

Practicing Mindfulness: An Introduction to Meditation

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is meditation? For thousands of years, human beings have practiced refined techniques of mental focusing, designed to change the habitual conditioning of the mind. Central to many spiritual and philosophical traditions and known in English as "meditation," these practices are considered a major means for enhanced awareness and self-mastery.

In recent decades, modern science has dramatically confirmed what advanced meditators have long claimed—that meditation, correctly practiced, offers deep and lasting benefits for mental functioning and emotional health, as well as for physical health and well-being.

The many practical benefits of meditation include:

- marked and lasting reduction of stress;
- increased ability to focus and concentrate, as well as clarity of thinking;
- freedom from detrimental patterns of thought and emotion;
- increased learning capacity and memory; and
- greatly enhanced well-being and peacefulness.

If practiced consistently, the results are real and very far-reaching. In the largest sense, meditation allows you to live in harmony with the realities of the world—to embrace life's ever-changing impermanence, to live in equanimity with the inevitable ups and downs of being human, and to feel deeply connected to the whole of life.

Now, in **Practicing Mindfulness: An Introduction to Meditation**, award-winning Professor Mark W. Muesse of Rhodes College takes you on a dynamic exploration of

your own mind, giving you a clear and useable understanding of the essence of meditation and how to practice it.

In 24 detailed lectures, using numerous guided exercises, Professor Muesse teaches you the principles and techniques of sitting meditation, the related practice of walking meditation, and the highly beneficial use of meditative awareness in many important activities, including eating and driving. As a major strength of the course, you learn in depth how to use the skills of meditation in working with thoughts and emotional states, in deepening sensory awareness of the body, and in becoming deeply attentive to the operation of your mind. Emphasizing clarity and practical understanding, this course will leave you with a solid basis for your own meditation practice and for bringing meditation's remarkable and empowering benefits to every area of your life.

"Mindfulness"—The Eye of the Witness

Meditation, as you learn it here, is closely related to the notion of "mindfulness." In Professor Muesse's words, "Mindfulness is a deliberate way of paying attention to what is occurring within oneself as it is happening. It is the process of attentively observing your experience as it unfolds, without judgment or evaluation."

"Meditation," he adds, "refers to certain exercises that can be used to enlarge and refine mindfulness." Meditation cultivates mindfulness by training you to develop deep attention to the present moment, allowing the mind to become settled and centered.

With the ongoing practice of meditation, you gain the ability to bring the liberating effects of mindful awareness to moment-to-moment living. Ultimately, this means developing a mind of openness and flexibility, profound physical calmness, and a deepening freedom to choose how you respond to life.

Throughout the lectures of this course, you practice the principles of mindfulness through focused meditations and guided exercises, including these:

- **Sitting meditation:** The core practice of the mindfulness tradition. You learn the specific methods of meditation with mindful awareness.
- **Body scan meditation:** A second fundamental practice, bringing deep focus to the body and bodily sensations, promoting both concentration and physical relaxation.
- **Mindful engagement with thoughts:** You learn four specific practices for releasing detrimental patterns of thought.
- ***Metta* meditation:** Central to the mindfulness tradition, you learn this form of directed contemplation, focusing on the well-being of others and powerfully effective for cultivating compassion.

- Meditations for physical pain: You practice two forms of meditation for alleviating pain and physical discomfort of all kinds.

The Insights of Meditation in Action

Building on your practice-based understanding, Professor Muesse takes the exploration into many different areas of life, showing you in depth how meditation and mindfulness apply to daily living.

Early in the course, you practice meditative awareness in the act of eating, in an exercise vividly highlighting all five senses. This exercise uncovers a richness of experience that usually goes unexplored and illustrates one of meditation's significant benefits—being deeply present in the moments of your own life.

You study the mindfulness tradition's approach to difficult emotions, using the example of anger. Here you find a way of disarming anger that builds on meditation, based in nonjudgmental attention, conscious acceptance, and the mental spaciousness to choose your response.

In the course's second half, you explore how mindfulness is used both in building qualities of personal character and in facing life's most challenging experiences. In individual lectures, you learn specific practices for cultivating generosity, empathy, and the beneficial use of speech, and for dealing with the inevitability of loss and grief.

Clarity on the Nature of Reality

As a core theme of this course, you delve into one of the most revealing and practical benefits of mindfulness—the freedom that comes with rigorous clarity about the nature of reality. Drawing on what Buddhism calls the "three marks of existence,"

- you see how our conditioned resistance to the transience and passing away of all things causes suffering, and how mindfulness practice allows you to freely and joyfully embrace life's impermanence;
- you explore the ways in which mindful awareness gives you freedom from the "insatiable" quality of human experience—the tendency to endlessly pursue the outward symbols of happiness and achievement;
- you look at the factors that determine the sense of separateness that burdens many people, and how mindfulness practice leads to a fundamental experience of connectedness to the whole.

The Power of Living Mindfully

An expert in Eastern philosophies, Professor Muesse is the rare teacher with both extensive academic credentials and decades of experience as a meditator, having studied and practiced with meditation masters in Thailand, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. He

enriches your experience with compelling reflections on his own journey with mindfulness practice, filmed demonstrations of key techniques, and enthralling stories and perspectives from the great spirits of history.

You hear the Buddha's penetrating counsel to a woman in the throes of grief, and Rilke's passionate words on the necessity of giving joyful consent to all of life. You hear about Professor Muesse's own transformative experience with the practice of generosity, and you contemplate the Zen parable of a man caught between two hungry tigers, highlighting the existential choices we all face in living rich and satisfying lives and in savoring life to the full.

In **Practicing Mindfulness: An Introduction to Meditation**, Professor Muesse offers you a rare and extraordinary opportunity. By grasping the essential nature of meditation and mindful awareness within the setting of specific, grounded practice, you deepen the power to shape your own mind and experience, to know a well-being that is not ruled by circumstances, and to find yourself truly and lastingly at home in the world.

Join Professor Muesse in this empowering journey of the spirit—the art of living at its most fulfilling, expansive, and meaningful.

24 Lectures

Disk 1

1. Mindlessness—The Default Setting
2. Mindfulness—The Power of Awareness
3. Expectations—Relinquishing Preconceptions
4. Preparation—Taking Moral Inventory
5. Position—Where to Be for Meditation
6. Breathing—Finding a Focus for Attention

Disk 2

7. Problems—Stepping-Stones to Mindfulness
8. Body—Attending to Our Physical Natures
9. Mind—Working with Thoughts
10. Walking—Mindfulness While Moving
11. Consuming—Watching What You Eat
12. Driving—Staying Awake at the Wheel

Disk 3

13. Insight—Clearing the Mind
14. Wisdom—Seeing the World as It Is
15. Compassion—Expressing Fundamental Kindness
16. Imperfection—Embracing Our Flaws
17. Wishing—May All Beings Be Well and Happy
18. Generosity—The Joy of Giving

Disk 4

- 19. Speech—Training the Tongue
- 20. Anger—Cooling the Fires of Irritation
- 21. Pain—Embracing Physical Discomfort
- 22. Grief—Learning to Accept Loss
- 23. Finitude—Living in the Face of Death
- 24. Life—Putting It All in Perspective

ABOUT THE PROFESSOR



Dr. Mark W. Muesse is W. J. Millard Professor of Religious Studies, Director of the Asian Studies Program, and Director of the Life: Then and Now Program at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. He earned a B.A., summa cum laude, in English Literature from Baylor University and a Master of Theological Studies, a Master of Arts, and a Ph.D. in the Study of Religion from Harvard University.

Before taking his position at Rhodes, Professor Muesse held positions at Harvard College, Harvard Divinity School, and the University of Southern Maine, where he served as Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

He is a recipient of the 2008 Clarence Day Award for Outstanding Teaching, Rhodes College's highest faculty honor. Known for his experiential teaching style, Professor Muesse was honored for his "effective use of imaginative and creative pedagogy" as well as his ability to motivate his students toward lifelong study.

Professor Muesse has written many articles, papers, and reviews in world religions, spirituality, theology, and gender studies and has coedited a collection of essays titled *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*. He is currently compiling an anthology of prayers from around the world.

Professor Muesse is a member of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Indian Philosophy and Religion and has been Visiting Professor at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, India. He has traveled extensively throughout Asia and has studied at Wat Mahadhatu, Bangkok, Thailand; the Himalayan Yogic Institute, Kathmandu, Nepal; the Subodhi Institute of Integral Education, Sri Lanka; and Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.