

Mindfulness and Stuttering: How can mindfulness help?

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Introduction

In this article I will focus on the specific ways in which mindfulness practice may help people gain control over their stuttering. I will also discuss how “mindful speaking” can play a role in therapy. I don’t intend to go into a lot of detail about what mindfulness is, because there are already plenty of publications available that do this. However, I will start with a brief summary of what mindfulness practice entails. This summary reflects my background, which is rooted in Zen practice, some aspects of which may not be shared by mindfulness practitioners from other backgrounds. I recommend reading around the topic so that ultimately you can form your own opinions. In the second half of this article I describe my own personal experience of mindfulness practice and its impact, over the years, on my stuttering and on myself.

What mindfulness practice involves and how it can affect us...

Stated most simply, mindfulness practice is all about paying attention. It can be divided into two types: (1) passively observing where your attention is currently going, and (2) actively trying to focus your attention on something in particular.

Mindfulness practice has the potential to instill significant and profound change in our lives. However, the extent to which this potential is realized is dependent on how much of it we do. All the evidence suggests that significant change requires consistent practice over a period of time – months or years. It works initially by making us more aware of where our attention is going and by increasing our control over where it does go. Over a longer period of time, this enhanced awareness and increased control can have very powerful and profound knock-on effects on our understanding and perception – of the world around us, the people in it, and also of ourselves and our relationships to the world and the people in it. Needless to say, over a period of time, mindfulness can also have a profound effect on our speech, although as hopefully it will become clear, the relationship between mindfulness and stuttering is not a straightforward linear one. Anyway, I want to start by dispelling a few common misconceptions about what mindfulness is...

Mindfulness is NOT a form of relaxation

Mindfulness is mindfulness, and we can be mindful of any state that we find ourselves in. So, just as we can be mindful of being relaxed, we can also be mindful of being angry, stressed or anxious. To be mindful of something means to pay attention to that something and to be aware of the fact that you are paying attention to it. A key aim of mindfulness practice is to train our attention so that we

can be fully awake and alert to the present moment and fully open the variety of potential experiences that exist within that moment – whatever they may be.

Mindfulness does NOT involve emptying your mind

Many people mistakenly equate mindfulness with stopping the flow of thoughts through their minds. However, although the flow of thoughts may sometimes (temporarily) seem to grind to a halt during some mindfulness practices, stopping one's flow of thoughts is not necessary in order to be mindful, and thoughts are not an obstacle to mindfulness. Thoughts come and go in our minds just like sounds come and go in the environment around us. There is no need to try and change this. Nevertheless, mindfulness practice can help you to develop more control over how much attention you pay to the thoughts that arise in your mind, and this can be useful.

Mindfulness is not a form of moral, ethical, or religious practice

In fact, a key outcome of mindfulness practice is an increased awareness of the ultimate arbitrariness of values and value judgments. So, if anything, mindfulness is likely to make us less dogmatic in our beliefs and more accepting of the variety of different moral and ethical values that people adhere to.

How can mindfulness practice influence stuttering?

Mindfulness can help us identify exactly what we do when we stutter

Mindfulness practice can help us to identify exactly what we do when we stutter. As Van Riper noted in the following quotes from his textbook "The treatment of stuttering" this ability to accurately identify what we do when we stutter is essential if we are to gain more control over it...

- One of the curious features in the stutterer's perception of his stuttering is his tendency to lump together a host of disparate behaviors ranging all the way from nose wrinkling to saying "ah-ah-ah" and to call that lump "stuttering".
- To ask a stutterer to begin immediately to change the way he stutters is to ask for failure, if only because he rarely knows how he stutters.
- We begin our therapy by training the stutterer to **identify** the overt and covert behaviors that constitute his disorder.

Van Riper 1973, pp245-246

The problem that Van Riper was describing here stems from the tendency for human beings to focus on the verbal descriptions of what they are doing rather than on what they are actually doing. Although convenient, and often useful, the words we use to describe things have an unforeseen consequence of diverting our attention towards themselves and away from the events, activities, or objects they are describing. So a key function of mindfulness practice is to train us to look beyond the words and observe directly the sensory experiences that underlie them.

Van Riper considered this identification of what we actually do when we stutter to be the essential starting point of all therapy for stuttering, and people attending his courses were first assigned a series of tasks (including, for example, watching themselves in front of a mirror) to make them more aware of what they really do when they are stuttering. The "identification" stage of Van Riper's stuttering therapy constitutes a very good example of mindfulness based cognitive therapy –

although he himself never actually called it that. Later in this article I will outline some applications of mindfulness practice that we can employ while speaking in order to increase our awareness of what exactly we are doing when we stutter.

Mindfulness helps us identify exactly how listeners are responding to us when we stutter

In addition to helping us to identify what we do when we stutter, mindfulness practice can also help us to increase our awareness of how our listeners respond to us when we speak and when we stutter. Arguably the practice of mindfully observing our listeners' responses is as important as mindfully observing ourselves. This is because, just as "stutterers rarely know how they stutter", they also rarely know how their listeners are really responding to them. Indeed probably the reality is that in many speaking situations, especially more challenging ones, we probably accurately perceive very little of how listeners are responding to us. Instead, at such times, our attention is likely to be distracted by memories of how listeners have responded to us in similar situations in the past. These past memories may not all be bad ones, but whatever the case, they are second-hand, and they draw our attention away from the reality of the present encounter. This lack of an accurate awareness of our listeners' responses diminishes our ability to determine the most effective and appropriate way of relating to them. It is thus likely to reduce the effectiveness of our communication and increase the likelihood that listeners will fail to grasp what we are trying to say. This process can form into a sort of vicious circle whereby, past experiences of communication failure cause us to make inappropriate (and often unnecessary) adjustments to our speech, which have the net effect of increasing the chances of communication failure in the future.

Mindfulness reduces our tendency to make unhelpful value judgments

An important side-effect of focusing attention on raw sensory experiences, rather than on thoughts, is that it brings about a reduction in the tendency to make value judgments. So, for example, we are less likely to think of things in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, etc. This reduction occurs because such judgments are largely tied up with the language we use, whereas sensory and emotional experiences are value-free. The more strongly we focus on direct sensory experiences and feelings, the less space there is for such value judgments. This is a particularly important issue for people who stutter because stuttering is intricately bound up with the judgments we make about the quality of our speech. We tend to stutter most when we anticipate or perceive that our speech is in some way "not good enough" and we feel like we have to do better.

It is important to understand this relationship between language, value judgments, and stuttering, because, if we do, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a lot we can do to help ourselves. To my mind, much of the advice given out by therapists in this regard is unhelpful. In particular, I am aware that many therapists advocate focusing on positive thoughts (about one's performance) instead of negative ones, and praising oneself for one's "successes". Although superficially this might seem a reasonable thing to do, it directly contradicts the mindfulness practice that I learned during my Zen training. The problem is that positive and negative judgments constitute two sides of the same coin. If you label one aspects of something as positive, by implication you are implying the non-labeled aspects are negative (or at least you are implying that they are less positive). So, if you praise yourself for the times you manage to say something well, you are still falling into the trap of categorizing your utterances into boxes of good and bad. So, while being mindful of your speech and of people's reactions to it, avoid verbal labels altogether. Just observe – be a passive observer, and resist the temptation to categorize what you perceive. Passive observation of the raw experiences is

enough. Having said that, be patient with yourself. In all of us, the tendency to categorize and ascribe values to our experiences is so deep rooted that it doesn't disappear overnight. So, if you find yourself still making value judgments, don't beat yourself up about it. Just let it serve as a reminder to focus more strongly on the raw experiences. Remember, the more you focus on the raw experiences, the less space there is for your mind to make such judgments.

Mindfulness can help reduce our use of unhelpful secondary symptoms

Secondary symptoms of stuttering are behaviors we pick up after stuttering has become established. These behaviors generally become entrenched because they sometimes help us to get our words out and to avoid unpleasant experiences of struggling with our speech. They may also help us avoid unpleasant responses from listeners. Consequently they become reinforced and we find ourselves using them over and over again, with an increasing degree of automaticity. Sometimes they become so firmly entrenched that they appear to be completely automatic. However, despite appearances, we do have the capacity to bring them back under voluntary control, provided we are sufficiently aware of the fact that we are engaging in them. The problem with secondary symptoms is that, although they appear to help us when we first start using them, overall, they add to the problem, and make our speech more effortful and more difficult for other people to understand. These secondary symptoms can be divided into two types: "avoidance behaviors" such as stalling before an anticipated block or substituting words, and "escape behaviors" such as using force to push through a block. There are an infinite number of ways these secondary symptoms can manifest. (I will post an article focusing on secondary symptoms in the near future).

Mindfulness is helpful in reducing these symptoms in a number of ways. First of all, the mindfulness practice of passively observing our speaking/stuttering makes us more consciously aware of the secondary symptoms that we are engaging in. This was quite an eye-opener for myself, because, prior to practicing mindfulness, I thought I was already quite well aware of what I was doing. However, as I stopped engaging in the more obvious secondary symptoms, like scrunching up my face, clenching my fists and jerking my head, I gradually became aware of many subtle secondary symptoms that I had never even noticed before. Many of these involved subtle stalling or delaying tactics before anticipated blocks, and abnormal prosody (i.e., abnormal emphasis, pitch and intonation). Many of these unhelpful symptoms start to diminish spontaneously, as soon as you start to become aware that you are doing them. However, it may not feel like they are diminishing at the time because you are more aware of them than you used to be. Active intervention to prevent yourself doing some of these things may ultimately prove to be necessary, but there is no need to make it a strategy of first resort.

Mindfulness also reduces secondary symptoms that constitute forms of avoidance because the very act of being mindful of something reduces one's avoidance of it. Indeed, in many ways, mindfulness implies non-avoidance.

Mindfulness promotes the development of a more realistic sense of self esteem

This is a much misunderstood function of mindfulness. The more closely we observe our lives and the way we respond to situations and other people, the more we become aware that our responses are largely beyond our control. The paradox here is that the more we become aware of (and accepting of) our ultimate lack of control over our thoughts and actions, the more they seem to spontaneously fall into line with what we would like them to be. There are several possible reasons

for this. For example, it may be that as we become more mindful our ideals changed and become more realistic, or it may be that our responses change and become more adaptive, or perhaps a bit of both. But whatever the case, the feeling is that such changes are happening spontaneously as mindfulness increases, and it is not really “me” that is instigating those changes.

Along with these changes comes an increasing awareness that, in fact, none of us have complete control over what we do. So, in this regard, we are all subject to a similar predicament. As this awareness grows, it brings with it an increasing sense of empathy towards the people we encounter in our everyday lives. This feeling of empathy that arises out of mindfulness helps us to communicate because, with it, we no longer feel that we have to rely so strongly on the actual words we speak. Instead we develop faith that, even if the words don’t come out quite as planned, the message will still get across. As this sense of faith increases, the fear of blocking and stuttering reduces.

Mindfulness practices

Essentially, there are two types of practice: (1) formal meditation; and (2) mindfulness whilst performing the actions of everyday life. These two practices support each other and, in my experience, both are equally important. I discuss the important points of both of these approaches below.

Formal sitting meditation

This involves setting aside some time, preferably on a daily basis, to practice focusing your attention on something. The practice is extremely straightforward. Essentially it involves: (a) deciding to focus your attention on something (for example on your breathing); (b) continuing to try to maintain your focus of attention on it; and (c) pulling your attention back to it as soon as you notice it has wandered. Inevitably it involves the process of pulling your attention back, again and again, to whatever it is that you have decided to focus on. It doesn’t matter how often your attention wanders off. All that matters is that as soon as you notice that it has wandered, you pull it back. Remember, it is in the nature of the mind to wander, so don’t be disappointed when it does. Each instance of wandering is an opportunity to pull it back, and each time you pull it back, you are making progress.

Personally, I think the posture you adopt when doing this formal meditation is important. Although I am aware that practitioners disagree somewhat on quite how important it is. Some postures – like maintaining a straight back - encourage us to pay attention and to stay awake. Also, some postures are easier on your circulation and so it is easier to remain feeling comfortable while you are staying still. Lying down is not generally conducive to being alert and paying attention. And, although meditation while lying down is not impossible, to my mind, it makes sense to adopt a posture that makes it easier to focus and not drift off.

Secondly, I find it is helpful to decide in advance exactly how long you are going to sit for and have a clock or timer with you to make sure that you stick to your original plan. If you don’t decide these things in advance, you are likely to spend much of the time thinking about whether or not to stop and do something else.

Thirdly, don't move! Or, at least, only move if you absolutely have to. Stay as still as you possibly can. If we allow ourselves to move, we are more likely to find ourselves fidgeting in order to avoid some of the many forms of discomfort that inevitably come and go during meditation. Remember, we are training ourselves in the art of non-avoidance. So the less we allow ourselves to move, the more effective the non-avoidance training will be.

Fourthly, and finally, I would suggest that if at all possible, do it together with (at least) one other person. If there is a mindfulness/meditation group you can join, that is great – as long as they really are doing it. But do bear in mind that many mindfulness groups are a bit wishy-washy. I've been to quite a few groups that do a few minutes of token-gesture mindfulness practice and then spend a much longer time (mindlessly) chatting and drinking tea. Alternatively, start a group yourself, and/or take turns hosting it with other people. In my experience, success in finding other people willing to do it with you is often a deciding factor in whether or not you succeed in maintaining a stable powerful practice. You can do it alone, but it is much harder.

Mindfulness while performing the actions of everyday life

Basically, this involves making a conscious decision to focus your attention on the task(s) you are doing, and pulling your attention back to that task as soon as you realize that it has wandered. It is easiest to practice when you are only doing one thing at a time, and so traditionally, mindfulness teachers have encouraged their students to be "single pointed" as far as possible. Hence Linji's famous saying...

When walking, just walk
When sitting, just sit
Above all, don't wobble!

(Linji was a 9th Century Chinese Zen monk)...

The more busy our lives are, the fewer opportunities we have to be single-pointed in this way. So, if your life is overfull with activities (and most of our lives probably are), ask yourself whether there are any activities you can let go of. Most people spend a lot of time watching television. So, one easy answer may be to get rid of the TV. Indeed, having too many things to do is also a significant hindrance when it comes to formal sitting meditation. If your life is over-full with activities, you will find it extremely hard to settle into doing it.

Some everyday activities lend themselves very well to mindfulness. For example, there is mindful eating. Not only does it radically increase your awareness the food, it also makes you feel satisfied more quickly, so it's very good for your health. A lot of sports naturally pull you towards mindfulness because they require high levels of attention in order to perform them well. So it's not surprising that mindfulness is explicitly emphasized and taught within many of the martial arts. Acting and dancing also spontaneously encourage mindfulness. If you drive a lot, I also found mindful driving to be an excellent practice, and one that is surprisingly easy to instill. Maintaining a state of mindfulness while performing some other activities can be more of a challenge, and of these, mindful conversation is definitely one of the most challenging, albeit, for ourselves, potentially also one of the most rewarding.

Mindful speaking

I first started thinking about the possibilities of mindful speaking when I joined a Zen meditation group. In the group, the main practice was silent sitting meditation. However, they also spent 15 minutes chanting each day – in ancient Japanese. I was not too keen on this in the beginning, but I soon realized that it was an excellent opportunity to simply observe the feelings that emanate from my body and mouth while I am speaking. I also noticed how much of the tension that I normally carried around with me in my vocal tract and lungs seemed to dissipate during the chanting. The chant was continuous, without any breaks or pauses to breathe. So each participant simply took a breath when they needed to and then fitted back in with the chorus. This meant that, every so often, one had to miss out one or two of the words, in order to breathe. If you made a mistake and chanted a word wrongly, you just had to keep going regardless. Nobody would wait for you. Invariably, over the course of the 15 minutes, I found that my voice resonated more and more strongly and I found the whole experience very therapeutic.

This experience of chanting has spurred me on more recently to experiment with “mindful talking” as a sort of formal meditation practice together with one or two of my friends. We sit in a circle, facing inwards (or if there are only two of us we face each other directly) with our eyes open, but softly focused (so not staring too hard at each other). After spending the first few minutes silently paying attention to our breathing, we then take alternate turns to speak and to listen to the other person speaking. We might begin with just counting numbers, for example one person would count from one to five, rhythmically, and then the next person, sticking to the same rhythm, would count from six to ten and so on. Then we would go on to practice mindful conversation. For each of these tasks we have experimented with various practices. The first involved simply focusing on becoming aware of where our attention went during the task – “What am I paying attention to?” Then, other practices have involved actively focusing our attention on different aspects of speaking and listening, including for example, the sound of the words, the feelings in our bodies and especially in our articulators, the emotional feelings that accompanied our speech, the movements of our conversation partners’ lips while speaking, their responses while speaking, and so on. Always, the emphasis is on just paying attention to the experiences. I have found that if I am paying attention well enough, there is no space for value judgments to creep in. But if I do find myself making value judgments, and thinking thoughts like “that sounded a bit too tense”, or “that didn’t sound good enough” I remind myself that the exercise is to passively observe... not to judge. Importantly, it is absolutely fine if we find ourselves blocking during mindful speaking. Indeed, such mindful speaking exercises provide a unique opportunity to observe our blocks. They also provide a unique opportunity to experiment with different styles of speaking and to experiment with different ways of responding to blocks. Mindful speaking exercises potentially also provide the excellent opportunities to learn to master a technique and, in particular, they appear to be a good way to learn to master [The Jump](#).

The experience of mindful speaking in a formal meditation setting also provides an excellent foundation for mindful speaking in the situations that arise in our everyday lives. In my experience, there is a lot of carry-over, so the more experience you can amass at the one, the easier you will find the other.

My personal experience of mindfulness practice and stuttering

My interest in meditation started when I was twenty years old. At the time I was going through something of a dark night of the soul. Ever since leaving school, my stuttering had been extremely severe. I had spent two painful years struggling to cope at university, and then finally gave up and took a job in a factory. My stutter at the time was overt, characterized by long blocks and quite extreme secondary symptoms. I had had speech therapy throughout my childhood, adolescence and at university, but none of it had made any lasting difference. The stutter prevented me from holding conversations, and even simple requests and statements were very difficult. It tended to fluctuate, and was somewhat less severe with people I knew well. Since dropping out of university, the overt symptoms had also improved somewhat. But even so, it was still very difficult to hold a conversation. Speaking was never enjoyable and listeners found it difficult to understand what I was trying to say. I felt trapped and socially isolated, and found it hard to envisage how my situation could possibly improve without a substantial improvement in my ability to speak.

Knowing that I was going through a particularly difficult patch, one of my former school friends recommended a book to me... "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance". This book was quite different to any that I had ever read, and it immediately stimulated an interest in me to find out more about Zen. So, over the following few months, I read several more books on the topic. A common theme that ran through all of these books was that, with respect to meditation, the ability to be silent and to refrain from talking was a great advantage. It occurred to me that meditation was something that I might be able to do particularly well! One book that I found particularly inspiring was "The Three Pillars of Zen". The author, Philip Kapleau, was an American reporter who had spent several years living in a Zen monastery in Japan, meditating and also transcribing conversations between the abbot and students who attended courses there. I was so impressed by how the book had been written that I decided to try and search this man out. My search eventually took me to Rochester, New York where, as it turned out, Kapleau had founded a Zen center of his own. When I arrived there, he was away on tour somewhere, so I never actually met him. Nevertheless, I was introduced to the monk who was in charge in his absence, and he arranged for me to stay nearby. I was invited to attend the daily morning and evening meditation sessions.

Each meditation session lasted for 2 hours in total, divided up into three 35-minute sessions of mindful sitting, interspersed with two five-minute sessions of mindful walking. During the final sitting session we also did some chanting and, sometimes, one of the monks gave a talk while we sat in meditation.

During the two week stay that I had in Rochester, I attended all the daily morning and evening sessions. I spent much of the rest of the time walking and reading, as there was limited opportunity to talk to people. Although my stutter was not my primary motive for wanting to practice mindfulness, I nevertheless expected to see some improvements in it as a side-effect of all the practice I was doing. So, at the end of that two week period I was a little disappointed to find that it had not got any less severe. In fact, its severity appeared to have increased somewhat since starting meditation. I discussed this during one of the regular meetings with the monk who had been assigned to look after me. He told me that, in his experience, it's very common for things to appear to get worse before they get better, and that this is often associated with changing perceptions. So perhaps before I started, I may not have been fully aware of how severe my stuttering really was. The explanation sounded reasonable.

At the end of the two week period, I had to return to Europe because my USA visa was expiring. An opportunity arose to then go and live near the Hamburg Zen Center, which was affiliated to the center in Rochester. So I continued practicing in Hamburg and, for the following 12 months, probably averaged around 2 hours formal practice a day. I was less enthusiastic about practicing mindfulness while performing everyday tasks. It just didn't appeal to me. So, when I was not sitting doing formal meditation, I tended not to make effort to be mindful. Nevertheless, during that 12 month period my stuttering did finally become less severe, the main change being that the secondary symptoms were very much diminished and I felt like I had much better control over them. But I still blocked a lot, and I still experienced significant difficulty speaking to people – both in English and in German.

Then, about a year after arriving in Hamburg, I was offered a new job, as a delivery driver. This involved making deliveries to various companies around northern Germany. As I would be alone in the cabin of the lorry most of the time, I decided that this would be an opportunity to finally get to grips with practicing mindfulness while performing actions, and I decided to start by experimenting with being mindful while driving.

I found that I was able to adjust the seat of the lorry so that I could sit comfortably with a straight back. Then, from the moment I started driving, I made effort to focus my attention entirely on the tasks of driving. Every time I found my attention wandering, I would pull it back to the road ahead and the task at hand.

Each of the deliveries I made required me to speak to people, although usually just for a few minutes. As it turned out, these short periods of talking also provided an ideal opportunity to practice mindfulness in action. Before each encounter, I reminded myself to remain mindful while speaking. Then, while speaking, I focused intensely on the sensory experiences that accompanied my speech and on the responses of the people I was speaking to. I also maintained a firm rule that, if I found myself blocking, I would not resort to the use of force to push the words out. I would simply gently try again, and keep trying until I could say what I needed to say gently, without force. Or alternatively, if there was no time, I would write it down instead. As it turned out, it was particularly easy to remain mindful during these periods. In part, I think this was because the subject matter of the conversations was relatively limited, repetitive, and not very cognitively demanding, and it definitely helped that the conversations were interspersed with relatively long periods of driving meditation.

Within a few weeks of starting this job, not only had the secondary symptoms apparently completely disappeared, but so had the blocks! It occurred to me that the big breakthrough happened because I had finally extended my mindfulness practice to mindfulness while performing actions, and in particular I felt that the frequent periods of short but highly disciplined mindful talking had played an important role in this change. Whatever the case, for the first time in my life, I found myself able to speak without blocking at all – not only at work, but at home too, and also when I went out socially, in the evenings. After maintaining this remission for a few months, I started to believe the stutter had finally disappeared.

Overall, the remission lasted about nine months. During this time my life changed beyond recognition. For the first time ever, I found myself able to really enjoy social interaction. And, at last, I got a girlfriend.

After a few months living together, we left Germany and went to live in Greece. I was keen to learn the language. So, once we had settled in, we developed a routine whereby we learnt some phrases from cassette recordings that came with a Greek language course we had bought before leaving Germany. After practicing the phrases on each other at home, we would go down to the village to try them out in real-life situations. Although I paid a lot of attention to pronouncing the words correctly, I was aware that I made a lot of mistakes when I tried to use them in real life – substantially more than my girlfriend, despite her appearing to make much less effort than myself. Often my words came out wrongly and the shopkeepers didn't understand me.

As I tried harder to avoid making mistakes in order to make myself understood, I started to notice what seemed like a few minor blocks starting to occur. Although these blocks were only of short duration, the experience significantly jolted my confidence. Up to that point, I had really believed I was "cured", so the appearance of these blocks demonstrated to me that this was not the case. First of all they only happened when trying to speak in Greek and failing to make myself understood. However, within a few weeks, I noticed the occasional blocks starting to reappear when speaking with people in English and German. Although they would have been hardly perceptible to anyone else, the experience frightened me because it made me consider, for the first time, the possibility that I might relapse fully. My girlfriend had no idea about how severely I had stuttered in the past, and I was afraid that if I started to stutter like that again, she would leave me.

My first reaction to the realization that I was relapsing was to presume that I had let my practice slip and that I wasn't being mindful enough. Consequently, I thought that, if I could make more effort and be more mindful, I would once again overcome the fear of blocking. However, after several years of intense mindfulness practice, I could not escape the fact that the fear had not diminished at all and that despite meditating regularly, and trying to remain mindful while speaking, the blocks continued to occur. Furthermore, although they were mainly of short duration, occasionally they would be longer and would significantly interfere with my ability to communicate. I always managed to maintain control over how I responded to them and never resorted to the use of force. Instead I simply went back and tried the word I was blocking on again, and again, until I could say it without blocking. Although this strategy ensured that the secondary symptoms never returned, it meant that sometimes it took a long time to get the words out and communication was no longer the easy and enjoyable experience that it had been during those months of remission.

So no matter how much I practiced and experimented with different forms of meditation, I still continued to block. Although I rarely produced any visible secondary symptoms and I never relapsed back to how I had been before moving to Hamburg, I nevertheless remained fearful of blocking whenever I spoke, and fearful that I may relapse further.

It was not until I was 40 years old that this fear of blocks finally relented. This happened quite suddenly, and coincided with my adopting a new approach to dealing with them: Instead of repeatedly going back and trying to say the problem-sound without blocking, I simply gave up and, instead, continued on to the next sound and on with the rest of what I wanted to say. Although this technique did not stop the blocks from occurring, it immediately proved to be a reliable way of quickly getting past them, such that they no longer constituted an obstacle to communication.

The breakthrough started with the slow realization that my previous strategy (of going back and starting a sound again whenever I found myself blocking on it) was not only not helping, but was in

fact actively preventing me from getting messages across. I think part of the reason it took so long for the coin to drop that it was not helping, was because the overwhelming message that I had received – from my parents, teachers and from speech therapists – had always been to stop, go back and gently try again. In contrast, this new approach, which effectively involved giving up on the sounds I couldn't say, felt like admitting defeat, and went against what I had been taught. Nevertheless, when I finally started to experiment with jumping over the sounds I was blocking on instead of going back, it worked.

Some wider reflections

My original reasons for being attracted to mindfulness were not so much to overcome stuttering, but rather to improve my quality of life and to give me a deeper sense of meaning and connectedness. Before I started reading those books on Zen, I was convinced that I would only be able to achieve such goals, if I could first of all overcome my stutter. The books changed all that, insofar as they presented me with the possibility that it was not necessary to overcome the stutter first in order to achieve those goals. I then started to think the opposite – that, all I had to do was to achieve that sense of connectedness, through mindfulness, and then the stutter would spontaneously remit.

Looking back over the thirty or so years that I've now been practicing mindfulness, I am aware that both of those beliefs were essentially misguided, although the second was probably somewhat more helpful than the first. Certainly stuttering and mindfulness may interact with one another, but they are not polar opposites. It is possible to stutter while being mindful, and it is equally possible to be fluent while being mindless. In a similar way, much of the change that mindfulness has brought about has entailed a process of deconstruction. The practice of focusing attention and grounding it in the present moment has forced me to review my beliefs, has revealed many of them to be untenable, and caused many of them to fall apart. This has not necessarily been an easy process, not least because what I have been left with has sometimes been very different to what I expected. Nor has it always brought me into line with the views of people around me or the received wisdom of wider society. Indeed, in the short term, this process of deconstruction has sometimes resulted in quite profound feelings of disillusionment. This is quite different to the overwhelmingly blissful experiences I had originally expected that meditation would bring.

Over time, however, I have learned to welcome disillusionment as a valuable indicator that change is taking place and that progress is being made. Insofar as the concept of enlightenment implies an absence of illusions, dis-illusionment is a necessary prerequisite. And, in this regard, it was comforting to recognize that Buddha's own life-story also reflects exactly this same process.

In my case, the process of deconstruction has been (and continues to be) a slow one, and it has not happened in a linear fashion. My initial expectation that my false beliefs would fall away and I then would see things as they really are, as it turned out, was itself a false belief. A more accurate depiction of the process is that, as one false belief fell away, it tended to be quickly replaced by another belief – which subsequently also turned out also to be false, and so on. Often, in the beginning, I felt like I was just going round in circles. However, as I have observed this process over a period of time, I've noticed that the way I perceive my beliefs has itself changed. Gradually, it has become less a matter of "Are they true or false?", and more a matter of "Are they useful?" Developing the ability to perceive them in this purely pragmatic way has been a great help.

So yes, all in all, my experiences of mindfulness have been quite different to what I expected when I first began practicing. Consequently, I find myself wanting to stress the possibility that other people's experiences may also be substantially different to what they may expect. It's not all bliss and happiness! And it might not stop you stuttering, although it probably will help. Whatever the case, it's worth it anyway – as long as you stick with it long enough.