

# Mindfulness in Freediving

## **Personal and Professional Background of Clinton Laurence**

Clinton works from his private psychology clinic at Unit 11 151 Cotlew St., Ashmore, Queensland, Australia as a clinical and sport psychologist. He has assessed and treated people in the areas of depression, anxiety/stress disorders, addictions (especially smoking & alcohol), sleep problems, illnesses/disease/rehabilitation problems, relationships, vocational problems, and pain management. For over five years he was a lecturer at Griffith University on the Gold Coast within the School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science where he taught the subjects *Exercise and Sport Psychology*, *Exercise Assessment and Counselling*, *Sports Coaching*, and *Health Psychology*. He has First Class Joint Honours in Psychology and Human Movement Studies from the University of Queensland and a Master of Clinical Psychology from the Australian National University. He is both a Member of the Australian Psychological Society and the Australian Society of Hypnosis, and is a registered psychologist. He has been involved in the martial arts for many years culminating in living in Japan for three years. He has high degree black belts in four martial arts (judo, karate, jodo and aikido), has competed at an international level and has been very successful at state and national levels in judo. Over the past 10 years he has thrown himself into adventure based activities such as bushwalking, kayaking, scuba diving and more recently freediving. He tries to practice engagement and mindfulness in his own life!

## **Introduction**

Mindfulness is the latest trend, research area and treatment approach in psychology but has really been around for hundreds of years in Buddhism and various mind-body disciplines such as yoga, and the martial arts. The purpose of this paper is to define mindfulness, describe the characteristics of mindfulness from the perspective of the athlete and in particular the freediver, describe some techniques for training mindfulness, and finally address the reasons for practicing mindfulness in freediving.

## **What is mindfulness?**

It has been variously defined as “Consciously bringing awareness to your here and now experiences, with openness, receptiveness and interest” (Harris, 2007, p. 164) or “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are” (Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Kabat-Zinn, 2007, p. 47). I would suggest that this is very similar, if not the same, as a better researched concept called flow. This state is best described by a swimmer (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, p. 4):

*When I've been happiest with my performance, I've sort of felt one with the water and my stroke and everything... I was really tuned into what I was doing. I knew exactly how I was going to swim the race, and I just knew I had it all under control, and I got in and I was really aware of what everyone in the race was doing... I was just totally absorbed in my stroke, and I knew I was passing them but I didn't care. I mean it's not that I didn't care; I was going, "Oh, this is cool!" And I just swam and won, and I was totally in control of the situation. It felt really cool.*

I think this description can easily be applied to the perception of the experience of free diving with the qualities of oneness with the water, heightened awareness, control, absorption and lack of critical thinking or non-judgement. The obvious exception to the above swimmer is that there is no free diver with whom to compare yourself to on a line beside you but as we shall shortly see this is

what partly makes free diving special and could in fact contribute to greater mindfulness. For the purposes of this paper I will use the concepts of mindfulness and flow interchangeably.

### ***Characteristics of Mindfulness/Flow***

Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) believe there are nine characteristics or components of flow. I will describe each of these components with reference to freediving.

1. Challenge-skills balance

The essential quality of this component is for the freediver to develop the skills to meet the challenge or demands of the situation. The free diver needs to extend themselves to dive ever deeper or longer. However, if the challenge is too difficult the free diver will simply be anxious. If the dive is too easy it could lead to boredom! Therefore, it is how the free diver perceives the challenge that is critical in triggering the flow state.

2. Action-awareness merging

This is best described as oneness with the movement or total absorption. Movements become effortless, and feel natural. I think it is even possible for the freediver 's body to blend with the water and to become part of it. You are part of the surroundings, the water, and the water triggers not only the mammalian dive response but a greater awareness of a different environment from our everyday reality! The water almost demands our attention.

3. Clear goals

This is the moment by moment awareness of what needs to be done and is very clear in freediving with the twin outcome goals of holding one's breath and diving further/deeper. Of course, the dive can be further segmented into process goals such as the breath-up, duck dive, freefalling, turning, kicking hard at the bottom, and finally floating to the surface. Elite athletes report knowing almost before they perform what the result will be leading to increased confidence.

4. Unambiguous feedback

Freedivers get clear feedback from their own bodies and movements about how they are going which helps them remain in control and persist. In many ways freediving appears to be a simple athletic activity and the outcome is obvious. The freediver gets immediate feedback by their ability to hold their breath.

5. Concentration on the task at hand

The ability to focus and maintain attention on what is required during the dive and not let irrelevant thoughts distract is the hallmark of the skilled freediver. This will be explored in more detail in the next section.

6. Sense of control

The sense of control is so great that athletes report “I can do anything” or “nothing can go wrong”. Of course, the freediver perceives that they have the required skills for the situation or challenge contributing to increased control, greater confidence and lower anxiety.

7. Loss of self-consciousness

The worry component is minimalised with few negative thoughts, and self-doubts. The fear of evaluation and what other people think is reduced or non-existent. I think this could be a special attribute of freediving and one of the few activities of mankind where athletic performance is rarely directly observed and evaluated. Of course, self-consciousness may return when we return to the surface!

8. Transformation of time

The awareness of time (the perennial stressor of modern life) is lost with the athlete’s perception of time either increasing (e.g., with comments like “all the time in the world”) or decreasing (“over before it starts”). I think the transformation of time during static breath holds and freediving is obvious and can be quite disorienting at times and could be a useful

training tool if judiciously applied. Nevertheless, too much of a focus on time can make holding a breath particularly discomfoting.

9. Autotelic experience.

An autotelic experience is enjoyable or pleasurable for its own sake. It's fun! The exhilarating feeling of moving through cool water; as if flying; moving freely in any direction; of being weightless with a sense of peacefulness/quietness/calmness is a particularly appealing aspect of freediving. For a few minutes you are free and the name of freediving is an apt one!

I think the aforementioned discussion is useful in describing what an athlete and a freediver specifically might experience once a mindful or flow state is achieved. However, it is not terribly useful in describing what needs to be done in getting into such a state. The next section focuses on this area.

### ***Training Mindfulness***

The subject of enhancing performance in sport is a comprehensive one and is the subject of many books in the area of sport psychology but I think the following approaches could be the most pertinent and practical for increasing mindfulness in freediving.

1. Focusing on task relevant cues and task demands

Any teaching techniques that encourages the freediver to be more aware of task relevant cues is the most practical method for maintaining concentration and minimising other distracting and intrusive thoughts (e.g., "I have to breath") and reducing unnecessary tension/anxiety levels. What are the task relevant cues in freediving? It depends on the task but for a static breath hold the cues could be: scanning the body and letting go of all tension, observing "pure" contractions without interpretation, feeling the water around the body and simply being part of it.

## 2. Becoming the Observer

Humans have the unique capacity to be able to become the observer of what is happening around them in their environment, their bodies and most importantly in their own heads. A part of us can be separate from what we are actually thinking and feeling, a kind of detachment. How does this work? Choose a discomforting or distressing thought (e.g., “I have to breathe”). Now take this thought and insert the phrase of “I notice/observe I’m having the thought that I have to breathe”. Try this the next time you are in the pool. What difference does this make? This observing self is free of pain, and cannot be hurt in any way. It is with us from birth to death but does not change or judge us in anyway. Becoming the observer helps us to create a space to observe directly events or reality without the interposing thought or interpretation. It is the interpretation that we react to, and not the event itself. Once we start thinking “I mustn’t breathe”, “I have to hold my breath longer”, “I can’t go any further”, we begin to struggle and identify with the thought leading to a vicious downward spiral in thoughts, reactions in our body and ultimately performance. See the work of Dr Russ Harris (2007) for a more in-depth discussion of this point.

## 3. Practice Breathing

This might seem obvious in a course on freediving but breathing is the essential and common ingredient of all forms of meditation, mind-body disciplines and most forms of relaxation therapy in psychology and is often one of the first mindfulness techniques taught! I would argue that breathing is the connection between mind and body and this is what elevates freediving into a mind-body discipline! While the techniques of breathing might be contentious (e.g., see [www.normalbreathing.com](http://www.normalbreathing.com) by Dr Artour Rakhimov for an interesting and thought provoking discussion or the work of Severinsen, 2010 on different breathing cycles and ratios in freediving training) the common elements in my opinion appear to be:

- (i) Single focus concentration on belly or diaphragmatic breathing (to the exclusion of other thoughts).

- (ii) Longer exhalation than inhalation with one breath at a time (to be in the moment).
- (iii) Scanning the body and letting go of tension (especially in face and upper body), especially on the exhalation.
- (iv) Developing a feeling of being centred, calm and at peace (no matter what is happening around you, in your own body or even in your own mind).

It is only possible to be more mindful, to have the space to be an Observer of our own thoughts/reactions, and to focus on task relevant cues to enhance performance if we come from a place of calmness, and being more centred (and not buffeted by the constant stream of often junk thoughts, possibly up to 60,000 thoughts per day!). Refer to the work of Kathleen McDonald (1984) for a description of what she calls stabilizing meditations and how to practice them. From my experience as a clinical psychologist 10 minutes of such breathing can make substantial changes in anxiety/mood levels, the focus of our thoughts and even sensations such as pain and fatigue.

#### 4. Acceptance

I think the most difficult aspect for us humans to train is facing reality, accepting things as they are, and not attempting to change what can't be changed. I mentioned the role of observing our thoughts to create some spaciousness enabling us to choose whether to react to our thoughts or not. Another approach is simply to accept that we will have critical, analytical and sometimes obsessive thoughts but that doesn't mean we need to do anything about them or take action on them. For example, some common thoughts of freedivers might be: (i) I must breathe; (ii) I can't stand this any longer; (iii) What if I can't breathe? (iv) Why am I putting myself through this? (v) I'm going to die!

Acceptance that these thoughts will likely occur is the first step in giving up the struggle with them and trying to push them away or block them out (rarely an effective long term

strategy). They are just thoughts! Perhaps reframe them (an important skill for coping with unhelpful thoughts) as coming from the part of the self-conscious part of the brain that “tricks you” into doing things that you don’t really want to do! Smile and say, “There’s my brain trying to trick me again!”

I think this is one of the most powerful mindfulness lessons in freediving. We have a thought that says “I must breathe” or “I have to breathe” and we don’t act upon it straight away. To breathe seems one of the most compulsory activities of humankind but we learn to accept it as just the first step in holding our breath longer. We learn not to act upon this thought. What other thoughts in our lives can we just accept and let them be without acting upon them in any way?

### ***Why practice mindfulness in freediving?***

I think the answer to this is threefold: (i) It increase freediving performance; (ii) It increases our satisfaction, enjoyment and other positive emotions in freediving; and (iii) It has powerful lessons that can be applied to other aspects of our lives to increase our happiness. I think the first two objectives have clearly been answered in the discussion so far, especially the components of mindfulness and the reports of athletes on optimal experiences in sport.

The work of Csikszentmihalyi (1992) on flow has been shown to exist across many human activities, and this quality of optimal experience has been described by Dr Seligman (2002), the father of positive psychology, as one of the paths to happiness! This is clearly of importance, when most people who visit me in my psychology practice answer “I just want to be happy” but really have no idea how to be happy. Meanwhile the prevalence of depression in our society is increasing with 12% of men and 20% of women suffering major depression in their lives (Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Kabat-Zinn, 2007). This is excluding the more minor mood and anxiety stresses that we all face on a daily basis in 21<sup>st</sup> century life!



It is imperative for our mental health to find an absorbing, or engaging activity that occupies our minds in the present moment and leads to an optimal experience of positive emotions. Freediving is a mind-body activity ideally placed to provide this optimal experience by teaching skills of mindfulness that allow people the capacity to focus attention, to control breathing, to create the spaciousness to become the observer of our own thoughts, and to choose whether to accept and let go or take action to make meaningful changes in our lives.

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