

What is meditation good for, anyway...?

Many people believe the purpose of meditation is to relax, to deaden the mind, to escape the frustrations and discomfort of everyday life. Some mediation is like that. For example, that is why I practiced Transcendental Meditation, as taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (<http://tinyurl.com/maharishi-TM>). In my case, it worked for a while but failed to address the root cause of the things I wanted to escape. Better yet, it failed to meet head-on my attempts to escape. This is not the purpose of vipassana practice.

Vipassana is a Pali word that loosely translated means, "insight into the true nature of things." It is the practice of turning our view inward so we can deal directly with thoughts and feelings as they arise. Vipassana practice, as taught by the Buddha, uses meditation to help concentrate the mind. As we sit in meditation, we begin to train the mind to look inside ourselves for the causes of frustration with what happens to us or around us.

Figure A shows how we usually deal with our experiences. When a sense object comes in contact with one of our senses--seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking--feeling and perception almost immediately arise. Feeling consists of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations. The nature of both feeling and perception is a product of a collection of habits and behavioral patterns we've accumulated over a lifetime. Without mindfulness training, we immediately react (volition) to the feelings and perceptions in way that reinforces our habits and patterns... and the cycle continues.

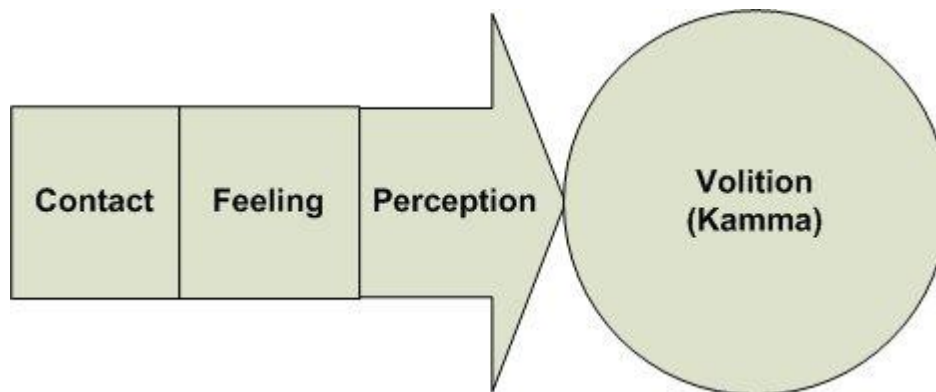


Figure A

When we react to the world in this way, we often speak, act, or think in unwholesome ways; we get stuck in the three defilements of greed, anger, and delusion. Reacting in this way causes harm to ourselves, to others, or to both. But there is a better way.

The Buddha taught that we can stop this cycle through mindfulness. Mindfulness allows us to see the arising of feelings and perceptions, note how they affect us, and then make a conscious choice to act with loving-kindness and compassion. As shown in **Figure B**, it drives a "wedge" between the arising effects of sense contact and volition. The wedge creates a space in which to stop our usual reactions and begin to weaken unwholesome habits and patterns.

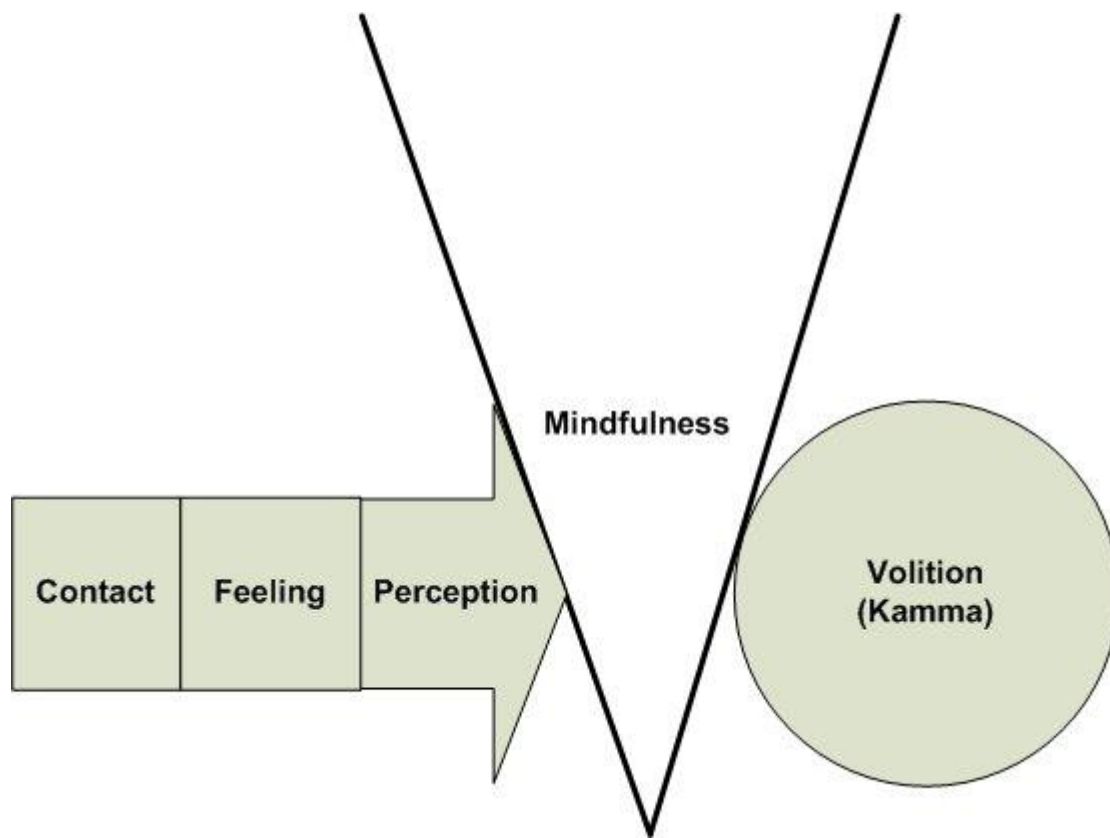


Figure B

As meditation practice deepens, your mind becomes more still and better able to pause before action. But meditation practice alone is not enough. A combination of meditation and daily life practice pushes the wedge deep and incrementally widens the gap. Daily life practice is taking into your daily activities the results and the benefits of meditation. In other words, meditation allows you to see how this process works and helps strengthen mindfulness so you will manage your feelings and perceptions throughout the day--instead of blindly reacting to them.