

Metaphor

We Are Constructed Through Metaphor makes the case for the importance of metaphors in life. I have used metaphors in my life and in teaching, and many have found them to be very useful. Note: Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers from Arnie Kozak's book *Wild Chickens and Petty Tyrants: 108 Metaphors for Mindfulness*

Automatic Pilot (32)

Quite a few people have used this metaphor when talking about daily life and the value of mindfulness. We spend much of our life in 'automatic pilot' mode. When we are on automatic pilot, we can be miles away without even realizing it. We are also more likely to have our 'buttons pushed' when things don't go as expected or planned. These unexpected or unplanned events can trigger thoughts and feelings, which can then trigger old habits of thinking that are not 'skillful.' As we become more aware of our sensations, thoughts, and feelings in our daily life, we increase the probability of more freedom and choice: We do not have to fall into the same ruts that have caused problems in the past.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a wonderful passage in his book *Transformation and Healing* that addresses this issue:

"In everyday life, we often get lost in forgetfulness...[and] we lose touch with ourselves, and we feel alienated from ourselves...Conscious breathing is a marvelous way to return to ourselves...Like a child who returns home after a long journey, we feel the warmth of our hearth, and we find ourselves again...The second result of conscious breathing is that we come in contact with life at the present moment, the only moment when we can touch life. The life in us and around us is wonderful and abundant. If we're not free, we can't be in contact with it, and we're not really living our lives. We [needn't] be imprisoned by regrets about the past, anxieties for the future, or attachment and aversion to the present...As we breathe consciously, our breath becomes more regular, and peace and joy arise and become more stable with every moment. Relying on our breathing, we come back to ourselves and are able to restore the oneness of our body and mind. This integration allows us to be in real contact with what is happening in the present moment, which is the essence of life" (pp. 38 - 39).

Balance

Many of us tend to treat balance as if it were a state: I feel like my life is in balanced. Today I feel so balanced. Or the opposite. However, balance is dynamic; it's moment to moment as opposed to "I'm always in balance." Imagine walking on stones across a shallow river. Each stone has its own shape, size, and texture. The river's currents and flow are not always the same. Thus we have moments of balance and then the next moment happens! You might find it helpful to think of life as surfing big waves or skiing down a challenging course.

Commentarial Mind (13)

When you watch a movie on Netflix or some other service, you can often get the Director's commentary. While the movie is playing, you can hear his or her ongoing commentary. When we realize that the commentarial mind is active, it can be helpful to pause and ask "is this really necessary?"

Doggy or Monkey Mind (14) or Wild Horse

Think of your mind as a little puppy running all over the place, never stopping, wanting to please everyone. Alternatively think of your mind as a monkey, swinging from branch to branch. Imagine a wild horse who has been free all his/her life, doing what s/he wants, roaming through the landscape. When such a horse is captured by humans and tamed, the horse initially resists with all his/her might. However, with skillful and kind training (think Horse Whisperer), the horse adjusts to the new life.

Emotional Baggage (70)

Imagine that your emotional baggage is literally a suitcase or backpack that you carry constantly with you. Sometimes a visual image like this can cause you to pause and let go of some of the baggage, to literally take it out of the suitcase or backpack.

Focus

Thinking of a camera lens, you can change the aperture from zoom to wide angle--more gentle concentration. I was in the Peace Corps in Nepal from 1978 – 1981. I remember talking one day with my closest Nepali friend and we had both decided we were ready to get married and settle down. He told me that he would ask his parents to find him a wife—arranged marriages are still traditional in Nepal. I was surprised and his response has stayed with me for 40 years. After he reminded me that the Nepali divorce rate was much lower than in America, he gave one of the reasons. Let's say you have a 'good' marriage, let's say, 90% great and 10% not so great—personality traits and habits of your spouse that you just don't like. He said that a Nepali is likely to feel so lucky that it's 90% great and an American is more likely to grumble about the 10%, wishing it were 5%. I've remembered that so many times over the years: where do we focus our attention and energy.

Glasses

When glasses are dirty, shaded, or distorted (think amusement park mirrors), you don't see as clearly. Over time our glasses are clearer. Even this is still linear: we actually have different glasses we wear in different situations. There is a video on YouTube where a man is having a really bad day and is irritated at everyone who gets in his way: a child who darts in front of the car, a person who takes his parking space, someone who bumps into him, a long line at the coffee shop. At one point, someone gives him a pair of glasses and says try these. He puts them on and now, when people do things that irritate him, he sees captions that tell more about the person: struggling with depression; wife just left me; single parent and not doing well; a close friend is dying. His naturally capacity for compassion kicks in and his mood is transformed.

Letting It Go vs. Letting It Be (130)

I recall using the phrase "let it go," and one participant who had been coming to the meditation at our Center for a couple months because of some anger issues made a wonderful comment: Sometimes I can't let it go but I can always let it be.

Making Mountains Out of Molehills

This one is fairly self-explanatory. The psychology behind meditation helps us to see that the original discomfort or pain is always magnified by wanting it to go away. This is nicely

illustrated by a session at my training in Worcester: after the meditation, one participant said she noticed that she was sad and the teacher asked ‘then what?’ and the participant responded ‘then I noticed that I didn’t want to be sad,’ and the teacher asked ‘then what?’ and then the participant said, ‘I felt even worse.’ The teacher then help up her fist and said this represented the initial feeling of sadness and then made a circle with her arms to represent the pain from not wanting to be sad.

I have seen this time and time in my own practice and in the experiences of many people whom I have taught. I was told that I had a bad back and needed back support when meditating and sure enough, my back would begin to ache after a long meditation. One day during a retreat I decided to bring that curious and non-aversive attention to my back pain during a body scan. When I got to my back, there was a lot of “pain,” but I moved beyond the label to the actual sensations which included: pressure, electrical energy, heat, a feeling of pulling, and an aching. Each of these were sensations and when my focus was on actually feeling them, my experience moved from “pain” to several sensations that were very unpleasant to simply strong sensations. During the next body scan, there were no sensations at all. Since then I have not again sat with back support and while I occasionally have discomfort in the back while meditating, it’s pretty ordinary.

One of the miracles of mindfulness is that when we are facing something unpleasant, a physical pain, an emotional pain, a task that we really don’t want to do, when we bring mindful attention (curious, gentle, non-judgmental) to the actual sensations in the body and the thoughts and emotions associated with this aversion, we can watch the original molehill start to grow and grow, and we realize that we are the ones that are making the mountain.

The Man Trap (69)

There was an episode in the original Star Trek series called “Man Trap.” An alien being was able to shape shift; when encountering a human, the alien could read the human’s mind and take on the appearance of someone that person loved or had loved. Even though the human logically knew that this person was light years away, they were seduced and the alien sucked all the salt out of their body and killed them.

This phenomenon is often summarized as “we see what we want to see.” H. L. Mencken said it so succinctly: “The most common of all follies is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief occupation of mankind.”-- There are two terms in psychology that are related: confirmation bias and motivated cognition.

“Confirmation bias is the tendency to favor information that confirms one’s beliefs. People display this bias when they gather or remember information selectively, or when they interpret it in a [biased way](#). The effect is stronger for emotionally charged issues and for deeply entrenched beliefs...Confirmation biases contribute to [overconfidence](#) in personal beliefs and can maintain or strengthen beliefs in the face of contrary evidence. Poor [decisions](#) due to these biases have been found in political and organizational contexts” (Wikipedia).

When people form and cling to false beliefs despite overwhelming evidence, the phenomenon is labeled "motivated reasoning." In other words, "rather than search rationally for information that

either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief, people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe. This is a form of implicit emotion regulation in which the brain converges on judgments that minimize negative and maximize positive affect states associated with threat to or attainment of motive” (Wikipedia). “Motivated reasoning is confirmation bias taken to the next level. Motivated reasoning leads people to confirm what they already believe, while ignoring contrary data. But it also drives people to develop elaborate rationalizations to justify holding beliefs that logic and evidence have shown to be wrong. (The Skeptic’s Dictionary)

Some well-know stories which are seen as motivated reasoning:

the Apollo moon landing was a hoax

Saddam Hussein was involved in 9/11

the Holocaust didn't happen

AIDS is not caused by HIV

Barack Obama was not born in the United States

Mindfulness Bluetooth Assistant

When explaining mindfulness, my first meditation teacher asked, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could have a tiny person sitting on our shoulder who would remind us when we were getting irritable or angry, not paying attention to the person we were listening to, mindlessly watching tv or munching on junk food, etc.” We all perked up and he said, “That’s what mindfulness practice is about—so you can remember more often during the day.” That was many years ago, and for many people the idea of a mindfulness Bluetooth assistant is relevant. In either case, people who practice mindfulness and/or meditation on a regular basis find that they **do** catch themselves more often in times of stress and struggle.

Ocean

Top layer with turbulence.

Middle layer seeing, feeling the currents, the currents moving through my mind, pushing me around. There are universal currents → the realization that we are all subject to conditions beyond our control.

Lower lay a vast, serene calmness.

Put Your Own Oxygen Mask on First (62)

One of the pre-flight announcements on airlines is that in case the cabin loses air pressure, oxygen masks will come down and the instruction for people who are traveling is to put your own oxygen mask on first. You are of no help to your children if you can’t breathe. The airlines need to say this because so many people feel that putting themselves first is selfish.

Taking time to practice mindfulness benefits not just you but also the people with whom you are in relationship. When I first started teaching meditation courses, I was amazed at how many participants (mostly women) talked about struggling with whether or not sign up for the course in the first place because it felt selfish to come to the class for eight weeks. At the end of those courses, most of the people who felt selfish reported that as a result of the course, they were more patient and kinder toward their family than before and that there is value in taking ‘me time.’

My own family was delighted that I meditated (virtually) every day. In fact, some times when I was irritable either my wife or one of my children would ask, "did you meditate today?" One meditation teacher when asked "why should I meditate every day," responded that if you meditate every day, you are more likely to realize earlier than later when you are getting irritated, angry, resentful, etc. Thus, meditation is like an Early Warning System.

Ruminating mind

Many people struggle with the ruminating. I have found it helpful when ruminating to realize that this is like being stuck in the mud and spinning the wheels instead of taking other measures to get unstuck.

Shoot First (92)

I was at a talk about healthy families and the presenter, offered that instead of "Ready, Aim, Shoot," when stressed most people wind up doing "Ready, Shoot, Aim." That is, we tend to react to situations than to respond.

Star Trek alien who fed off negative emotions

This being comprised of pure energy also has one hell of a diet: unlike the vampire of "Obsession" which feeds off human blood, this thing (which resembled a cluster of rotating lights that turn red when fully "charged") subsists on violent emotions like hate and anger. So naturally, throwing a bunch of Klingons onto the Enterprise, arming both sides with medieval weapons and stoking the fires of suspicion and hostility would end up becoming a never-ending buffet for this creature. That's what happens in this popular third season episode, although Kirk and the Klingon commander Kang (Michael Ansara) eventually find a way to laugh the whole incident off and send the weakened entity dejectedly out into space, where it winks out of existence. This fellow could also be kissing cousins with the fear-hungry "Red Jack" entity from Season 2's "Wolf in the Fold."

This leads the officers to suspect that the entity thrives on the [hateful](#) emotions of others. To combat the alien, Kirk and Spock agree that they must join forces with the Klingons and eliminate all hateful emotions from the ship.

The entity fed on the emotions of hatred, anger, and primitive predatory instincts exhibited by humanoids in close proximity to it.

Story Telling Mind (7)

Our mind loves to tell stories. If we pay attention, we realize that we often tell ourselves stories: "I can't believe he did that. He treats others like this too and it makes the workplace intolerable...." "This professor is terrible, and it's almost possible to stay focused for 1 ½ hours on his rambling, but I have to in order to get the information, but it's hard. And I have to get an A in this course to keep my scholarship which is now in jeopardy..."

Someone wrote a wonderful poem called My Story from Sy Safransky's Notebook in The Sun Magazine, March 2010, issue 411.

I left my story in a barn so someone else could keep milking it.

I left my story in the fitting room; it didn't fit me anymore.
I left my story at the hospital because it wouldn't stop bleeding.
I left my story at the rest stop; it needed a rest.
I left my story at the body shop because it always wanted a different one.
I left my story with some cash so it could never say, "Poor me."
I left my story without saying where I was going because I didn't want it to follow me; it never even noticed I was gone.

The story telling mind is especially dangerous when the story is a catastrophizing story like "I'm doing poorly in this course and am going to flunk out," "I'm sure she is about ready to break up with me," etc. Here are some ways to respond to the story-telling mind in these times of ruminating:

it's just a story; it's not a fact
don't believe everything the mind says
this is a patterned behavior in my mind.

Mark Twain once said that most of the worst experiences of my life never actually happened. Someone actually researched this and had people journal about things they were worried about happening and how often it actually happened. The number was about 15% of the times it actually happened. That means that 6 out of 7 times it didn't happen.

Technology Metaphors

There are a number of technology metaphors that my students and others have come up with that, when remembered, cause them to smile and to respond.

Press the Pause Button.

When my daughter was a teen-ager and would let loose with some pretty strong words, I would take two breaths before responding. Occasionally, that would irritate her and she would say "there goes dad breathing again." At the same time, she let me breathe, because she knew that what came out of my mouth after two breaths would be better for both of us.

Reboot or Restart

The computer is frozen or just not working well. So reboot/restart; often that's all that is needed.

Viruses

Common human viruses include the To Do virus, the fix or solve everything virus

Corrupted files

Over time, computer programs get corrupted. We have many corrupted files—rumination, habits, etc.

Change the Channel (34)

You are watching TV a channel surfing and you suddenly realize that you are watching a mindless show. An almost opposite way to use this metaphor is to realize that with our busyness and with many ways to be distracted, our life can be compared to holding a remote control at life and so frequently changing the channels: pick one TV program or turn it off.

You've Got Mail (22)

But you don't have to read it every time you hear the beep or see the image.

Note: mindfulness of technology exercise in *Mindfulness Exercises Between Classes*

This Piece of Paper is My Universe (118)

Imagine looking at a sheet of paper on your desk and then holding it to your face. It “looms so large in your visual field that it has become your universe in this moment; you can’t see anything else at all. The [paper] itself has not changed, of course, but your perspective has.”

Several meditation teachers use another metaphor with a similar message. Imagine putting one drop of black ink into a clear thimble. Immediately the water is dark and opaque. Now imagine putting one drop of black ink into a bathtub. Your eyes can see no change in the water.

These metaphors help to describe the concept of spaciousness, and many people have found that when they “took a step back,” their anger softened. Another one of my students shared a thought she had with a similar effect: “one month from now will this still be a big issue for me? if the answer is no, then why not let it go now?!”

Thoughts Are Like Soap Bubbles (47) or Clouds

These images can bring a sense of lightness, smiling, and ease to meditation.

Throwing Gasoline on a Fire

(Note: I got this metaphor from a teacher 40 years ago, and I am rethinking its value. I still find it useful in terms of seeing myself on fire and throwing gasoline on the fire instead of water. However, it has a flaw—the Buddha talked about “putting out the fire” by not adding more wood to the fire, that is, if you stop adding fuel, the fire will simply burn out. The gasoline/water metaphor has the connotation of force whereas the wood metaphor connotes wisdom—no longer adding fuel to the fire.)

The metaphor of fire is often used. I’ve heard many administrators say that their job consists of putting out fires. Many times in our daily life something happens that we don’t like and a fire begins: “damn, the prescription is not ready; now I have to call my doctor again,” “just my luck, everyone decided to come to the Post Office right now,” “my child is throwing a temper tantrum and I want to scream.” In these cases, we can feel the fire burning inside. When we don’t bring mindfulness to our feelings here, instead of pouring water on the fire, we throw gasoline on the fire—continuing to replay our anger and creating a feedback loop that escalates, or yelling at the child and then they yell back and then....

Many people have found that simply taking a moment to stand back and take a breath or two reminds us that we can choose water or gasoline. So this metaphor is similar to making a mountain out of a molehill.

Tsunami

Sometimes people think mindfulness can be used in every situation, and sometimes life’s events are like tsunamis—the death of a loved one, the diagnosis of a very serious medical condition, losing one’s job. While there is value in these situations of mindfulness, sometimes you need to get to higher ground where you are safe, for example, reach out to friends.

Walking Down the Street

Imagine taking a walk with a friend. When you encounter people you know who greet you, you return each greeting with hospitality but continue talking. If someone interrupts you, for

example, “I’ve been meaning to call you about...,” you politely say that you are engaged in conversation and will call them back later, and you go back to your conversation. So too with meditation. As you meditate, you will frequently be greeted by other visitors—noises, thoughts, emotions. In each case, you meet them with hospitality. If some persist, you acknowledge being pulled away from the meditation, maintain an attitude of hospitality and then go back to the meditation. In this way, our meditation time need not be a stressful experience with expectations and shoulds, but a rather a time to simply pay attention to what is happening moment to moment with the attitudes of curiosity and non-judgment

More Metaphors

1. Bend but not break
2. Black hole: observing vs. getting caught up; getting sucked in;
3. Boating—becalmed, just right, storm. All three will change: impermanence
4. Building vs. Network
5. Circuit breaker: gives space
6. Daily supplements and vitamins: that's what meditation is
7. Dredging a canal that has gotten clogged up. Need to open back up then maintenance.
8. The floods of life
9. Meditation is like turning garbage into compost
10. Gardening metaphor: cultivating vision plan reading; stages—prep, planting, sprouting, weeding, fertilizing, maintaining
11. Gated community. It doesn't protect you; it imprisons you.
12. The Golden Buddha—There was a minor statue in Thailand that was covered with a layer of stucco. When relocating the statue in 1955, the workers discovered that it was a gold statue. Apparently the villagers had covered it with stucco some time in the past so that invaders would overlook it.
13. Onion: layers of attachment, craving
14. Pond: if there is wind or agitation, you can't see the bottom of the pond
15. Pressure cooker—let the steam out slowly to reduce the pressure; this is like realizing you are suppressing “negative” thoughts and emotions—let them out.
16. Reclaiming the desert—plants with long roots, sustainable
17. Riding out the storm
18. Riptide—let the tide carry you out (no resistance). When the pull is less, swim horizontal to shore until you are able to swim back to shore.
19. Snorkeling without corrective lenses and snorkeling with corrective lenses
20. Speed of life: Start on foot, then bike, then car, then a race car (which you couldn't drive at beginning)
21. Solar panels. Meditating pays for itself like solar panels.
22. Learning to “stay in your own lane” vs. intruding into other people's lives
23. Stuck in the mud and spinning the wheels.
24. Take a number—when you have a whole line of thoughts, invite them to take a number.
25. Toolbox: having only a hammer vs. having a hammer and a screwdriver
26. Train: I'm observing the train vs. I'm on the train
27. Turning an ocean liner

