

## Zen Teaching & Teaching Zen: 5 Mindfulness Exercises for Educators



### 1. Mindfulness begins on the morning commute

The exact moment you transition from “you-you” to “teacher-you” is somewhat ambiguous, but important to reflect on. What if you were to **bring mindfulness to this transitional period** as you make your morning commute? As you drive, bike, ride the train, take note of your physical environment. What does it look like? Where are you mentally? Are you already in the classroom? If you are, why? Are you paying an overdue credit card bill? Are you annoyed by the traffic?

Now ask yourself this: **How would I usually respond** to this situation? How am I responding to it now? The more in tune you are with the relationship between your inner experience and outer environment, the **more skillful you will become at managing that relationship when you need to**. If you thought, hey, this activity can be used both inside and outside of the classroom, you are exactly right.

### 2. Stop everything before you begin your day

Most of us have a set routine when we get to school: Pour the third cup of coffee, turn the computer on, respond to a couple of emails, respond to a few papers—the ones you kept shuffling to the bottom of the pile last night. **Do these activities have a clear beginning and end?** In other words, do you end up typing three or four concluding sentences or reading one final paragraph while your students trickle in?

It’s tempting to squeeze the juice out of every moment before “it” really begins, isn’t it? But there’s a costly tradeoff. Sure, you may have gotten through one more email, but did you notice the **energy, demeanor, attitude, vibe of your students** as they trickled in? Did you greet each student by name and say hello? Did they say hello to you? Whether or not you know it, you are incredibly adroit at reading body language...take advantage of this skill. **If the first time you become mindful of the classroom dynamic is during attendance, you’ve missed a lot of valuable information about them.**

### 3. Starting Class

OK. So you’ve made your morning commute; you went through your rituals (coffee, email, Facebook, prep); you’ve “read” your students as they entered the classroom. Now what? How do you begin the class in a mindful way? Let’s say it’s Friday. Your

students are a bit more lively than usual. How do you capture their attention? How do you compete and meet their energy level? You don't.

**Save your energy by trying some of these techniques:**

- Quietly walk over to the light switch and flick them on and off
- Walk over to your computer, slowly turn up the volume on, oh, how about Chopin's "Nocturne for Piano, No. 8 in D flat Major." This will silence them.
- Begin by talking about a random, off-the-wall experience you had. Without asking for their attention, pose a riddle or read a short news clip. In our experience, the stranger and more amusing it is, the better.
- Pull out an object that is associated with the lesson, hold it up and start looking at it. Ask your students to tell you what they see; then ask them why you brought it.

**4. Are you mindful of what's working? Are you mindful of what's *not* working?**

There are deadlines. There are goals. There are administrators and parents we have to answer to, so it can be a temptation to push through an activity, a discussion, a lecture, whatever, even when something clearly isn't working.

When this happens, **try stopping and say, "Hey, something's up.** How is everyone feeling right *now*?" This may surprise your students the first or second time it happens. If that happens, describe to them **what you are seeing** (or *think* you are seeing); tell them **how you are interpreting that behavior**; then ask them **if your interpretation of that behavior is accurate.**

Here's another idea: When something *is* working, why not stop what you're doing to fully take it in and experience it? Then, at the end of class (or what the heck, try it while it's happening), share your observations with your students and vice versa.

**5. What's 5 minutes, really?**

The way you *start* and *end* the day sets the tone for your classroom experience. After you take attendance, **take the first (or last) 5 minutes of class** to ask your students a question about something—anything, really. Maybe you have a current event you'd like to share with your students. Maybe you have an anecdote or a joke, or you simply wish to know how their weekend was. Go around the room and have your students tell you what they did or what they want to do next weekend. Once everyone has spoken, **tell them something you did or plan on doing.**

You may already know this, but we're continually (and pleasantly) surprised by how curious students are about **our lives outside the classroom.** When we have a relationship with our students, they will want to know where we go, where we eat and what movies we like. It's cool to mention a restaurant or a movie in class and have your students come back on Monday and tell you that they ate at the same place or rented the same movie simply because you recommended it.

*Source: <http://info.marygrove.edu>*