

Excerpt from *APPRECIATIVE MOMENTS: Stories and Practices for Living and Working Appreciatively*, by Edward Jacobson, PhD, January 2008, Tenacity Press.

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Chapter 20

Telephone Meditation: A Mindfulness Practice

For the last few days, I've found myself thinking a lot about telephone meditation. It's been dancing around in my mind lately, so I'm going to follow the scent and see where it leads. Telephone meditation is a mindfulness practice created by Thich Nhat Hanh. The beloved Vietnamese Buddhist monk, [known to followers as] *Thay* (pronounced Tie...) has created a raft of such practices to help facilitate the art of mindful living. [In] *Thay's* own words:

...And when you hear the telephone ringing you can consider it to be the sound of the mindfulness bell. You practice telephone meditation. Every time you hear the telephone ringing you stay exactly where you are (laughter). You breathe in and breathe out and enjoy your breathing. Listen, listen—this wonderful sound brings you back to your true home. Then when you hear the second ring you stand up and you go to the telephone with dignity.

...When I learned this practice from him fourteen years ago, he taught us to wait until after the third ring ...

Instead of grabbing the receiver on the first ring (or pressing the speaker button on the console) and barking "Hello!" or "Yes?" you simply let the phone ring. You watch your breath and come home to yourself—the self you have lost sight of by getting caught up in your activity of the moment. During the first ring, don't check e-mails, don't clip that nasty cuticle, and don't open that interoffice envelope staring up at you. Instead, follow your breath as it comes in, and follow it as it exits your body. Repeat the same pattern on the second ring: one breath in, one breath out. As *Thay* does in the quotation above, you might say a *gatha* (pronounced gah-ta): a short, prayerful expression, such as ... "May this conversation be for the benefit of all beings." If that's too large a sentiment for you, then try "May we find common ground." Or make up your own.

...Smile as you pick up the receiver. In fact, smile as you reach for the receiver in the first place. Here's why. The 297 muscles (really, 297 of them) involved in creating our

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smile tell the brain that we're happy, and the message gets transmitted to the caller as we issue our smiley greeting. The caller senses the smile in our voice. You see, our brains don't know that we're deliberately making our faces smile. As brilliant as it is about so many things, the brain can't distinguish whether (a) something external has made you happy, (b) you're putting on a smile because you think it's a good mindfulness practice, or (c) you're overmedicated. All it knows is "Alert! Smile detected down below! Apparently, I am happy!" And you place the caller in a better frame of mind because, instead of barking or droning our greeting, you've sonically [welcomed] the person on the other end of the line.

Try it for yourself... It will launch the conversation in such a way that things almost inevitably go better because of it. Case in point: After I handwrote part of the draft of this chapter, my phone rang. I practiced telephone meditation. I let the first two rings go by, followed my breath, and smiled and picked up the receiver before the third ring. Darned if it didn't work! I felt so calm, so eager to hear the caller's voice. I truly believe it got us off to a great start. Interesting side note: my client on the other end of the phone began the conversation with, "Hi, Ed. I've been thinking a lot about meditation lately." This completely blew me away!

I don't do telephone meditation often enough for my own well-being, and that of my callers. It's often said in education circles that you teach a subject in order to learn it. Maybe that's why I've been driven to write about this topic: to come home to myself, as Thay phrases it, by coming home to telephone meditation and other mindfulness practices that I've let languish. And coming home to oneself is a phrase that has such meaning for me that it forms a core element of my work: to bring people home to themselves. I can't very well do that if I'm not at home in myself, can I?

... Plan to get home to yourself more often. It will benefit not only you, but also everyone you encounter—even telemarketers! You see, the deep ease you exude when you're at home in yourself will be contagious for other people, and they will interact with you and others in a more spacious manner. It's an example of a virtuous cycle. And because what goes around comes around, it will come back around to you. It works that way.