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Erin Gocinski  
gocinski@lesley.edu

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**Unlocking Creativity in the Visual Arts: Using Mindfulness and Open Awareness  
Meditation to Access Creative Insight**

Erin Gocinski

Mindfulness Studies, Lesley University

January 2023

Dr. Melissa Jean & Dr. Andrew Olendzki

## **Abstract**

An artist's creativity is a vital resource, so it is important to nourish this internal phenomenon and develop helpful techniques when they experience a creative block. Researchers have discovered that mindfulness and meditation positively affect artists' ability to access creative insight. The research reviewed in this rationale paper demonstrates beneficial experiences for artists who are trying to foster creativity or move beyond a creative block. After reviewing research, there were common threads linking the reasons for artists' creative blocks and the positive impacts of mindfulness and meditation. The creative project is a handbook designed for artists and provides information, meditative practices, creative exercises, and reflection questions developed to support visual artists on their creative journeys. While the discussion around mindfulness and meditation's impact on creativity for a visual artist is a niche topic, there is still room for continuing research in this field. Current research supports that offerings such as a handbook that provides mindfulness and meditation exercises can positively contribute to visual artists who wish to foster their creative exploration.

*Keywords:* creativity, visual arts, creative block, mindfulness, meditation, open awareness meditation

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## **Unlocking Creativity in the Visual Arts: Using Mindfulness and Open Awareness**

### **Meditation to Access Creative Insight**

Creativity is a critical resource found within. This phenomenon continues to be the driving force behind evolution and innovation. Karwowski and Lebuda (2016) described creativity as the ability to produce an individualized expression that has not been seen before. Horan (2009) noted that from a psychological standpoint, creativity is someone's need to "transcend informational boundaries" (p. 199) and that it is the production of information that has been freed from habitual thoughts, "a leap across the logical gap" (p. 201). Creativity is complex and associated with many disciplines. Karwowski and Lebuda (2016) argued that creativity is domain-specific; therefore, a person who is highly creative in the visual arts may not demonstrate the same level of creativity in other domains.

Considering the complexity of creativity, this review narrows its focus on creativity in visual artists and the growing body of evidence that suggests mindfulness and meditation can support the ability to cultivate a creative quality of mind. This review provides preliminary research to support the development of a manuscript designed to help artists create a deeper connection with their creative experience. Not only will this paper explain how mindfulness and meditation help visual artists expand their awareness of how their thoughts, self-judgment, and emotions impact their creative unfolding, but also ways artists can use mindfulness and meditation to nourish creativity through curiosity and opening to new perspectives.

### **Creativity in the Visual Arts**

Creativity is a vital resource for artists and valuable for society as it is the basis of unique and innovative ideas. Root-Bernstein's (2004) research contributes to this conversation when they write that the visual arts supersede simply being a pretty picture by stating that "the arts

have often stimulated scientific discoveries, and science has often influenced the nature of artistic creativity" (p. 128). Historically, one can observe how creativity in the visual arts has contributed to innovation, such as Leonardo DaVinci's drawings of anatomy, flying machines, and automatic weapons. Whether an artist is trying to produce a great creative achievement or simply expressing their inner experience, accessing creative insight is critical to their process (Root-Bernstein, 2004).

It is vital for artists to know how to find inspiration from their innermost thoughts when they are seeking to make a one-of-a-kind creation. Tuning into this pure state of mind comes easier for some than others. However, it is a common fear and an unfortunate experience when creative insight does not seem accessible. It is not unusual for artists to experience times when their creative juices are not flowing, and they have encountered a creative block. Furthermore, understanding how to nurture creativity is just as essential as understanding the reasons for creative blocks.

### **Creative Blocks**

Creative block is a psychological experience that can plague an artist and may take years to overcome (Paris, 2008). Artists can create a block by putting unnecessary pressure on themselves, using more energy worrying about the success of their final product rather than the act of mindfully engaging in the creative process (Langer, 2006). Over time, habitual evaluative thinking can become unconscious and hamper the acceptance of unique ideas and the desire to execute them. Zabelina et al. (2011) found that self-consciousness negatively correlates with the ability to fully engage in a creative activity. Ever-growing research shows that artists experiencing creative block are prone to fixating on societal pressures, becoming stuck in

habitual thought patterns, and experiencing emotions associated with self-doubt (Henriksen et al., 2022; Karwowski & Lebuda, 2016; Zabelina et al., 2011).

### *Social Constructs*

Studies performed by McDonald (2008) observed that unnecessary social structures could prevent a person from realizing their creative potential. Social constructs can foster a fear-based mindset, resulting in an artist's resistance to making out-of-the-box creations (McDonald, 2008). Therefore, research suggests that it is vital to building a network of artists to provide emotional and practical support as they explore ideas that may make them vulnerable to the public.

Society uses fear to conform children at a young age to disregard their creative ideas to avoid being interpreted as strange or crazy (Langer, 2006). It is a common practice to correct a child who colors outside the lines and teach them to make art that is recognizable, which sends them the message that it is wrong or not good enough (Saltzman, 2017). Artistically gifted students are often discouraged from pursuing artistic careers and are instead pressured to choose a career path that is socially acceptable by Western standards (Karwowski & Lebuda, 2016).

It is common for a child to want to conform to please the people in their lives, including their teachers, family, and other members of their community (Saltzman, 2017). Thus, the role of influential people in a child's development can significantly influence whether their creative talent is nurtured or undermined. Paris (2008) explained that this is a typical behavior called compliance, which is toxic to the creative process. When artists lose their creative freedom and put constraints on their creations to satisfy others, they will likely lose the desire to make art altogether.

### *Creative Constraints Caused by Training*

Studies on creative block have shown that rigorous artistic training can support the development of an artist's technical skillset but can counterintuitively result in a creative block (Evans, 1996). It is possible that individuals may be discouraged from taking creative risks if they follow classical rules because they fear that their expression will be deemed technically incorrect. It is suggested that artists who do not allow themselves to take creative risks confine themselves to the mundane (Langer, 2006). Abiding by prior knowledge of what is "right" or "truth" within artistic training may limit the potential to create novel ideas (Evans, 1996). It is possible that technical training may have, at one time, provided stability and safety, but it is essential to recognize that it may hinder creative innovation (Langer, 2006).

### ***Self-Judgment***

It is part of our human experience to judge ourselves. Self-judging thoughts are commonly referred to as the inner critic and are a psychological concept known as the *Voice of Judgment* (Henriksen et al., 2022). Studies show that beliefs based on societal pressures and unrealistic personal expectations can influence self-judgmental thoughts that often result in a creative block (Gallay, 2013). Artists with unrealistic performance expectations often result in lower creative self-efficacy (Karwowski & Lebuda, 2016).

A widely accepted perspective suggests that the Voice of Judgment lives within each of us and filters each person's experience. Henriksen et al. (2022) argue that this inner dialogue critically evaluates one's thoughts and actions and that this voice can significantly hinder an individual's ability to think creatively. There is speculation that if one allows the Voice of Judgment to become part of their inner dialogue, there is a danger that they may become fixated on negativity which would inhibit creative freedom (2022). Additionally, it is thought that



ruminating on negative thoughts and feelings can also have a detrimental impact on all aspects of a person's life (Agnoli et al., 2018).

Several studies have revealed that even the most passionate and successful visual artist can have a haunting inner dialogue that reinforces notions driven by judgment and fear. Henriksen et al. (2022) performed a study where art and design students within a major university were asked to maintain a meditation practice and observe how it impacted their creativity. In their study, Henriksen et al. (2022) observed that the artists noticed their Voice of Judgment negatively impacted their ability to focus on the creative process. Additionally, it was common for participants to experience paralyzing effects when ruminating on judgmental thoughts.

Henriksen et al. (2022) found evidence that demonstrated that the Voice of Judgment could manifest undesired emotions and put an artist in a position where they may not allow themselves to engage in the creative process. Similarly, a study conducted by Gallay (2013) indicated that fear and anxiety led to a loss of creativity and motivation among artists. These detrimental emotions commonly manifest in perfectionism, lack of faith in oneself, jealousy, procrastination, performance anxiety, and interpersonal struggles such as isolation (2013). Creative blocks have spiked researchers' interest in observing whether an artist who practices mindfulness and meditation can experience more creative freedom by coping with suffering caused by inhibiting thoughts and self-judgment.

### **Mindfulness and Creativity**

Many artists feel as if creativity can only come as a rare spark of insight inspired by a muse. Growing findings suggest that mindfulness can nurture creative insight for visual artists rather than waiting for a spontaneous revelation. Defined by Neff and Germer (2013),

mindfulness is the quality of paying attention to what one's experience is in the present moment while maintaining the ability to have a curious, open, non-judgmental stance. Kabat-Zinn (2003), the person who popularized mindfulness in the west, traces its roots to Buddhist contemplative practices. Kabat-Zinn (2003) wrote that mindfulness is "the awareness that emerges through paying attention objectively, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding experience moment to moment" (p. 145). Practitioners of these Buddhist teachings use mindfulness to examine and undo the root of their suffering and discomfort to gain inner wisdom (2003). Haller et al. (2017) found that mindfulness and creativity have direct links through qualities such as openness, curiosity, and willingness to try new things.

Studies have found that artists can tune into inherent sparks of creative insight through inner wisdom and intentional awareness cultivated through mindfulness (Alexander, 2022). Researchers noticed that paying attention to the present moment allows artists to fully immerse themselves in their artmaking (Agnoli et al., 2018). It was observed that a mindfulness practice can help artists develop the ability to notice streaming thoughts, judgments, and emotional states, all of which influence their creative experience (Henriksen et al., 2022). Artists demonstrated that they could use mindfulness to work with their personal suffering to foster their creative experience through curiosity and opening their minds to new possibilities (Gallay, 2013).

### **Awareness of Thoughts**

An individual's thoughts are formed based on how they perceive their life experiences (Schwartz, 2018). This can consciously and unconsciously give the mind permission to allow creative ideas to arise (2018). Mindfulness develops the skill to be aware of a person's arising thoughts and perceptions, which gives an artist a conscious understanding of what is influencing their creative experience. It is believed that with a mindfulness practice, an artist may be able to

acknowledge their thoughts and choose whether they are productive in their creative unfolding. Sarath (2006) argued that an awareness of thoughts is the key to accessing creativity. This awareness technique helps artists understand the impact their fruitful and unfruitful thoughts may have on their creative expression.

Findings have demonstrated that mindful awareness can help an artist free themselves from fear of failure and perfectionistic tendencies. Henriksen et al. (2022) recognized that when a participant was able to address her hindering thoughts about making mistakes, it alleviated her creative struggle:

I have learned to forgive myself for my mistakes, especially as I dwell on those things that I failed at in the past that were my fault. In doing so, this seems to have alleviated some of the anxiety associated with beginning new projects or letting go of past fears about my work. (p. 158)

With mindfulness, one can recognize compounded suffering created through avoidance (Horowitz, 2010). With this personal insight, there is an opportunity to address these detrimental patterns of avoidance with compassion and acceptance (Feldman, 2017). Noticing counterproductive thoughts opens a window to cultivating inner peace, providing a sense of ease that nurtures an artist's creative journey.

Interpersonal and societal expectations may leave an artist feeling as though their art "should" be something it is not (Gallay, 2013). For this reason, studies have examined the impacts mindfulness has on artists as they develop a deeper awareness of the ideas and perspectives influencing their creativity. Evans (1996) stated that creativity is letting go of fixating on what one knows to be correct. Gallay (2013) found that the detached state of mind cultivated by a mindfulness practice reduced habitual responses and generated more novel

thoughts and creations. Mindfulness helps artists observe their mental chatter and let go of preconditioned societal ideals while strengthening thoughts that support creative exploration (Colzato et al., 2012). These studies have demonstrated that increased receptivity and flexible open perspective, influenced by mindfulness practice, can positively impact one's creative efficacy.

### **Working with Self-Judgment**

Studies have demonstrated that mindfulness can help one become aware of habitual negative self-talk, allowing an artist to lessen rumination and self-judgment, which are attributes associated with a creative block (Agnoli et al., 2018; Langer, 2006). The research conducted by Lebuda et al. (2016) reported that several studies demonstrated that mindfulness decreases fear of being judged and increases living in the present moment, improving stress regulation and cognitive and interpersonal function. As a result of a study conducted by Henriksen et al. (2022), participants who were able to rid themselves of carrying the weight of self-judgment claimed that they could open their minds to new creative ideas. In this same study, it was demonstrated that artists who were able to take risks and refrain from self-judgment have a higher level of creative ability.

Mindfulness research has demonstrated the importance of not using your art as an identity because if an artist's art "fails", then they are considered a failure (Alexander, 2022). With mindfulness practice, an artist can address unhealthy and counterproductive thoughts with understanding and compassion, which can loosen the grasp of their inner Voice of Judgment (Henriksen et al., 2022). Formerly perceived failure and disappointment are no longer internalized and instead can be used as creative launching points (2022). Artists who can allow themselves to make mistakes have the ability to uninhibitedly explore new artistic realms and

find unforeseen inspiration within themselves. Mindfulness trains the mind to see prior limiting beliefs and not emotionally react to their presence which can unfold into creative freedom (Karwowski & Lebuda, 2016).

### **Emotions**

Being mindful of one's thoughts can enable one to recognize negative emotions as mental events rather than getting caught up in their narratives (Ivtzan, 2020). Through mindfulness, artists can acknowledge emotions that may interfere with their creativity while experiencing those that may enhance their authentic expression (2020). Henriksen et al.'s (2022) study showed that participants who had a mindfulness practice felt that they became calm and clear as they let go of fear, stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions. Therefore, mindful awareness allows an artist to notice and move "beyond self-consciousness (e.g., rumination) or task-orientation (e.g., self-efficacy), which similarly predicts creative elaboration relative to creative originality" (Zabelina et al., 2011, p. 250). Furthermore, Henriksen et al. (2022) explained that "when mindfulness practitioners have self-regulation of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, their intention for practice tends to shift into self-exploration, followed by self-liberation" (p. 164). To summarize, an artist who maintains a mindfulness practice can develop a healthy sense of detachment from the emotional "self," which benefits creative efficacy.

### **Nourishing Creativity Through Curiosity and Opening to New Possibilities**

Studies suggest that mindfulness allows artists to act on their curiosities by taking risks without being intimidated by the inner critic, which often places self-blame for inevitable mistakes (Henriksen et al., 2022). When an artist can set aside their ego and adopt a curious and open attitude, there is room to let go of the preconceived ideas of their capabilities and possibilities (Alexander, 2022). Alexander (2022) suggests that when one drops the ego, one

gains an understanding of the non-self and can access our core creativity. Alexander (2022) reframed the traditional perspective of a mistake when he wrote:

If you're willing to detach from your winning formula in your ego's ideas about who you are and what you're not capable of, you might find that failures, setbacks, and mistakes can be viewed as mis-takes which leads you to new opportunities. (p. 109)

Whenever an artist becomes curious about their perceived failures and mistakes, there is an unforeseen window of opportunity that can create even more profound creative confidence rather than sinking into habitual patterns of self-defeat.

Researchers noted that artists who lack confidence in their creative endeavors might lose interest in sharing their avant-garde ideas. Confidence in one's creative ability nourishes an artist's desire to explore their curiosity and embrace creative insights (Alexander, 2022). Pirson et al. (2018) reported that past literature demonstrated a positive connection to a mindfulness practice, enhancing creative confidence and performance. Schwartz (2018) quoted Edwin Land (the inventor of the Polaroid camera) when he was speaking about how an open perspective fosters curiosity by letting go of preconceived ideas:

After all the hundreds of engineers and scientists I have worked with, the most impacting discoveries were made by some individual who has freed themselves from a way of thinking that is held by friends and associates who may be more intelligent, better educated, better disciplined, but who have not mastered the art of the fresh, clean look at the old, old knowledge. (p. 674)

Furthermore, these studies found that mindfulness promotes qualities of thought that cultivate creative freedom instead of being hindered by negative thoughts about creative abilities.

### **Meditation and Creativity**

One of the most direct ways to practice mindfulness is through meditation (Agnoli et al., 2018). Meditation is a practice that supports the development of healthy thought patterns and mental clarity, which subsequently results in a more vibrant mindfulness practice. Meditation has been used as a central component of mindfulness interventions because it offers specific practices for developing awareness of one's thoughts (Ivtzan, 2020). Thus, meditation can help people to gain a deeper connection to their thoughts and emotions in the present moment (2020). Raina (2015) stated that meditation is practiced around the world to access well-being, inner calm, and compassion, which leads to a reservoir of creative clarity and insight.

Meditation allows a practitioner to intentionally create a space where they can notice thoughts, emotions, and sensations with a quality of openness and acceptance (Tang et al., 2015). During meditation, a person takes intentional time (typically 10 to 20 min) to practice obtaining a specific quality of mind. Usually, this state of mind involves an acute awareness of attention. Sarath (2006) explained, "meditation enables us to tap into deeper dimensions of consciousness, which then enables us to engage in ordinary activity with greater presence, mind-body integration, freedom, calm, clarity, focus, inventiveness, and interactiveness, which are important criteria for creativity" (p. 1835).

Roth (1994) claimed that with a meditation practice, one could solve problems with a clear, more alert, creative perspective. In a study performed by Henriksen et al. (2022), a participant explained their experience of how meditation impacted them:

I usually do a quick meditation before brainstorming a painting. It helps me open my mind to new ideas. I can have a more open conversation with myself without judgment and without my inner critic telling me it is stupid. (p.160)

Similarly, Roth (1994) provided a quote from a student interviewed for their study which claimed, "Since I've been meditating, good ideas just seem to come easily. I feel that there's no end to what I can accomplish, it's like access to a creative storehouse" (p. 18). One can nurture and discover their unique self-expression by letting go of inhibiting mindsets.

There is a broad array of meditation methods that may impact creativity. Therefore, further investigation on this topic is needed. However, researchers have paid particular attention to open awareness meditation and found significant evidence around its ability to foster creativity. Open awareness meditation has been found to enhance the ability to let go of impeding perceptions and open to new perspectives, improve divergent thinking abilities, and activate key regions of the brain related to creativity (Colzato et al., 2012).

### **Open Awareness Meditation**

When one practices open awareness, meditation creativity emerges. In open awareness meditation, the meditator allows an expansive open awareness of all things that stream into their consciousness, from thoughts to sensations, and intentionally notices and experiences them without judgment. Open awareness meditation is when the meditator observes sensations and thoughts nonjudgmentally without actively focusing on a fixed item allowing their attention to remain uninhibited and flexible (Colzato et al., 2012). Open awareness meditation is an experience of detached witnessing. When practiced regularly, it can strengthen cognitive flexibility by actively disengaging with habitual associative thinking and supporting the production of new ideas and connections through a nonreactive expansive awareness (Horan, 2009).

According to Agnoli et al. (2018), the inventor Erwin Land proposed that creativity is a result of becoming aware of one's own thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations (p. 42). Land's



theory aligns with the notion that creative insight can be accessed by cultivating the same qualities of mind which are developed during open awareness meditation. Through open awareness meditation, an artist can find creative freedom by opening to new perspectives. According to studies, when a person can let go of fixed perspectives and maintain an open, flexible state of mind, they improve their divergent thinking abilities, which, in turn, leads to positive neurological changes and brain function (Colzato et al., 2012; Henriksen et al., 2022; Lebuda, 2016).

### ***Dropping the Self and Opening to New Perspectives***

There have been promising results showing that the practice of open awareness meditation allows artists to expand their creativity beyond their self-created concepts and open to new perspectives. Identification with one's art may lead to excessive pressure to create in a particular style or genre, which may impede the development of innovative ideas (Zajonc, 2013). As an artist lets go of the "self," he or she can allow the mind to create and draw upon new and unexpected associations. A quote from one of the students in the Henriksen et al.'s (2022) study demonstrated this when she said, "I must remind myself that thoughts are just thoughts and not who I am. This affects my relationship with everything I touch" (p. 160). The participant demonstrated her understanding that she could have freedom within her creative endeavors when she can let go of the imprisoning thoughts that keep her in a closed frame of mind. Conclusive evidence has found that open awareness meditation has lasting impacts on cognitive function in a way that improves the ability to access divergent thinking, which is a critical factor in creative efficacy (Colzato et al., 2012).

### ***Divergent Thinking***

The mental state nurtured through open awareness meditation aligns with the phenomenon of divergent thinking. The expansive yet finite observations made during open awareness meditation encourage a detached perspective and an expansive field of awareness which primes the brain to engage in divergent thinking naturally (Henriksen et al., 2020). Colzato et al. (2012) state that divergent thinking can significantly impact human creative cognition by improving one's ability to solve a creative problem with many unique ideas or solutions. Karwowski and Lebeda (2016) used meta-analyses to evaluate divergent thinking and stated that this type of thinking is an engine of creativity. In these studies, researchers hypothesized that if artists could intentionally access divergent thinking through open awareness meditation, it could allow them to move through inevitable creative struggles.

Artists, especially those who have gone to art school, are trained rigorously in technique and composition. It is speculated that traditional and linear training can unconsciously narrow an artist's creative concepts and hinder creative problem-solving and self-expression (Langer, 2006). Artistic training strengthens technique but unintentionally may discourage creative innovation. With this insight, they can intentionally spend time creatively brainstorming through a flexible divergent thought process (2006). With an open awareness practice, artists can realize their creative roadblocks and let go of fixed mindsets.

Most often, artists do not desire a rigid mindset and celebrate those who make out-of-the-box creations. An artist who has an open awareness meditation practice may find ease in letting go of fixed thought processes that inhibit divergent thinking. There was correlating evidence between divergent thinking tests and artists' testimonies concluding that open awareness meditation enhanced creativity. Not only has there been a positive correlation between meditation and creativity on a behavioral level, but neuroscientists have also confirmed these

correlations using electroencephalogram (EEG) testing (Horan, 2009; Tang et al., 2015; Zabelina et al., 2011).

### *Neurological Correlations Between Open Awareness Meditation and Creativity*

The promising claims researchers have made about open awareness meditation's impact on creativity have piqued the interest of neuroscientists. Müller et al. (2016) reported robust evidence demonstrating that meditation can enhance creativity through its impacts on cognitive processing and mental flexibility. Increasing evidence indicates that open awareness meditation promotes creative abilities by rewiring undesired rigid neuropathways (Colzato et al., 2012). In turn, it strengthens the brain's ability to encourage unconventional informational associations that can be used to stimulate creative inspiration (2012).

Several studies have revealed that open awareness meditation can restructure cognitive processing, allowing a practitioner to intentionally reduce top-down control, which provides access to more creative resources (Colzato et al., 2012). Horan (2009) explained that open awareness meditation creates low-alpha activity, which signifies that the brain is in a calm and relaxed witnessing state, allowing the mind to let go of the confinements of habitual thinking, which is necessary for creative thoughts to arise. His evidence stated:

An initial increase in alpha in the posterior attention and orientation association areas due to integration of basic interoceptive and exteroceptive sensory processes involved in present awareness, followed by a hypofunction of the lateral prefrontal regions (e.g., low-alpha) supporting quietude and more self-detached transcendent awareness of the moment. (p. 204)

According to Lutz et al. (2008), rewiring the brain so that it is responsive rather than reactive reduces rumination and the predisposition to become stuck in a creative block.

Another confirming observation from EEG scans verified that open awareness meditation produced higher theta amplitude in the left frontal cortex (Horan, 2009). High theta activity is linked with experiences such as pleasure through novelty, freedom from cognitive constraints, and open, receptive, flexible thinking necessary for creativity (2009). It is believed that clarity found in moments of internal stillness enables the mind to receive associations previously unknown, leading to new insights and discoveries (2009).

### **Discussion**

As an artist, art teacher, and meditator, I am passionate about creating a resource that uses mindfulness and meditation to teach creative practices. Ultimately, my hope is that the reader can develop an open-minded, curious perspective by letting go of the inner critic and counterintuitive habitual thinking. The final project is a book that provides researched-based, reader-friendly information to help artists to overcome creative blocks or find new ways to nourish and ignite creativity. Mindfulness and meditation practices within this book are intended to help an artist develop a sustainable creative unfolding to promote self-awareness and personal insight. These practices are meant to be user-friendly and accessible to any person. The book will include five chapters with mindfulness or meditation practices, meditation scripts with a QR code for guided recordings, creative prompts, and reflection questions about the reader's experiences. The topics elaborated on within this book were chosen and developed because of their impact on my creative journey.

Creative block was the driving force behind this research paper and project. A creative block is one primary reason an artist may need to use this resource to help them cultivate creativity. I experienced creative block for years after art school, finding myself in many creative ruts on my journey to begin making again. In my personal experience, mindfulness has helped

me gain insight to move through some inner challenges I was experiencing, which helped me move forward on my creative journey as an artist. Mindfulness taught me how to recognize and work with overthinking and perfectionistic tendencies rather than denying that they were holding me back and succumbing to their messages. The more I meditated, the more creative ideas I noticed streaming into my consciousness. I knew that there was something of substance connecting mindfulness and meditation, and creativity that was worth exploring to support and share with other artists.

The research within this paper gave supporting evidence that solidified my inner experience providing the confidence to create this project. Numerous factors contribute to the development of a block, and if it is ignored for an extended period, it may cause months or years of suffering (Gallay, 2013). Therefore, woven within the chapters, the reader will find different reasons why an artist may develop a creative block. Some of the main reasons discussed are distractions, lack of ideas, self-sabotaging thoughts, and tunnel vision. The chapters intentionally align mindfulness and meditation practices with specific creative challenges to help an artist recognize and prevent creative blocks from becoming all-consuming.

This book is designed so that the reader can open any chapter and do the exercise they need at that particular time. However, it is explained in part one of the book that a person new to mindfulness and meditation should start with chapter one due to the sequential nature of the information; beginners may benefit from following the chapters in order. Each chapter will provide the reader with a mindfulness or meditation practice and have correlating activities that will guide them to connect with their inner landscape. The five chapters are titled: A Mindful Approach to Creativity, Focused Follow-Through, Open to New Inspiration, Working with Your Inner Experience, and Obstacles or Opportunities.

The first chapter, *A Mindful Approach to Creativity*, uses mindfulness to ground the reader in the present moment and teach them to see ordinary objects with a fresh and curious lens. One of the inspirations for this chapter is based on my experiences traveling. I found myself very mindfully present each time I went to a new country. My inspiration to sketch everything I was experiencing was an absolute as I rode a train through the burning fields in Cambodia, tasted the street food in Thailand, and trekked through the jungle in Costa Rica. As I noticed the sights, smells, and textures of a foreign land, I was grounded in the present moment, and my creativity was ignited. The practice of mindfulness is about being present in the moment and seeing life with a fresh perspective that allows one to see the ordinary as extraordinary (Ivtzan, 2020). The mindfulness practice offered in this chapter asks the artist to take in their surroundings as if they are witnessing them for the first time. During this time, they make careful observations regarding a particular item. Their experience during the meditation practice is used as a launching point for a drawing exercise inspired by their keen observations. The intention of this exercise is not for an artist to make a final work of art but rather to release anything that may hold them back and begin to regain their creative momentum.

The second chapter, *Focused Follow-Through*, highlights focused awareness meditation, a foundational meditation practice (Colzato et al., 2012). Focused awareness meditation has allowed me to slow down my overactive mind and imagination. I have the internal and external space of a creative, meaning there is a lot going on. Sometimes the ideas are hard to sift through to find ones worth pursuing. After a focused awareness meditation, I noticed more clarity within my creative insights. In this meditation technique, the practitioner uses the breath to focus their attention, observe distractions when they arise, and gently return their attention to their original point of focus. Henriksen et al. (2022) concluded that one of the biggest creative challenges for

artists was maintaining focus while working on creative projects. For example, artists become distracted by everyday life or cannot focus on one thought and execute it (Henriksen et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2016). Two creative activities follow this meditation practice. The first activity is a drawing and painting exercise that supports present-moment attention. The second activity requires the artist to be curious about their physical and mental space to create an intentional atmosphere supporting their creative processes. This meditation practice can pay off as the artist learns to tune in and respond to whether or not their environment is nurturing or inhibiting their creative follow-through (Henriksen et al., 2022).

In chapter three, *Opening to New Inspiration*, open awareness meditation is introduced. Open awareness meditation allows the practitioner to sit in a mental space of vast openness, allowing a large informational download without feeling overwhelmed. When practicing open awareness meditation, I learned to let go of fixating on something to find a solution. One of the most concrete examples of when I experience this phenomenon is when I am creating a title for a piece. I foster a relaxed open mindset, and words begin to connect and let go until the right ones in the right combinations stick. The second I fixate on a word I like, I struggle to develop the entire title. Practicing open awareness meditation can cultivate a flexible and expansive field of awareness. The meditator accesses each of their senses as they take in information from their surroundings without fixating on one specific item. Supporting evidence indicates that this meditation practice can enhance one's creative abilities (Sarath, 2006; Müller et al., 2016). There is evidence that this specific practice can improve divergent thinking and thereby allow an artist to solve creative problems with greater ease (Colzato et al., 2012; Horan, 2009; Tang et al., 2015; Zabelina et al., 2011). The meditation in this chapter is coupled with a writing activity and a drawing exercise. Artists will use open awareness practice prior to the creative activity to

address a creative challenge they are currently experiencing. This meditation will help the artist to exercise the ability to let go of fixed thoughts they may have regarding that project.

Chapter four, *Working with Your Inner Experience*, explores the cultivation of self-compassion to support the vulnerable process of creative expression. The Voice of Judgment or inner critic is one of the leading reasons artists lack creative follow-through or shut down creative thought altogether (Henriksen et al., 2022). Their critical internal dialogue can sabotage a novel idea before it gets to paper. As a person who went to art school, I struggle with the haunting voices of my past professors and judgment from people who did not support my decision to take this educational path. These voices ridicule everything I make to the point where I become embarrassed when I would make anything. Nothing I made was good enough until I had the tools to recognize and understand this inner voice. I became trapped in the sense of failure and imposters syndrome. As I learned that my inner voice was trying to support me rather than destroy me, I could work with it and begin to create more inner peace. The meditation in this chapter allows the artist to discover what they need to ease the grasp of the critic. The creative activities that follow the meditation support the artist in developing a healthy relationship with their critic. If artists can see and hear their critic, they can listen and respond to its messages rather than unconsciously reacting to them. By spending less time dwelling on self-judgmental thoughts, the artist will have more energy and excitement to devote to creative endeavors.

Lastly, chapter five, *Obstacles or Opportunities*, assists the artist in unveiling their perceptions and perspectives and how they could influence their creative experience. As I strengthened my meditation practice, I began revealing many of my perceptions of reality that discouraged my desire to make. I realized that I had a results-based attitude. Some thoughts that



hampered my creativity were: “Why make a piece of art if it was not going to be good?” “Those who cannot do teach.” I also thought about how others would perceive me and would make stories about what I thought their perspective was about me, in turn creating a negative perspective of myself. This chapter explores how our perceptions can influence our creative endeavors. By fostering intentional space, one can find understanding behind habitual thoughts or beliefs that no longer serve our creative pursuits and nurture the perceptions and truths that encourage creative awakening (Zabelina et al., 2011). When things do not work out as planned, one may experience disappointment and many other draining emotions that block creative flow (Pirson et al., 2018). This chapter offers a meditation to assist the artist in exploring a challenge they consider a roadblock and open to new ideas by letting go. There is a creative activity following the meditation, in which the artist must use limited items to create a collage. Collages are an excellent way to practice encountering unexpected challenges and use them as opportunities and inspiration rather than shutting down because things did not go according to plan.

In addition to mindfulness activities, each chapter will have a reflection section. Reflection is essential to promote personal inquiry and foster a meaningful experience when one begins a new practice. Deep reflection has strengthened my connection to my inner wisdom, which has enhanced my creative unfolding. My art feels more authentic as I can incorporate personal insights into my creative journey, which has helped me rediscover the creative freedom I had as a child. With reflection, artists develop a deeper understanding of their inner landscape, which enhances their ability to ignite creativity with greater ease and joy.

An artist’s mind can sabotage a desire to create by requiring the creator to think about what should be made rather than allowing curiosity and discovery. This book encourages artists

to develop a healthy yet detached awareness that may lead to unforeseen opportunities, liberate them from stale ideas, and enable authentic creative expression. A mindfulness and meditation practice can assist and encourage artists to put their brush back on canvas or squish their hands back into clay.

### **Conclusion**

The creative experience for visual artists may come in a variety of ways. Some may have sparks of insight that they jot down on napkins in a restaurant, and others may have rituals that open their creative minds eye. Whatever the means an artist uses to access their unique and authentic creative self, findings consistently show that mindfulness and meditation are effective ways to tune into the creative process. Both mindfulness and meditation have fundamental principles that help a practitioner develop an artist's keen awareness of their internal and external experience and open to a new perspective to nourish creativity (Henriksen et al., 2022, Henriksen et al., 2020).

An ever-increasing body of literature shows that mindfulness practice can support an artist in letting go of an inhibiting inner dialogue and limiting thoughts to access pure creative insight. Empirical studies found that open awareness meditation correlates with divergent thinking (Colzato et al., 2012; Henriksen et al., 2022; Lebuda, 2016). Divergent thinking is a vital attribute to help an artist develop the ability to let go of former ways of thinking and cultivate the ability to attain originality in creative solutions. Artistic, creative insights and experiences can be discovered and nurtured through the broadened awareness and mindsets developed from mindfulness and meditation that may otherwise be denied or ignored. Therefore, this project is designed to support an artist's creative fulfillment by providing mindfulness and meditation resources to assist them in connecting with and igniting their inner creativity.

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# Why Wait? Create!

*A visual artist's guide to using mindfulness and meditation to  
enhance their creative journey.*

*Erin Gocinski*

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# Preface

As an art teacher and artist who struggles with creative block, I was inspired to create this resource for visual artists to find ways to tune into their creative wisdom. Between my personal artistic barriers and teaching art to high schoolers, I am familiar with finding ways to tap into the creative source to work through the dreaded creative block. Over the past four years, the journey of my mindfulness practice and my ability to find more creative freedom seem to parallel each other. Through mindfulness and meditation, I have uncovered and let go of many of my deepest insecurities and fears, some of which profoundly influenced my beliefs about myself as an artist. As I move beyond these barriers, I can make room for creative insight where I once struggled.

After attending art school, I had an excruciating 5-year span where I did not create anything. As I strengthened my meditation practice, I noticed the habitual thought processes that were keeping me from creating: "my craftsmanship isn't good enough," "I don't have time," and "why am I even doing this." As an art teacher, I began recognizing and questioning my inner judgmental voice. Why am I so hard on myself but so supportive of the creative journey of others?

One major turning point was meeting my inner critic, who I found to be a stubborn and opinionated woman. Within the dialogue of my inner critic, I notice the influences of my professors who taught me rigorous design and craftsmanship training and the voices of those who doubted my ability to "do anything" with an art degree. Through my mindfulness practice, I have befriended my inner critic. I am learning to have patience and compassion for her with the clarity that I am not obligated to listen. By establishing a relationship with this inner voice, I spend less time ruminating in habitual thoughts that aren't serving me, and I am learning to trust that my creativity is a valid form of my personal expression.

I received some of my most creative insights during or soon after meditation. In my experience, meditation slows my internal chatter, helps me recognize and let go of the thoughts that inhibit my creative flow, and opens my mind to new inspirations. As I strengthen my mindfulness and meditation practice, I feel more at ease when a creative challenge arises. Instead of accepting limitations as a block, I find ways to use them as a creative launching point. My

journey inspired the creation of this book to provide other visual artist insight into this phenomenon. I use research-based information, meditations, creative activities, and reflective exercises as tools to support personal creative freedom through inner exploration. The techniques and information presented in this book are not only tested within my personal experience but are supported by research methods that have been proven to nurture creativity.

As visual artists, it is vital to have a healthy relationship with our creative processes. Creativity cannot be forced, and it is normal to experience a time when you may feel like you have hit a roadblock. The themes in this book will support your investigation of your internal landscape and how to slow down and notice creative inspirations that can be found within yourself or in your daily life. You will gain tools to support the intimate journey of discovering personal insight and wisdom to deepen your relationship with your creative experience. You will find strategies to become in tune with yourself as a creative being and align your unique creative insights with your authentic expressions.

# Part 1

# How to Use This Book

You will find liberating perspectives, creative activities, and contemplative reflection in each chapter. My only request is that you enter this with an open heart and mind, without expectations of making your next masterpiece. You must let go of your preconceived notions about what you want to make or what you are hoping to achieve and allow your most authentic creative ideas to unfold without judgment. Each chapter will be comprised of four parts. First, there will be information provided on a guiding principle. Next, there will be a written meditation script and QR code that links you to a recording of the meditation (if you are guiding yourself in your meditation, it is not critical to memorize the script word per word). The meditation is followed by a creative activity that reinforces the topics addressed in the chapter. Lastly, each chapter will conclude with reflection questions to help process your experience and insights.

The format of this book allows the reader who is experienced in meditation to skip from chapter to chapter exploring what they need at that moment. However, if the reader has no prior mindfulness or meditation practice, it is recommended that they follow the first three chapters in order. The first three chapters develop a foundational understanding of mindfulness and meditation. The first chapter is a practice that embodies the fundamental principles of mindfulness. The second chapter provides a focused awareness meditation that will exercise the ability to pay attention to what the mind is focusing on. The third chapter uses open awareness meditation to exercise the ability to open the mind beyond limiting perspectives. The last two chapters utilize foundational concepts learned in the first three chapters. In chapter four, you will learn to observe and work with your inner critic. Chapter five, the final chapter, will bring attention to how you perceive the world and overcome personal limitations.

# Mindfulness and Meditation Basics

This book uses mindfulness and meditation exercises to help visual artists use insight to unlock pure creativity. Mindfulness and meditation are practiced by noticing body sensations, thoughts, and feelings while maintaining a non-judgmental curious attitude. Mindfulness helps a person ground themselves in present-moment awareness. Letting go of mental chatter and becoming present frees up mental real estate, allowing the artist's mind to create space and become receptive to innovative ideas, while supporting their ability to maintain focus and execute lofty goals. Before embarking on this journey, it is crucial to note mindfulness is not a panacea or the solution to all your creative problems. However, mindfulness and meditation practices can deepen an artist's connection with themselves and their art by revealing the mind's unconscious perceptions, connecting them with inner wisdom, and helping them see new perspectives.

Developing a quality of mindfulness comes with intention and practice. Meditation is the best way to strengthen your ability to access mindful awareness in your daily life (Agnoli et al., 2018). Through meditation, you eliminate external stimuli to see and understand inner experiences more clearly. Within meditation, you can observe individual passing thoughts, creating the illusion that time has slowed down to provide an opportunity to connect with yourself. Witnessing the self can free an artist from rigid external and internal views of reality, creating space for, debris to fall away and new insights to arise (Alexander, 2022). Meditation exercises strengthen the ability to work with thoughts, emotions, and perceptions in a detached non-judgmental state rather than allowing them to define or consume you. Just like working out at the gym, a meditation practice is challenging at first it may take some repetition to feel comfortable, but after some time, you feel pretty fit. This book will use specific meditative practices to nurture different aspects of the creative experience.

There are many types of meditation practices. Two foundational meditation styles are focused awareness and open awareness meditation (Lippelt et al., 2014). A guided focused awareness meditation will be used to support the information in chapter two, and an open awareness meditation will be used in chapter three. This is intentional for someone new to mindfulness and meditation to support their foundational development and understanding of the

practice. Focused awareness meditation is practiced by finding a comfortable posture and directing your attention on a single point of focus (most commonly, the breath). When you become distracted, you will simply redirect your attention back to the original point of focus. Open awareness meditation is a style of meditation where the practitioner intentionally watches their attention move from one stimulus to another. The practitioner allows external and internal stimuli to momentarily hold their attention while maintaining a neutral stance toward the object of attention. This form of meditation trains the brain to move beyond a fixed point of view and develop a flexible, open state of mind.

Before you meditate, choose a place where you feel safe, with no distractions. A classic meditation posture is to be seated with your legs crossed while sitting on a pillow, keeping the pelvis above the knees for optimum comfort. However, this is not required; if it is uncomfortable to sit on the ground, you can sit in a chair, stand, or lie down. Typically, in a meditation posture, the spine is elongated and alert but not striving. If you feel comfortable, close your eyes, but if this does not feel safe, you can put your eyes at a downward gaze to minimize distractions. At this point, you are ready to take a few breaths to settle into the body and begin your meditation. During meditation, it is vital to have the assurance that you are in charge and that anything you do not feel comfortable with, you do not need to do. If the guided meditations feel uncomfortable, you can bring your attention back to the breath, your hands, or the grounding feeling of gravity. Your meditative practice should start with short durations (5-10 minutes), which can grow over time (20-30 minutes).

It is helpful to practice daily to experience the most out of your meditation practice. Like any exercise, begin with short meditations and build up to longer ones so you create a sustainable experience and do not burn out (over-practicing may cause fatigue and disappointment). When people quit a meditation practice, it is often due to unmet expectations or not reaching desired results in a specific time frame. This person may make statements such as “I can’t meditate because I’m too distractable” or “I tried meditation a few times, and it doesn’t work.” Remind yourself that it is not magic, and it takes time to build a fruitful practice. Letting go of expectations and allowing yourself to grow at your own pace will pay off in the long run. You will feel nourished as your mindfulness practice strengthens and you meet creative explorations with qualities of mindfulness such as patience, self-compassion, and an open mindset.

New practitioners may be discouraged by mind wandering. Your mind is sure to wander during the meditation. This is what minds do! When you notice your mind wandering, reassure yourself you are not messing up or doing anything wrong. Then congratulate yourself that you have experienced a moment of being mindful! This is a good thing. You are noticing the workings of the mind! How exciting! The next step is to bring your attention back to the intention of the meditation. You can acknowledge (don't reject) your thought and kindly reassure it that, if necessary, you will address it after you are done meditating. You can say, "Hello, anxious thought; I am meditating right now, but you are important, and I will get back to you in five minutes when I am done taking this time for myself." Always have patience and kindness towards your mind and treat it like your best friend. Even if your mind wanders for the entire time, it is okay; you are doing great, which is why they call it practice. Congratulate yourself for taking some time just to sit. Now enjoy the offerings within this book and treat your experience with kindness and acceptance. Each expression you make is valid to your personal unfolding. It is all good stuff!



## Part 2

## Chapter 1

# A Mindful Approach to Creativity

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*You must have your eyes open. The habit of looking at things with curiosity should carry through in everything you do. Marvel is all around you.*

*Enrique Martinez Celaya*

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How is it possible that mindfulness can ignite creativity? Simply put, an artist can use mindfulness to gain present-moment awareness to observe thoughts with curiosity to allow new creative insight. It is impossible to fully unpack this simple yet profound statement in one chapter. Therefore, you will see bits and pieces of the impact mindfulness can have on fostering creative discovery as the chapters in this book unfold.

Have you ever noticed a young child's ability to access imagination and creativity with confidence and ease? Most children become self-proclaimed artists by the age of 5 but by the age of 15, they definitively state, "I'm just not creative" or "I just can't do art". It is easy to observe that a young child creates with a sense of curiosity and wonder with no concern for the outcome. Humans seem to be born with this beautiful ability to uninhibitedly create, but as they age, this becomes lost, and they find themselves spending conscious effort trying to recapture their creative freedom.

Engaging in pure spontaneous expression is only possible when you let go of mental chatter based on what you think you know. Your past stories and knowledge can inhibit novel creative insights. A childlike curiosity frees you from what you once knew and unlocks a fresh point of view. Grounding yourself in moment-to-moment awareness with a curious frame of mind requires a conscious effort to embody a mindset of wonderment and freedom that only exist in the now.

It is an inspiring experience to rediscover and find joy in the small wonders that exist in the nuances of daily life. This practice becomes a quest to discover a world within the world that we thought we knew. Remember the visceral rush that comes with the experience of seeing something for the first time? Imagine seeing a flower or a train for the first time. You are consumed and captivated by the vivid sounds, colors, and energy, and you think anything is possible, which ignites an unexplainable joy and a beautiful spark of imagination. In the book *Core Creativity*, Alexander (2022) explains that core creativity is the ability to find insight from your creative unconscious and it is accessed when you learn to “hear with new ears, see a sunset with new sight” (p. 17) and break out of the box you didn’t realize was confining you.

Fostering an attitude of mindfulness can help guide and nurture creative liberation through recultivating this childlike curiosity. When you rediscover the world with an open mind, you may feel uncomfortable or strange as you leave behind your old perceptions of what you knew. However, as you keep practicing, you begin to see things from an invigorating new perspective. With this liberating new lens on life, you may find inspiration from what you once saw as mundane. When you empower your curious mind, you can experience a pure sense of joy and wonderment of seeing everything as if it were the first time. The freedom attained by letting go of what you think you know provides opportunities for you to find unlimited creative inspiration all around you.

The mindfulness activity in this chapter will assist you in viewing the world with fresh sight as you take in every minute detail that enters your senses. This easy grounding exercise can be integrated into your daily life and performed anywhere without anyone knowing you are in practice. A great opportunity to practice this technique is when you are waiting for something or experiencing intense emotion. I often use this exercise when I realize I am overthinking or trying too hard to create a solution for something. Grounding myself in my surroundings helps me let go of emotional blockages such as frustration. When I let go and use my surroundings as a resource, my mind opens to a receptive mental space, and I receive great creative insight. As this chapter unfolds, you will find a mindfulness activity on seeing the world through a new lens, a drawing activity, a photography activity, and reflection questions to allow your discoveries to sink in. I will provide a script for the mindfulness exercise, or if you want a guided experience, you can scan the QR code. Enjoy seeing your everyday experience with new sight!

# Mindfulness Practice

<https://eringocinski.wixsite.com/mysite>



*Listen To This Meditation*

## Orange Colored Glasses

This exercise is a guided mindfulness practice. This practice aims to train the brain to slow down and notice possible inspirations that may have been previously overlooked in your daily activities. Consider doing this practice for five minutes per day for the next week to gain a fresh perspective on the world. If you forget a day or two, it is okay! Just pick up where you left off. You can do this anywhere, whether you are going for a walk or doing an everyday task like eating lunch.

### Clear the Mind

Take a moment to center yourself.

Take a few deep breaths and clear your mind.

Intentionally let go of any sticky thoughts for the next few minutes.

Don't worry; they will be waiting for you when you are done.

For now, kindly ask them to take a break.

Relax the muscles in your head, jaw, neck, back, arms, legs, feet, and toes.

Take one last deep breath, and on the out-breath, let everything go.

### Curious Exploration

In this relaxed and open mindset, imagine that you found some glasses with orange lenses (orange is associated with curiosity and creativity).

When you put them on, you are gifted with the sight of a child who sees everything for the first time.

If you're feeling playful, you can use your blue light glasses, sunglasses, or actual glasses and pretend they are your orange-lensed glasses.

Explore your environment for the next few moments as if you had never seen, felt, heard, or smelt it before.

Heighten your senses, and allow your mind to be curious, soaking it all in.

Go slow and notice every minute detail.

For instance, you could notice the colors and texture of the fabric that upholsters your couch.

What does it sound like when you brush your hand on it? How does it feel as you slowly run your fingers on the fabric? How does it smell?

Note the urge to like or dislike experiencing these different sensations.

It's challenging, but can you drop the story attached to this object and purely experience it in a detached sense of wonderment?

It's okay when you notice the desire to create a story or memory attached to your object of interest; just gently shift your mind back to pure observation.

You may say to yourself:

I see: brown, grey, tan, shadows, and dark

I feel: soft, fuzzy, bumpy, pillly

I hear: scratchy, high-pitched zipper

I smell: dusty but sweet (this one can be a hard one. Remember to drop associated stories and emotional reactions about whether you like or dislike it.)

Do this for about five minutes.

Wherever you place your attention, completely immerse yourself in its essence.

### **When The Mind Wanders**

Notice when your mind wanders (don't worry, because it will), and when you notice it has wandered, kindly redirect your attention back to the object of curiosity.

Forgive your mind when it wanders.

The mind is designed to think, associate, and analyze, so when this happens, just gently guide yourself back to the wonderment of seeing your surroundings for the first time.

Try to avoid getting tangled in the memories and judgments or create explanations associated with the object of your attention.

Enjoy this practice where ever you are and as long as you like.

# Create!

## Curious Creations

Indulging in curiosity is one of the best ways to get your creative juices flowing. This chapter has two activities. In the first activity, you will draw something you noted from your mindfulness practice. You can draw with any medium you'd like; it is okay to be curious and experiment with what you choose to draw with. Drawing lends itself to the ability to gesture an expression or idea quickly, and it is an excellent way to stay in the moment with no pressure and almost no cost. Practice mindfulness and curiosity as you draw. Don't let your thoughts get in the way; stay in the moment and enjoy yourself as your drawing reveals itself. In the second activity, you will use your cellphone camera. Take advantage of this accessible medium. Allow yourself to exist in the sense of pure creativity only found in the spontaneity of the present moment. Notice. Let go. Be curious.

### Activity 1

#### Drawing

Before you start drawing, spend some extra time slowly observing and noticing every detail of your object of curiosity. While drawing, let go of the tendency to judge what you are drawing and stay in the pure moment. Use the practice of being curious while you draw by embracing and enjoying the unknown.

Step 1 Draw what sparked your curiosity in incredible detail.

Step 2 Draw an abstract expression of the essence of the object.

Step 3 Draw an expressive representation of how the sensation of curiosity showed up in your body. Consider what you felt, heard, smelled, or tasted. Draw an interpretation of what your visceral experience might look like. Let go of perfectionism!

### Activity 2

#### Photography

After you have completed your practice and your drawing exercises, go back and photograph any visual nuances that were inspiring. If you found specific sounds especially curious, you could do a ten-second recording or a ten-second video.

# Reflection

- ◆ Write personal notes about what it was like to put on the orange-colored glasses. Note any insights or curiosities that arose during the practice.
  - \*Beginning \*Middle \*End
- ◆ List what you saw, heard, tasted, and smelled.
- ◆ Explain what emotion, if any, arose when you noticed something new.
  - \*Excitement \*Wonder \*Joy \*Nothing at All
- ◆ What was it like to draw your experience? Did you have any specific thoughts, body sensations, or emotions you noticed when you were drawing?
  - \*Thoughts \*Sensations \*Emotions

## Chapter 2

# Focused Follow-Through

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*The purpose of art is to bring people into the present.*

*Jim Carrey*

---

It's easy to lose ourselves in the hustle and bustle of life. It is common to be lost in thoughts about the past or future, but people are rarely in the present. Henriksen et al. (2022) explain that distractions are one of the most common reasons for creative block and lack of creative follow-through. It is challenging to notice thoughts and even more challenging to avoid getting caught up in the emotions and stories that are associated with them. In meditation, you observe your thoughts with a detached perspective as you practice concentrating your attention on a chosen object. The meditation provided in this chapter is called focused awareness meditation. In this meditation, you practice noticing, letting go, and finding a space of peace within the breath.

Often artists are daydreamers and have beautiful imaginations. However, it is beneficial to maintain a conscious awareness of where your mind has been wandering off to. Unconscious mind wandering can take you away from the present moment, which could be filled with creative potential. Practicing the ability to have conscious control over your attention will provide insight into whether your ideas are one's worth pursuing. Using a focused awareness meditation will help you gain a mindful understanding of where you are placing your valuable attention. As you learn where you place your attention, you will become aware of distractions that interfere with the ability to accomplish creative goals.

Distractions can leave an artist in a state of procrastination. Focused awareness meditation is a great way to practice the foundational skill of noticing and redirecting your attention. The meditator trains their mind to note distractions and, without judgment,



intentionally bring their attention back to their point of focus. Focused awareness meditation is not about fixing yourself, labeling what's right or wrong, but instead slowing the mind to develop a quality of paying attention with a clear, detached lens. It will not matter how many unique ideas an artist has until they put their creative ideas into action. When focusing on the present moment, we are gifted the opportunity to give birth to our creations.

Focused awareness meditation is a foundational practice. All meditations require understanding how to work with your attention to develop a healthier frame of mind. Focused awareness meditation is an excellent place to start as you create a meditation practice. If you don't have meditation experience or would like a few detailed reminders on how to meditate, read the *Mindfulness and Meditation Basics* section on page 3. Traditionally focused awareness meditation uses the breath as a main point of focus. In my experience, this was a trigger point. As I began my meditation practice, I found focusing on the breath to feel suffocating. So, if you have an experience that is counterproductive to the intention of the meditation, it is ok to take a break or create a modification. I learned to shift my attention to the sensation of gravity pulling me to the earth. This sensation felt safe and grounding. As I continued my meditation journey, I became more comfortable with my breath, and now I find it comforting. I use my relationship with my breath to inform my mind to cue into knowing when I need to practice grounding exercises. I no longer fear an unsteady breath; I respect it and the insight it provides me. Often my breath cues me into my mental state before my mind can process what has happened.

Be kind to yourself if you forget to meditate for a few days this week. Remember, meditation is a practice, so the more you practice, the more you may notice a shift in perspective and access to insights. The remaining sections of this chapter will offer a meditation that helps develop intentional focus, a creative activity that will keep your attention in the present, an exercise about exploring your environment, and reflection questions to help strengthen the goal of maintaining focus awareness.

# Meditation Practice

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## Focused Awareness Meditation

Try this meditation once daily for five minutes before starting your creative practice.

**Environment:** Find a safe place where you won't be distracted.

**Posture reminder:** You can sit on a cushion to lift your pelvis above the knees while maintaining an erect but not rigid spine, sit in a chair, lie down, or stand.

### Settling in

Find a posture that is right for your body at this moment.

You can sit, stand, or lie down.

Take a few deep breaths and let go of any tension on the out-breath.

Close your eyes or have a rested downward gaze.

### Check-in

Check in with the sensations of your body

Note anything you feel.

Perhaps you feel tingling, pain, or aching.

Resist the urge to ruminate on stories or place any judgment.

You may be experiencing an emotion tied to these sensations.

Acknowledge your inner experience.

Allow yourself to let go for now.

Give yourself permission to rest in this present moment.

### Finding the Breath

When you are ready, direct your attention to your breath.

Where do you feel your breath?

Perhaps at the tip of your nose? Back of your throat? In your chest or belly?

Notice its quality.

Is it slow? Fast? Warm? Cool?

### Reminder

If you find focusing on the breath unpleasant, finding another place to anchor your attention that is sure, and grounding is okay.

For instance, your feet touching the floor, the assuring sensation of gravity weighing your body to the earth, or possibly your hands touching your thighs.

Don't push yourself if anything feels uncomfortable.

### **Resting in Awareness**

Using your anchor, bring your full attention to the present moment right here, right now.

Rest your attention on your point of focus.

Watch the rise and fall of the breath.

Breathing in

Breathing out

In

Out

Allowing yourself these moments to simply be present with yourself.

When your attention wanders, kindly guide your attention back to your breath.

You are doing everything right.

Observing the breath

Breathing in

Breathing out

### **Closing**

No matter how your experience unfolds, every sit is a good sit,

You took the time for yourself, and that's enough,

Remind yourself that you are whole, you are enough, and you are perfect just as you are,

### **Coming Back**

As you return to the body, slowly begin to move your arms, and wiggle your toes.

Very slowly, allow the light to enter your eyes.

And smile

Take a refreshing breath in.

Take your time to rest in this moment for as long as you'd like.

# Create!

## Cultivating Creativity

Focused awareness meditation lends itself to the act of creating art. Similarly, creating art can be a meditative experience as you are present with your work and respond and notice the distinct way the brush touches the canvas or the pressure your hand applies to the clay. Becoming mindfully absorbed in the act of making allows access for your creativity to flow. Try the focused awareness meditation before you create. Notice if the meditation settles you into a space of clarity and focus to fully immerse yourself in the act of expression and creative flow. This chapter features two creative activities.

The art practice in activity 1 embodies how present-moment awareness can unlock creativity. The activity is called Cloud Painting. The late Charles Rocky of Manitou Springs, Colorado, coined this term and technique. He was a locally famous beloved painter who we called "Rocky." This exercise aims to let go of the "end goal" and simply respond to how an image reveals itself at the moment. It is an intuition-based process and a great way to loosen up if you have a creative block or want to have no-pressure fun. This art activity is a longer project that could take one hour to multiple hours. This activity is a great side project and can be worked on over time when you need a creative break.

Activity 2 is an exercise to experiment and be intentional about your creative environment. It is inspired by Csikszentmihalyi's (2013) book *Creativity* when he explains that no artist is immune to their surroundings and that the right setting will allow them to forget the world and concentrate "pursuing the Muse" (p. 128). As artists, we are responsible for nurturing our creative endeavors by focusing on and following through with our ideas. There can be times when it feels like pulling teeth to meet a creative deadline or to get yourself back in the studio. It is easy to be distracted by new ideas, the realities of life, or get caught up in your head. Learning to foster a nurturing environment that welcomes your creative experience can be critical to your follow-through.

## Activity 1

### Cloud Painting

**Materials:** Paper, Shaving Cream, Pan or Tray, Food Coloring, Squeegee, Fork (anything you don't mind swirling the shaving cream and food coloring with), Pencil, Fine-tip Marker

Step 1 Make approximately ½ inch bed of shaving cream.

Step 2 Put a drop of food coloring sporadically around the edge of the shaving cream.

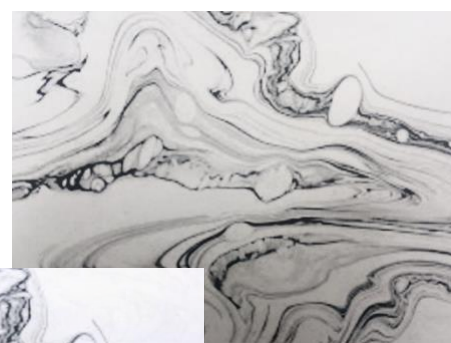
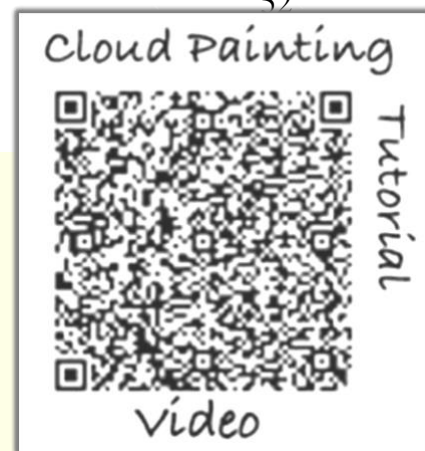
Step 3 Use the fork to swirl around the food coloring as much as you like.

Step 4 Gently squish the paper into the shaving cream.

Step 5 Peel back the paper and squeegee off the excess shaving cream. You will be left with a marbled piece of paper.

Step 6 Time for your imagination to run wild! Find your drawing medium of choice (I suggest a micron pen if you have it, but anything will do).

- ◆ Use the curious perspective of a child and view the swirls and blobs of color the same way you did when you were looking at the clouds as a kid. First, outline your creatures in pencil, then use your pen to create your final marks. Allow the images to reveal themselves. What do you see?
  - ◆ Maybe the images will work together to tell a wild story, or each "cloud" may be its own creature. Rocky had a very mythical lens on his creations. He often saw woodland creatures such as elves and ferries that told fable-like stories.
- Step 7 As a finishing touch, it can be fun to go back with a white paint pen and add highlights. The piece is done whenever you decide.



## Activity 2

### Exploring Your Creative Experience

#### Experiment with your physical environment.

Each time you sit down to do an art project this week, change an environmental factor and notice how it impacts the focus and flow of your creative session.

- ◆ Experiment with the time, location, music (headphones or speaker), setting (public or private), and other sensory stimuli such as beverages (tea, sparkling water, coffee, water) and scents (candles, fresh air, essential oils).

#### Notice

What helps you focus and stay in your creative experience? Notice what inspires your creative flow.

## Reflection

### Meditation

Focus awareness meditation may clue you into what physical and emotional experiences impact your creative unfolding. Influencing factors could be sleep, life stressors/successes, or pain. Note what you find.

### Activity 1 Reflection

- ◆ What emotions did you notice when you did this activity?
  - \*Beginning \*Middle \*End
- ◆ Did you find yourself judging your creations or getting caught up in overthinking?
- ◆ Were you able to get into the flow and allow yourself creative freedom?

### Activity 2 Reflection

Did you notice any changes when you did the meditation before your creative practice?

- ◆ What physical and emotional experiences impacted your creativity? And in what way?
- ◆ How did your environment impact your creative experience?
  - Time. Place. Smells. Sounds
- ◆ Was there a factor you noticed that was helpful and you could use in the future to nurture your creative flow?

## Chapter 3

# Opening To New Inspiration

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*Ideas are like fish. If you want to catch a little fish, you can stay in the shallow water. But if you want to catch a big fish, you've got to go deeper. Down deep, the fish are more powerful and more pure. They're huge and abstract. And they are very beautiful.*

*David Lynch*

---

Can you recall the last time you experienced creative flow? When you are in the flow, your mind is open, and there is a sense of ease, maybe joy. Within this mindset, you welcome ideas without judgment as the mind sculpts curious and spontaneous creations that draw from elements of your life experiences. In this space, creative ideas seem to form themselves without even trying. Open awareness meditation can help you intentionally have this experience by remaining open-minded and letting go of the urge to over-fixate on something.

The practice of open awareness meditation involves training the mind to access a field of awareness that extends beyond oneself. In observing your mindscape and allowing yourself to let go, your habitual thoughts and concrete perspectives fall away. From a neutral witnessing standpoint, nature teaches us that everything must come and go, even what we consider to be our identity; and you learn the only thing that is constant is change. To go with the flow, you must resist the urge to attach to the "self" or ego; and be okay with your successes and failures, knowing that these, too, will not last. As you become aware of the interdependence of all things, what you identify as "self" begins to fade. Clinging to fixed ideas and desires of success manifests into suffering and can exacerbate the struggle to open to the infinite possibilities that everyday life can inspire.

Open awareness meditation is one way to broaden your conscious awareness, see multiple perspectives, and develop the ability to notice beyond yourself. In open awareness meditation, the meditator pays attention to their mental and physical landscapes but does not fixate on any one stimulus, whether it be internal or external. As a result of this practice, you can observe a wide range of information without becoming entangled in the story associated with that information. When you can let go of rigid thought processes and ground yourself in the elevated awareness of your physical, environmental, and mental states, you discover the unexpected ability to pull innovative inspiration from common spaces. During this state of heightened awareness, the analytical mind is quieted, and you are in a position of being rather than doing, which provides creative freedom driven by intuition. This experience is often referred to as the flow.

Developing techniques that help tap into a creative flow can benefit all artists, especially those struggling with a creative block. Blocks can develop for many reasons, such as over-fixating on something that went wrong and wanting a piece of art to be something that it is not, which causes the inability to "go with the flow." When experiencing a creative block, your mind becomes closed off, feels stuck, or you may spiral into rumination. This mindset may lead to tunnel vision and the loss of the ability to recognize creative insights and inspirations. In order to nurture fertile ground for creativity to blossom, it is essential to learn how to free up mental space by quieting unwanted internal chatter, opening your field of awareness, and allowing the flow of new ideas. Letting go of a fixed and closed-minded point of view opens your mind to creative inspirations that exist all around and within you. One way to practice this intentionally is an open awareness meditation. Alexander (2022) explained that the openness that results from open awareness meditation allows what they call a "core creative download" (p. 17).

Open awareness meditation strengthens the ability to think with a flexible open perspective which has been associated with improving divergent thinking (Langer, 2006). Research has shown that divergent thinking is one of the most critical factors in creativity. When thinking divergently, you can devise multiple solutions for a particular problem and observe streams of thought in a non-judgmental manner. Open awareness meditation allows an artist to access an uninhibited stream of thought that encourages unique connections. Divergent thinking can help an artist maintain fresh and innovative expressions and let go of the perception of being



stuck. Through open awareness meditation, the mind can be trained to remain open to all experiences and channel spontaneous new connections to create one-of-a-kind pieces of art.

According to research, open awareness meditation has a positive impact on creativity. Neuroscience has provided qualitative evidence that verifies artists who claim that their meditation practices have opened creative doors. Colzato et al. (2012) and Horan (2009) proclaimed that meditation creates neurological conditions that free the mind from the restraints of top-down thought patterns and affirm bottom-up thought formation and expression. Bottom-up thinking allows creative, flexible thoughts as the mind absorbs information without fixating on a specific stimulus. This mode of thinking allows a broadened perspective that assists an artist in overcoming barriers caused by habitual thinking and fixed views. These evidence-based findings reinforce the claim that open awareness meditation can contribute to generating and accessing creative insight.

Open awareness meditation can be a great alternative for the person who struggles with focused awareness meditation because you allow the mind to actively move from one point of attention to another. I suggest doing the meditation every day, for ten minutes, for a month to begin to notice creative insights. You may notice shifts of awareness sooner, or it may take longer, but I ask that whatever you do, try to refrain from having expectations and judging your experience. These mindsets will counteract the openness that you are trying to nurture. Personally, I have had experiences where I feel as though I've left my body, and I have become my awareness. However, this is not something to strive for. This experience occurred after several years of meditation practice. Never minimize your personal experience. Each person will experience their practice in their own way and grow at their own pace. Respect your journey and whatever you experience it is, it is perfect. The remaining pages in this chapter provide an open awareness meditation, a writing and drawing creative activity, and it concludes with reflection questions about your experience. Remember to meet yourself where you are today and that every sit is good. It is called a practice for a reason. Now open to possibility, creative freedom, and enjoyment!

# Meditation Practice

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## Open Awareness Meditation

This meditation will support your ability to explore and observe your internal and external experiences from a detached perspective. As you begin this meditation, remind yourself that if you become distracted by thoughts or stories, that's okay. Gently notice where your attention is without judgment and bring it back into the present moment.

### Settle In

Find a posture that feels right for your body right now.

There is no need to strive for perfection.

It is important to accept yourself as you are in this moment.

Take a few deep breaths at your own pace to settle

Set an intention to let go of any sticky thoughts.

They will still be there after you are done with your practice.

Memories and imagined scenarios are not real.

What is real is being in right here in this present moment

Your only thing to do right now is to just be.

### Body Scan

When you are ready, scan the body.

With a curious quality of attention scan from your head down to your toes.

Notice where you feel physical sensations, such as tension, warmth, or pain.

It's possible that you feel nothing at all, and that's okay.

Perhaps you notice emotional responses to these sensations, which may look like fear, frustration, or joy.

Continue scanning the body spending a moment in different areas just to see what's there.

You're not trying to change anything.

Let go of the story behind sensations.  
 Allow it to be what it is.  
 Just note what is there.  
 Resist the urge to label it as good or bad.

Give yourself permission to rest in whole-body awareness.

**Now expand your awareness to notice external stimuli within a few feet of you.**

Place your attention on what you smell.  
 What are the nuances in the smells around you?  
 Perhaps you notice the smell of a candle, something cooking, or fresh-cut grass.  
 Note the scent and continue to allow your attention to move to the next scent as it arises.

Try not to get hung up on a particular stimulus.

Next, guide your attention to your ears.  
 Notice these sounds with detached attention.  
 You may hear the hum of the electronics nearby, the fan from the heater, or chirping birds.  
 Note the sound and continue to allow your attention to move to the next sound as it arises.

Refrain from allowing a specific sound or thought to hijack your attention.  
 Let go of judgments on what you think things “should” be.

Note your thoughts as they come and go.

Practice moving your attention with ease as things arise in your attention.  
 Never getting stuck on one thing.  
 Intentionally moving the attention to what arises in each moment and noting what it is.  
 Note the thought, then let it go.  
 Note the smell, then let it go.  
 Note the emotion, then let it go.

This might look like:

Buzzing

Ticking

Anxious Thought

Pain

Sweet Scent

Open to what arises in the present moment.

**Expand your awareness to include your full experience.**

Resist the urge to fixate your attention on something specific.

Allow sounds and smells from a distance to enter your field of awareness.

Watch these experiences as they come and go.

Allowing

Opening

What is it like existing in your inner and outer experience?

You are in an expansive state of awareness.

Resting in full awareness, opening to all that exists in their present moment.

Finding peace that you are one with all your surrounding stimuli.

**Conclude your practice by slowly coming back into your body.**

Taking a few deep breaths.

Wiggling the toes and fingers.

Slowly move the arms and legs.

Gently open your eyes.

# Create!

## Creative Crossroads

When you have completed your meditation, allow yourself to exist in an open, curious frame of mind. The following activities are fun ways to generate unique ideas. The first exercise is a writing activity. The second activity builds off the first using drawing as a medium. You will start with a writing activity to allow a quick and spontaneous idea stream to flow with no room for the analytical mind to judge. Drawing is a longer process than writing, so getting hung up on specific visual details is possible. Remind yourself that over-fixating on an idea could create tunnel vision and prohibit the flow of creative insight. Before you start, take a moment to consider a creative challenge or opportunity that you currently face. It could be a project in the making or the idea of creating something new.

### Activity 1

#### Writing Exercise

Using the mental space cultivated by your meditation, maintain an open, non-judgmental mindset.

**Materials:** Journal, Timer, Writing Utensil

Step 1 Set a five-minute timer.

Step 2 With a creative challenge or opportunity in mind, allow a stream of ideas to come through to you.

- ◆ Write whatever pops into your mind
- ◆ Do not put any restrictions on your experience to ensure that you are not creating any unconscious blocks.
- ◆ The words you write can be anything. Maybe they explore texture, colors, material, or subject matter.
- ◆ They may seem to have nothing to do with your piece, and that's okay. Just write it down
- ◆ If, at some point you feel that you have come up with a brilliant idea, don't stop. Keep writing until the time is up! You never know if those next few words or ideas will take your creation to the next level.
- ◆ Become curious about what you spontaneously write and allow it to influence your next insight.
- ◆ Don't reject anything! Just write it down.

## Activity 2

### Drawing Exercise

Do this exercise with no expectations, no pressure, and with the intention of simply opening up to whatever arises.

#### Step 1

- ◆ Now that you have a list of words, circle three words that are calling you.
- ◆ Draw three or more small thumbnail sketches inspired by collaborating on the three words you chose.
  - A thumbnail is a drawing about the size of a sticky note. Don't overthink it! They are a great way to get your creative juices flowing and brainstorm your final composition.
- ◆ Draw the general idea of your subject matter and composition.
- ◆ Do not spend time drawing details. Save that for the real deal.
- ◆ Each thumbnail should not take longer than 15 minutes.
- ◆ If you feel stuck, there is no pressure; just move to the next one.

#### Step 2

- ◆ Use your thumbnails to create a work of art in your medium of choice.
- ◆ It does not need to be your next masterpiece; just have fun and enjoy without judgment.

## Reflection

As you reflect, remember none of these experiences are good or bad. They just are what they are. It won't help you if you start judging yourself for being judgmental. Just notice it and move on to the next moment.

#### Meditation Reflection

- ◆ What were some things that stood out during the meditation practice?
- ◆ How did your body feel during this meditation?
- ◆ How did you feel emotionally?
- ◆ Were there any reoccurring intrusive thoughts?
- ◆ Were you able to let go of the thoughts and be present?

#### Creative Exercise Reflection

- ◆ Were you able to have fun with it, or did the judging mind get in the way?
- ◆ Did you notice habitual thoughts or judgments arise while doing this exercise?
- ◆ Were you able to fully let go when brainstorming a list? If not, what do you think was holding you back?
  - Time \*Places \*Smells \*Sounds

## Chapter 4

# Working With Your Inner Experience

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*In spite of everything, I shall rise again: I will take my pencil, which I have forsaken in my great discouragement, and I will go on with my drawing.*

*Vincent van Gogh*

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Have you ever experienced self-doubt or been overly critical of your creative ideas? While the inner critic is helpful in some situations, its judgmental voice can discourage creative endeavors. There is a tendency for this voice to take on a critical and self-deprecating tone rather than a constructive one. Using meditation, you can find liberation as you become familiar with your inner dialogue and observe how it impacts your creative potential. A key principle of mindfulness is noticing your internal dialogue and maintaining a non-judgmental attitude toward oneself. Becoming familiar with your inner voice and working with its doubts, fears, and anxiety will clear your mental space and allow creative ideas to reveal themselves.

Artists may experience self-doubt, judgment, and fear, influenced by societal ideals. This critical self-judging voice often comes from a collective societal perspective, resulting in the artist feeling isolated or labeling themselves as odd or weird. You may find yourself replaying the haunting criticisms of your art teachers, parents, or other influential opinions that planted judgmental seeds. Artists who attended art schools may find this experience particularly challenging due to the sudden loss of their supportive, like-minded community, which may result in feelings of insecurity and isolation. Self-judgment can manifest in the form of fear and doubt. You may fear that a creative idea is beyond your skillset, that you will be judged by the results,

or that you are wasting time and money (Smit & Van der Hulst, 2017). These fears are common; however, indulging in them exhausts your creative energy that could be dedicated to your creative exploration.

After you become familiar with the inner workings of your mind, you may notice a tendency to judge most things as good or bad. We are conditioned to think that when something is good, we want more of it, but when something is bad, to push it away. For instance, you may think you should have sold more work at your last art show; therefore, it is pointless to do the next exhibition because why set yourself up for failure? This scenario exemplifies how your inner judgment takes away an opportunity based on fear. Although the inner critic is trying to protect you from failure, it may lead to long-term suffering. It is possible to deepen your creative insight when you acknowledge and work with your self-judgment.

When you perceive your artwork, creative ideas, or artistic identity as bad or that they will be bad, you suffer from negative emotions such as disappointment, depression, or grief. Internalizing that your artwork, creative ideas, or artistic identity is good or was good sets you up to experience future disappointment. When you fail to meet unrealistic expectations or hear criticism from others that do not align with your personal views, it may change your self-perception, and you may experience a sense of loss. All these thoughts may contribute to the development of inherent beliefs that are painful and counterproductive. In *The Book That Takes Its Time*, authors Smit and Van der Hulst (2017) explained that patterns of protection would inevitably close doors and prevent us from experiencing new things. It is important to deepen your relationship with your inner voice and respect that it is trying to protect you from future pain. This inner awareness will offer an opportunity to move through self-manifested obstacles rather than ruminating on them.

Our inner narrative may be an exaggeration of reality, or it may fixate on painful truths. It is natural to want to remedy critical thoughts with silence. Unfortunately, denial of their presence perpetuates their existence. It is only when our inner fire is tended to we can have the ability to tame it and not let it grow. Working with the inner critic allows us to listen to necessary critical thoughts that keep us motivated versus the self-judging thoughts that paralyze creative exploration and accomplishment. You will find freedom when you learn to work with your inner critic rather than suppressing it. Recognizing things as they are with a detached point of view can provide freedom from habitual negative self-perceptions. Our perceptions filter our thoughts



which inform our experience. It can be profound when you realize your thoughts are not truths and you are not bound to them, nor do you have to abide by them. A pure creative source becomes accessible once an artist develops a practice of letting go of habitual self-sabotaging perceptions.

When a thought becomes habitual, it strengthens neural connections in the brain, and the more negative thoughts we think, the stronger the connections become. In the book, *Mindfulness and the Art of Drawing*, Wendy Greenhalgh (2020) describes this phenomenon as a superhighway in the brain. However, neuroscientists have discovered neuroplasticity, which means with practice, the brain can change these pathways to make new connections. The more often you tame unnecessary negative self-perceptions, the less frequently they arise, which fosters ease and creative freedom.

Often, our inner critic discourages us from leaving our comfort zones and taking risks, but creativity lies within the realm of risk-taking. Do not be afraid to embrace the awkwardness and suffering that are inherent in processes of creative discovery. It is liberating to watch the fluctuations of your opinionated inner dialogue and break the pattern of being hijacked by emotions from success and failure. You will relieve unnecessary pressure you may be inflicting on yourself by accepting your creative expression as neither good nor bad, desirable or undesirable. By letting go of the judging ego, you can make art without intending to produce an outcome, allowing you to open your mind to new creative possibilities.

Is it possible that unconscious cognitive distortions in your personal narrative prevent you from creative freedom? Thoughts evolve from the stories we have been telling ourselves for years. Mindfulness gives you the superpower to have conscious awareness of your thoughts and decide whether you would like to accept self-judgment. When you are in the stillness of meditation, it is easier to identify your thoughts for what they are rather than accepting them as truths. In a meditative state, your thoughts seem to slow down, allowing you to observe them as they arise rather than reacting to them after they have been played out. When you cultivate an open and curious self-perception, you become a creative channel rather than a roadblock. If you can accept a piece of art as it is and create art for art's sake, then you are on your way to finding inner peace.

A self-compassion meditation is a way to work with a challenging inner dialogue. This practice can nurture the ability to cultivate clarity and acceptance during and after making art.

Self-compassion meditation can help shift your personal perception if practiced every morning or before you make art. When you develop self-compassion, you can ease the daggers of self-judgment. Befriending your inner critic may allow you to think more compassionately about your artistic endeavors. This chapter includes a self-compassion meditation, a reflection exercise, and a creative activity. Unlike the other chapters in this book, reflection questions will follow the self-compassion meditation to prepare you for the creative activity. The art activity is designed to provide respectful separation from the inner critic and to let go of over-identifying with its messages. Remember that change within the brain does not occur overnight and that drastic changes may take many years. Patience, acceptance, and self-respect will go a long way as you begin this journey.

# Meditation Practice

<https://eringocinski.wixsite.com/mysite>



## Self-Compassion Meditation

This meditation is excellent when you feel apathetic, inadequate, or engaging in other negative self-talk. This practice can help you let go of ruminating thoughts about self-worth and over-identifying with failure or mistakes.

### Settle In

Take a moment to become present and settle into your body.  
 Find a comfortable posture.  
 If it feels right, close your eyes, or cast a downward gaze.  
 Sink into this moment.  
 Notice your breath.  
 Take a few deep, centering breaths at your own pace.  
 Bringing yourself fully into this moment.

Now breathing at a normal rhythm, what are its qualities?  
 Perhaps Cool on the in-breath and warm on the out-breath.  
 Where is it the most noticeable in your body?  
 The nose? Throat? Chest?

For the next few moments, continue to breathe naturally.

### Grounding in the Breath with Compassion

On the in-breath, think self-kindness.  
 On the out-breath release, what is not serving you?  
 In self-kindness  
 Out letting go  
 Self-kindness  
 Let go

### Imagine

In your mind's eye, imagine the door to the room you are currently in.

You see the door open.

A person who is a dear loved one walks through the door with a loving smile on their face.

Maybe it is a family member, friend, spiritual figure, or pet.

Dogs and cats are great teachers of unconditional love.

You greet them with an embrace.

You know they are here because they care for you deeply.

Notice how their loving presence makes you feel

What emotions are arising?

Perhaps relief? Love? Joy?

Where do you feel these emotions in your body?

Chest? Stomach? Limbs?

What sensations do you feel in your body?

Warm? Tingly? Release?

Whatever comes up for you, allow it to be there.

Rest in these uplifting sensations for a moment.

Consider what you need to hear right now.

What words would you want this being to say to you if they could speak?

Or if they are a pet, what do they say with their actions, posture, and eyes?

*"I love you no matter what."*

*"You are okay."*

*"You are worthy."*

*"Your feelings are valid."*

*"I am proud of you."*

*"You're a creative being."*

*"You are a good person."*

Repeat their message quietly to yourself.

Place a hand on your heart and feel that sense of love, support, and acceptance flowing through your body.

If it feels right, you might put both arms around yourself in a warm embrace.

Imagine this love surrounding you, holding you, and loving every single part of you, including the part that is struggling.

**Befriend your Critic**

Now take a moment to reflect.

Where has your inner critic been showing up?

What has this voice been saying about your creative experience?

Maybe it is fixated on a piece of art you were unhappy with or a deadline you missed.

If you can't think of anything at this moment, that's okay.

Just continue resting in the sensation of love and acceptance from your dear loved one.

Is it possible to meet the voice of judgment with love?

What would your loved one say to this critical part of you?

What would they say to offer compassion and acceptance?

How does this feel?

Repeat this message quietly to yourself

### **Closing**

Resonate within this sensation of being in the presence of your loved one.

Try to remember their love and comfort beyond this practice.

You always have access to this love when you go within.

### **Coming Back**

When you are ready, slowly come back to the sensation of your seat.

You can gently wiggle your fingers and toes.

And when you are ready, take a deep, cleansing breath.

Gently open your eyes.

# Reflection

**This chapter's reflection will be more productive before the creative activity.**

- ◆ Journal each day:
- ◆ When did you notice the voice of your inner critic?
  - What was its message?
- ◆ Did you notice any triggers?
  - Time \*Location \*Activity \*People you were with
- ◆ Was there a pattern?
- ◆ Do you see similar patterns show up when you are creative in making art?

**A trick is to greet these thoughts with a non-judgmental, friendly attitude as if they were separate from yourself.**

- ◆ What advice would you give a friend who was thinking these same thoughts?
- ◆ What support do you think they would need?
- ◆ Are you able to provide yourself this same support?

# Create!

## Meeting our Inner Critic

Befriending your inner critic can be challenging and seemingly impossible once you realize all the self-deprecating things it says. Despite this, the more we push the voice of judgment aside, the louder it becomes. The inner critic is your personal voice of protection against emotional and physical pain. It may not always have the best inherent solutions, but we should be compassionate toward our inner critic, as it is doing its best to keep us safe. Listening to your inner critic and writing it a letter of compassion can help establish a healthy relationship. Sending the inner critic love rather than frustration and anger will provide opportunities to work with it rather than getting caught up in unnecessary suffering. During this exercise, you will write to your inner voice with compassion and acceptance. Then you will complete the experience by creating a piece of art symbolic of your inner critic.

The first time I did this exercise and realized all the negative messages my inner critic was saying, I was furious. I felt anger and resentment towards the people in my past who clearly influenced these cruel messages. I quickly recognized these toxic emotions, deemed them

unnecessary, and moved to a mental space of forgiveness, healing, and self-respect. I found that I could not fully love myself until I had self-respect, which my inner voice did not have. Part of this exercise is to name your critic, which establishes a healthy way to let go of over-identifying with unhealthy messages. My inner critic's name is Chelsea. This practice has helped me have the ability to recognize a self-deprecating thought such as "Wow, you are doing an awful job teaching this lesson on charcoal. It looks like you've never drawn in your life." I recognize this critical thought as something Chelsea might say. I find that being playful with my inner critic can cultivate more compassion. So, I might say to myself, "okay, Chelsea; I don't need your input right now. I am okay. For now, it would be nice if you drank a cup of chamomile tea and just relaxed." I hope you enjoy this fun way to work with your inner dialogue.

## Activity 1

### Writing Activity

Remember, the critic will continue to reveal itself, but with compassion, you can free yourself from the perpetual suffering they may cause.

**Materials:** Journal, Timer, Writing Utensil

Step 1 Set a timer for 20 minutes

Step 2 Write some of the typical things the critic tells you:

- What you can't do, won't do, shouldn't do, have to do
- What others think about you
- What will happen to you if you make mistakes
- What your shortcomings are
- ◆ Who are some of the outside influences that you hear?
- ◆ What is the tone of the inner critic's voice?

Step 3 Set a new timer for 20 minutes and free write about why your critic is trying to protect you from these things.

Step 4 Give your critic a name.

Step 5 Write them a letter in a tone of understanding and compassion, letting them know what messages are no longer needed.

## Activity 2

### Artistic Expression

#### Putting a Name to the Face

Hopefully, putting a face to the name of your inner critic will help you on your inner journey of working with this voice instead of letting it hold you back. Remember to be kind.

**Materials:** Art Mediums of Choice!

Step 1 Use any medium and create a painting or drawing of your inner critic.

Step 2 Title it their name.



## Chapter 5

# Obstacles or Opportunities

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*Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant, there is no such thing. Making your unknown know is the important thing.*

*Georgia O'Keeffe*

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Visual art is a creative expression of the artist's interpretation of the interpersonal relationship of their life experiences. In a piece of visual art, you can get a glimpse into how an artist sees the world. It is possible to ignite places of authentic creative expression by examining and exploring how your perspectives are influenced by your unique experience (race, gender, or cultural upbringing). Understanding how your thoughts and external influences have shaped your internal dialogue can lead to creative and interpersonal breakthroughs. Similarly to meditation, creative expression may hold space to process inner observations of your experiences which have formed your perceptions and perspectives.

This chapter examines how your truths shape your perception of the world and how your perception influences your perspective on life which inevitably affects your creative expression. In the book *Be, Awake, Create*, Younger (2019) writes that where you place your awareness is what you perceive because “the brain is the gatekeeper to our experience,” so we are only seeing a “slice of our reality and filling the gaps with assumptions” (p. 56) creating our own version of the world. Uncovering your unconscious beliefs and perceptions can lead to a fascinating journey as you explore the origin of your unique perspectives. By observing your lens on reality, you can create truly original art. You may find that this deep dive into your inner psyche may lead to project ideas or a theme for a series or provide an opportunity to create works of art for the sole purpose of personal exploration and creative liberation.

**Self-Perception:** In exploring your mindscape, one of the most challenging but insightful places to begin is observing your beliefs about yourself. How do you perceive yourself? Inwardly, do you identify yourself as an artist, a wannabe, or someone who was once an artist? It is wise to note that any label you consider true about yourself influences your thoughts and emotions, which leads you to develop your perspective on how and what you create. It is essential to avoid creating narrow perceptions about yourself and what you make. When you associate your identity with a fixed label, you can experience unnecessary suffering because if your art fails, you also become a failure. It is easy to become trapped in habitual thoughts about "should haves," "would haves," and your limitations. Identify any negative perceptions of yourself and ask them to take the back seat so your creative forces may take the wheel.

**Limiting Habitual Thoughts:** Circumstances in life are ever-changing; therefore, associating with habitual perceptions and perspectives about your creative experience will only hold you back. Fixed perspectives create roadblocks. If your mind falls back on old habits when encountering a challenge, you will limit your opportunity to leave the mundane and embark on a new creative journey. Free yourself from trying to make your piece fit within a style or past series, and you will see that something genuinely authentic can come from what you are experiencing right now. Letting go of attempting to fit your artwork into a mold will open the doors to your evolution as an artist and will welcome creative insight.

**Idea Block:** If a limitation manifests as a lack of ideas, it is helpful to remember that you have a unique bank of life experiences to draw from. Your inspiration can come from the mundane to the extraordinary. Or it can come from viewing the mundane with a fresh and extraordinary perspective. There are many places to find inspiration, from the coffee shop you frequent to the epic vacation you took, or you can scroll through your photos on your phone. Traveling the world is unnecessary if your abilities or means limit you. No matter what hand you are dealt, there will always be limitations. You can increase your access to inspiration by letting go of limiting perceptions and embracing new perspectives. Examining the world you have always lived in from a new perspective may take your art in a new and unexpected direction.

**Comfort Zone:** Many limiting beliefs can be triggered by the awkward and frightening process of leaving the comfort zone. When a creative struggle is interpreted as a block, you may be inclined to perceive it as a failure or an impossibility. Our only certainty in life is that it is constantly changing. Creative potential is limited when we resist these changes to stay in the comfort of old thought processes. However, an artist who can embrace sitting in fear and discomfort has the opportunity to open to new experiences and can welcome unforeseen creative insights without judgment.

**Mental Limitations:** When encountering a problem in artmaking, most artists attempt to solve it by drawing inspiration from something they already know, and if that does not work, they perceive the problem as a limitation. You may experience a negative impact on your creative flow when you hold on to fixed perspectives of limitations in terms of time, money, and ability. Maybe you believe your materials have to be of a certain quality, or you do not have the means or access to your most desired tools. Author of *Place Your Thoughts Here*, Saitzyk (2013), explains that an artist may equate an unfamiliar, uncomfortable space as a block or something wrong. He explains that this is the opportunity to drop habitual mentalities and the precise space where something is about to happen. Unlimited creative possibilities are available when you shift your perception of a limitation as a problem into a creative launching point. The key to unlocking more creative freedom lies in letting go of the idea that limitations are undesirable or frightening.

**Physical Reactions:** When the mind perceives a limitation, the body often responds in an unconscious visceral manner, such as deep sighs of frustration, rolling of the eyes, and perhaps a slumped posture. As a consequence of our physical postures and breathing patterns, we send unconscious messages to our brains which can exacerbate feelings of defeat and a sense of being stuck. The parasympathetic nervous system activates on the long out breath of a sigh, which tells the body to relax (Tang et al., 2015). In this circumstance, a long sigh out may trigger unconscious negative thoughts. As a result, the parasympathetic response can perpetuate a lack of enthusiasm and energy, validating the perspective that the artist should give up. In the future, try noticing and counteracting this physical reaction with an energetic breath and a smile, which encourages excitement and curiosity about how your piece will unfold.

**Training the Brain:** It is possible that you perceive limitations as a dreadful obstacle or even a complete creative block. It takes conscious effort to retrain the brain to find a new perspective on limitations. Habitual reactions and perceptions may stem from neuropathways developed as far back as childhood, which were designed to keep you safe and satisfy your needs (Colzato et al., 2012). These thought processes and reactions to triggers create strong and steady neuropathways in our brains. An analogy would be to compare these habitual thought processes and patterns with a riverbed. A river will create erosion to ensure it continues flowing in the same direction. As time passes, the deeper the riverbed becomes. Changing the direction that a river flows may take years and require a lot of hard work. This process is similar to rewiring the pathways within our brains and is why habitual reactive tendencies are hard to break. When you notice habits that no longer serve your creative endeavors, meet yourself with compassion. You are not alone. This struggle is part of the human experience. Be kind and patient with yourself and see if it is possible to use your art to move through these spaces.

**Moving Beyond Limiting Expectations With Mindfulness and Meditation:** With mindfulness and meditation practice, it is possible to experience less suffering by noticing and letting go of unrealistic expectations while befriending our triggers and limitations (Zabelina et al., 2011). As you gain this clarity and insight, it is possible to acknowledge what is holding you back and what has the potential to move you forward. Once we recognize and understand our outlook on our creative endeavors and let go of resistance caused by unproductive beliefs, we can realize unforeseen potential. However, there is no need to have hard feelings toward your limiting beliefs; your mind created them to protect you from potential suffering. We must acknowledge them and send them compassion to soften their hold to gain the ability to open up to new perspectives and possibilities.

Mindfulness and meditation can help artists understand how their perspectives, bias, and assumptions impact their creative journey for the better or the worse. Using mindfulness and meditation, you learn ways to drop preconceived perceptions and perspectives and meet each passing moment with a fresh and open perspective. Insight gathered through meditation provides an opportunity to wake up, stop sleepwalking, intentionally respond to adversity, and experience more peace and creative freedom. Throughout this chapter, be curious about yourself, and send

yourself compassion while you soften habitual thoughts that may keep you from reaching your full creative potential. The meditation in this chapter will guide you as you acknowledge a creative challenge or limiting perspective and compassionately work with it so new ideas can emerge. The remaining sections of this chapter will include a meditation on letting go with compassion, a collage activity, and reflection questions to deepen your inner exploration. Give yourself permission to let go of the things that no longer serve you and open to a more fulfilling creative experience. Now, with compassion, let go and allow.

# Meditation Practice

<https://eringocinski.wixsite.com/mysite>



## Letting go with Compassion

By practicing this meditation, you can acknowledge a creative challenge or limiting perspective, meet it with compassion, and let go or loosen the hold it may have on you. This practice can cultivate inner space that will allow the flow of creative ideas and insights.

### Settle In

Find a quiet space where you won't be disturbed.  
 Allow yourself to find a posture that is comfortable yet alert.  
 If you wish, you can gently sway from side to side.  
 Find a center point in your balance that feels sure and aligned.  
 If you feel comfortable, close your eyes, or cast a downward gaze.

At your own pace, take a few grounding deep breaths.  
 Notice how it feels as the breath enters your lungs and how every part of your body responds.

Take the next few moments to check-in.  
 What are you bringing to this practice?  
 Allow yourself to release anything you don't need on the out-breath.

### Seeing What's Really There

Without getting caught up in the story, envision a recent roadblock within your art-making.  
 If nothing comes to mind, that's okay.  
 Another direction could be to think of something you would like to create but haven't started.

Simply observe it with a neutral, detached stance, letting go of the idea that it is a problem.

What are you currently perceiving as a creative limitation?

When did you first form this perspective?

What are the roots of this limitation?

Was it influenced by other people, past experiences, expectations, or resources?

What is the unconscious belief that is allowing this limitation to stay?

Notice how you are feeling right now.

Are there emotions such as fear, anger, or anxiety associated with it?

Whatever that feeling is, it's okay, and if you feel no emotion, that's okay too.

Where does the emotion live in your body?

If it feels right, put your hand there for comfort.

With understanding and forgiveness, send yourself some compassion.

Though these limiting beliefs may not serve you, your mind created them to protect you from pain.

Recognize and send your patterns gratitude for their efforts.

If it's possible and seems right for your situation, allow yourself to let it go, and assure yourself that you are okay and that this is no longer serving you.

Breathe in compassion.

And on your out-breath, let go.

In compassion

Out letting go

### **Looking with a New Lens**

When we stop living in our limiting stories, we can open doors to the creative opportunities that exist in the present moment.

How would someone you look up to work with this challenging experience?

Would they have a different attitude or perspective?

Is it possible to turn this creative challenge on its head and look at it in a new way?

Resting in open awareness, let go of trying to create solutions and open to the infinite.

Come back to the breath.

Scan the body.

Notice the sounds and smells in your environment while never fixating on or getting caught up in your thoughts.

Allow your attention to move with ease from one stimulus to another.

How are you feeling now?

Open? Curious? Excited?

Or you still may be feeling stuck, and that's okay.

Becoming a coworker with your creative experience allows you to see challenges as opportunities.

You will begin to experience true creative freedom.

Give yourself compassion for making time to open to a new frame of mind.

Patterns of thought are not easy to change.

So, be patient, persistent, and compassionate with yourself.

### **Coming Back**

Make small wiggles in your body.

Take a refreshing breath in.

Slowly open your eyes.

Take your time and rest in this moment for as long as you'd like.

In my experience, this is the time when insights reveal themselves.



# Create!

## Letting Go

Authentic visual art is a personal and outward expression of an artist's interpretation of their inward experience. It can be challenging to accurately communicate your inner vision, which can often lead to disappointment. As part of this creative exercise, you will practice having limitations through collage and try to view them as exciting opportunities. Notice how working with limited materials opens unforeseen creative ideas. Let go of your expectations for the idea and instead allow **it to come** to life on its own. If you feel stuck or frustrated with the images you are limited to, remember that you have everything you need right in front of you. **You** just have to open your eyes and mind. It is right there! Can't you see it? Now practice responding to limitations with curiosity and wonder.

## Activity

### Collage

**Materials:** Glue, Scissors, Collage Base, and Collage Items

Step 1 Decide what your base will be. My preference is to use heavy-weight paper or cardboard because I enjoy layering. However, you can use anything, even something three-dimensional, such as a lampshade or animal skull.

Step 2 Gather images, printed text, or items of interest.

- ◆ Avoid printing specific images from the computer; instead, use junk mail, photos, magazines, newspapers, things from nature, or old books. There is no need for traditional materials; you could use plastic caps, packaging, cans, or coins.
  - There is something to be said for having few images to work with. This allows you to focus on an exciting opportunity when a limitation presents itself. Use whatever is calling you.

Step 3 There are no rules once you have your materials in front of you; just be open as your image evolves.

# Reflection

- ◆ Did you discover perceptions that are coloring your current experience in life?
  - Were there associated beliefs or perspectives?
- ◆ How do you see these inner and outer experiences show up in your art and creative processes?
  - Positively? And or detrimentally?
- ◆ Did you notice any limiting beliefs?
- ◆ Is there a typical way you react or respond to limitations when you encounter them?
- ◆ Within the meditation, what was your creative roadblock?
  - What is the perceived limitation that gave you this perspective?
- ◆ How do you feel when you consider letting go of this limitation and instead look at it as an opportunity?
  - What emotions come up?
  - What physical sensations arise?
- ◆ Imagine how someone you look up to would have handled the same situation. What might they have done differently?
- ◆ Would it be possible to change your perspective and see your "limitations" as opportunities for creativity? If so, what would your new response look like?

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