behavior holds the fate of our society in its fragile hands, and the only way we can head towards a better path is to realize where we stand on the path thus far.

### Defining Mindlessness

Is there an operational definition of mindlessness we can use to describe our perceptual quandary? According to Harvard Professor Ellen Langer, mindlessness can be understood as the lack of the following attributes: “(a) openness to novelty; (b) alertness to distinction; (c) sensitivity to different contexts; (d) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; and (e) orientation in the present” (Sternberg 12). In the article “Mindfulness and Self-Acceptance” Shelley Carson and Ellen Langer elaborate upon these five constructs allowing us to understand clearer image of the mindless perspective. According to Carson and Langer:

Mindlessness is a state of rigidity in which one adheres to a single perspective and acts automatically. When one is *mindless*, one is

trapped in a rigid mindset and is oblivious to context or perspective. The mindless condition pigeonholes experiences, behaviors, objects, and other people into rigid categories. Mindless thought-processing and behavior are governed by rules, routines, and previously constructed categories.... When information and experience are processed mindlessly, the potential for reconsideration and reinterpretation is abandoned (Carson and Langer 30).

Given these explanations it seems that we may be able to describe a mindless perspective as one that is not creative, it is a mindset that accepts what is given rather than inquiring about it, it is a perspective that forms beliefs, truths, and habits without tracing them back to their roots or looking for an alternative way, it is a tendency to be focused in the past, future, or non-existent with little awareness to the nuances within the present. The mindless perspective is also an inauthentic expression of our emotions, it is an abbreviation of what we feel and what we communicate, and therefore it greatly lacks elements of understanding and compassion. If we wish to fix our problems of mindlessness, the monkey-minded perspective, and the mad astronaut view of life we must first clear out the various irritants that are in the way- “pull them right out by the root so they won’t grow back” (Gunaratana 15). But what does this entitle and how do we do this? “We are just beginning to realize that we have overdeveloped the material aspects of existence at the expense of the deeper emotional and spiritual aspects, and we are paying the price for that error. It is one thing to talk about the degeneration of moral and spiritual fiber in America today, and another thing to actually do something about it” (Gunaratana 13).

Luckily we have all the tools we need to fix our mindless ways of living, thinking, and being, we just need to start using these tools instead of mindlessly disregarding our exceptional and promising capabilities. The time to start this change is now, and the place to start is within us. “Cultivating an experiential understanding of the mind is a direct focus of mindful awareness...the human potential for compassion and empathy is huge. Realizing that potential may be challenging in these troubled times, but perhaps it may be as direct as attuning to ourselves, one mind, one relationship, one moment at a time” (Siegel, Reflections on the Mindful State, 2007).

## **OVERCOMING THE CURSE OF MINDLESSNESS**

Contemporary culture in the United States is marked by extraordinary advances in science and technology. We have created a virtual world, and in doing so, we have complicated our “real world” by adding even more tasks to our hours and days and more obligations which require our awareness, attention, and responsibility (“About Marc” 2006). The problem our society now faces is that we have increased the pressure and complexity of our day-to-day lives. This way of living leaves us mentally vulnerable. We encounter moments where our fuse has run out, we are apt to explode, and we verbally lash out on others around us. After a tiring day filled with never-ending work, endless costly bills, and wasted time in congested traffic, we find that the smallest things irritate us or make us uneasy. At other times we encounter moments where we simply mentally break down. Our future is a monsoon-wave of daunting anxieties, and its ever-looming presence mentally paralyzes us. Our thoughts race from one worry to the next, and as the wave of our anxiety grows, the paralyzing undertow sucks us under a monsoon-wave of panic, distress, and helplessness. The information overload we experience everyday clouds our perception of reality, and we find that our attention is divided, focused on the ‘real world,’ the ‘virtual world,’ and our own individual ‘internal world.’ At times we begin to experience life on auto-pilot, re-acting instead of acting, following familiar emotional and physical responses.

Our learned emotional response to people, things, ideas, and even our self is what binds us to our mindless perception (Carson and Langer 31). Fortunately, if we take the opportunity, we can become mindful within the present moment instead of mindless. Becoming mindful will not change the world around us but it will help change the way we perceive the world around us.

As Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine Emeritus and founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School suggests, mindfulness practices will not eradicate painful or difficult life experiences, but they will help us to relate to them more gently and calmly, ultimately leading us to a perspective which has a more peaceful sense of spaciousness, relaxation, understanding, and compassion (umassmed.edu). With a calmer state of mind, and an increase in the virtues of understanding and compassion, we can express and relate to others more genuinely. As we learn to understand the ways others perceive life, we become more open to the interpretation of our own view on life. As we learn to be more open to the different possibilities of life we become more able to calmly deal with the true fluidity of life. Mindfulness helps us stay in sync with the spontaneous, ever-changing nature of the world. Mindfulness allows us to experience life through a larger perspective and with practice, mindfulness can help us experience a richer, calmer, and more creative perception. The concept of mindfulness has been around for centuries, but where did it originate from?

### Ancient Roots of Mindfulness

The roots of mindfulness lie in the Buddhist tradition, however, understanding the concept of mindfulness is difficult because mindfulness is a practice, not simply a theory. The Buddhist tradition as a whole is quite different from the theological religions with which the Westerners are most familiar. The Buddhist tradition is a “direct entrance to a spiritual or divine realm, without assistance from deities or other ‘agents’ and its flavor is ‘intensely clinical’, much more akin to what we might call psychology than to what we should usually call religion”

(Gunaratana 2). The Buddhist practice is a tradition set to investigate the ongoing phenomenon of reality; it is a microscopic examination of the very process of our mental perception, aiming towards a state of complete awareness towards the ultimate reality which is clouded by a screen of lies, delusions, and judgments (Gunaratana 2). The spirit of mindfulness is one of tolerance and understanding and has been from the beginning one of the most “cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization” (Rahula 5). At the heart of the Buddha’s teachings lies the Four Noble Truths which help to explain the origin of mindfulness.

The first noble truth is *Dukkha-ariyasacca*, which is usually translated as ‘The Noble Truth of Suffering,’ meaning that life is nothing but pain and suffering (Rahula 16). We suffer because we are attached to the material objects of this world, and we suffer because of our attachments to this world. We suffer the pain of old age and illness and we struggle with the mental pressures, anxieties, and stresses of our lives. We are attached to certain objects, people, and beliefs, which leads us to the Second Noble Truth, that there is an arising or origin of suffering, *Dukkhasamudaya-ariyasacca* (Rahula 29). Our thirst, desire, greed, craving, and manifestation for sense-pleasures is the origin of our suffering. We desire certain things, we want to be happy, we want to have a significant other, we want to be successful, we want to return to that time where we were on vacation with our friends, and we want to return to those moments where we were happy. We also yearn for the cessation of our mental anxieties, that is, we desire for certain things to go away. We want our sickness to leave and our health to return; we want our wrinkles to vanish and our skin to glow young and fresh; we crave for certain things to exist and for certain things to just go away.

The Third Noble Truth, *Dukkanirodha-ariyasacca*, is usually interpreted as the idea that there is emancipation, liberation, or freedom from the constant cycle of suffering, or *dukkha* (Rahula 35). “To eliminate *dukkha* completely one has to eliminate the main root of *dukkha*, which is ‘thirst’ (*taṇhā*), as we saw earlier. Therefore Nirvāṇa is known also by the term *Taṇhakkhaya* ‘Extinction of Thirst’” (Rahula 35). But how do we end our suffering? How do we quench our ‘thirst’? According to the teachings of Buddha, the Fourth Noble Truth explains that the Way leading to the cessation of *Dukkha* (suffering), can be found in the ‘Middle Path’, and this ‘Middle Path’ is also commonly referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path, because it is composed of eight categories or divisions: namely (1) Right Understanding, (2) Right Thought, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, and (8) Right Concentration (Rahula 45). So what exactly constitutes Right Mindfulness? According to the teachings of the Buddha, Right Mindfulness (or Attentiveness) is to be “diligently aware, mindful and attentive with regard to (1) the activities of the body, (2) sensations or feelings, (3) the activities of the mind, and (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things” (Rahula 48). Mindfulness can then be seen as the antagonist to mindlessness. When one is mindful they are aware of all forms of feelings and sensations which arise, appear, and disappear, within the mind, whether they be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (Rahula 48).

“Mindfulness is the English translation of the Pali word *sati*. *Sati* is an activity.” (Gunaratana 147). The examination of our perception involves our becoming aware of how and why we form our mental thoughts, and this examination is something that we must actually do. It is a process, it is a practice, it is an activity, it is a verb and not a noun. Therefore, mindfulness is a concept that is not easily defined through language, because words are symbolic levels within



the mind, and mindfulness is presymbolic, it “is not shackled by logic” (Gunaratana 137). Therefore, the concept of mindfulness can be described in words if one realizes that words only point towards the actual experience, therefore, language can only lead one to realize an experience but cannot constitute the make-up of the actual experience. In a similar way I could describe to you my favorite song to play on the piano; I could tell you that it is a classical song, in the key of B minor, by the composer Tchaikovsky, with dramatic melancholy bass chords, and a beautiful but haunting melody. However the actual experience of this song cannot be described in words, only by my fingers playing the keys on the piano, and my language can only provide a diluted version of the aural experience your ears would actually experience when hearing the music flow through the air. No matter how many or few words I choose to describe the song, the essence of the experience of the actual song can only be fully enjoyed by the direct experience of the song. Likewise, words can only describe the experience of mindfulness and point towards the actuality of mindful awareness and experience.

Mindfulness is often defined or described as direct experiencing in the present moment, but it is not found solely in the Buddhist religion, philosophy, and psychology. The concept of mindfulness, or being aware, can be found in almost all of the world’s major religions: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jewish, and Taoist teachings. From mystical Christianity, to Muslim prayer, and even Hindu chanting; “one sees the use of the idea of being aware of the present moment in a different light from the cognitive aspect of mindfulness” (Siegel, *Reflections on The Mindful Brain*, 2007). However, over 2,500 years ago the meditation technique called *vipassana* (insight) that was introduced by the Buddha. Vipassana meditation is a set of mental activities specifically aimed at experiencing a state of uninterrupted mindfulness

(Gunaratana 157). “The capacity to evoke mindfulness ostensibly is developed using various meditation techniques that originate from Buddhist spiritual practices. Mindfulness in Buddhist traditions occupies a central role in a system that was developed as a path leading to the cessation of personal suffering” (Bishop et al. 230) The Pali term *sati* is described as a process but it also bears the connotation of the English word ‘remember’ (Gunaratana 146), but it does not mean memory in the sense of ideas and pictures from the past, but rather “clear direct, wordless knowing of what is and what is not, of what is correct and what is incorrect, of what we are doing and how we should go about it” (Gunaratana 146).

Therefore the process of mindfulness reminds us to pay attention to the proper object, task, and experience at hand and to apply our attention to the job which needs to be done. This means, for example, that when we talk to others we listen to their thoughts, views, and perspectives in a manner which is accepting, understanding, and open. We would not grasp onto our previous opinions of who we believe them to be, mindlessly classifying others in narrow boxes, this person talks too much, this person is close-minded, this person is annoying. Rather, we should listen to their words with an energy that is properly and honestly applied so that we are in a state of calm, alert awareness. When we are mindful we engage honestly with others and share our experience with them, rather than mindlessly listening and ascribing certain traits, faults, beliefs, and characteristics to others within our heads. Harvard psychology professor Ellen J. Langer states that “Virtually all the world’s ills boil down to mindlessness,” if you can understand someone else’s perspective then there’s no reason to be angry at them, envy them, steal from them. Langer believes that mindfulness is a tool for the masses that can prop open our minds. Langer continues to state that mindfulness is “something you have to strain to do, it’s like

those optical illusion brain teasers... Once you've seen there is another perspective, you can never *not* see that there's another point of view" (Feinberg 71).

### Tiep Hein

In the mid-1960s the Order of Interbeing (*Tiep Hein*) was formed by Zen Master, scholar, and peacemaker Thich Nhat Hanh, a time when "Vietnam was escalating and the teachings of the Buddha were desperately needed to combat the hatred, violence, and divisiveness enveloping his country" (Hanh vii). The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing are guidelines for anyone wishing to live mindfully. The trainings are focused to develop a sense of peace, serenity, and conscientious living within a society, and can be seen as useful today, in our society, as they were in the 1960s in Vietnam. The translation of the word *tiep* means "being in touch with" and "continuing", and *Hien* means "realizing" and "making it here and now" (Hanh 3). These translations bring to light major notions concerning the essence of mindful living and highlight the importance of living mindfully and embracing a compassionate and understanding mindset. The first translation derived from *tiep* is "being in touch with" which means that we must be aware of everything around us. This sort of awareness means we must step beyond our mental barriers and look deeply into reality, including the animal, vegetal, and mineral world around us (Hanh 4). We must be aware of the beauty which lies in the flowers and insects around us, the glory of the moon and sun above us, and the animals and humans next to us. We must also be in touch with the suffering which encompasses our world, the wars, the hunger, the disease, torture, and oppression which also fill our reality. As Thich Nhat Hanh states: "Overflowing with understanding and compassion, we can appreciate the wonders of life, and, at

the same time, act with the firm resolve to alleviate the suffering. Too many people distinguish between the inner world of our mind and the world outside, but these worlds are not separate” (Hanh 4). The second connotation of *tiep* is continuation and this means that we understand the idea of mindfulness as a practice or process that we must take the responsibility to undertake.

The third concept offered by Thich Nhat Hanh comes from *Hein* and it means “to realize.” We cannot simply say we are compassionate or understanding towards others, we cannot simply say we are being mindful, we must realize that mindfulness means transforming ourselves through practice and effort. Thich Nhat Hanh describes this concept, explaining that “If we wish to share joy and happiness with others, we must have joy and happiness within ourselves. If we wish to share calmness and serenity, we should first realize them within ourselves” (Hanh 5). Therefore, mindfulness is something inside of us that we must bring out. We can choose to think and act mindfully towards others, but in order to do this we must first realize our inner thoughts, we must free our self from the inner monster which dwells deep inside our conscious, we must give up our desire to be happy and realize that we can decide to be happy in the present moment if we choose to be. Only when we begin with our self can we spread this joy to others. The second expression of *Hein* is “making it here and now” which means that we must realize the potential of the present moment and not be imprisoned by our thoughts and worries about the past and the future. Mindfulness is not something that is meant to help us in the afterlife, it is a practice with a purpose aimed towards peace for ourselves and others in the now, while we are alive and breathing (Hanh 6).

### Expanding Meaning

Within the last 20 years, *mindfulness*, the ancient practice of being aware of one's sensory experience in the present moment, has taken a prominent place in discussion among clinicians, educators, and the general public (Siegal, Mindfulness training). The concept of mindfulness is now being utilized as a way to "cultivate well-being in our minds, our bodies, and even in our relationships with each other," and scientific investigation has concluded that the notion of being mindful within the present moment "does indeed improve immune function, enhance a sense of equanimity and clarity and may even increase empathy and relational satisfaction" (Siegel, Mindfulness Training). But how could the way we focus our attention change the quality of our lives'? How exactly should we understand the contemporary idea of mindfulness?

According to Daniel J. Siegel, director of the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center, we should develop an awareness of the present moment that is filled with COAL-curious, openness, acceptance, and love toward our ongoing experience (Siegel, Mindfulness Training), an idea which is very similar to Thich Nhat Hanh's view that we need to experience the present moment with a sense of understanding, acceptance, and compassion. Scott R. Bishop and colleagues from the University of Toronto offer similar explanations for mindful experience, proposing a two-component model of mindfulness, the first component involving self-regulation and the second involving the adoption of a particular orientation toward one's experiences in the present moment. According to Bishop and colleagues, "the component of self-regulation focuses on the idea that one must devote their attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment" (Bishop et

al. 232). The second component involves the adoption of a particular orientation toward one's personal experiences, and this orientation is characterized by "curiosity, openness, and acceptance" (232). Ronald D. Siegel and colleagues suggest that mindfulness can best be described from a definition offered by Jon Kabat-Zinn, that is, mindfulness is "(1) *awareness* (2) *of present experience*, and (3) *with acceptance*" (Siegel, Germer, Olendzki 20). A more in-depth definition of mindfulness from the view of Jon Kabat-Zinn is that mindfulness is "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Siegel, Reflections, 6). Robert J. Sternberg of Yale University offers us another interpretation of mindfulness, using Ellen Langer's definition. According to Sternberg and Langer, a perspective of mindfulness contains the following components: "(a) openness to novelty, (b) alertness to distinction, (c) sensitivity to different contexts, (d) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives, and (e) orientation in the present" (Sternberg 12).

Daniel J. Siegel explains that mindful awareness requires us to dive deeply into the inner nature of our mind, so that we can sense our daily experiences in a new light. Siegel explains that mindfulness allows us to investigate our inner world, and in doing so, we can drastically transform how we interpret the outer world. According to Siegel this internal world, "this subjective stuff of the mind, is at the heart of what enables us to sense each other's pain, to embrace each other at times of distress, to revel in each other's joy, to create meaning in the stories of our lives, to find connection in each other's eyes" (Siegel, Reflections, 3). Therefore, Siegel believes that by being mindful we wake up from sensing life on auto-pilot mode because we become aware of aspects within the mind itself, thus, mindfulness allows us to awaken and

with this “reflection on the mind we make choice and change possible” by developing a certain form of attention to our “here-and-now experiences and the nature of our mind itself,” thereby creating a special form of awareness called “mindfulness” (Siegel, Reflections, 5).

### Illustrating Mindfulness: Understanding Authentic Creativity

In the following chapter I illustrate the concept of mindfulness through the idea I call ‘authentic creativity,’ as demonstrated in playing the piano. The practice and mindfulness and the practice of music share a sweet relationship. But why would mindfulness and ‘authentic creativity’ have similar outcomes, implications, definitions, or meanings? As explained earlier, the anxiety-driven nature of our society has left us vulnerable to the madness and stress of living mindlessly, and this vulnerability looms in our presence whether we are conscious or unconscious of this dilemma. We experience life, and our will leaves us subject to an endless struggle of desire. Suffering to arrive at some state of completeness or mental state of satisfaction, our disintegration with the world around us becomes part of our character, and as we becoming mindless, monkey-minded, or mad-astronaut-like in our mental perceptions, we become less receptive towards others and the world around us. The art of music is an action which revolves around the practice of ‘authentic creativity.’ The practice of ‘authentic creativity’ is an action that embodies many similar characteristics of mindfulness. Mindfulness allows us to create a calmer life experience but ‘authentic creativity’ allows us to escape. Through the practice of ‘authentic creativity’ we can escape our mental angst and be drawn into a sense of absorption in which we gradually lose awareness of our own body, preoccupations, and tensions and escape into a world where our intuition carries us to transcendental-like states.

‘Authentic creativity, art, and in this case specifically the art of playing the piano, can serve as one of our healthiest preoccupations in our day-to-day lives because it embraces larger contexts of life’s meaning by allowing the self to be aware of its own involvement in creation and growth. By creating music in a manner that is ‘authentic,’ or that is mindful, one can lead to higher levels of comprehension because experiencing with the arts develops an expanded ability to think and connect with others and the self.

Like mindfulness, playing the piano is a process, there is no end point, there is only more to learn and more to grow from; we can only become better by practice, and reading about playing the piano simply can only help us to a certain extent. Authentic creativity is very similar to Ellen J. Langer’s concept of “sideways learning”. According to Langer, “sideways learning aims at maintaining a mindful state,” it creates a “rich awareness of discriminatory detail” (Langer, *The Power*, 23). Langer explains that expertise in sideways learning, or authentic creativity, is “not dependent on a particular hierarchical assimilation of basic skills, but that greater effectiveness and mastery may be accessible through inventive transformations of the routine” (24).

We have to practice piano to become better, and according to Langer the best way to improve our expertise or creativity is to embrace the unique moment of every experience. Likewise if we choose to be mindful we must *actually* practice being mindful in order to make any real growth or progress, and requires effort, just as practicing piano does. Mindfulness is characterized by an open, understanding, and embracing acceptance of the present moment, and likewise, creative learning requires a means of total attention and adjustment to change. In the



following chapter I explain the essence of ‘authentic creativity’ in relation to the philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Leo Tolstoy in order to provide a clearer illustration of the concept of mindfulness in music and its benefits towards our society.

## **AUTHENTIC CREATIVITY AND THE POWER OF THE WILL**

As human beings we mainly choose to communicate by language; we internalize language in order to categorize, label, interpret, and understand the phenomena of life around us and we verbalize these thoughts in order to communicate our reality to others. Through language we internalize our own will and through our actions and speech we externalize our will to others around us. Our lives are quite metaphorical to the experience of a rollercoaster. Our individual views concerning a rollercoaster are unique and even after riding the same rollercoaster as a group of friends, one will notice how every person creates a unique experience of the same ride. Some of us are frightened just by the thought of a rollercoaster just as some of us are frightened by the anxieties and stresses of daily life. We watch others jump aboard the speedy steel ride, we cringe in fear of actually boarding such a terrifying rollercoaster. Some of us become overwhelmed by anxiety and uncertainty when questioning whether or not to jump on the ride; how can I enjoy a ride in which I have little or no control over my destiny or personal safety? What if something happens to go wrong or an unexpected malfunction arises? We may be terrified by the idea that we have no control over our experience on the ride; we are strapped in and blasting off, so there is no point in worrying whether the seatbelt safety system is working. You're on, and you're on until it's over. There is no chance to change your decision once you've been strapped in and the ride begins.

Others of us are filled with excitement when we think of rollercoasters. We crave just one more ride, one more series of laughs and stomach butterflies, one more time to live that surreal, dizzying fantasy. The long line to the rollercoaster in theme parks across the country brews anxiety in some and great anticipation in others. When we are put face-to-face with the gigantic

metal infrastructure, the choice becomes ours and ours alone: do we go for the ride or not? Sometimes, the rollercoaster may look too daunting and we fear that we have made the wrong choice. No, wait... don't start the ride, I have to get off now! This rollercoaster is a metaphor for human life, except there is no large object to point at when contemplating life. How can one point at 'life'? We can point to other humans, animals, or plants, we can point to the trees that are larger than us, the mountains that tower over us, the sunsets that inspire us, or the lightning storms which petrify us, but those are merely pieces of 'life;' they are the many tracks which create the rollercoaster.

In life, it doesn't matter whether you're frightened, or nervous, or excited, because you're always on the ride. Just as we all see the rollercoaster differently, we all see life differently, and because our actions are based in our views and understandings, we all make different choices. If we are scared of the ride we may push it away. If we love the rollercoaster we will crave and long for just one more ride. The rollercoaster of life presents different opportunities, setbacks, goals, achievements, and letdowns to all of us, and our choice in whether we ride or decline it's adventure represents our will. Our will is our choice and path of action in life. Our perception lies in how we view, understand, and prescribe judgment towards the experience of life, or the hypothetical rollercoaster, and our will lies in how we act according to our decided perception. Therefore our will and experience in the world lies hand-in-hand with our nature as human beings, and our understanding of this collective experience known as life is understood to us through the use and attribution of language.

We can see life, or the metaphorical rollercoaster, and decide whether we think it's scary, enticing, invigorating, or frightening. Likewise we can talk to others and understand their views of the rollercoaster. Maybe after talking to some friends, one may decide that going on the ride could be fun and adventurous, instead of scary. In life we consult our friends and family when we feel like the ride is too scary. We have language as our tool to communicate and calm our nerves, anxieties, and worries. As we have seen, the nature of humankind is the fact that our will strives, and because of this we are often subject to the glories, let downs, worries, and desires caused by our insatiable will. Through the practice of mindfulness we become aware of our perceptions and therefore gain a greater sense of control and calmness through the exercise of our will. Our will according to philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, is "something we observe at work in our own activities and may reasonably infer to be at work, though not in a conscious form, in the universe at large" (Schopenhauer 150). Our will affects others and vice versa; if we all have to ride the metaphorical rollercoaster ride of life, some of us need a helping hand in shaping and building our will to ride.

#### A Mindless Will

Schopenhauer understands our existence as humans in a similar notion to that of the Buddha, regarding the universe as a "theatre of suffering and life as a 'mistake', a febrile, frustrating search for satisfaction, punctuated by occasional moments of respite which soon sour into boredom" (Schopenhauer 150). To Schopenhauer, life is waiting hours in line for the most magnificent rollercoaster ride which ultimately yields an unforeseen letdown, a ride below desired standards, a ride that ended too soon. As you step off that ride you step right back into

another line, a longer line, and the line moves slower, and the anticipation grows greater, and the anxiety rises past your ears, leaving your face flushed and uneasy. The line moves so slow it seems almost stagnant, and you wonder whether it's even worth it to wait again, but you know the rollercoaster is exciting and you yearn to satisfy that urge. You ride the rollercoaster and the brief experience, though great, is short lived. Do you wait in line again or is the experience of the ride becoming increasingly stale? Is it time to find another endeavor to excite and appease the will, or are you ok riding the same rollercoaster for the rest of your life? Are you ok with mindlessly throwing the will back in line or can you allow your will to create a rollercoaster of its own?

The monster of mindlessness creeps back into our lives' and as it does it makes the envisioned rollercoaster line even longer and the actual experience of the ride rather disappointing. The monster of mindlessness keeps us trapped in a never-ending cycle of discontent. The monster of mindlessness that haunts our society is another concept familiar to Schopenhauer's philosophy, and he explains that because our will strives it becomes satisfied only to strive anew (Schopenhauer 156). Our will therefore is the root of our angst, worry, and strife; in our will lies the monster of mindless behavior and mindless thinking. The problem which Schopenhauer recognizes is that our will fails to follow a mindful, calm, middle path, and so the will's endeavor becomes chaotic, stressful, and uneasy. Schopenhauer believes that our striving will eventually become satisfied, and from this satisfaction the will strives anew, and this cycle of existence continues on and on. The will is stuck in the line for the rollercoaster ride and never gets to enjoy the ride. In this light, Schopenhauer believes that our "happiness and well-being consist only in the transition from desire to satisfaction" (Schopenhauer 156) and as

satisfaction is reached a fresh desire rapidly approaches. Schopenhauer's notion of the will's efforts resemble the cycle of existence and the cycle of suffering, key elements within Buddhist philosophy, where the "non-appearance of satisfaction is suffering" and "the empty longing for a new desire is languor, boredom" (Schopenhauer 156).

### Redirecting the Will

Schopenhauer realizes that the will can momentarily escape this cycle by contemplating the highest form of art, music. To Schopenhauer, music differs from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon, or, more exactly, of the will's adequate objectivity, but is directly a copy of the will itself, and therefore expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon (Schopenhauer 158). The redirection of the will incorporates adopting a mindful perception. A mindful perception according to Ellen Langer's definition includes (1) openness to novelty; (2) alertness to distinction; (3) sensitivity to different contexts; (4) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; and (5) orientation in the present (Langer, *Power of Mindful Learning*, 23). Schopenhauer proclaims that through music the will can exist in another world, a temporary escape from language and logic and a sweet indulgence in feeling, passion, and intuition. Schopenhauer argues that humans can escape the cycle of suffering through a redirection of the will towards art, however he argues that music is the ultimate form of art because it's creation represents a universal will. I agree with Schopenhauer's belief; music is an outlet for our mind. It can create the feeling of a rollercoaster ride where no rollercoaster exists, it can create meaning in life where no meaning was, and it can

provide a realm for one to transcend and get lost in when the physical world becomes too overbearing.

Music, according to Schopenhauer, recreates feelings of excitements, fear, sorrow, and suspense. I agree with Schopenhauer's views of music and support the fact that engagement in the creative activity of music must be authentic, and in order for this activity to be authentic, it must be a mindful process. The power of mindful learning is at the root of authentic creativity, and authentic creativity is at the root of mindful practice. Personally I have found my authentic creativity to flourish in the realm of classical piano music. Departing from my place in time and space I enter a realm of music where bass notes create the deepest layers of the universe. From this original matter emerge harmonies, colors, feelings, and moods which shape the world for the melody to sing an unforgettable tune. Music itself is the will. As I sit on my piano bench and place my hands upon my keys I am redirecting my will, my attention, focus, learned skills, and mindful perspective towards the music, and as I play, I create the very language and expression of music. "The inexpressible depth of all music, by virtue of which it floats past us as a paradise quite familiar and yet eternally remote, and is so easy to understand and yet so inexplicable, is due to the fact that it reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote for its pain" (Schopenhauer 159).

The language of music lies in different tones, and an ultimate meaningful expression is created as individual tones create harmonies, which evolve into melodic expressions. This expression is not merely a composer's particular feeling, but rather of the 'essential nature' of the emotions, as it were 'in the abstract' (Schopenhauer 151). Music, especially music without any

lyrics, has the power to redirect the will to exist in another world void of language and logic, a world that is lush in passion and feeling. We can regard the “phenomenal world, or nature, and music as two different expressions of the same thing; and this thing itself is therefore the only medium of their analogy, a knowledge of which is required if we are to understand that analogy” (Schopenhauer 157).

### The Authentic Creative Will

The art of practicing piano is an activity which Schopenhauer would recognize as an ultimate ascent of the will, an escape to another realm, but in order to truly enjoy this experience I believe one must engage in authentic creativity. Authentic creativity is not merely just practicing piano, it is *playing* piano, and it takes the player and listeners to a new place. The tones which come alive as one plays certain keys has the power to create awe-inspiring melodies, but this creativity can only be reached through mindful learning. “One of the most cherished myths in education or any kind of training is that in order to learn a skill one must practice it to the point of doing it without thinking” (Langer, Power of Mindful Learning, 10). However if one can perform a task mindlessly, then the true spontaneity, flow, and unique feeling of the music cannot be expressed. It’s not about playing each note, as written, and following your fingers as they play the written harmonies, it’s about feeling the expression of the music and rejoicing in the created expression. The art of playing the piano is an activity that requires Ellen Langer’s five guidelines to mindfulness. As mentioned before these are 1) openness to novelty; (2) alertness to distinction; (3) sensitivity to different contexts; (4) implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; and (5) orientation in the present, and by experiencing the expression of



the will, of music, “the production of something *new*” (Tolstoy 171) is born, and this, according to Leo Tolstoy, is the real artistic activity.

Authentic creativity is mindful in its essence, and therefore, authentic creativity is also characteristic of Leo Tolstoy’s views of good art. Music connects humans; we understand the happy expressions of major chords and the somber mood within a minor melody. We feel the beat and can move fast to the rhythm or sway gently to the slow pulse of a song. The music speaks to us, drawing us together, and bringing about a sense of community, expression, receptiveness, and understanding. Tolstoy believes that good art should satisfy three conditions: content, form, and sincerity. The expression of music is an expression of the will, and through the practice of mindfulness one can harbor great insight and contemplation which can be expressed to others through the piano keys. The music is beautiful, touching, suspenseful, or angry because the music is the expression of the will, and the more sincere, understood, and important that feeling is, the better it can be expressed in both linguistic and musical languages. According to Tolstoy, the content should be important, so that the value of the art and expression created by the music should widen our perceptive outlook, and should therefore increase the spiritual wealth that is humanity’s capital (Tolstoy 171). Mindfulness increases one’s sensitivity to different contexts and awareness of multiple perspectives, and through this contemplation one can arrive at greater meanings and forms within life. Through mindful living one can harbor the intensity of their feelings and by engaging in authentic creativity, one can express their will through a new mode of language, through the language of music.

Secondly Tolstoy believes that greater valued art should be expressed clearly so that people may understand the form. However, music is the direct expression of the will. In most classical music there are no words or lyrics to express feelings, and therefore the power of music also lies in the listener or players' receptivity and effort in appreciating the form of the expression. For the form of the expression to be realized I believe that the third criteria must also be met. Tolstoy believes that the artist should be sincere, so "that what incites the author to work at his [or her] production should be an inner need and not an external inducement" (Tolstoy 171). In order for the power and expression of music to be transmitted from artist to audience, the artist must be sincere, mindful, and authentically creative in his or her expression. The mindful piano player creates a "rich awareness of discriminatory detail" (Langer, 23) and in a truly great performance of authentic creative expression "performance of all technical skills are transformed into a unique, context-sensitive, one-of-a-kind experience" (Langer 25). In order to gain an understanding of the form of music and also, in order to experience its flowering expression means that one will have to be mindfully engaged in the musical suite or sonata.

To experience a piece of music mindfully is a task they requires practice and effort, as explained by Richard Guggenheimer. Guggenheimer writes: "But to hear the sonata through the duration of its playing time requires from the average listener a formidable mental exertion if he [or she] is to achieve at the end a recognition of its architectonic total at all comparable to its author's concept and intention" (Guggenheimer, *Creative Vision*, 24). In the conclusion I have decided express this authentic creative experience in relation to one specific song I love to play on the piano. Being engaged in not only the musical experience but specifically the musical creation of a great piece of music allows one to better understand the author's expression or will.

Guggenheimer continues to explain that, “A satisfactory grasp of such musical form necessitates successful retention or recall at every stage of its unfolding of all that has gone before”

(Guggenheimer, *Creative Vision*, 24). The following chapter is meant to illustrate how the experience of music can transcend one into another realm of existence; it is a description of the process, practice, and experience of Schopenhauer’s ascent of the will.

## CONCLUSION

In my personal experience in practicing mindfulness I have discovered that some obstacles are harder than others. When I first started practicing mindfulness I would engage in simple mindfulness exercises that aimed at experiencing life from a creative and new way. In the evenings I would sit on my porch and instead of allowing my mind to create and narrate the reality I experienced, I decided to redirect my attention to the layers of different sounds which dwell in the Nature Reservation behind my home. As I listened I heard Jurassic sand hill crane cries, I heard wind tossing around trees and branches, I heard the quick, deep vibration of flying cicada bugs, I heard the distant rumble of traffic, and I heard the quiet breeze of the air enter my lungs through the tips of my nostrils. To experience life mindfully means embracing the forms of life around you, it means being a part of the symphony of life around you. The forest behind my house is full of diversity and spontaneity, and as I recognize the exciting new sounds which encompass its essence, I understand and appreciate the mystery of the forest. Through quiet moments of contemplation I began to hear the symphony of life which dwells in the forest.

However, there are times that I sit on my back porch and I begin to worry, I worry about the homework I need to do, I worry about the groceries I need to buy, I worry about the bills I have to pay, and my worrying nature leaves me drained, exhausted, and stressed. Sometimes this anxiety becomes overwhelming and I find myself paralyzed. The worrisome nature of my racing mind freezes all my action, I become overwhelmed and panicked. However, as I continued to practice mindfulness I became more aware of why I created my worries and how I dealt with them. When I would unconsciously begin to worry I found it harder to quiet my thinking and focus on the ever-changing sounds within the forest. My inner voice would disrupt my focus on

the forest, and I realized how monkey-minded I am when dealing with stress in my life. The inner monster within my head had encompassed the forest, and the inspiring mystery of the forest was silenced by my worry and insecurity towards the future. The practice of mindfulness helped me be aware of my mental formations, and through my awareness I discovered the antidote to my surges of stress and panic could be found in music.

One evening I sat on my porch, exhausted, stressed, and overwhelmed by the complexity, anxiety, and worry which hindered on my every thought. At that moment I mindfully decided to redirect my attention elsewhere, I decided to escape into my favorite dream, *Claire de Lune*. Claude Debussy's classical masterwork is a suite which possesses a dream-like tranquility, it is a musical and magical flight of intensity which leaves the listener and the performer in a peaceful trance of serenity. Debussy's *Claire de Lune* is like a dream, it exists in the musical realm, apart from this world. When I wasn't close to my piano I imagined playing the song from beginning to end, and when my keys were close I played the song again and again. Debussy's suite is not only beautiful but challenging, and it took me nearly four months to get through what J.R. Anderson describes as the three stages of experience which result in the acquisition of a new skill. After about four months of practice I had reached Anderson's first stage, the *cognitive* stage which involves "first taking in enough information about the skill to permit the learner to perform the desired behavior in at least some crude approximation" (Langer, *The Power*, 26). In this stage I learned to play the notes on the page, I learned what keys needed to be played, I learned the best finger positioning for my hands on the keys, and I became familiar with the sounds of the piece. This initial stage of learning is crucial, one must persevere through frustrating hours and days of the same song, yet with each practice one should learn or hear something new within the

song in order to improve. One should become more and more familiar with the situation, and in the case of the piano, my fingers become more familiar with the specific dance they perform on the keys. With practice and a sense of familiarity of what is to come, my fingers begin to play the song with less and less effort.

J. R. Anderson's second stage of learning is the *associative* stage which "involves smoothing out performance" (Langer, *The Power*, 26). In this stage "any errors in the initial understanding of the skill are gradually identified and eliminated" (26). In this stage I began to notice the form of the chords played in my left hand, I knew which moments of the musical piece were to be played quickly and which parts were to be slow and gentle. I found the melodic line and tried to bring that part out, I wanted the melody to be separate from the lower bass and harmonies, I wanted the melody to sing out. At certain times during *Claire de Lune* my fingers would be playing up to eight different keys, and while all these tones were important, I found that I must practice to bring out certain tones more than others. Anderson's final stage of learning is the *autonomous* stage, "one of ongoing gradual improvement in performance" (26). This is the stage I am in now; in this stage improvement can continue indefinitely" (26).

The final stage of learning involves an "inventive transformation of the routine," (Langer, *The Power*, 24). Good technique is not merely the internalization of some set of rules which should be followed in order to achieve a correct performance, but rather, a good performance is where all "technical skills are transformed into a unique, context-sensitive- one-of-a-kind experience" (Langer 25). Prior to this stage, I practice and practice until I can reach that state of satisfaction described by Schopenhauer, and only when I can play a piece from beginning to

finish does my will become satisfied. But there is more to music than simply playing the notes on the page, adhering to the key signatures and accidentals, and following the correct rhythm. The song itself is a creation and expression of the will, and when I play *Claire de Lune* I escape from the reality of this world and enter the realm of music, where my anxiety and stress no longer exist, only the will I create through the keys of my piano, and this expression puts me in a world separate from time, logic, and language. In order to play *Claire de Lune* authentically, I must leave behind my stress or else it will be transmitted in my musical expression; I must embody the dream-like tranquility of the piece in my mind and if I do not, it will show up in my performance. When the technical aspect of a piece of music is mastered, then the creation of the song is only half complete. To truly escape into the realm of music one must honestly express their will, one must put their hands, posture, minds, and fingers into the very performance of the song, one must truly *feel* the power of the music, and in doing so one can express the inspiration and miracle within an authentic musical performance.

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