

# How I Discovered That I Wasn't the Centre of the Universe (and Neither Are You)

## BY BARRY BOYCE / December 2019

While getting centered feels like a relief to those of us who are scatterbrained meditators, it can also serve as a natural starting point to explore the art of decentering and tap an elusive state of being centerless. Here, Founding Editor Barry Boyce takes us on a mindful tour of these mental vantage points.

"I need to get centered."

We've all heard these words hundreds of times. Perhaps we've said something like this hundreds of times. It's also something that, in a cynical mood, people like to make fun of: the airy-fairy mindfulness-spouting person who is so "in touch with themselves" that they're out of touch with everyone and everything around them. You know, "Excuse me, what did you say? I was finding my center."

When we talk about getting centered, though, what do we really mean? Is there any value to it? And is "getting centered" the be-all, end-all when it comes to mindfulness and meditation?

### Centering on Getting Centered

In the context of mindfulness—the innate human ability to be aware of where we are and what's happening inside and out—"centering" connotes the opposite of being scattered, distracted, unfocused, carried away by the next thought when we would like to be attending to what is at hand. It's a good thing.

And we have lots of practices—such as [mindfulness of breathing](#)—that can address the need to come into focus.

In bodily terms, *centered* conveys a feeling of being in balance. If we are in a yoga pose or aikido stance, for example, we are aware of our midline and our core and our extremities in relation to our center of gravity—in a holistic way, not necessarily by going through a checklist to figure out where everything is and how it's all hanging together.

The same goes for a simple meditation posture. We are not perched on our chair or cushion, nor are we hanging back off the edge or tilting to the side. We're settled in the middle, like a rider adroitly positioned in the saddle. A good seat confers a feeling of being connected to the ground, letting

gravity do its work, while our inner gyroscope holds our place in relation to what's going on around us.

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The psychological dimension of being centered can include lots of things that have to do with how we're fitting in not just spatially, but in terms of time and relationships. What sociologists call *ontological security* comes into play, for example, when what we're talking about is being centered in our lives. "Ontological," from Greek *ontos*, meaning "being," gives an indication of what this kind of security is about. We want to feel that, in a sense, we are where we belong. If you don't know what you're doing or why you're doing it, you'll be insecure, off-center. This aspect of centering, then, incorporates meaning, purpose, direction, ordering—even values. It's why human beings take vows, swear oaths, and have professional codes of conduct. In the midst of chaos, confusion, and conflict, we have our bearings, including our sense of what's right and wrong, wholesome and unwholesome, what we're good at and what we're not.

Mindfulness practice can indeed help with this kind of centering just as much as it helps us with centering in our body and our immediate surroundings. When we are unsettled, our body and mind tend to give us messages, but those messages are easy to ignore or suppress. Mindfulness practice, as it blossoms into a more comprehensive awareness, can help us to listen more carefully to those messages that are telling us that something is off, that we've lost track of what we're trying to do. Good mindfulness practice can let us know that it's time to take out the road map and figure out where we are and where we're going—and whether we need to consider a course correction.

### Welcoming Equanimity

Another aspect of finding a good center has to do with our tendency to gravitate to extremes. If something good happens, it's GRRRRRRREAT (like Tony the Tiger in the cereal commercial). Conversely, when something bad happens, it's the WORST. We are drawn to extremes, perhaps because there's energy available there. If we perceive something in the worst possible terms, our body and mind's alarm system goes off and adrenaline and rapid cognition take over.

Likewise, if we treat something good as automatically superlative—as good as it could be—we tap into → our capacity for excitement, and even ecstasy. We love that buzz. These extremes have their place and their

value, of course, but when we go there too often, we can deplete our energy. Our nervous system may begin to wonder whether we're the boy who cried wolf.

Equanimity—not going too high or too low in response to circumstances—is a deep kind of center that preserves our energy and well-being. The more equanimity we can cultivate, the more ease and confidence we can offer to ourselves and others. It's not an indifferent center, a cocoon of safety and uncaring we nestle into. It's a powerful center, from which we can act with resolve, for the very reason that we have *not* been thrown off balance. Or if we have, like a horse coming out of a stumble, we recover easily and even gracefully. All martial arts are based on this kind of calm yet dynamic center as a source of power.

In a similar vein, Judson Brewer, meditation researcher and teacher, now with Brown University, talks about calibrating our contracting and expanding, to notice when we are pulling back and closing in, and when we are more expansive. Equanimity, Brewer posits, comes when in response to circumstances, rather than contracting (which he associates with resisting and recoiling from), we expand. We're curious, we let in. Rather than saying "I want *this* or I don't want *this*," we say simply, "What is this?" (Brewer's research suggests that there are correlates in our brains for this contracting and expanding activity, which makes it measurable.)

Overdoing it and underdoing it are other extremes that seem to plague many of us. For years, I was on a cycle I came to call "crank and crash." I learned a lot about this tendency, and where centering fits in, when a friend of mine with a back injury consulted an occupational therapist. The therapist worked with him first on cooking and housework—key "activities of daily living," as they're called in the business. The therapist pointed out that it's very common if we're in pain to tough it out and blow past that pain or to shut down completely. Either extreme, in fact, is not so good for healing or for our state of mind. (Or for our ontological security for that matter: We might start to feel worthless, that we can't even do the simplest things, dammit!)

We need to "calibrate to the middle" rather than bouncing between over- and underdoing. As a human resources counselor put it, we need to "pulse" just as our heart does, meaning we need to live more rhythmically, hewing more consistently to the midline. For example, if I do a given activity more slowly or in smaller doses, I may be able to do it longer. If I remember to take breaks to refresh, I can accomplish more over the long run. It also helps to know when a bridge too far is a bridge too far. This kind of centering of our exertion becomes extremely important as we age, when

it's all too easy to ignore, rail at, or feel guilty about a decline in capability. If we're calibrating to a center that existed when we were 25 and we're 65, something is bound to give.

### De-centering, or Less Center

The statement I opened with—"I need to get centered"—makes a lot of sense, then, when we consider all the ways we have a center: a physical, psychological, spatial, social, and temporal homeground. It gives us a sense that we know where we are in time and space and in relation to other people. And when we find that center, we find power, and even peace.

Alas, though, good things can bring problems.

For one thing, centering can suggest to meditators that there is a very specific place we're supposed to strive to get to. On top of that, centering becomes problematic for us when it gets tied up with identity, particularly fixed identity. And that's why full-fledged mindfulness →practice not only involves centering but *de-centering*.

De-centering? If you're asked to introduce yourself, you will say your name and maybe something about your work and family, where you live. If someone probes further, you may talk about where you grew up, what you're passionate about. If it's someone trying to get to know you in a deeper way and you're up for that, probing even further may lead to sharing more frank and intimate details of how you've been hurt or what you struggle with, your opinions, biases, peeves, and so on.

All these elements taken together are aspects of what we usually call our "identity," and in and of themselves, they are useful constructs that we use to understand who we are—and they are not problematic. If you can't say where you live or what your name is, you may have a serious cognitive impairment. Where identity becomes problematic is when we cling to it tightly as a fixed and unchanging anchor. We all do this. We centralize to a fault, filtering every experience back through central headquarters to decide whether it's good, bad, or neutral for our team: Team Me.

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This habit of verifying everything according to how it relates to Team Me creates all sorts of distortions and problems, largely because we are not in fact the center of the universe.

And it gets worse.

We have problems not only of *me*, but we have problems of *mine*. We can be pretty possessive, we humans. We stake out territory and start to furnish it according to our tastes, and the tastes of our chosen clan. And whoever doesn't fit in that territory doesn't belong. It's like a gated community with lots of covenants. These kinds of people and this kind of behavior is OK; these kinds are not. When a leader in an organization develops a fiefdom, woe betide the brave soul who tries to make change.

In short, ego-centricity is a bit of a problem.

That's why people who teach Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and who research it, like Patricia Rockman and Evan Collins (who coauthored, along with Susan Wood, the book *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy: Embodied Presence and Inquiry in Practice*), emphasize de-centering.

As Rockman and Collins—who provide a de-centering practice on page 68—say, “Rigid attachment to who you believe yourself to be and the stories you tell about yourself are limiting and are the root cause of many of our problems.” They also point out that identity is extremely “subjective and influenced by who we socialize with, our cultures, values, and experiences.” Researchers now use psychological scales to measure the “skill” of de-centering.

Identity is something dangerous to center on, for the simple reason that it is constructed from so many bits and pieces and influences and is a flimsy and constantly moving target. Rockman and Collins assert, “Identity in itself is not necessarily bad but rather gripping it too tightly and using it to think ‘different’ means better or worse” creates big problems. It becomes the source of so much toxic comparing. Better, then, to loosen our grip on this centralizing tendency.

A light touch is what's called for.

Expanding Beyond the Center

I asked Zindel Segal, one of the founders of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, about de-centering, since he has done research on how development of this skill is helpful in counteracting the overly self-referential habits of people suffering with depression. When we're caught up in depression we are, among other things, coloring the world through a heavily me-tinted lens. We're not perceiving what is actually happening.

Segal indicates that the term de-centering traces back to the pioneering developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, who talked about it as an

important developmental stage (also known as “decentration”) when a child can begin to see things in the world from multiple perspectives. As a psychological trait for adults, de-centering takes this developmental skill to its greatest extent, to perceive ourselves and our world in a “multi-perspectival” way.

A related quality or skill is “meta-cognition,” the ability to be aware of our thought process. With meta-cognition, or meta-awareness, we see thought in motion, allowing it to move us through life while simultaneously recognizing that it may not be presenting a fully accurate picture of reality that we should cling to at all costs.

Jamie Bristow, director of the United Kingdom’s Mindfulness Initiative, has addressed concerns that de-centering and meta-cognition promote a kind of dissociative → state where you are out of touch with who you are—a vague, unsettled state of mind where thoughts and feelings are perceived, in Bristow’s words, as “disconnected, impersonal events.” In response to the fear that mindfulness is promoting such a state of mind, he has written that we “already have some degree of meta-cognition, and psychologists think that its emergence in children represents important stages in development. Through mindfulness training, we shift from considering ‘thoughts as facts’ to viewing them as ‘mental events’ that may or may not represent the truth of a situation. Our felt experience of these objects can still be deeply personal, linked by an understanding of causality, personal history and responsibility. Now [with mindfulness] there’s just a healthy dose of skepticism about their inherent validity...”

In terms of an ongoing mindfulness practice, when we have sufficiently centered ourselves, in body and mind, we have the room to de-center, to be less concerned about centralizing all the data we’re taking in, which can bring with it an almost childlike sense of wonder and curiosity. That’s why “getting centered” at a certain point can become a counterproductive motivation. Because we don’t want to end up trapped in a me- and mine-centric universe. As freeing as we imagine it might be to be boss dog, it’s very stuffy and very stuck.

In fact, we can even stand to be a little *eccentric*, off-center. Trusting that our fundamental center is taken care of, we can leap and dance and let that little bit of weird we all possess shine. We dance as if no one is watching, because we’re judging ourselves less, and less concerned about responding to the literal and imagined judgments of others.

Judson Brewer, borrowing from the groundbreaking work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has written about how loosening the need for

securing our ego results in flow, a free-floating sense of ease. Athletes talk about being in the zone, musicians lose themselves in the flow, all of us have moments when we just don't seem to matter and yet we are fully engaged. We don't need to fuss about centering. We have faith that it's there without needing to be checked up on like a misbehaving child.

### Being Centerless

We could well stop there, but it's worth taking our exploration of center just a tad farther. The experience of flow free from ego-fixation can be so free, and freeing, at times that we may get glimpses of a kind of psychological space that is completely open, referred to in some meditation literature as centerless.

What could that possibly mean?

If we consider the totality of our experience, what we see, hear, taste, smell, think, and feel, it is ordered to a certain degree, but it is also chaotic, and contains a lot of uncertainty. We don't really know what will happen next. Respecting that ultimate reality, the loosest form of meditation is utterly without focus or intent. It's a bit like being "spaced out" without losing touch with the ground.

In 2015, four meditation researchers, Antoine Lutz, Amishi Jha, John Dunne, and Clifford Saran published a paper in the *American Psychologist* that laid out a framework describing the spectrum of meditation practices from the most focused and centralized to the most open and decentralized.

At the most subtle and nuanced end of the scale, they describe a kind of "practice" that is almost a nonpractice, that involves little to no effort and yet has a great deal of clarity. If de-centering involves less concern with our center, at this stage we have no concern with a center: Wherever you go, there you are. Meditation teachers often discuss this kind of experience as coming upon us accidentally, simply popping up out of nowhere. It's also said to be difficult to maintain, since it is so formless and aimless, and impossible to pinpoint in words—the ultimate "you had to be there" kind of experience.

Well, there's not much to say about something that's said to be impossible to describe, but I will say this much. I have faith that we all have sudden glimpses of a kind of experience that takes us utterly out of our me-centric concerns. Maybe it's the smile of a baby, the first glimpse of sunrise, a moment of falling in love, the juiciness of a homegrown tomato. Whatever it is, it leaves us with a little residue of feeling, a desire to get

more of that. And then, it's gone. Poof. And perhaps we think, maybe I should practice some mindfulness and see if I could hang out here longer.