




Finding *Flow* in Your Studio

ONE PSYCHOLOGIST AND
3 ARTISTS ON THEIR JOURNEY
WITH MINDFULNESS

BY GIGI ROSENBERG



I imagine my surprise last summer when I arrived at the Tin House Writers Workshop, a week-long program for “serious” writers, and noticed a class on mindfulness meditation as the first offering on day one.

Having been an on-again, off-again meditator, I showed up and met Mark Miller, psychologist and mindfulness teacher, who led meditations and talks every morning all week. In these sessions, I was reminded how much meditation helps the creative process. After all, if I can’t stay at my writing desk because my mind keeps calling me away, then how am I ever going to make the work, and re-make the work, and edit it once again so I can create something deep and good? No amount of marketing is going to help if I don’t have what it takes to go through the discomfort of creating.

One day, Miller talked about flow — that state when you lose track of time and there’s nothing between you and the art you’re creating. He explained how meditation can encourage that state. After the workshop ended, I tracked him down and invited him to share his wisdom about meditation and flow with *Professional Artist* readers. Then, I interviewed three artists (Pam Comeau, Elley Li and Margaret Galvin Johnson) who meditate regularly and asked them to share the benefits this practice brings to their creativity and businesses. Listen in.

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igi Rosenberg: How can mindfulness meditation help an artist with their creative process?

Mark Miller: Mindfulness gives us direct access to our experience of life. It not only helps us to fully experience pleasant things, but it allows us to be with and tolerate the difficult, unpleasant things. If access to our full lives is not fuel for the creative process, I don't know what is. Think about all the ways we distract ourselves: Netflix, drinking or getting high, sleeping, shopping and many others. All of these things are fine in themselves, but using them to hide from things that are unpleasant leaves us with little of our lives lived. And the un-lived life does not lead to expressive art. Whatever you can let yourself experience, you can allow to flow into your art.

GR: How can an artist benefit from mindfulness meditation?

MM: Giving the searching, anxious brain a break can lead the intuitive, creative mind to have more of a say. When we slow down and pay attention to what our hearts, minds and bodies present to us, we learn about ourselves. There's a stillness that comes from not judging our experiences and ourselves for having them. When we stop running around, trying to avoid and fix the unpleasant or desperately hold onto what we desire, we connect with ourselves, and begin to know what we have to offer the world. It is in our own vulnerability to our lives that we begin to know ourselves through this compassionate and appreciative gaze.

Mindfulness enhances our concentration abilities. With concentration, we can stay engaged longer without being distracted by internal or external events. It also has a social payoff. We can attend to loved ones and clients

longer and more fully. Instead of just waiting for our turn to talk, concentration and mindfulness can lead to empathetic and compassionate responses to others.

GR: How has your meditation practice affected/helped your creative process?

Pam Comeau: The more frequently I practice, the better I become at observing my mind. Often in the middle of a meditation session, when I am watching my thoughts, I will have images and ideas just come to me. Creativity comes from a deep place in our consciousness, and meditation allows my mind to visit this deep place.

Margaret Galvin Johnson: My artwork is built on my meditation practice. Meditation informs me in not only what I paint but who I paint about, the colors I use, the direction I take, and the subjects I choose to paint.

What meditation has changed for me is that I'm much more focused on my priorities while

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~ Pam Comeau



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[2] *Icelandic Poppy*, 2017, by Margaret Galvin Johnson. Oil on Wood Panel, 36" x 36". Copyright © 2017 Margaret Galvin Johnson. Used by permission of the artist.



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allowing for some fun and spontaneity. I am much calmer and the projects that matter to me move forward with more ease. It makes me feel more expansive in my outlook and more connected to what matters not just in my studio but in my life.

Elley Li: I immigrated from Hong Kong to Canada and changed my career from finance to photography five years ago. I always thought I could not paint or draw. During this life transition, I started meditating. One day after meditating, I had the desire to paint. I got my ink and brush out and I found myself doing Zen painting, which I had never done before. That was the first time in my life I found that I could paint freely. With time, I started to realize that meditation helped me center myself, relax and let go of control. Meditation opened a new door for me, which I'd never imagined existed, and then I dared to push it open.

GR: What does a meditation practice involve? What is the formal practice?

MM: A strong meditation practice has two elements:

formal and informal. Formal practice involves selecting a time and place to do something specific with your mind, such as following the breath. Formal practice is done either alone, away from the distractions of business, family, pets and so on, or with a group that is also committing that time to practice. This is where we simply watch our experience unfold, even if strong and uncomfortable emotions or thoughts arise. It's an experimental space where we expand our window of tolerance to include more and more. It's where we intentionally build feelings of loving kindness and compassion for ourselves and others.

Formal practice lasts as little as five minutes or as long as several hours. This is where we learn about our depths and our strengths, as well as our fears and habits to avoid them.

GR: What does your meditation practice involve?

PC: Four years ago, I realized the benefits it was delivering and set the intention to practice daily. To have a quick and quiet place to go, I bought a tent for the back yard, (which is replaced or repaired every year) and I go to this tent,

³ *Status is Imaginary*, 2017, by Pam Comeau. Oil on canvas with gold, silver and bronze leaf, 28" x 38".
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“ When the flow state happens while painting, it’s as if I am one with the art. ~ Pam Comeau



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4 *Daughters of Mother Earth*, 2017, by Pam Comeau. Oil on canvas, 30" x 30". Copyright © 2017 Pam Comeau. Used by permission of the artist.

rain or shine, freezing or scorching weather, for 30-45 minutes every single day. I have winter sleeping bags for 20 degrees below, and ice packs for 28 degrees above.

MGJ: My meditation practice involves starting in a simple comfortable sitting position where I close my eyes and breathe slowly. Sometimes I'll use a mantra if I need help in refocusing on the moment. If I think too much, I just simply get back to the breath. It's not at all complicated or forced. After 15-20 minutes, I slowly open my eyes and carry on with my day.

I do not expect a specific outcome, but often I feel relaxed and renewed. Afterward, in an unstressed manner, it shapes how I go about doing the work. It's not about the pressure of creating a masterpiece. It helps me realize I have the power to structure my day however I want, and I don't have to act on every idea. It gives me the space to distill my thoughts and I make better decisions about my art practice because of it.

EL: I do meditation, mindful walking and write Chinese calligraphy of Buddhist text. I meditate 40 minutes to one hour in the morning and a few short sessions of 10 minutes whenever I feel I need it.

GR: Is formal practice enough?

MM: Formal practice is not enough. We also need to practice when we experience difficulty, or maybe even joy, in the moment. Our formal practice powers our informal practice through self-knowledge and stillness. When we experience difficulty, we use informal practices to create space to respond to events instead of reacting.

This responsiveness looks at our reactive urges and lets those urges pass so that a thoughtful and compassionate course of action can be generated (if needed). In informal practices, you step away and check-in with your emotions and thoughts that arise during a difficulty. It might be that you watch an urge to use a substance or to sleep in the middle of the day as it rises and passes away without giving in to it. Informal practice can also be experiencing the world as you walk or drive through it, noticing both the beauty and the ugliness.



GR: What are flow states and how does meditation affect those?

MM: Flow states happen when we unleash our bodies and minds to rise to a challenge unhindered by our internal monologue or strong emotions. Muscle memory is allowed to do what it knows to do, and it's applied to the challenge reflexively and nimbly by a mind focused on the task. They're often experienced as time slowing down, having a wide view that permits options and opportunities to be seen and recognized instantaneously, and then a sense of almost watching the body follow through with the unspoken intention to act.

Two discrete sets of activities can come together to create flow states. One is practice. Practice is the activity of repeating an intentional action until muscle memory makes it second nature. Whether it's shooting hoops or shaping clay, practice ingrains skills and makes them available upon demand. The other is the application of mindfulness. If we can be present in the moment, instead of living in the future or the past, we become quickly responsive, solving problems with and exploiting opportunities with practiced expertise instead of worry and hesitation.

GR: How have you experienced the flow state? Was it enhanced by your meditation practice?

PC: When all distractions are gone, and my attention is fully pinpointed, that feels like a flow state, and I am very happy whenever this experience happens! When I am meditating with this level of concentration, I know that I am on the right track. When the flow state

Meditation from Mark Miller

Find a comfortable seated position. Ideally your feet and knees would be below your hips.

Close your eyes, if you're comfortable doing so.

Find that part of your body where you feel your breath most prominently. It could be the edges of your nostrils, the tip of your nose, your upper lip, or in the expansion or contraction of your abdomen. Once you locate it, lock in that choice, and don't change it for the duration of the exercise.

Simply rest your attention on the spot you've selected. When your mind wanders, gently, without judgment, bring your awareness back to that spot.

Mind wandering is not a failure, it's an inevitability, so don't judge it. Instead, try being grateful for noticing your mind has wandered.

You can set a timer for 10 minutes (or more or less)

The Interviewees

■ **Mark Miller**, clinical psychologist, is a teacher at Mindful USC and InsightLA. He has been a meditator for over 25 years and has practiced in both the Tibetan (Kagyu) and Insight traditions. He was trained as a mindfulness teacher by Trudy Goodman in the Teacher Development Group at insightLA and by The Center for Mindful Self Compassion. Miller is deeply committed to sharing the power of mindfulness to ease human suffering. For details about his teaching, contact mark.i.miller@gmail.com.

■ **Pam Comeau** (pamcomeau.com) painted for fun for two and a half decades until, in 2013, she decided to pursue an art career. She has exhibited in group shows at Montreal Art Center, Montreal Yes Art exhibit, Super Wonder Gallery in Toronto and Galerie Vanasse in St. Lambert. In 2015, she was a featured artist in Manhattan Arts International and won the Dynasty Brush company competition. In 2017, she won the Art Kudos Award of Distinction.

■ **Margaret Galvin Johnson's** (margaretgalvinjohnsonstudios.com) work is mostly autobiographical after she went through significant adversity early in her life. Her new series of paintings honor her mother. Her meditative and studio practice builds integrity into her choices and actions. Forgiveness and self-compassion are key components in her work and helps her find a new and brighter perspective on her place in the world every day.

■ **Elley Li** (elleyli.com) is a self-taught abstract painter using a variety of materials including ink, watercolor, gouache, oil pastel and acrylic on rice paper, watercolor paper, glass and canvas. She combines her Chinese philosophy, experience working in a Japanese company and her art education in Canada to create her mixed media art. She's exhibited in Canada and China.

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MGJ: The flow state happens in my studio while painting more than in my sitting meditation practice, but I sometimes get the feeling of timelessness in meditation. Time will go very quickly. There is a sense of real freedom there. The more I meditate the more I achieve that feeling of being present in the moment and that is all we really have.

EL: I do not paint everyday as I paint terribly when I force myself. But I can paint nonstop for hours and days when I am in the flow. I use the floor as my painting table which allows me to kneel down to breathe and concentrate before painting and move freely. I incorporate meditating into my life to feel good, not to get something out of it.

GR: How can you get started with meditation?

MM: Trying meditation can be as simple as reading directions in a book (see sidebar for a meditation from Miller), downloading a trustworthy meditation app (see sidebar for resource suggestions) to your phone, or finding a local meditation center.

The best and easiest way is to make a commitment. Maybe it's just 10 minutes one time per week or per day. It doesn't matter how long or how often. Use an app with recorded meditations, find videos of trusted teachers and make a commitment to try it for a month. Try sitting with a

group in your area, if available, and notice whether you prefer meditating alone or with others. Use that preference to bolster your practice.

Mindfulness meditation has what's

known as a dose response curve; which means the more you do it, the more effect you get. Also, note that meditation has benefits whether the meditation on any given day feels "good" or "bad," as long as the posture or other factors are not giving you pain.

GR: How has this practice affected your business practice?

PC: Mindfulness has made me more interested in the act of creation than in the feeling of being accomplished. This is because mediation has grown my awareness of being connected to everyone else, so my competitive

nature has been decreasing as my loving-kindness grows. This easygoing attitude actually makes the business side of my career better. I still sell and promote myself, but without the stress that comes from feeling separate. **PA**

Recommended Reading & Apps

- *Real Happiness*, by Sharon Salzberg
- *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* by Joseph Goldstein
- *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *How to Meditate*, by Pema Chödrön
- Mindful USC, is an App that Miller helped create for the University of Southern California.
- Headspace
- Stop, Breathe & Think

Gigi Rosenberg is an author, artist coach and editor of Professional Artist. She wrote The Artist's Guide to Grant Writing (Watson-Guptill) and coaches artists to help them find funding, blast through creative blocks and launch vibrant marketing plans. Follow her on Twitter @gigirosenberg or on Facebook at GigiRosenberg/Author. To download the free 5 Steps to Your Elevator Speech, visit gigirosenberg.com.