

KNOW THYSELF

The Greek philosopher Socrates issued an important directive for living when he said, “Know thyself.” He was inviting us to self-inquiry, which is an essential and ongoing process if we are to live peaceably with ourselves and with others.

For me, this method of self-inquiry has been mindfulness. Buddhist teacher James Baraz describes it this way: “Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasantness without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won’t).”

We might also call this experience “bare-naked awareness.” It invites steadiness and equanimity, and ultimately, with time and practice, a greater sense of peace.

The best way I know to grow in mindful awareness is to be a scientist of myself. I like to think of it this way. In any given moment I can put on an imaginary white lab coat and put my eye to the microscope of my own mind. With great interest, I look in to see what I can see. “Ah, isn’t that interesting?” Purely observing. No judgment. Just interest. I don’t have to analyze myself, find meaning in what’s there, or, in that moment anyway, do something specific about what I’ve found. You can do this process, too.

Continuing on as a scientist of yourself, you may wish to identify what you’ve noticed. “Ah, anger. Isn’t that interesting?” “Ah, jealousy. I see you.” “Ah, self-doubt, there you are again.” We can acknowledge the thoughts and feelings under investigation and do so with a gentle touch—with kindness and compassion because, in your moment of discovery, more thoughts and feelings may arise to urge you to dislike what you’ve found. This non-judgmental, bare-naked awareness allows us to see how very human we really are. We are perfectly imperfect and there can actually be comfort and relief in that!

Mindful awareness can and should begin with the breath to center and stabilize us as we self-observe. (This is why I have included so many breath awareness practices in this guide.) When we stop and take a series of intentional breaths to begin, we give ourselves an extraordinary gift—the privilege of knowing ourselves better.

Self-knowledge is power. If you are aware of your thoughts, aware of your feelings, and especially aware of how the world around you affects you, you can make new choices that are wiser, kinder, gentler.

We must not be afraid of what we’ll discover about ourselves when we stop rushing and look within. By paying kind attention to our innermost dialogue and feelings, we will set ourselves free. Each mindful breath can bring us closer to the truth of our being—to peace.

