

THE POWER OF NATURE

Could mindfulness really be the key to happiness and saving the planet? **Trail** investigates.

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Our expert: **Claire Thompson**

Passionate about mountains and wild places, Claire is the author of two books on mindfulness and facilitator of Mindfulness in Nature workshops and holidays. She also works for conservation organisation BirdLife International.

Allowing senses to quiet minds on the shores of Derwent Water.

Before you turn the page thinking ‘mindfulness’ is not for you, you may be surprised to find out that you are already a little more in tune than you realised.

Consider these questions:

- 1.) Does walking in the great outdoors always make you feel better?
- 2.) Does being in nature give a renewed perspective on your worries?
- 3.) Do you appreciate the little things more when out in the hills – from birdsong to the warmth of the sun on your face?
- 4.) Does escaping to the mountains somehow reconnect you to something primal and important that society seems to have forgotten about?

My guess is that most of your answers are “yes”, which means not only are you already open to the concepts of mindfulness, but you are already half way there. And according to our expert, Claire Thompson, there are huge benefits in choosing to harness that connection to the senses, which are enhanced when we are walking in nature, as we learned...

INTO THE UNKNOWN

We had driven away from the Trail office and into the glorious sun-drenched valley of Borrowdale in the Lake District to meet Claire. Our mindfulness expert was far from ‘far out’: she was in fact very down to earth, articulate, and well, just lovely.

The plan was for Claire to lead us on one of her mindfulness in nature walks to introduce us to the benefits of the practice for us hillwalkers.

Setting out towards Derwent Water, she explained mindfulness is a natural skill that has been left behind by modern life. It enables us to consciously choose to pay attention to the direct experience of our bodies and senses, rather than allowing our thinking minds to run the show. “After quite an academic upbringing, I found that I was in my head too much. I realised that being in nature effortlessly took me out of my head and into my senses. I felt at my happiest and most relaxed when in nature,” Claire said.

THE MODERN MIND

Claire explained how we have evolved from hunter-gatherers, where fear played a natural part in keeping us alive. To survive, we had to be alert to danger and in tune with the natural world. Our brains evolved accordingly, as threat-detecting problem-solvers which enabled us to survive by gaining access to resources such as food and territory.

The evolution of our conscious minds gave humans great creativity and ability to innovate. But it has also led to problems in our modern society, where we spend precious little time in nature and wild surroundings, and we no longer generally have to worry about survival. As a consequence, stress, depression and anxiety in both adults and children have

the heat of the sun released a soothing smell from the pines. Birds sang in stereo from every angle. Taking in the gorgeous Lakeland scenery in one deep breath, it seems daft saying it now, but my eyes actually welled up a little. The chattering of my mind had been quietened and replaced by a joy of just how good it felt to be alive.

The mountains always made me feel a deep pleasure, but it was like opening the door wide open. “You don’t have to sit cross-legged to be at one with the world,” said Claire. “Being in the hills effortlessly takes us out of our thinking minds, but actively practicing mindfulness in nature can take this experience to the next level.”

We reached the rippling waters of Derwent, de-booted and peeled off sweaty socks. Paddling in the shallows, Claire asked us to feel the grounding pull of the earth’s gravity through our feet. To notice the sensation of the cool water around our ankles and the gravel underfoot. Then to quietly scan our whole bodies from head to foot, feeling the breath go in and out, to acknowledge any feelings without judging.

In a way,

mindfulness is about reconnecting with the natural world and experiencing it to its full potential, but as Claire was showing us, it’s also about using it to create a powerful “stop” – to give a little distance and perspective by moving our attention away from our thinking minds for just a moment by concentrating on our senses.

ALL ABOUT THE JOURNEY

So far, our mindfulness walk had involved a lot of relaxation. But with boots back on, we headed towards our mountain fix for the day. Cat Bells is just a hill really, but it punches well above its weight, with mountain views as good as any in the Lakes, and a steep rocky crest that makes it feel much more majestic than its 451 metres would suggest.

With heads down, we began our usual march to the top, before Claire stopped us. “In our focus to get to the



It was hard not to feel a child-like joy in the glorious Derwent Fells.



“OUR INNATE BOND WITH NATURE IS BEING FORGOTTEN AND WE ARE LOSING OUR ABILITY TO EXPERIENCE LIFE WITH OUR SENSES RATHER THAN OUR MINDS”



top we forget about the journey and miss so much,” she reminded us. She encouraged us to again walk in silence, noticing every moment of the unfolding journey, appreciating each new angle and the opening panorama. She encouraged us to feel the discomfort of the heat and exertion of the climb, but to not judge; to acknowledge any interrupting thoughts but to just let them float past. And then, a strange revelation occurred.

OUR THOUGHTS ARE NOT THE TRUTH

Climbing that hill, with Claire’s insight, I realised that she was right. The experience we have on the hill, or of life in general, is highly influenced by our judgment of it. Our minds are constantly making assessments.

“You are not your thoughts. Thoughts are not truth. Our direct experience is not good or bad – that is the judgement that you put on it, which in turn affects its impact on you. We can choose to let these judgements go,” explained Claire.

Pondering this new perspective was liberating. An increased awareness meant that it could be possible to harness the mind to empower ourselves; to train our minds to not get absorbed in unhelpful thought patterns, but instead create a mindful “stop” and think in ways that are

more positive and helpful to us.

In Claire’s book she quotes John Ruskin (1819-1900 – artist and philanthropist), who says: “Sunshine is delicious, rain is refreshing, wind braces us up, snow is exhilarating, there really is no such thing as bad weather, only different kinds of good weather.” Quite pertinent for positive-thinking British hillwalkers!

BACK TO NATURE

Before long, we had reached the top of Cat Bells. We languished in this perfect place for way longer than we normally would. It was indulgent and, dwarfed by the 360° spectacle, we soaked in as much of the experience as possible to take home.


“Standing in a landscape of this scale gives you a sense of perspective. The silence is stunning and the feeling of insignificance is reassuring in that all the stuff in your head just doesn’t seem that important anymore,” said Claire.

But as well as insignificance, there was also an undeniable sense of being an integral part of something much larger than ourselves; of being part of the natural world. “The definition of nature in the dictionary separates humans and nature. But we are nature. Our bodies are made of the same stuff and we’re related to all the living things around us... When I feel isolated or lonely, being in nature

helps me come back to this sense of belonging,” said Claire.

Being mindful of nature is also crucial to the survival of our planet, according to Claire. “It’s dangerous to lose sight of our innate connection with the planet that provides for us. Nature has become a commodity to exploit – and if we are nature, then the damage we do to it, we do to ourselves,” she said. “Rational arguments are not enough to convince people to care about the planet. I think being in and experiencing nature with our senses and our hearts is what matters. People protect what they care about.”

SECRET TO EVERYTHING?

We finally dragged ourselves away from the small but perfect summit, and after a quiet day of contemplation, we were energised by all we’d learned and experienced. I always knew the hills had healing powers, but I couldn’t help but think, what if everyone just took a little bit more time to pay attention to the whole experience of nature, and then transferred a little of that serenity and love back into everyday life? I’m pretty sure that the world would not only be a happier place, but we’d have a fighting chance of protecting the planet for future generations with a renewed appreciation of our reliance and connection to it. 

FAST-TRACK TO MINDFUL HILLWALKING

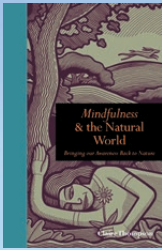
- Take moments of silence
- Open all your senses to your surroundings
- Feel the grounding pull of gravity through your feet
- Scan your body from head to foot, noticing how it feels
- Be open to child-like playfulness, take off your shoes, have a dip in the lake, run around like a loon!
- Stop, sit, take time to appreciate and enjoy
- Acknowledge your thoughts but let them pass – imagine yourself



on a surfboard, riding over your emotions, rather than being consumed by the wave

■ Be in the present – focusing on the journey, not the destination

■ When you are back within the constructs of modern life, visualise your happy place; how it smells, what you can hear, how it feels, what you can see... take a bit of mountain home with you!



Find out more in Claire’s book *Mindfulness and the Natural World* or go to www.mindfulness-of-nature.com

For the full experience Claire is running a week’s holiday in the alpine wonderland of Austria on 9-16 June 2018. www.tinyurl.com/y8ysnhoa for more information.