

# Worksheet 01.04 Observing

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The mindful skill of observing involves attuning yourself to your experiences in the present moment by paying attention to the information your senses are giving you. Sensory experiences occur in the present moment. You cannot see, hear, touch, taste, or smell anything in the past or future. You can only engage in sensory experiences in the now of existence. You do this by observing the information your senses are giving you. When you observe the information coming from your senses you bring your conscious awareness into the present moment, without thoughts or feelings about the past or future.

It's not that you're telling yourself not to think about the past or the future, because telling yourself not to think about it is thinking about it. The more you tell yourself not to think about it, the more you're thinking about it. Instead, you're using the information that your senses are giving you to shift your conscious awareness away from thoughts about the past and the future and towards thoughts about the present moment.

The first step to observing is to focus on one thing at a time. For example, close your eyes for a moment and observe what you might be hearing. Were you aware of these sounds before this exercise called your attention to them?

Now look around you. What do you see in the immediate environment? If you were an artist, and you had to draw the things you see around you, how would you see things differently? What would you notice about the shapes and colors around you? What about their proportions relative to each other? What about how the light and the shadow fall on the various objects that you see?

Now notice your sense of smell. Are there any pleasant aromas in the air around you? What about unpleasant ones? What memories do these aromas evoke?

Direct your awareness now to your sense of touch. What do you notice about your body as you read this? If sitting, how does your body make contact with the chair? If standing, or lying down, what do you notice about how your body interacts with the environment? Is the temperature too hot, too cold, or just right? Is there any tension in your body? Are there any pleasurable sensations? And pain? Any comfort?

Finally, direct your attention to your sense of taste. Unless you are eating or drinking something it may be hard to experience your sense of taste in the current moment; however, you might experiment by taking a few deep breaths. As the air passes over your tongue can you detect any taste to it, however faint? Are you able to taste the changes in the weather? Don't worry if you have trouble tasting the air at first; it's a difficult skill to learn, but it does indicate the level of awareness and sensitivity that can be achieved through observing.

Experiment for a few moments with observing through your senses in this manner. When you feel you are ready, go on to complete the exercises on the next page.

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## Focusing on One Thing at a Time

Negative thoughts tend to come in bunches. Usually when you have one negative thought or feeling, it leads to another, and to another, and so on until you're soon wrapped up in a tangled ball of negative thoughts and feelings. This process is referred to as ruminating. It is also sometimes called snowballing because of the way it works. If you picture a snowball starting at the top of a hill, gaining speed, momentum and size as it rolls down, you will probably have a pretty accurate picture of what snowballing or ruminating feels like to the person experiencing it.

Focusing on one thing at a time is just the opposite of this ruminating or snowballing experience. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, but if you focus on the thousand miles you'll be too overwhelmed to take the first step. The key is to instead focus on the first step, and only on the first step, until it is accomplished. Then focus on the next step, and the next, and so on. Eventually you will find that the thousand miles are over. This is because small change leads to bigger change.

If you find yourself snowballing, the way out of it is to focus on one thing at a time. The first step is to ask yourself, "What is the smallest thing I can do right now to make a difference?" When you've answered that question, go on and do that one thing. Don't worry about anything else until that one thing is accomplished. When it is done, then go on and ask yourself, "What is the next smallest thing I can do that will make a difference?" Then do that thing, and so on until your "thousand mile" journey is done. In the case of feelings or negative thoughts, it may not be necessary to do anything. In fact, sometimes there may be nothing you can do. If that is the case, you may leave doing mode and enter being mode, just noticing the thought or the feeling in the moment. You don't have to follow the thought to the next thought. Just focus on the thought before you.

For this exercise we're going to practice observing in a natural setting.

First, go outside and find a relatively calm outdoor spot where you will be undisturbed for the duration of the exercise.

To begin focusing on one thing at a time, close your eyes take a few deep breaths in this outdoor setting. Continue breathing until you feel calm and centered. When you are ready, open your eyes and focus on the first thing that catches your attention. Practice observing by answering the questions below.

What is the first thing you noticed?

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In observing this thing, is there anything about it you have never noticed before?

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What are the visual characteristics of the thing you noticed? What does it look like? What color is it? What shape? Describe it here:

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What are the auditory characteristics of the thing you noticed? Does it make any sounds? If so, describe them here:

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Are there any aromas associated with the thing you noticed? If so, describe them here:

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Is it possible to touch the thing you noticed? If so, do so now. If not, just imagine what it might feel like to hold this object, and describe these sensations here:

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Is the object edible? If it is, are there any tastes you might associate with it? If so, describe them here. If not, take a deep breath and see if you notice any taste to the air, and describe it:

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Does observing this object in this manner change your experience of it? If so, how?

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Now that you have some experience with observing things outside of yourself, let's go on to observing things inside of yourself. Continue to sit quietly in your peaceful outdoor setting. Take a few deep breaths and notice the first thought that comes to mind. What is that thought?

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Just notice this thought, and this thought alone. If this thought tries to lead you on to more thoughts, just gently return your attention to this thought.

Step back and watch what your mind is doing. Thoughts and feelings are not who you are; they are just processes of the brain. When observing your thoughts in this manner you develop the awareness that you are not your thoughts. You are not your feelings. If another thought comes into your mind during this process, just notice it. It may help to picture your thoughts and feelings like a river. Sometimes negative thoughts and feelings float to the top, and sometimes negative thoughts and feelings float to the bottom. If you find yourself in a part of the river where the negative thoughts and feelings are on the surface, your goal isn't to dam up the river. You're not trying to block the flow of thoughts and feelings. You couldn't even if you wanted to. If you tried to stop your thoughts by building a dam on the river, they'd eventually rise up behind the dam until the dam burst and flooded your consciousness.

Instead, if you find yourself floating in negative thoughts, you don't have to let them wash you downstream. You can make a conscious choice to get out of the river for a moment and allow those thoughts and feelings to float downstream on their own. You don't have to stay in the river and drown. Instead, you can choose to sit on the riverbank and watch them flow by.

Do this now by choosing one thought or feeling to observe. Allow yourself to experience it for as long as you'd like. When you feel you are ready, go on to the next page and answer the questions.

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What was the experience of observing your thoughts and feelings like for you? Did you find it easy or difficult?

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How similar or different was this to the way you usually experience your thoughts and feelings? Why?

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Were you able to avoid the temptation to follow your thoughts and feelings into “snowballing” mode? Were you able to focus on one thing at a time? What might have made it easier for you?

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