



Learning to flow like water

Mindfulness and Meditation

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Do you ever find yourself behaving rigidly? This seems to happen when life feels stressful or when we're somehow feeling threatened. It's as if the mind unconsciously says, "NO" to everything that isn't exactly as we wish it to be. We get very brittle—the least thing that goes wrong might upset us; someone disagreeing or even questioning us might get a snappy retort.

We're frozen, closed off.

Like many of our behaviors, this happens with a "good intention" in the brain. In times of stress, things feel shaky and unstable, so the brain tries to put a lock-down on certain types of variability in order to feel safer. "Sure, I can't control how crazy the office will be today, but I can be very certain about the sandwich I'm going to order for lunch... and heaven help us if they run out of it before I get there!" This may sound silly, but situations like this do play out, often under the surface of our awareness. Sometimes the only thing we're aware of is that at the end of the day, this inner rigidity has us feeling frustrated and exhausted.

While these controlling instincts may be intended to keep us safe, we end up more unhappy and uneasy when we're reacting in this way. Being upset, annoyed, or disappointed when outcomes don't match our expectations... these inner reactions are unpleasant to experience, and how we deal with these emotions can turn an already-stressful time into an even worse situation. We may behave in ways we're not proud of.

So, what's the alternative? Learning to flow like water.



What does it mean to flow?

When we flow, we are softer, more open and flexible. To start getting an understanding of what it's like to flow, we can look to the natural world.

For a moment, imagine that you're standing by a stream watching the water flow by. Let yourself see the stream in your mind's eye. Is it slow or fast-moving?

What happens when there is a boulder in the path of the water? The water flows around or over it. It keeps moving.

Bruce Lee said:

"You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drop and it can crash. Become like water, my friend."



How would it be to flow through life like water?

How would it feel to be fluid, to be responsive to what is needed in the moment, working with what occurs rather than fighting against the unexpected and unwanted?

What would it be like to simply register “here is a boulder,” and then find a new way, given this new reality?

What would it be like to be soft and open, curious... to show up with attentiveness to the situation, rather than with a fixed agenda?

When I feel into these ways of being, I sense much more ease. Something in me unclenches and actually feels more serene and secure.

If we know that we are able to flow, and we hold our agenda lightly or not at all, then there is no real risk of “What if something unexpected happens?” If this happens, I flow with it. I find a different path... And I don’t have to know what that path is right now.

How can we practice flowing like water?

Meditation: Sit and notice your breath flowing in and out. Let yourself just be with whatever arises. When thoughts come in or a sound grabs your attention, practice being ok with it. Just notice it and then, whenever you're ready, come back to the breath.

Mindfulness: ACC Wellness provides a virtual, 30-minute Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction every Tuesday morning at 8:15 AM and more information can be found in each month's Wellness schedule.

Movement: Try practicing flowing movements like qigong or tai chi, or simply create your own flowing movements, perhaps swaying like a tree in the breeze or moving your arms back and forth. In this way, you can actually embody the qualities of water.

Water as a touchstone: Notice water wherever it is— as the morning mist, a glimpse of the bay, washing the dishes, brushing your teeth... Whenever you encounter water, notice its movement, see what it has to teach you. If it's possible, take yourself to water outdoors: a creek, ditch, pond, ocean... spend time sitting, lying, immersing in water's ways.

Ask the question: At various points throughout the day, ask yourself, "What would it be like to flow with what is happening?" See what shifts occur.