

## The Power of Mindfulness and Heart

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Dogs are constantly assessing us, to know if they ought to follow our lead and move into the feeling of safety and trust. They track the quality and confidence in our movements, our breathing patterns, our pheromones, our perspiration, and our level of engagement with them.

The way you move is important. Dogs can feel the difference if you are moving from your head, or your heart. When we are breathing comfortably, they feel secure, comforted and more connected. They can also tell when we are stressed, in pain, confused, concerned or worried, because we unconsciously hold our breath. (Ref. Jonathan Rudinger, PetMassage Institute)

When I began my journey to seek mind, body and spiritual peace and happiness – and learning how it all works together as a whole to bring complete balance to our life, I really had no idea the impact this would have on me and all other beings I would come in contact with. The goal, along with my own inner peace, was to have a more connected and ultimately effective outcome with the dogs I would work with.

Like most, I have done quite a bit of reading and watched a lot of documentaries to gain a clear understanding of how to accomplish this inner peace. Although my mind was comprehending this information, it seemed to be a very superficial feeling for me and I wasn't sure if or how I would be able to make the internal connection. It's so easy to get caught up in our daily distractions and stresses, that constantly reminding ourselves to "just let it go" seems practically impossible.

In the midst of this journey a new challenge landed in my path, literally. A nest of baby birds scattered around my yard would soon change everything for me. After an unsuccessful attempt to return them to their nest, I felt it was my responsibility to fight for them and give them a chance to survive. These five babies, only days old, were severely dehydrated and sick. My spouse took three of them and I the other two, and we worked to get them rehydrated. We were both doing our best to care for them, while also trying to read as fast as we could about their symptoms. Then, sadly, my spouse was holding the first baby when it died. I could see the others weren't far behind. Based on everything I was reading, it seemed they were suffering from a yeast infection, both internally and externally. Warm baths in diluted apple cider vinegar to cleanse their skin and rehydrating with a tiny syringe, also filled with acv, were the best I felt we could do for them. Minutes later, another baby my spouse was caring for, died... then, the third.

That's when something shifted in me. That is really the best word I can come up with for what happened. It was like a tunnel vision experience. I didn't see or hear anything going on around me. It was as though the world had stopped. All I know is that I was holding these two lives in the palms of my hands, and in that moment, my whole being became about saving them.

I became aware of every second passing by. I became aware of the water enveloping their tiny body's. I became aware of the color and texture of their skin... and of how their bodies were deflating and dying. It was as though it was all happening in slow motion. Even though my eyes were watching them fade away, something inside of me wouldn't allow me to stop trying. I was physically seeing them die, but deep within me all I was feeling, was life.

I didn't feel sad or anxious... I felt calm and full of love for them. I hoped that if I held them close to my heart, it could help them feel safe and secure. I hoped that they would somehow sense what I was feeling for them, and it would give them the strength and will to fight to live.

Each second, became minutes. The same way I was aware of them dying, I was now witnessing them come back to life... still, in slow motion. Their bodies were beginning to rehydrate. Their skin went from pale to pink... their veins red and full again. I felt love and happiness on a completely different level than I had ever experienced.

With each day they became healthier and stronger. I continue to observe and learn about them. I think when we see birds, or any wild animal in general, we see them as a specific species that all function the same. That isn't the case at all. They very much have their own distinct personalities.

I've also learned about their fears... which seems to be a lot of things! They're afraid of things like, new objects in their environment and bright colors such as, reds and fluorescents. What I've found especially interesting is their reaction to certain sounds.

So, there are "sounds" that they are afraid of, but what I've witnessed has been physical responses to tones in voices and the energy coming from a person. Loud, obnoxious laughing and tense, or emotionally heightened tones in voices, cause them to become aggressive and bite at the person's nose and mouth.

More than anything though, the energy we give off affects them the most... This, ultimately affecting me the most. This is where I began to piece together the things I had read about, with all of my experiences with the birds. I recalled reading about how mindfulness is when you are truly there, mind and body together. You breathe in and out mindfully, you bring your mind back to your body, and you are there. When your mind is there with your body, you are established in the present moment. Then you can recognize the many conditions of happiness that are in you and around you, and happiness just comes naturally. Mindfulness practice should be enjoyable, not work. Like breathing, it takes no effort. Allow your breath to take place. Become aware of it and enjoy it.

During the time you are practicing mindfulness, you stop talking – not only the talking outside, but the talking inside. The talking inside is the thinking, the mental discourse that goes on and on inside. Real silence is the cessation of talking – of both the mouth

and of the mind. This is not the kind of silence that oppresses us. It is a very powerful kind of silence... that heals and nourishes us.

All of this makes so much sense and doesn't really seem hard at all... but when we only know a life of mental chatter, turning it off isn't that easy. So, there I was, at a place where I thought I was doing well and practicing my breathing to calm my tensions and stresses. I quickly learned, with a little help, that I wasn't doing it quite right. I wasn't breathing mindfully. I needed to focus my attention on it. This is my in-breath. This is my out-breath. When you do that, the mental chatter stops. You don't think anymore and you don't have to make an effort to stop your thinking; you bring your attention to your in-breath and the mental discourse just stops. That is the miracle of the practice. You don't think of the past anymore and you don't think of the future. You don't think of anything, because you are focusing your attention, your mindfulness, on your breath. It takes practice, constantly reminding ourselves to just, stop.

For me, apparently it took the help of a little birdie on my shoulder. Or, two little birdie's. They can sense my tension, before I even realize I am tense. If I am feeling stressed, or anxious about something, they let me know by fluttering in my face. If I am upset, or angry, and yelling for my dogs to stop chasing a rabbit, or another dog, the birds will come and bite at my nose and mouth. The same if I am just feeling the anger inside, because perhaps I had a tense encounter with someone. They sense it and let me know. It was during these times, that I learned to breathe mindfully. That is the key... and it changed everything. I became the safe, secure and loving place for these birds. They come to me for comfort when something scares them. They rest against my neck, or my chest over my heart – both where they can feel my heartbeat and it calms them. Mindful breathing quickly became a new way of life for me.

When you breath mindfully, you become aware of your body. The quality of your in-breath and out-breath will be improved. There is more peace and harmony in your breathing, and if you continue to practice like that, the peace and harmony will penetrate into the body and the body will profit.

Breathing in, you are aware of your body. Breathing out, you release the tension in your body. Peace now becomes possible. I was not only seeing how this was affecting my own being, but it was affecting all beings around me.

The coexistence between all of us – my dogs, birds and myself, became a beautiful harmonious dance. The dogs were able to understand how important the birds are, thus, no longer viewing them as prey. And the birds understand that the dogs have their place as well, and learned to maneuver around them. They are learning what different sounds mean, that the others make. They've learned what play is and they actually try to be a part of it. They all love to be loved and just want to be a part of the family. Both teaching the other how to coexist in harmony. None of this though, could have happened without a peaceful and loving environment. Mindfulness.

It is always possible to practice releasing the tension in yourself. You don't have to wait for the right time, or place. It can be practiced many times a day – in the workplace, while you are driving, cooking, washing dishes, or while you're watering the garden. There is no right or wrong time for it.

I walk dogs for other people every day. I've extended my mindful breathing, into mindful walking. Essentially, walking meditation. Every step is enjoyable. Body and mind together, I am completely aware. I am fully alive, fully present in the here and now, able to touch the wonders of life around me. When you walk like that, every step brings healing, peace and joy, because every step is a miracle. My growth throughout this journey has changed my interaction and ability to better connect with the dogs I work with. I make sure to always be aware of my breathing before I engage them. If I am having an "off" day, they instantly know it and our connection will be "off" as well. As mentioned at the beginning of this writing, dogs are constantly assessing us, to know if they ought to follow our lead and move into the feeling of safety and trust. This essentially applies to all animals. It seems people tend to assume the position that the "pet" should just learn to adjust to a life with humans and all of the chaos that goes with it. And for the most part, that is exactly what they do. They try in their own way to let us know when something isn't right, or isn't balanced. The problem is, we don't always pay attention, or we assume it's just something with our pets. But what if, we actually took a step back to observe and listen with mindfulness... and in turn, move with our hearts.

They say that dogs live for the now. They don't live in the past and they don't live for an unknown future. This is true for all animals. And thanks to them, I understand it now. They have shown me that there is nothing more important than the present. That our mere existence is a miracle and a blessing and should be treated as such. And that we should respect, nourish and love it. There are teachers all around us, who can show us the way to a more meaningful and fulfilling life... all we have to do, is listen.



