

Singing and Mindfulness

NATS *Journal of Singing* October 2010

Mindfulness has become a popular word lately. A google search for the term produces over 3 million results, ranging from books about meditation, to articles on parenting, relationships and neuroplasticity, to websites for programs in stress reduction, cognitive therapy, hospice care, and education. Thanks in part to the pioneering work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, and the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, the main stream medical community has embraced the healthful benefits of mindfulness training. From the Harvard Women's Health Watch: "There is mounting evidence that cultivating mindfulness can increase our enjoyment of life, expand our capacity to cope with illness, and possibly improve our physical and emotional health...It can reduce stress and may help other treatments work better."¹

The Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) method developed by Kabat-Zinn has been taught to hundreds of thousands of people. Mindfulness based programs for care givers, hospice workers, prison inmates, corporate and community leaders, as well as teachers in all levels of education are also becoming more widely available.²

Defining mindfulness and how it can help singing

The term mindfulness comes from a style of Buddhist meditation called Vipassana, which is translated from the original Pali language as "insight" or "clear seeing." Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to present moment experience without judgment or attachment. In the words of some well known and respected mindfulness teachers: Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, "Mindfulness is present moment awareness. It is the observance of what is happening right now in the present... Mindfulness is nonjudgmental observation. It is that ability of the mind to observe without criticism."³; Sharon Salzberg, "The power of mindfulness opens and connects us to the entire range of our experience... We use mindfulness to bring us back as close as we can get to the direct experience. Only then can we see the simple truth of things, in an innocent way, with

¹ *Harvard Women's Health Watch* (February 2004), Harvard Medical School. Quoted on www.valeymindfulness.com

² Andrea Miller, "The Mindful Society," *Shambala Sun* (September 2008), pp.56-63.

³ Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), pp. 139-140.

clarity.”⁴ ; Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness can be thought of as moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, and as open-heartedly as possible.”⁵

Though mindfulness comes from Buddhist thought and practice, it is possible to use mindfulness in a completely secular way, without any connection to Buddhism in particular. Try this simple exercise right now: just notice your breathing for a few moments. Follow a complete breath cycle from the very beginning of an inhalation, to the crest of the in breath, see what happens at the precise moment when the inhale becomes an exhale, then follow the breath all the way to its end and see what happens between the end of that exhale and the next inhale. Is there a pause between the inhalation and the exhalation, or the exhalation and the next inhalation? Where do you notice the movement of the breath – at the nostrils, in the throat or diaphragm? You don’t have to control the breath in any way, just stay with it and observe. It doesn’t matter if it is slow and deep or fast and shallow. However it feels is absolutely fine. You are just paying attention to how it is right now and being present with that experience. This is mindful awareness. The success of health and education based mindfulness programs shows how easily this way of paying attention can be applied to a wide variety of life experiences with great benefits. Mindfulness can be learned and practiced through meditation. But mindfulness can also be applied to other activities, including walking, eating, washing dishes, brushing your teeth, and singing.

Benefits of mindfulness training

Some of the benefits of mindfulness training are increased concentration, more focus and clarity, decreased agitation and reactivity, and a greater feeling of calm and ease. These are all qualities that we know are enormously helpful in singing and performing. How many of us wouldn’t like to be less distracted and nervous when we are performing, and more calm and focused more of the time. How wonderful that we can practice and strengthen these beneficial qualities using mindfulness and apply them to our singing. Mindfulness training is really just cultivating certain wholesome habits of the mind that lead away from suffering and towards happiness and freedom. As we learn to pay attention with more direct observation, we might see ourselves about to fall into an

⁴ Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein, *Insight Meditation* workbook (Boulder, Co.: Sounds True, 2001), pp.15, 17.

⁵ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* (New York: Hyperion, 2005), p. 108.

old habit, which might not be the best thing for us. In that moment of awareness we have a choice to continue with the old habit, or take a new direction and establish a new habit pattern. If we're not aware of the old habit, we can't really do anything about it. If we see it and recognize it, it is possible to transform it. Retraining our old bad habits, however, is the hard part, and that's why mindfulness takes practice.

We already know how to practice

As singers, we are several steps ahead of the game because we already know how to practice. We are always trying to establish and maintain healthy physical and mental habits for singing, and we know what hard work it takes to break old patterns and replace them with new ones. Adding mindful awareness to our singing practice is really just a more refined way of paying attention to what we are already doing. The difference, however, is that with mindful attention, we are just noticing what is happening with out judging it. We are not trying to hold onto the experience or push it away. We are not criticizing our experience or striving for any particular result. This is where singing and mindfulness can be the most difficult, but also where it can be the most helpful.

Posture and Breath

Most mindfulness meditation starts with awareness of the posture and the breath. We already direct a lot of attention to these issues in singing. It is very easy, however, to get distracted when singing and forget what is going on with body alignment and breathing. We have a lot of things to keep track of in singing, including pitches and rhythm, diction and interpretation, coordination with the accompaniment as well as vocal technique. It is very easy to get overwhelmed juggling all these elements. From time to time it is good to start over with something simple. To strengthen concentration and develop some stability of attention, it can be helpful to rest the awareness in one spot of the body, maybe the feet on the ground, the hands hanging relaxed from the arms, or the alignment of the neck and shoulders. If you notice that your attention has drifted off to something else, just come back to that one spot in the body and relax the attention there for one or several moments. Getting distracted is not a bad thing in and of itself. It happens to all of us. But each time we notice we have gotten distracted is a moment of awareness, and an opportunity to strengthen mindfulness.

When your attention is a little bit more stable, you might realize that you are holding some tension in the part of the body that you are observing. You could be watching your neck and shoulders, or your jaw, or tongue. Really seeing a spot of muscular tension for yourself in a moment of mindful awareness is very different from being told by your voice teacher to relax your shoulders or release your jaw. Trying to relax a tight jaw or knotted tongue can be an ongoing battle, albeit, one well worth waging. But when a student realizes and clearly feels the holding in their own body,

without trying to make it go away, just the act of observing and recognizing it transforms the experience. Noticing the tension with mindfulness can help to release and dissolve it.

Many meditation techniques focus exclusively on the breath. As singers, our breath is certainly one of the most important elements in what we do, and it is a wonderful object of mindful awareness. Rather than trying to get the breath to *do* something in particular, you can just observe the breath as it flows in and out of your body. Is it strong or gentle, high or low, are your abdominal muscles contracted or relaxed? These questions are not meant to stimulate an intellectual analysis or explanation. Rather they are an invitation to increase your awareness of the experience.

Aside from the particular breathing technique you may be working on, you want to strengthen and refine your powers of observation of the breath just as it is in your body in the present moment. Can you notice the precise moment when the inhalation starts, exactly which muscles engage at the beginning, middle, and end of the breath, the precise moment the inhalation comes in contact with a tone, the moment the tone stops, and what happens between the end of a tone and the beginning of the next breath? You can also explore how the breath pressure changes throughout one note or phrase: does it stay the same or change slightly, where exactly do you feel the change in pressure, in your abdominal area, chest, back, throat, or face? How does the breath feel in different vowels, or as it moves through various consonant clusters? Often, in trying to get the breath to accomplish something specific, we are pushing or holding with out realizing it. In observing the breath just as it is you may see how you are making your job more difficult by working too hard. As you observe the breath in more subtle detail you may see how it can accomplish the job at hand with less effort. Eventually you may feel that the breath is breathing you, instead of the other way around.

Thoughts and Emotions

It is amazing how many moments we actually miss because we are thinking ahead to something that will happen in the future, or thinking back on something that happened in the past. We may miss the very beginning of a breath because we are already thinking ahead about the vowel placement. We may miss the very end of a breath because we are still trying to decide if we liked that vowel placement. We may spend two pages of an aria worrying about the high note coming at the end. We may spend two pages of an aria fretting over a mispronounced word, or an unsure pitch at the very beginning. We probably have an ongoing chatter of coaching, criticizing, judging and worrying accompanying our singing most of the time. This is extremely normal. It is what the mind does; it thinks, it plans, it reviews, it evaluates. This happens to everyone, but it doesn't have to be a problem: the chatter in the mind can actually be a wonderful object of mindful awareness. Whenever you notice that you are planning ahead, just recognize planning, and come back to the present moment. When you notice that you are judging, just recognize judging, and come back to the present moment. It is actually fascinating to

watch the wide variety of thoughts and plans and memories and conversations that float through our mind. One thought is no better or worse than another. It is all just mental chatter. Instead of getting carried away by a train of thought, if you can notice it as thinking and come back to the present moment, that is a moment of mindful awareness. “When unattended, our thinking runs our lives without our even knowing it. Attended with mindful awareness, we have a chance not only to know ourselves better, and see what is in our minds, but also to hold our thoughts differently, so they no longer rule our lives.”⁶

Thoughts often give rise to accompanying emotions. The emotions often have physical sensations that go along with them. If the emotions we feel when we are singing are connected to the meaning of the text, or the drama in the music, they can help us communicate with more depth and authenticity. If the sensations in the body associated with a particular emotion are relaxed, warm and pleasant, we can enjoy them and let them help our singing. Emotions in the music such as sadness, anguish, despair, anger, or other afflictive feelings so common in vocal music, can call up physical sensations in the body that might make singing more challenging. Often, in these situations it is possible to choose to focus on some other aspect of singing so the physical sensations of despair or anger won't get in the way of vocalizing. Hopefully, we can convey the emotion to the audience without being carried away by it ourselves.

If we are feeling nervousness, worry, or self doubt, however, these emotions can make singing much more difficult and even extremely unpleasant. Fear or doubt may result in tightness in the neck or throat, we may notice our breath more shallow or unsteady, we may feel we have to swallow or cough, or other physical manifestations. These physical sensations can give rise in turn to more negative thoughts such as, “I'll never be able to do this,” “I always get so nervous,” “I'm not a good singer.” But these thoughts and emotions can also be held with mindfulness. Instead of getting caught up in the emotion, and the swirl of negative thoughts and even panic that can compound it, you can use the physical sensations themselves as objects of mindful awareness. What does the sensation of having to swallow actually feel like? Where exactly is the tightness in the throat? How does a shallow breath or pounding heart feel? You can also recognize the familiar habit pattern of nervousness itself. By bringing a gentle and friendly curiosity to the sensations of nervousness, the very act of observing and recognizing what is happening in the moment can help relax the cascade of thoughts and feelings and bring more calm and focus to your whole system. As Joseph Goldstein teaches, “To recognize this...’Oh – this is just a thought’ – is often a relief. You realize that the drama in which you've been lost, and which has consumed so much energy, is nothing more than a passing thought in the moment. Your experience immediately becomes more spacious, and you feel your body and mind relaxing again.”⁷

⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to our Senses*, p. 406.

⁷ Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein, *Insight Meditation*, pp. 47-48.

Everything is constantly changing

This may sound like an obvious statement, but when you bring mindful awareness to more and more moments, you begin to realize, in a very deep way, that a moment doesn't last very long. Each moment is constantly arising and passing away, melting into the next moment, one after another. You were observing your breath and then you were planning your next recital, then you were thinking of something you needed at the drug store, then you were planning what to wear at an audition next week, then you remembered some comment your coach made about diction, and then you were feeling that consonant cluster in your mouth. All these thoughts and sensations are constantly flitting by. You were worrying about a high note coming up, then you were trying to listen to the high note to see if you liked it, then you were judging the high note and comparing it to the last time you tried to sing that note. Meanwhile, the note has come and gone and you missed what it actually felt like in that moment.

The more you experience the constantly changing parade of thoughts, sensations and emotions, the never ceasing arising and passing away of moment after moment, the easier it is not to get attached to any one moment or experience. That tough vowel in the passaggio will come and go, the breath might feel tight and shallow right now, but it will change. You think that little tickle in your throat will last forever but it will also be gone soon enough. The old adage "what you resist persists" is certainly true here. The more you want an unpleasant experience to go away, the more tenaciously it remains. The less you resist, however, the more easily the experience will dissolve into something else. By the same token, along with thoughts of doubt and judgment, fabulous high notes and endless breath for long legato phrases will also come and go. If you bring mindful awareness to every experience, you can be present for all of it without pushing away, or holding on to any of it.

Deciding what to pay attention to

Traditional instructions for Vipassana meditation recommend starting with the breath. Once the attention is a bit steady, you can gradually widen the field of awareness to include physical sensations, thoughts and emotions. Whatever calls the attention most prominently can be used as an object of awareness. When that object fades away, as it certainly will, you can come back to the breath as a home base or anchor, or move onto whatever other object calls your attention. Eventually you want to be able to establish some continuity of awareness from one moment to the next. These instructions also work well for singing. If you start with the breath and use it as a home base, you can move to sensations of resonance and placement, or the feeling of diction in the mouth, or problem areas of holding and tension.

No doubt your voice teacher or coach will give you plenty of guidance on what to focus on. You will also want to attend to the meaning of the text and the pacing of a

phrase. You can be present and mindful for all these tasks and move from one to another as needed. If you notice that you are lost in thought or gripped by worry or judgment, you can recognize that as well and come back to the breath, or other physical sensations you were working with. It is also common to get caught in striving or working too hard. You can notice that too and begin again. “The particular sensations, emotions or thoughts that arise when we practice mindfulness are not so important. It is our willingness to become still and pay attention to our experience, whatever it may be...With time we develop the capacity to relate to our passing experience, whether in meditation or in daily life, with deep clarity and kindness.”⁸ This sounds simple, and it is, but it is far from easy to do. This kind of paying attention takes practice, just like everything else.

Finding the right amount of effort

When we sing we must find the right balance between energy and relaxation, effort and ease. We need energy in the body and breath to get it to connect to our resonance or placement. We need effort and commitment to sustain a tone or line, but we need relaxation in the surrounding muscles as well. We need a lot of concentration to keep track of pitches and rhythm, diction and translation, yet we need to coordinate all these elements so it sounds easy and natural. When we find that balance, singing feels wonderful. The same is true for mindfulness. We need energy and commitment to connect our awareness to an object and maintain some continuity from moment to moment. Yet we need to hold each object of awareness gently and with spaciousness without gripping or forcing. Jon Kabat-Zinn describes it this way: “A colleague coming off retreat said she thought meditation practice was all about aiming the attention and then sustaining that focus moment by moment...The more we practice aiming and sustaining our attention, the more we learn to rest effortlessly in the sustain, as when we depress the sustain pedal on a piano – the notes continue to reverberate long after the keys are struck.”⁹

This is a place where singing and mindfulness work beautifully together. One of my favorite moments in teaching comes when a student finishes an exercise in which they were totally absorbed in observing their tongue, or the vibrations in the mask, or the sensations of the breath. They look up at me with a delighted and surprised expression on their face and say “that felt so easy!” or “that felt effortless!” They were so fully present with the experience of the moment, that there was no room for their ego to get in the way with thoughts or doubts or judgment or even effort. Bringing mindfulness to our singing, we can discover the natural ease in our instrument. We can literally lose ourselves in the present moment, and what we find there is freedom and joy.

⁸ Tara Brach, Ph.D., *Radical Acceptance* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), p.48.

⁹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to our Senses*, pp.75, 78.

