

Mindful Cycling
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There's a good chance you've heard about mindfulness. You most likely know mindfulness practices originate in the traditional physical and meditative arts of India and Asia, such as yoga, tai chi, and Zen meditation. You may even be familiar with the work of the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, whose books like *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment* explain the concept of mindfulness in clear, beautiful, and simple words most everyone can relate to.

If you've done research into mindfulness, you've uncovered the work of Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a scientist from the University of Massachusetts who pioneered the movement to quantify and verify the utility of meditative practices in a clinical mental health setting. Dr. Kabat Zinn was one of the first to publish data-driven evidence to support generations of personal and anecdotal evidence regarding the stress-reduction benefits of yoga and meditation in everyday life.

It's hard to imagine you haven't heard about cycling—yes, riding bikes—and the fact that thousands of people across the world enjoy cycling as a sport, a recreational activity, and healthy and environmentally friendly way to get to and from work or run daily errands. In this article, I'll discuss the relationship between this common aerobic activity—cycling—and the more esoteric practice—mindfulness—and describe how I discovered something I like to call *mindful cycling*.

Aerobic Exercise, Mindfulness, and Stress Relief

Research into the effect of aerobic exercise on stress confirms beyond the shadow of a doubt that a regular regimen of aerobic exercise leads to [positive emotional and psychological](#) outcomes. Another strain of research confirms, also beyond the shadow of a doubt, that [Mindful Based Stress Reduction](#) (MBSR) practices reduce stress, increase well-being, and improves overall quality of life. One thing research hasn't done is confirm what happens when you combine the two. I propose the synthesis of the two results in a one-two punch, which can simultaneously increase health and reduce stress.

I don't have data to support this proposal, but I do have a wealth of experiential knowledge to share. When I first experienced stress in my life—real stress, not problems with peers, adolescent worries about relationships, or angsty teen agonizing about identity and the meaning of life—my refuge was running. I worked nights in a restaurant. Money was tight. I was spinning my wheels. When I went to my mailbox, all I ever found was bills, and they were all in my name: I was a real, bona-fide adult living without a safety net.

I needed something to do to let off steam after my restaurant shifts. At the time, my go-to tactic was staying out late and socializing with my coworkers. But I knew that was not sustainable coping mechanism. I needed a different way to feel good. I needed something else—and running gave me that. My nightly post-work runs made me feel good, relieved stress, kept me in shape, and gave me a positive activity to look forward to every night.

Around the same time I started taking yoga classes and learning the basics of meditation. The yoga, I loved, but the meditation part, I had a hard time with. My mind would not be quiet. The chatter wouldn't stop. I suffered through those parts of class, and figured meditation just wasn't for me.

I hadn't quite made the connection yet—I didn't get the idea that there are many paths to a quiet mind, and sitting still in yogic meditation isn't the only one. I didn't understand the relationship of aerobic exercise and mindfulness, even though I was already reaping the physical, psychological, and emotional benefits of both during my nightly runs.

Now, well into adulthood, my mind and my joints are tired of the high-impact nature of running. It's been a gradual process, but over the years I've traded the intensity of running for the smooth, rhythmic cadence of road cycling. I've found fertile ground in incorporating mindfulness techniques from yoga and meditation into my daily rides.

Mindfulness and Cycling: Moon, Lake, and Concentric Circles

When I ride, I feel liberated. I get an amazing sensation. I feel like I'm moving and staying still at the same time. I'm *acting* and *observing*. I'm thinking – without judging – and doing – without thinking. It's a conundrum, I know. But it's one that matches the goal of most mindful meditation: I find a way to be the object and the subject of my thoughts and myself, simultaneously. I'm spectator and participant – at the same time. It happens every time I ride. After about twenty minutes, my legs warm up and move smooth and easy. My breathing finds its perfect rate. Everything agrees, combines, and finds balance. My legs, lungs, and mind synergize, and I reach place I never really thought it could, years ago in my first meditation class.

When I reach that state – my mindful zone – I remember my first mindful meditation class. The instructor asked us all to imagine sitting by a calm lake on a night with a full, clear, bright moon. She told us to visualize the moonlight reflecting off the surface of the water, creating a smooth, unbroken path across the lake. Then she asked us to imagine tossing a pebble into the water, right in the middle of the moonlit path. The pebble causes ripples that disturb the perfection of the moonlight – but as they expand outward, they fade. Soon, they're gone. The water returns to stillness. The moonlit path becomes calm and unbroken once again.

She asked us to think of the moon as our mindful self. Our clear, nonjudgmental mind, seeing things as they are. The lake, she said, represented our everyday mind. Each pebble, she told us, represents a thought from our everyday mind, and the ripples the pebbles cause represent the patterns of thought that occur after each new thought we have. When we simply observe our thoughts, she said, they run their course. They disturb the perfection of moon and lake for a short while, but then they fade – and the perfection returns: just you, your mindful mind, and your everyday mind, sitting together in a peaceful union.

Back then, all that sounded like total nonsense.

Now, it all makes sense. When I'm on the bike, my body is in motion, but my mind is still and peaceful. That's the conundrum at the center of mindfulness: our bodies and minds move nonstop, 24/7. Even sitting still our bodies move, internally. And our minds can feel chaotic and unfocused. Distracted by all the motion. By the disturbances. By our thoughts. Mindfulness teaches us we can train ourselves, though, to find the calm center inside all of that. To observe our bodies, minds, and thoughts with our mindful self. To find peace inside the constant motion.

That's what happens on the bike. I fly down hills, fast. I stream by houses. Trees, bushes, and flowers flow by in a blur. It's all motion, yet when I look down at my hands, they're still. And when I'm in a good position – either all aero-racy style with legs spinning fast, or sitting upright pedaling nice and easy – the rest of my body is totally still, too. Except the legs, of course. That's when I get it. I understand the whole moonlight-lake-pebble-thought thing.

My mindful mind is the moon, my legs are the constant processes of my body, and everything passing by are my thoughts, which I don't have to dwell on or stress about at all. I let them slide on by. Of course, I am the bike, at the center of it all. That's my "Eureka!" moment – and I get there every time I ride.

And every time, I'm both surprised and comforted by how good and peaceful it feels. I'm surprised because it's so simple, and comforted by the fact that I know I'm finally doing my version of meditating.

It might not be what the ancients had in mind, but it works for me.

Bringing Mindfulness Home

After my rides, what I learn comes back with me. It doesn't matter that I need to learn the same lesson over and over again. It's the lesson that counts. That moment of realization – when I find stillness in motion, peace in the speed, calm in the chaos – applies to other areas of my life. When things get stressful or overwhelming, I remember I can access my mindful self. I can watch what's happening around me

without getting caught up in it or getting annoyed, angry, or unhappy about it. It gives me the perspective I need when perspective is what I need most. It took years, and it didn't happen in an official mindful meditation class, but I know that when I practice my special version of mindfulness – mindful cycling – I get all the benefits of mindfulness: a sense of peace, a sense of acceptance, and the knowledge that in every moment, no matter how challenging it may be, I can find my center.