The Mindfulness Sampler

Shambhala Authors on the Power of Awareness in Daily Life
THE MINDFULNESS SAMPLER

Shambhala Authors on the Power of Awareness in Daily Life

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CONTENTS

Introduction v

Happiness and Peace Are Possible 1
  Thich Nhat Hanh

The Liberating Practice of Mindfulness 19
  Jack Kornfield

Not Causing Harm 33
  Pema Chödrön

The Practice of Ordinary Life 41
  Jan Chozen Bays, MD

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness 61
  Chögyam Trungpa

Mindfulness in Relationships 101
  David Richo

Work’s Invitation to Wake Up 119
  Michael Carroll
Contents

Raising Mindful Kids  133
  Eline Snel

Mindfulness and Addiction  145
  Lawrence A. Peltz, MD

Mindful Communication  171
  Susan Gillis Chapman

Further Readings  197
“Life is accessible only in the present moment.” This revolutionary teaching of the Buddha, as emphasized by the great Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, is the hallmark of the mindfulness movement—and it is taking the world by storm. Mindfulness, or the simple practice of becoming aware of what is happening in our lives, has long been at the heart of the Buddhist tradition as the quintessence of spirituality. But it isn’t just for Buddhists! Over the past few decades, clinical research in the West has also demonstrated that mindfulness practice can impart numerous practical benefits to truly anyone, including improved immune health, better focus, and reduced stress and anxiety, just to name a few. And through these pioneering efforts, today mindfulness teachings have reached out beyond the confines of the meditation hall and have begun to permeate every aspect of our culture—from medicine to business, parenting, eating, and so much more.

As a way of introducing readers to its contemporary practice, Shambhala Publications is delighted to offer this short eBook of selections from mindfulness books by some of the most prominent figures in the field. If you’re looking to learn
more about what mindfulness is and how it might benefit you, this is the perfect place to start. And if you’re already familiar with mindfulness teachings and versed in the practice, here you will find some of the newest contributions to the literature alongside beloved classics.

The first five chapters offer an explanation of all the fundamentals of mindfulness—what it is and how it can be nurtured in our own lives—especially as it has been classically taught in the Buddhist traditions. In “Happiness and Peace Are Possible,” Thich Nhat Hanh describes mindfulness as a healing miracle—one with the power to liberate us from struggle and unearth in us a happiness that we never before thought possible. Jack Kornfield focuses on this same liberating aspect in the chapter from *Bringing Home the Dharma* that follows, and he outlines four key principles for transforming the difficulties in our lives into opportunities for tenderness and joy. In “Not Causing Harm,” Pema Chödrön identifies mindfulness as the foundation for nonviolence and the means to creating a peaceful, enlightened society. Zen teacher and pediatrician Jan Chozen Bays clears up many misunderstandings about mindfulness practice and introduces useful exercises for instilling mindfulness in the activities of ordinary, everyday life. Finally, Chögyam Trungpa offers a thorough explanation of what are called “the four foundations of mindfulness,” most especially in the way that mindfulness is cultivated through meditation practice.

The chapters that follow discuss the application of mindfulness to some of life’s most difficult challenges. David Richo presents ways in which we can bring mindfulness into our relationships by becoming attentive to the emotional states of others and truly present in their lives. He also offers insights into how mindfulness can help us cultivate personal integrity
Introduction

and more holistic well-being throughout adulthood. In a chapter from his book *Awake at Work*, Michael Carroll teaches how to engage work with attentiveness and openness, ultimately leading to newfound contentment in our professional lives—no small thing when most spend a third or more of each day on the job. In a passage from her book *Sitting Still Like a Frog*, Eline Snel shows how mindfulness practice can benefit children just as much as adults, and teaches parents a variety of techniques for raising peaceful, respectful, and happy kids. Lawrence Peltz, MD, discusses ways to overcome addiction by deepening our awareness of the addictive process and treating suffering at its fundamental root—including a useful introduction to MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) training. And Susan Gillis Chapman shows how mindfulness can help us become better communicators and the extraordinary boon this confers to our emotional lives.

At the end, you will find a list of further readings for you to explore, comprised of many of the books on mindful living available from Shambhala Publications. But it is by no means exhaustive. For details on our full collection of mindfulness books and much, much more, visit Shambhala.com and discover for yourself what might suit your interests most.

From the origins of our company more than forty years ago, it has been our deepest wish that the books we bring to you might nurture greater happiness, freedom, and well-being—and perhaps contribute in some small way to a more sane and peaceful world. We hope that you enjoy these readings and that the teachings offered here might prove beneficial to you in your own life.

JOHN GOLEBIEWSKI  
Editor  
Shambhala Publications
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THE MINDFULNESS SAMPLER
Every twenty-four-hour day is a tremendous gift to us. So we all should learn to live in a way that makes joy and happiness possible. We can do this. I begin my day by making an offering of incense while following my breath. I think to myself that this day is a day to live fully, and I make the vow to live each moment of it in a way that is beautiful, solid, and free. This only takes me three or four minutes, but it gives me a great deal of pleasure. You can do the same thing when you wake up. Breathe in and tell yourself that a new day has been offered to you, and you have to be here to live it.

The way to maintain your presence in the here and now is through mindfulness of the breath. There is no need to manipulate the breath. Breath is a natural thing, like air, like light; we should leave it as it is and not interfere with it. What we are doing is simply lighting up the lamp of awareness to illuminate our breathing. We generate the energy of mindfulness to illuminate everything that is happening in the present moment.
As you breathe in, you say can to yourself, “Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” When you do this, the energy of mindfulness embraces your in-breath, just like sun light touching the leaves and branches of a tree. The light of mindfulness is content just to be there and embrace the breath, without doing it any violence, without intervening directly. As you breathe out, you can gently say, “Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.”

Buddhist practice is based on nonviolence and nondualism. You don’t have to struggle with your breath. You don’t have to struggle with your body, or with your hate, or with your anger. Treat your in-breath and out-breath tenderly, nonviolently, as you would treat a flower. Later you will be able to do the same thing with your physical body, treating it with gentleness, respect, nonviolence, and tenderness.

When you are dealing with pain, with a moment of irritation, or with a bout of anger, you can learn to treat them in the same way. Do not fight against pain; do not fight against irritation or jealousy. Embrace them with great tenderness, as though you were embracing a little baby. Your anger is yourself, and you should not be violent toward it. The same thing goes for all of your emotions.

So we begin with the breath. Be nonviolent with your breathing. Be tender with it. Respect it, and let it be as it is. You breathe in—there’s an in breath, that’s all. If the in-breath is short, let it be short. If the in-breath is long, let it be long. Do not intervene, or force either your in-breath or your out-breath. It’s like looking at a flower: letting it be as it is, mindful of the fact that it is there, a kind of miracle. See the flower as it is. See the breath as it is. We let the flower be as it is, and we should not do violence to our breath either.

Then we move to the physical body. In practicing sitting and walking meditation, in practicing total relaxation, you
embrace your physical body with the energy of mindfulness, with great tenderness and nonviolence. This is the practice of true love in relation to your body.

In Buddhist meditation, you do not turn yourself into a battlefield, with good fighting against evil. Both sides belong to you, the good and the evil. Evil can be transformed into good, and vice versa. They are completely organic things.

If you look deeply at a flower, at its freshness and its beauty, you will see that there is also compost in it, made of garbage. The gardener had the skill to transform this garbage into compost, and with this compost, he made a flower grow.

Flowers and garbage are both organic in nature. So looking deeply into the nature of a flower, you can see the presence of the compost and the garbage. The flower is also going to turn into garbage; but don’t be afraid! You are a gardener, and you have in your hands the power to transform garbage into flowers, into fruit, into vegetables. You don’t throw anything away, because you are not afraid of garbage. Your hands are capable of transforming it into flowers, or lettuce, or cucumbers.

The same thing is true of your happiness and your sorrow. Sorrow, fear, and depression are all a kind of garbage. These bits of garbage are part of real life, and we must look deeply into their nature. You can practice in order to turn these bits of garbage into flowers. It is not only your love that is organic; your hate is, too. So you should not throw anything out. All you have to do is learn how to transform your garbage into flowers.

In the practice of Buddhism, we see that all mental formations —such as compassion, love, fear, sorrow, and despair—are organic in nature. We don’t need to be afraid of them, because transformation is possible. Just by having this deep insight into the organic nature of mental formations, you become a lot
more solid, a lot calmer and more peaceful. With just a smile, and mindful breathing, you can start to transform them.

If you feel irritation or depression or despair, recognize their presence and practice this mantra: “Dear one, I am here for you.” You should talk to your depression or your anger just as you would to a child. You embrace it tenderly with the energy of mindfulness and say, “Dear one, I know you are there, and I am going to take care of you,” just as you would with your crying baby. There is no discrimination or dualism here, because compassion and love are you, but anger is too. All three are organic in nature, so you don’t need to be afraid. You can transform them.

Let me repeat: In the practice of Buddhist meditation, we do not turn ourselves into a battlefield of good versus evil. The good must take care of the evil as a big brother takes care of his little brother, or as a big sister takes care of her little sister—with a great deal of tenderness, in a spirit of nonduality. Knowing that, there is a lot of peace in you already. The insight of nonduality will put a stop to the war in you. You have struggled in the past, and perhaps you are still struggling; but is it necessary? No. Struggle is useless. Stop struggling.

So I take care of my breath as if it were my tender little baby. I breathe in, and I let my in-breath proceed naturally. I rejoice in the fact that my breathing is there. Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out. I smile at my out-breath. This is how you can practice. You will get a great deal of joy out of it right away, and if you continue for a minute, you will see that your breathing is already different. After a minute of practicing breathing mindfully, without discrimination, the quality of your breathing improves. It becomes calmer, longer; and the
Happiness and Peace Are Possible

gentleness and harmony generated by your breathing penetrates into your body and into your mental formations.

Try to breathe in this way when you experience joy. For example, when you are looking at a sunset and are in contact with the beauty of nature, practice mindful breathing. Touch deeply the beauty that is before you. I am breathing in—what happiness! I am breathing out—the sunset is lovely! Continue that way for a few minutes.

Getting in touch with the beauty of nature makes life much more beautiful, much more real, and the more mindful and concentrated you are, the more deeply the sunset will reveal itself to you. Your happiness is multiplied by ten, by twenty. Look at a leaf or a flower with mindfulness, listen to the song of a bird, and you will get much more deeply in touch with them. After a minute of this practice, your joy will increase; your breathing will become deeper and more gentle; and this gentleness and depth will influence your body.

Mindful breathing is a kind of bridge that brings the body and the mind together. If through mindfulness of the breath you generate harmony, depth, and calm, these will penetrate into your body and mind. In fact, whatever happens in the mind affects the body, and vice versa. If you generate peacefulness in your breathing, that peacefulness permeates your body and your state of mind. If you have practiced meditation, you have already discovered this. If you have been able to embrace your in-breath and your out-breath with tenderness, you know that they in turn embrace your body and your mind. Peace is contagious. Happiness is also contagious, because in the practice of meditation, the three elements of body, mind, and breath become one.

So as you breathe in, respect the in-breath. Light up the lamp of mindfulness so that it illuminates your in-breath.
“Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” It’s simple. When the in-breath is short, you take note of the fact that it is short. That’s all. You don’t need to judge. Just note very simply: my in-breath is short and I know that it is short. Do not try to make it longer. Let it be short. And when your in-breath is long, you simply say to yourself, “My in-breath is long.”

You respect your in-breath, your out-breath, your physical body, and your mental formations. The in-breath moves inward, the out-breath moves outward. In and out. It’s child’s play; but it provides a great deal of happiness. During the time you are doing it, there is no tension at all. You are here for life; and if you are here for life, life will be here for you. It’s simple.

THE FIRST MIRACLE OF MINDFULNESS

Presence

The first miracle brought about by mindfulness is your own presence, your real presence. With this energy dwelling in you, you become completely alive. When the energy of mindfulness is dwelling in you, Buddha is dwelling in you. The energy of mindfulness is the energy of Buddha. It is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit. Where the Holy Spirit is, there is also understanding, life, healing, and compassion. Where mindfulness is, true life, solidity, freedom, and healing also manifest. We all have the ability to generate this energy of mindfulness. Do walking meditation, breathe mindfully, drink your tea mindfully, and cultivate this energy that dwells in you, that illuminates you, and makes life possible.

The miracle of mindfulness is, first of all, that you are here. Being truly here is very important—being here for yourself, and for the one you love. How can you love if you are not here? A fundamental condition for love is your own presence.
In order to love, you must be here. That is certain. Fortunately, being here is not a difficult thing to accomplish. It is enough to breathe and let go of thinking or planning. Just come back to yourself, concentrate on your breath, and smile. You are here, body and mind together. You are here, alive, completely alive. That is a miracle.

Some people live as though they are already dead. There are people moving around us who are consumed by their past, terrified of their future, and stuck in their anger and jealousy. They are not alive; they are just walking corpses. If you look around yourself with mindfulness, you will see people going around like zombies. Have a great deal of compassion for the people around you who are living like this. They do not know that life is accessible only in the here and now.

We must practice resurrection, and this is an everyday practice. With an in-breath, you bring your mind back to your body. In this way you become alive in the here and now. Joy, peace, and happiness are possible. You have an appointment with life, an appointment that is in the here and now.

It is necessary to come back to the present moment in order to touch life in a deep way. We all have the ability to walk in the Kingdom of God, to walk in the Pure Land of Buddha everyday. You have all you need—legs, lungs, eyes, and mind—and with a little bit of practice, you can generate the energy of mindfulness within you, just like lighting a lamp. Once you have become truly alive, take a step and you will enter the Pure Land. You will enter into the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is not a mere notion. It is a reality that can be touched in everyday life. The Kingdom of God is now or never, and we all have the ability to touch it—not only with our minds, but with our feet. The energy of mindfulness helps you in this. With one mindful step, you touch the Kingdom of God.
For me the Kingdom of God is where mindfulness exists, and it is a kingdom where there is compassion. The Kingdom of God, the Pure Land, is not a place where there is no suffering. Many people aspire to go to a place where pain and suffering do not exist, a place where there is only happiness. This is a rather dangerous idea, for compassion is not possible without pain and suffering. It is only when we enter into contact with suffering that understanding and compassion can be born. Without suffering, we do not have the opportunity to cultivate compassion and understanding; and without understanding, there can be no true love. So we should not imagine a place where there is no suffering, where there is only happiness. That would be a very naive idea.

We have spoken of the organic nature of things. Suffering is also organic. It is from garbage that we produce flowers; and similarly, it is from suffering that we produce understanding and compassion. I would not want to live in a place where there is no suffering, because in such a place I would not be able to cultivate understanding and compassion, which are the basis of my happiness. Happiness is a function of compassion. If you do not have compassion in your heart, you do not have any happiness.

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is about recognizing the existence of suffering. We must get deeply in touch with suffering to develop understanding. One day, when you are looking deeply at the nature of suffering, you will see the way that leads to transformation, to healing, and to happiness; for it is precisely through touching suffering that we discover the Fourth Noble Truth, the path to healing.

The First Noble Truth is dukkha, suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth is magga, the path that transforms suffering into well-being. Things interexist; they inter-are. They are organic.
There is no path to the cessation of suffering without suffering. The Buddha told us to embrace our suffering and to look at it deeply in order to understand its nature. We should not try to escape from our pain. We should look at it directly. Looking at suffering deeply, we will have deep insight into its nature, and the path of transformation and healing will present itself to us.

To me, the definition of hell is simple. It is a place where there is no understanding and no compassion. We have all been to hell. We are acquainted with hell’s heat, and we know that hell is in need of compassion. If there is compassion, then hell ceases to be hell. You can generate this compassion yourself. If you can bring a little compassion to this place, a little bit of understanding, it ceases to be hell. You can be the bodhisattva who does this. Your practice consists in generating compassion and understanding and bringing them to hell. Hell is here, all around us. Hell is in us, like a seed. We need to cultivate the positive within us so we can generate the energy of understanding and compassion and transform hell. Hell is a matter of everyday life, like the Kingdom of God. The choice is yours.

We can touch the Kingdom of God in everyday life. There is no need to travel a great distance to touch the Kingdom of God, because it is not located in space or time. The Kingdom of God is in your heart. It is in every cell of your physical body. With a single mindful breath, a single insight that is deep enough, you can touch the Kingdom of God. When you are practicing mindful walking, that is exactly what you are doing—touching the Kingdom of God, walking in it mindfully, with compassion and understanding. The Kingdom of God becomes your kingdom.

Not a day goes by without my walking in the Pure Land. I see suffering, but I have compassion in me. This is something
everybody can do. Don’t underestimate yourself: you have the ability to wake up. You have the ability to be compassionate. You just need a little bit of practice to be able to touch the best that is in you. Enlightenment, mindfulness, understanding, and compassion are in you. Very simple practices—such as meditative walking, mindful breathing, or washing dishes mindfully—make it possible for you to leave hell and touch the positive seeds that are within you.

You can live in such a way that you are in the Kingdom of God every moment. This is not just a wish, and it is not a promise of some future happiness. This is a reality. An hour of mindfulness practice, even fifteen minutes, is already enough to prove to you that mindfulness is possible, that real life is possible. A beautiful sunset is something that exists; the song of a bird and the blue sky also exist. The paradise of forms and colors is always accessible.

Your eyes may be in good condition, but do you know it?

Breathing in, I am mindful that I have eyes that are still in good condition.
Breathing out, I smile to my eyes that are still in good condition.

In this practice, you touch your eyes with your mindfulness, and you have this simple insight: your eyes are in good shape, and they still exist. You only have to open them to make contact with the paradise of forms and colors, a true paradise.

Some people wait until they have lost their sight to appreciate their eyes. Blind people may hope that someone will help them to recover their sight so they can be in paradise once more. You, all you have to do is open your eyes, and the paradise of forms and colors is available to you. You are in par-
Happiness and Peace Are Possible

adise already, but you don't pay any attention to your eyes, even though they are a condition of happiness. You should recognize that your eyes are there for you, and they are so very precious. They are more precious than pearls.

Your heart is also there for you. Your heart works night and day in order to maintain your well-being. You take time to sleep and to rest, but your heart works non-stop to supply all the cells in your body with blood. Have you touched your heart with the energy of mindfulness?

Breathing in, I am mindful that my heart is working night and day for me.
Breathing out, I smile to my heart.

Your heart is like a flower. Is it still refusing to open? Is it still refusing to love? You must ask, “My heart, are you ready to open as flowers do?” You must ask it that.

When you touch and embrace your heart with the energy of mindfulness, you are already practicing love. When you touch your heart with your mindfulness, you see that you have not been very friendly with it. You have eaten and drunk in ways that put great stress on it. You have not done everything you could to keep it in good health, even though it is one of the basic conditions of your well-being.

The Buddha taught us to meditate on the body. He suggested that we lie on the ground and begin to breathe. Begin with breathing mindfully, while recognizing each part of your body. You can start with your brain. Then you turn your attention to your eyes, your ears, your nose, and your tongue, touching them with mindful awareness and smiling as you touch each one. You can send energy, tenderness, and gratitude to the various parts of your body. “My heart,” you say,
“I know that you are there for me, and I want to be there for you, too.” In this way, you will stop drinking alcohol and you will stop smoking, because they are harmful to your heart. With mindfulness, these things will appear to you clearly.

What is love? Love is treating your heart with a great deal of tenderness, with understanding, love, and compassion. If you cannot treat your own heart this way, how can you treat your partner with understanding and love?

My heart, I am here for you.
My eyes, I am here for you.

You embrace your body with a great deal of tenderness. You know that your body needs you. You should be there for it and generate the energy of mindfulness to bring it harmony, peace, and relaxation. This is how you practice love meditation toward your body.

We all need to learn the techniques of deep relaxation, so we can deal with the stress of life’s ups and downs. You should practice this technique of total relaxation every day, in your living room, with your partner, with your children. It is the way to love your body. It is the way to take care of your nervous system. This is very important. The basis of practice is to be here: “I am here for my breathing; I am here for my body; I am here for my troubles, for my depression, and for my suffering.”

THE SECOND MIRACLE OF MINDFULNESS

The Other

The first miracle of mindfulness is our true presence—being here, present, and totally alive. Then, if you are really here,
something else will also be here: the presence of the other. You are here and the other is here. What is the other? It could be your heart; your eyes; your body; or your in-breath. The other is the sunset, the song of the birds. Or it could be your lover, your partner, your son, your daughter, or your friend.

The other is the Kingdom of God. If you are really here, solid and free, the Kingdom of God will also be here for you. The fundamental condition for recognizing the presence of the other is your own true presence. What is loving? It is recognizing the presence of the other with your love. This is not a theory; it is a practice. Whether the object of your love is your heart, your in-breath, your physical body, or your baby, whether it is your son, your daughter, or your partner, your declaration of love is always the same. It is: “Dear one, I am here for you.”

Please try this practice. You can practice mindfulness of the breath for a minute or walk mindfully toward the person you love most in the world. Then you are truly here, truly present. You open your mouth and you utter the magic words of the mantra: “Dear one, I am really here for you.” You embrace the presence of the other with the mindfulness that is within you.

If the other person is far away from you, you still can do this practice. The other will still be accessible to you. With this practice, there is no need to use the telephone or the fax machine. When you are truly present, the other is present, too; you are both included within the Kingdom of God.

When the other person realizes that his or her presence has been recognized and confirmed, he or she will blossom like a flower. To be loved is to be recognized as existing. Have you looked at others in this way? If you embrace them with the energy of mindfulness, with your true presence, this energy is
completely nourishing. It is like water for a flower. A flower
needs water to live, and the person you love needs your pre-

cence! Your presence is the most precious gift you can give him
or her. “Dear one, I am here, really here, for you.” All of us can
practice this mantra. It really works.

Even one minute of walking meditation or mindful breath-
ing will make it possible for you to be present and offer your
true presence to your loved one. If you ignore the person you
love, your loved one will not have the impression of being
loved by you. “He is ignoring me, he is paying no attention to
me, he doesn’t love me,” she will say to herself if you are not
paying attention to her.

I knew a boy whose father said to him one day, “Tomorrow
is your birthday. I want to buy you a present.” The boy was
at a loss. He knew that his father was very rich, that he could
buy him anything, but the one thing the boy truly needed was
his father’s presence. His father spent all his time and energy
staying rich, and as a result he had no time to give to his fam-
ily. He could give them lots of money and lots of presents, but
the thing that was most precious of all, he was unable to give
his child. That is why the child was sad, and after a moment
he said, “I don’t want any present. It’s you that I want.”

Have you offered your presence to the person you love?
Are you so busy that you cannot be there for that person? If
you are a father or a mother or a partner, generate your own
presence, because that is the most precious gift you can offer.

You know how to generate your own presence, so now you
can make a gift of it to the one you love. This is something
very practical. It is easy to do, it costs nothing, and it can be
done very quickly. You do not have to practice for years to see
the results. One minute will do. So you should put what you
have learned into practice right away.
Happiness and Peace Are Possible

THE THIRD MIRACLE OF MINDFULNESS

Working with Positive and Negative Elements

The third miracle of mindfulness involves maintaining your own presence and your mindfulness of the other. You are truly present and the other is truly present—you have to maintain both presences. You achieve this through the practice of mindful breathing or mindful walking. If the presence of the other is refreshing and healing to you, keep hold of this presence and nourish yourself with it. If there are negative things around you, you can always find something that is healthy, refreshing, and healing, and with your mindfulness you can recognize its presence in your life.

Perhaps you are in contact with too many negative elements. You have looked at, listened to, and touched things that are negative in nature, such as fear and despair. These negative forces are everywhere. When you turn on the television, for instance, you run the risk of ingesting harmful things, such as violence, despair, or fear. At that moment, you say to yourself with mindfulness, “I don’t need these things. I already have suffering, violence, anger, and despair in me. I refuse to watch these programs. I am going to seek out things that are refreshing in nature, healing and helpful things. I will practice walking meditation; I will make contact with the blue sky, with spring, with the song of birds. I will play with my little girl, my little boy. I’ll do those kinds of things.”

You need to recognize that these kinds of positive elements exist and that you can benefit from their refreshing and helpful presence. If you are facing a sunset, a marvelous spectacle, give yourself a chance to be in touch with it. Give yourself five minutes, breathing deeply, and you will be truly there. Touch the beauty of nature in a deep way. That will do your
body and mind a great deal of good. This is the third miracle of mindfulness—maintaining this precious presence in order to benefit from it.

If something negative comes to the surface, such as your despair and anger, or the despair and anger of your spouse, you need the energy of mindfulness to embrace it.

Breathing in, I know that anger is there in me.
Breathing out, I care for my anger.

This is like a mother hearing her baby cry out. She is in the kitchen, and she hears her baby wailing. She puts down whatever she has in her hands, goes into the baby’s room, and picks it up in her arms. You can do exactly the same thing—embrace the pain that is coming to the surface.

Breathing in, I know that you are there, my dear anger, my dear despair.
I am there for you; I will take care of you.

You can do mindful walking or sitting meditation at the same time that you are embracing your pain, because this energy of mindfulness will help you hold your pain. Where does this energy come from? It comes from your daily practice.

That is why you should practice walking, washing the dishes, watering the vegetables, and any other activity with mindfulness. When you begin the practice, the seed of mindfulness is quite small, but if you cultivate it every day, it becomes much bigger and stronger. Every time you need this seed, touch it with mindful breathing. Then the energy of mindfulness will make its appearance, and you will be able to embrace the pain that is within you.
Even when you are driving your car, you can practice. Take advantage of that moment to cultivate mindfulness. In fact, you can practice quite well while you are driving a car. Breathe in and breathe out, and remain aware of everything that goes on inside you when, for example, you come to a red light. You look at the red light and you smile. The red light is not your enemy. It is a friend who is helping you come back to yourself.

About ten years ago when I was in Montreal, I noticed that the license plates on the cars had the phrase *Je me souviens*, “I remember.” I turned to my friend who was driving the car, and I said, “Dear friend, I have a gift for you. Every time you’re driving and you see the phrase *Je me souviens*, come back to yourself and practice mindful breathing with the thought, ‘I remember to come back to the here and now.’” Since that day, my friends in Montreal practice mindfulness of the breath every time they see a license plate.

*Je me souviens*. A car license plate can be a bell of mindfulness. Even when you are driving your car, you can generate the energy of mindfulness. When you make breakfast, that is also a moment to cultivate mindfulness. Be mindful of the act of pouring hot water into a teapot. You breathe and you say, “I know that I am in the process of pouring hot water into the teapot,” and you smile. It is not only in the meditation hall that we practice meditation.

So the third miracle of mindfulness is drawing benefit from the freshness of positive elements, and embracing the negative elements within and around you in order to pacify them. There are moments where your breathing is not harmonious. When you are frightened or angry, your breathing is of poor quality. You can notice this through mindfulness, smile at your breathing, and embrace it with the energy of mindfulness.
“Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.”

You will need a minute to improve the quality of your breathing, and then fear and despair will be transformed, and anger also. Touch your breathing with mindfulness and your breathing will improve the state of your body and your mind. You can be sure of it.

Excerpted from You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment by Thich Nhat Hanh (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010). © 2001 by Unified Buddhist Church, Inc.

If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy Your True Home: The Everyday Wisdom of Thich Nhat Hanh by Thich Nhat Hanh, ed. Melvin McLeod (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2011).
In myths from around the world, men and women have searched for an elixir that will bring protection from suffering. Buddhism’s answer is mindfulness. How does mindfulness work? Let me illustrate with a story that became the basis for the 1988 film Gorillas in the Mist. This movie is about Dian Fossey, a courageous field biologist who managed to befriend a tribe of gorillas. Fossey had gone to Africa to follow in the footsteps of her mentor, George Schaller, a renowned primate biologist who had returned from the wilds with more intimate and compelling information about gorilla life than any scientist before. When his colleagues asked how he was able to learn such remarkable detail about the tribal structure, family life, and habits of gorillas, he attributed it to one simple thing: he didn’t carry a gun.

Previous generations of biologists had entered the territory of these large animals with the assumption that they were dangerous. So the scientists came with an aggressive spirit, large rifles in hand. The gorillas could sense the danger around
these rifle-bearing men and kept a far distance. By contrast, Schaller—and later his student Dian Fossey—entered their territory without weapons. They had to move slowly, gently, and above all, respectfully toward these creatures. And, in time, sensing the benevolence of these humans, the gorillas allowed them to come right among them and learn their ways. Sitting still, hour after hour, with careful, patient attention, Fossey finally understood what she saw. As the African-American sage George Washington Carver explained, “Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough.”

Mindfulness is this kind of attention. It is a nonjudging, receptive awareness, a respectful awareness. Unfortunately, much of the time we don’t attend in this way. Instead, we react, judging whether we like, dislike, or can ignore what is happening. Or we measure our experience against our expectation. We evaluate ourselves and others with a stream of commentary and criticism. When people initially come to a meditation class to train in mindfulness, they hope to become calm and peaceful. Usually they are in for a big shock. The first hour of mindfulness meditation reveals its opposite, bringing an unseen stream of evaluation and judgment into stark relief. In the first hour many feel bored and dislike the boredom. We can hear a door slam and wish for quiet. Our knees hurt and we try to avoid the pain. We wish we had a better cushion. We can’t feel our breath and we get frustrated. We notice our mind won’t stop planning and we feel like a failure. Then we remember someone we’re angry at and get upset, and if we notice how many judgments there are, we feel proud of ourselves for noticing.

But like George Schaller, we can put aside these weapons of judgment. We can become mindful. When we are mind-
ful, it is as if we can bow to our experience without judgment or expectation. “Mindfulness,” declared the Buddha, “is all-helpful.”

Peter, a middle-aged computer designer, came to a meditation retreat looking for relief. He was coping with a recently failed business, a shaky marriage, and a sick mother. But meditation quickly became an agony. The anger and disappointment that pervaded his current situation rose up in the quiet room to fill his mind. His attempts to quiet himself by sensing his breath felt hopeless; his attention was repelled away from his body like water on a hot skillet. Then it got worse. A restless woman seated nearby began to cough loudly and frequently. She began to fidget and move and cough more as the first day wore on. Peter, who was struggling just to be with his own sorrow, became frustrated and angry and, as she continued coughing, enraged. He sought out my coteacher and good friend Debra Chamberlin-Taylor and insisted that meditation was the wrong approach and that he wanted to leave. Debra asked Peter to close his eyes and mindfully notice the state of his body. It was filled with tension and hurting. With Debra’s help, Peter found he could hold the tension and hurt with more acceptance and kindness. He breathed, relaxed a little, and recognized that the medicine he needed was nothing other than attention to directly understand his own pain.

The next instruction he was given was simple: as you sit, keep a gentle mindfulness on your body and notice whatever happens. After only a few minutes, his fidgety neighbor began a long coughing spell. With each cough Peter felt his own muscles clench and his breath stop. Now he became more curious, interested in how his body was reacting. He
began to notice that hearing each cough produced an internal clenching and a wave of anger, which subsided as he practiced relaxing between the spells. Finally, at the end of the sitting period, he got up to walk down to the lunchroom. As he arrived, he noticed this same difficult woman in line just ahead of him. Immediately he noticed how his stomach clenched and his breath stopped—just seeing her! Again, he relaxed. After lunch when he returned to the meditation hall he checked to see what time his name was listed for a private interview with his teacher. Farther down the same list he read the restless woman’s name. Still paying attention, he was surprised. Just seeing her name made his stomach clench and his breath tighten! He relaxed again. He realized that his body had become a mirror, and that his mindfulness was showing him when he was caught and where he could let go.

As the retreat went on, his attention grew more precise. He noticed that his own anxious and angry thoughts about his family and business problems could trigger the same clenching and tightening as the woman’s cough did. He had always tried to have things under control. Now that his life had proved out of control, the habits of anger, blame, and judgments toward himself were tying him in knots. With each reaction, he could feel the knots arise. After each one he would pause mindfully and bring in a touch of ease. He began to trust mindfulness. By the close of the retreat, he was grateful to the restless woman near him. He wanted to thank her for her teaching. With mindfulness Peter found relief. He also discovered the benefit of curiosity and openness, what Zen master Suzuki Roshi famously called beginner’s mind. In Suzuki Roshi’s words, “We pay attention with respect and interest, not in order to manipulate, but to understand what is true. And seeing what is true, the heart becomes free.”
MINDFULNESS AS FEARLESS PRESENCE

The art of listening is neither careless drifting on the one hand nor fearful clinging on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive.

—ALAN WATTS

Sitting mindfully with our sorrows and fears, or with those of another, is an act of courage. It is not easy. Mary believed that to face her rage might kill her. John’s son’s cystic fibrosis brought terrifying images of wheelchairs and early death. Perry was afraid to face his infidelities and sexual peculiarities. Ron could hardly bear to think of the carnage he had seen during his work in Bosnia. For Angela, facing the recurrence of her cancer meant facing death. And Konda had longings and joy and creativity that she had never dared to express.

With patience and courage, they gradually learned how to sit firmly on the earth and sense the contraction and trembling of their bodies without running away. They learned how to feel the floods of emotions—fear, grief, longing, and rage—and to allow them to slowly release with mindfulness. They learned to see the endless mental stories of fear and judgment that repeat over and over, and with the help of mindfulness to let them go and relax, to steady the mind and return to the present.

In the Buddha’s search for freedom he, too, turned his mindfulness to overcoming his fears. In a text called “Overcoming Fear and Dread,” he recounts his practice:

How would it be if in the dark of the month, with no moon, I were to enter the most strange and frightening
of places, near tombs and in the thick of the forest, that I might come to understand fear and terror. And in so doing, a wild animal would approach or the wind rustle the leaves and I would think, “Perhaps the fear and terror now comes.” And being resolved to dispel the hold of that fear and terror, I remained in whatever posture it arose, sitting or standing, walking or lying down. I did not change until I had faced that fear and terror in that very posture, until I was free of its hold upon me.... And having this thought, I did so. By facing the fear and terror I became free.

In the traditional training at Ajahn Chah’s forest monastery in Thailand, we were sent to sit alone in the forest at night to practice the meditations on death. Stories of monks who had encountered tigers and other wild animals were part of what kept us alert. There were many snakes, including cobras. At Ajahn Buddhadasa’s forest monastery we were taught to tap our walking sticks on the paths at night so the snakes would “hear” us and move out of the way. There were moments when I was really frightened. At another monastery, I periodically sat all night at the charnel grounds. Every few weeks a body was brought for cremation. After the lighting of the funeral pyre and the chanting, most people would leave, with one or several monks left alone to tend the fire in the dark forest. Then, as a practice, one monk would be left, remaining there until dawn, contemplating death. Not everyone did these practices. But I was a young man, looking for initiation, eager to prove myself, so I gravitated toward these difficulties.

As it turned out, sitting in the dark forest with its tigers and snakes was easier than sitting with my inner demons—my
insecurity, loneliness, shame, boredom; my frustrations and hurts. Sitting with these took more courage than practicing all night in the charnel ground. Little by little I learned to face them with mindfulness, to make a clearing within the dark woods of my own heart.

Mindfulness does not reject experience. It lets experience be the teacher. One Buddhist practitioner with severe asthma learned to bring a mindful attention to his breath and limit his attacks by being patient as the muscles in his throat and chest constricted, slowly relaxing the stress in his body. Another man undergoing a painful cancer treatment used mindfulness to quell his fear of the pain and added loving-kindness for his body as a complement to his chemotherapy. Through mindfulness a politician learned not to be discouraged by his attackers. A frazzled single mother of preschoolers used mindfulness to acknowledge feeling tense and overwhelmed, and to become more respectful and spacious with herself and her boys. Each of these practitioners learned to trust the space of mindful awareness. With mindfulness they entered the difficulties in their own lives, and like the Buddha in the thick of the forest, they found healing and freedom.

FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR MINDFUL TRANSFORMATION

*Learning takes place only in a mind that is innocent and vulnerable.*

—J. KRISHNAMURTI

RAIN is a useful acronym for the four key principles of mindful transformation of difficulties. RAIN stands for Recognition, Acceptance, Investigation, and Nonidentification. A line
from Zen poetry reminds us, “the rain falls equally on all things.” Like the nourishment of outer rain, the inner principles of RAIN can be applied to all our experiences, and can transform our difficulties.

**Recognition**

Recognition is the first step of mindfulness. When we feel stuck, we must begin with a willingness to see what is so. It is as if someone asks us gently, “What is happening now?” Do we reply brusquely, “Nothing”? Or do we pause and acknowledge the reality of our experience, here and now? With recognition we step out of denial. Denial undermines our freedom. The diabetic who denies his body is sick and ignores its needs is not free. Neither is the driven, stressed-out executive who denies the cost of her lifestyle, or the self-critical would-be painter who denies his love of making art. The society that denies its poverty and injustice has lost a part of its freedom as well. If we deny our dissatisfaction, our anger, our pain, our ambition, we will suffer. If we deny our values, our beliefs, our longings, or our goodness, we will suffer.

“The emergence and blossoming of understanding, love, and intelligence has nothing to do with any outer tradition,” observes Zen teacher Toni Packer. “It happens completely on its own when a human being questions, wonders, listens, and looks without getting stuck in fear. When self-concern is quiet, in abeyance, heaven and earth are open.”

With recognition our awareness becomes like the dignified host. We name and inwardly bow to our experience: “Ah, sorrow. Now excitement. Hmm, yes, conflict; and yes, tension. Oh, now pain, yes, and now, ah, the judging mind.” Recognition moves us from delusion and ignorance toward freedom.
“We can light a lamp in the darkness,” says the Buddha. We can see what is so.

Acceptance

The next step of RAIN is acceptance. Acceptance allows us to relax and open to the facts before us. It is necessary because with recognition, there can come a subtle aversion, a resistance, a wish it weren’t so. Acceptance does not mean that we cannot work to improve things. But just now, this is what is so. In Zen they say, “If you understand, things are just as they are. And if you don’t understand, things are still just as they are.”

Acceptance is not passivity. It is a courageous step in the process of transformation. “Trouble? Life is trouble. Only death is nice,” Zorba the Greek declares. “To live is to roll up your sleeves and embrace trouble.” Acceptance is a willing movement of the heart to include whatever is before it. In individual transformation we have to acknowledge the reality of our own suffering. For social transformation we have to start with the reality of collective suffering, of injustice, racism, greed, and hate. We can transform the world just as we learn to transform ourselves. As Carl Jung comments, “Perhaps I myself am the enemy who must be loved.”

With acceptance and respect, problems that seem intractable often become workable. A man began to give large doses of cod liver oil to his Doberman because he had been told that the stuff was good for dogs. Each day he would hold the head of the protesting dog between his knees, force its jaws open, and pour the liquid down its throat. One day the dog broke loose and the fish oil spilled on the floor. Then, to the man’s great surprise, the dog returned to lick the puddle. That is when the man discovered that what the
dog had been fighting was not the oil but his lack of respect in administering it. With acceptance and respect, surprising transformations can occur.

Investigation

Recognition and acceptance lead to the third step of RAIN, investigation. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh calls this “seeing deeply.” In recognition and acceptance we recognize our dilemma and accept the truth of the whole situation. Now we must investigate more fully. Buddhism teaches that whenever we are stuck, it is because we have not looked deeply enough into the nature of the experience.

Buddhist practice systematically directs our investigation to four areas that are critical for understanding and freedom. These are called the four foundations of mindfulness—body, feelings, mind, and dharma—the underlying principles of experience.

Here is how we can apply them when working with a difficult experience. Starting with investigation in the body, we mindfully locate where our difficulties are held. Sometimes we find sensations of heat, contraction, hardness, or vibration. Sometimes we notice throbbing, numbness, a certain shape or color. We can investigate whether we are meeting this area with resistance or with mindfulness. We notice what happens as we hold these sensations with mindfulness and kindness. Do they open? Are there other layers? Is there a center? Do they intensify, move, expand, change, repeat, dissolve, or transform?

In the second foundation of mindfulness, we can investigate what feelings are part of this difficulty. Is the primary feeling tone pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? Are we meeting this feeling with mindfulness? And what are the secondary
feelings associated with it? Often we discover a constellation of feelings.

A man remembering his divorce may feel sadness, anger, jealousy, loss, fear, and loneliness. A woman who was unable to help her addicted nephew can feel longing, aversion, guilt, desire, emptiness, and unworthiness. With mindfulness, each feeling is recognized and accepted. We investigate how each emotion feels, whether it is pleasant or painful, contracted or relaxed, tense or sad. We notice where we feel the emotion in our body and what happens to it as it is held in mindfulness.

Next comes the mind. What thoughts and images are associated with this difficulty? What stories, judgments, and beliefs are we holding? When we look more closely, we often discover that many of them are one-sided, fixed points of view or outmoded, habitual perspectives. When we see that they are only stories, they loosen their hold on us. We cling less to them.

The fourth foundation to investigate is called mindfulness of the dharma. Dharma is an important and multifaceted word that can mean “the teachings and the path of Buddhism.” It can also mean “the truth, the elements and patterns that make up experience.” In mindfulness of the dharma we look into the principles and laws that are operating. We can notice if an experience is actually as solid as it appears. Is it unchanging or is it impermanent, moving, shifting, re-creating itself? We notice if the difficulty expands or contracts the space in our mind, if it is in our control or if it has its own life. We notice if it is self-constructed. We investigate whether we are clinging to it, struggling with it, or simply letting it be. We see whether our relationship to it is a source of suffering or happiness. And finally, we notice how much we identify with it. This leads us to the last step of RAIN, nonidentification.
Nonidentification

In nonidentification we stop taking the experience as “mine” or part of “me.” We see how identification creates dependence, anxiety, and inauthenticity. In practicing nonidentification, we inquire of every state, experience, and story, is this who I really am? We see the tentativeness of this identity. Instead of identification with this difficulty, we let go and rest in awareness itself. This is the culmination of releasing difficulty through RAIN.

One Buddhist practitioner, David, identified himself as a failure. His life had many disappointments, and after a few years of Buddhist practice, he was disappointed by his meditation too. He became calmer but that was all. He was still plagued by unrelenting critical thoughts and self-judgments, leftovers from a harsh and painful past. He identified with these thoughts and his wounded history. Even the practice of compassion for himself brought little relief.

Then, during a ten-day mindfulness retreat, he was inspired by the teachings on nonidentification. He was touched by the stories of those who faced their demons and freed themselves. He remembered the account of the Buddha, who on the night of his enlightenment faced the armies and temptations of Mara, a powerful demon of Buddhist folklore who personifies our difficulties and obstacles on the path. David decided to stay up all night and directly face his own demons. For many hours, he tried to be mindful of his breath and body.

In between sittings, he took periods of walking meditation. At each sitting, he was washed over by familiar waves of sleepiness, body pains, and critical thoughts. Then he began to notice that each changing experience was met by one common element, awareness itself. In the middle of the night, he
had an “aha” moment. He realized that awareness was not affected by any of these experiences, that it was open and untouched, like space itself. All his struggles, the painful feelings and thoughts, came and went without the slightest disturbance to awareness itself.

Awareness became his refuge. David decided to test his realization. The meditation hall was empty so he rolled on the floor. Awareness just noticed. He stood up, shouted, laughed, made funny animal noises. Awareness just noticed. He ran around the room, he lay down quietly, he went outside to the edge of the forest, he picked up a stone and threw it, jumped up and down, laughed, came back and sat. Awareness just noticed it all. Finding this, he felt free. He watched the sun rise softly over the hills. Then he went back to sleep for a time. And when he reawakened, his day was full of joy. Even when his doubts came back, awareness just noticed. Like the rain, his awareness allowed all things equally.

It would be too rosy to end this story here. Later in the retreat David again fell into periods of doubt, self-judgment, and depression. But now, even in the middle of it, he could recognize that it was just doubt, just judgment, just depression. He could not take it fully as his identity anymore. Awareness noticed this too. And was silent, free.

Buddhism calls nonidentification the abode of awakening, the end of clinging, true peace, nirvana. Without identification we can live with care, yet we are no longer bound by the fears and illusions of the small sense of self. We see the secret beauty behind all that we meet. Mindfulness and fearless presence bring true protection. When we meet the world with recognition, acceptance, investigation, and nonidentification, we discover that wherever we are, freedom is possible, just as the rain falls on and nurtures all things equally.

If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy *The Buddha Is Still Teaching: Contemporary Buddhist Wisdom* by Jack Kornfield, ed. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2011).
NOT CAUSING HARM

Not causing harm obviously includes not killing or robbing or lying to people. It also includes not being aggressive—not being aggressive with our actions, our speech, or our minds. Learning not to cause harm to ourselves or others is a basic Buddhist teaching on the healing power of non-aggression.

Not harming ourselves or others in the beginning, not harming ourselves or others in the middle, and not harming ourselves or others in the end is the basis of enlightened society. This is how there could be a sane world. It starts with sane citizens, and that is us. The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves, is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently.

The ground of not causing harm is mindfulness, a sense of clear seeing with respect and compassion for what it is we see. This is what basic practice shows us. But mindfulness doesn’t stop with formal meditation. It helps us relate with all the details of our lives. It helps us see and hear and smell, without
closing our eyes or our ears or our noses. It’s a lifetime’s journey to relate honestly to the immediacy of our experience and to respect ourselves enough not to judge it.

As we become more wholehearted in this journey of gentle honesty, it comes as quite a shock to realize how much we’ve blinded ourselves to some of the ways in which we cause harm. Our style is so ingrained that we can’t hear when people try to tell us, either kindly or rudely, that maybe we’re causing some harm by the way we are or the way we relate with others. We’ve become so used to the way we do things that somehow we think that others are used to it too.

It’s painful to face how we harm others, and it takes a while. It’s a journey that happens because of our commitment to gentleness and honesty, our commitment to staying awake, to being mindful. Because of mindfulness, we see our desires and our aggression, our jealousy and our ignorance. We don’t act on them; we just see them. Without mindfulness, we don’t see them.

The next step is refraining. Mindfulness is the ground; refraining is the path. Refraining is one of those uptight words that sound repressive. Surely alive, juicy, interesting people would not practice refraining. Maybe they would sometimes refrain, but not as a lifestyle. In this context, however, refraining is very much the method of becoming a dharmic person. It’s the quality of not grabbing for entertainment the minute we feel a slight edge of boredom coming on. It’s the practice of not immediately filling up space just because there’s a gap.

Once I was given an interesting meditation practice that combined mindfulness and refraining. We were told just to notice what our physical movements were when we felt uncomfortable. I began to notice that when I felt uncomfortable, I did things like pull my ear, scratch my nose or head when it
didn’t itch, or straighten my collar. I made all kinds of little jumpy, jittery movements when I felt like I was losing ground. Our instruction was not to try to change anything, not to criticize ourselves for whatever we were doing, but just to see what we did.

Noticing how we try to avoid it is a way to get in touch with basic groundlessness. Refraining—not habitually acting out impulsively—has something to do with giving up entertainment mentality. Through refraining, we see that there’s something between the arising of the craving—or the aggression or the loneliness or whatever it might be—and whatever action we take as a result. There’s something there in us that we don’t want to experience, and we never do experience, because we’re so quick to act.

Underneath our ordinary lives, underneath all the talking we do, all the moving we do, all the thoughts in our minds, there’s a fundamental groundlessness. It’s there bubbling along all the time. We experience it as restlessness and edginess. We experience it as fear. It motivates passion, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, and pride, but we never get down to the essence of it.

Refraining is the method for getting to know the nature of this restlessness and fear. It’s a method for settling into groundlessness. If we immediately entertain ourselves by talking, by acting, by thinking—if there’s never any pause—we will never be able to relax. We will always be speeding through our lives. We’ll always be stuck with what my grandfather called a good case of the jitters. Refraining is a way of making friends with ourselves at the most profound level possible. We can begin to relate with what’s underneath all the bubbles and burps and farts, all the stuff that comes out and expresses itself as uptight, controlling, manipulative behavior, or whatever it is.
Underneath all that, there’s something very soft, very tender, that we experience as fear or edginess.

Once there was a young warrior. Her teacher told her that she had to do battle with fear. She didn’t want to do that. It seemed too aggressive; it was scary; it seemed unfriendly. But the teacher said she had to do it and gave her the instructions for the battle. The day arrived. The student warrior stood on one side, and fear stood on the other. The warrior was feeling very small, and fear was looking big and wrathful. They both had their weapons. The young warrior roused herself and went toward fear, prostrated three times, and asked, “May I have permission to go into battle with you?” Fear said, “Thank you for showing me so much respect that you ask permission.” Then the young warrior said, “How can I defeat you?” Fear replied, “My weapons are that I talk fast, and I get very close to your face. Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say. If you don’t do what I tell you, I have no power. You can listen to me, and you can have respect for me. You can even be convinced by me. But if you don’t do what I say, I have no power.” In that way, the student warrior learned how to defeat fear.

This is how it actually works. There has to be some kind of respect for the jitters, some understanding of how our emotions have the power to run us around in circles. That understanding helps us discover how we increase our pain, how we increase our confusion, how we cause harm to ourselves. Because we have basic goodness, basic wisdom, basic intelligence, we can stop harming ourselves and harming others. Because of mindfulness, we see things when they arise. Because of our understanding, we don’t buy into the chain reaction that makes things grow from minute to expansive. We leave things minute. They stay tiny. They don’t keep expanding...
into World War III or domestic violence. It all comes through learning to pause for a moment, learning not to just impulsively do the same thing again and again. It's a transformative experience to simply pause instead of immediately filling up the space. By waiting, we begin to connect with fundamental restlessness as well as fundamental spaciousness.

The result is that we cease to cause harm. We begin to know ourselves thoroughly and to respect ourselves. Anything can come up, anything can walk into our house; we can find anything sitting on our living-room couch, and we don’t freak out. We have been thoroughly processed by coming to know ourselves, thoroughly processed by this honest, gentle mindfulness.

This process connects us with the fruition of not causing harm—fundamental well-being of our body, speech, and mind. Well-being of body is like a mountain. A lot happens on a mountain. It hails, and the winds come up, and it rains and snows. The sun gets very hot, clouds cross over, animals shit and piss on the mountain, and so do people. People leave their trash, and other people clean it up. Many things come and go on this mountain, but it just sits there. When we’ve seen ourselves completely, there’s a stillness of body that is like a mountain. We no longer get jumpy and have to scratch our noses, pull our ears, punch somebody, go running from the room, or drink ourselves into oblivion. A thoroughly good relationship with ourselves results in being still, which doesn’t mean we don’t run and jump and dance about. It means there’s no compulsiveness. We don’t overwork, overeat, oversmoke, overseduce. In short, we begin to stop causing harm.

Well-being of speech is like a lute without strings. Even without strings, the musical instrument proclaims itself. This
is an image of our speech being settled. It doesn’t mean that we’re controlling, uptight, trying hard not to say the wrong thing. It means that our speech is straightforward and disciplined. We don’t start blurtling out words just because no one else is talking and we’re nervous. We don’t chatter away like magpies and crows. We’ve heard it all; we’ve been insulted and we’ve been praised. We know what it is to be in situations where everyone is angry, where everyone is peaceful. We’re at home in the world because we’re at home with ourselves, so we don’t feel that out of nervousness, out of our habitual pattern, we have to run at the mouth. Our speech is tamed, and when we speak, it communicates. We don’t waste the gift of speech in expressing our neurosis.

Well-being of mind is like a mountain lake without ripples. When the lake has no ripples, everything in the lake can be seen. When the water is all churned up, nothing can be seen. The still lake without ripples is an image of our minds at ease, so full of unlimited friendliness for all the junk at the bottom of the lake that we don’t feel the need to churn up the waters just to avoid looking at what’s there.

Not causing harm requires staying awake. Part of being awake is slowing down enough to notice what we say and do. The more we witness our emotional chain reactions and understand how they work, the easier it is to refrain. It becomes a way of life to stay awake, slow down, and notice.

At the root of all the harm we cause is ignorance. Through meditation, that’s what we begin to undo. If we see that we have no mindfulness, that we rarely refrain, that we have little well-being, that is not confusion, that’s the beginning of clarity. As the moments of our lives go by, our ability to be deaf, dumb, and blind just doesn’t work so well anymore. Rather than making us more uptight, interestingly enough,
this process liberates us. This is the liberation that naturally arises when we are completely here, without anxiety about imperfection.


If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* by Pema Chödrön (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001).
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People often say to me, “I’d love to practice mindfulness, but I’m so busy I can’t seem to find the time.”

Most people think of mindfulness as something they must squeeze into an already full schedule of working, raising children, caring for a home. In truth, making mindfulness part of your life is more like a game of connect the dots, or like a paint-by-numbers kit. Do you remember those pictures where each small area is labeled with a number that tells you which color to use? As you filled in all the brown areas, then the greens and the blues, a pleasing picture begins to emerge.

Mindfulness practice is like that. You begin with one small area of your life, let’s say how you answer the phone. Each time the phone rings, you pause to take three long, slow breaths before you pick it up. You do this for a week or so, until it becomes a habit. Then you add another mindfulness practice, such as mindful eating. Once this way of being present is integrated into your life, you add another. Gradually you are present and aware for more and more moments of the day. The pleasing experience of an awakened life begins to emerge.
The exercises described here point to many different spaces in your life that you can begin to fill in with the warm colors of open-hearted mindfulness. I am a meditation teacher, and I live at a Zen monastery in Oregon. I’m also a pediatrician, a wife, a mother, and a grandmother, so I understand well how stressful and challenging daily life can become. I developed many of these exercises to help me be more aware, happy, and at ease within the flow of a busy life. I offer this collection to anyone who would like to become more fully present and enjoy the small moments of their life. You don’t have to go to a monthlong meditation retreat or move to a monastery to restore peace and balance to your life. They are already available to you. Bit by bit, daily mindfulness practice will help you uncover satisfaction and fulfillment in the very life you are living now.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In recent years, interest in mindfulness has grown enormously among researchers, psychologists, physicians, educators, and among the general public. There’s now a significant body of scientific research indicating the benefits of mindfulness for mental and physical health. But what exactly do we mean by “mindfulness”?

Here’s the definition I like to use:

Mindfulness is deliberately paying full attention to what is happening around you and within you—in your body, heart, and mind. Mindfulness is awareness without criticism or judgment.

Sometimes we are mindful, and sometimes we are not. A good example is paying attention to your hands on the steer-
ing wheel of a car. Remember when you were first learning
to drive, and how the car wobbled and wove its way along
the road as your hands clumsily jerked the wheel back and
forth, correcting and overcorrecting? You were wide awake,
completely focused on the mechanics of driving. After a while
your hands learned to steer well, making subtle and auto-
matic adjustments. You could keep the car moving smoothly
ahead without paying any conscious attention to your hands.
You could drive, talk, eat, and listen to the radio, all at the
same time.

Thus arises the experience we have all had, of driving on
automatic pilot. You open the car door, search for your keys,
back carefully out of the driveway, and . . . you pull into the
parking garage at work. Wait a minute! What happened to
twenty miles and forty minutes between house and job? Were
the lights red or green? Your mind took a vacation, in some
pleasant or distressing realm, as your body deftly maneuvered
your car through flowing traffic and stoplights, suddenly
awakening as you arrived at your destination.

Is that bad? It’s not bad in the sense of something you
should feel ashamed or guilty about. If you are able to drive
to work on autopilot for years without having an accident,
that’s pretty skillful! We could say that it’s sad, though, be-
cause when we spend a lot of time with our body doing one
thing while our mind is on vacation somewhere else, it means
that we aren’t really present for much of our life. When we
aren’t present, it makes us feel vaguely but persistently dissat-
isfied. This sense of dissatisfaction, of a gap between us and
everything and everyone else, is the essential problem of hu-
man life. It leads to those moments when we are pierced with
a feeling of deep doubt and loneliness.

The Buddha called it the First Truth: the fact that every
person will at some time experience this kind of distress.
There are many happy moments in our lives, of course, but when our friends go home, when we are lonely or tired, when we feel disappointed or sad or betrayed, then dissatisfaction and unhappiness emerge once again.

We all try over-the-counter remedies—food, drugs, sex, overwork, alcohol, movies, shopping, gambling—to relieve the pain of ordinary life as a human being. All of these remedies work for a little while, but most of them have side effects—such as being in debt, blacking out, getting arrested, or losing someone we love—so they only increase our distress in the long run.

The labels on over-the-counter remedies say, “For temporary relief of symptoms only. If symptoms persist, see your doctor.” Over the course of many years I have found one reliable remedy for the relief of recurrent discomfort and unhappiness. I have prescribed it for myself and for many other people, with excellent results. It is regular mindfulness practice.

Much of our dissatisfaction with life will disappear, and many simple joys will emerge, if we can learn to be present with things just as they are.

You’ve already experienced moments of mindful awareness. Everyone can recall at least one time when they were completely awake, when everything became clear and vivid. We call these peak moments. They can happen when we experience something unusually beautiful or poignant, such as the birth of a child or the passing of a loved one. It can also happen when our car goes into a skid. Time slows down as we watch the accident unfold or not. But it doesn’t have to be dramatic. It can happen on an ordinary walk, as we turn a corner and everything is, for a moment, luminous.

What we call peak moments are times when we are completely aware. Our life and our awareness are undivided, at
one. At these times the gap between us and everything else closes and suffering disappears. We feel satisfied. Actually we are beyond satisfaction and dissatisfaction. We are present. We are Presence. We get a tantalizing taste of what Buddhists call the enlightened life.

These moments inevitably fade, and there we are again, separate and grumpy about it. We can’t force peak moments or enlightenment to happen. The tools of mindfulness, however, can help us close the gaps that cause our unhappiness. Mindfulness unifies our body, heart, and mind, bringing them together in focused attention. When we are thus unified, the barrier between “me” and “everything else” becomes thinner and thinner until, in a moment, it vanishes! For a while, often a brief moment or occasionally a lifetime, all is whole, all is holy, and at peace.

THE BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

There are many benefits of mindfulness practice. Research on happiness conducted by Brown and Ryan at the University of Rochester shows “people high in mindfulness are models of flourishing and positive mental health.” It is good for all ailments your heart and mind, and even of your body. But don’t believe me just because I said so. Try the exercises in this book for a year and discover how they change your own life.

Here are a few of the benefits of mindfulness that I have found.

1. Mindfulness conserves energy.

It is fortunate that we can learn to do tasks skillfully. It is unfortunate that this skill enables us to go unconscious as we
do them. It is unfortunate because when we go unconscious, we are missing out on large parts of our life. When we “check out,” our mind tends to go to one of three places: the past, the future, or the fantasy realm. These three places have no reality outside our imagination. Right here where we are is the only place, and right now is the only time where we are actually alive.

The capacity of the human mind to recall the past is a unique gift. It helps us learn from our errors and change an unhealthy life direction. However, when the mind doubles back to the past, it often begins to ruminate endlessly on our past mistakes. “If only I’d said this . . . , then she would have said that . . .” Unfortunately the mind seems to think we are very stupid. It calls up the errors of our past over and over, blaming and criticising us repeatedly. We wouldn’t pay to rent and watch the same painful movie two hundred fifty times, but somehow we let our mind replay a bad memory over and over, each time experiencing the same distress and shame. We wouldn’t remind a child two hundred fifty times of a small mistake he or she made, but somehow we allow our mind to continue to call up the past and to inflict anger and shame upon our own inner small being. It seems that our mind is afraid that we will fall prey to bad judgment, ignorance, or inattention yet again. It doesn’t believe that actually we are smart—smart enough to learn from one mistake, and not to repeat it.

Ironically, a mind filled with anxiety is likely to create what it most fears. The anxious mind doesn’t realize that when it pulls us into daydreams of regret about the past, we are not attending to the present. When we are unable to be present, we tend not to act wisely or skillfully. We are more likely to do the very thing the mind worries we will do.
The capacity of the human mind to plan for the future is another of our unique gifts. It gives us a road map and compass to steer by. It decreases the chances that we will make a wrong turn and end up caught in a long detour. It increases the chances that we will arrive at the end of life satisfied with our life path and what we have accomplished.

Unfortunately the mind, in its anxiety for us, tries to make plans for a huge number of possible futures, most of which will never arrive. This constant leapfrogging into the future is a waste of our mental and emotional energy. The most important way we can prepare for the unknown-to-come is to make a reasonable plan and then to pay attention to what is happening right now. Then we can greet what flows toward us with a clear, flexible mind and an open heart, ready and able to modify our plan according to the reality of the moment.

The mind also enjoys excursions into realms of fantasy, where it creates an internal video of a new and different me, famous, handsome, powerful, talented, successful, wealthy, and loved. The capacity of the human mind to fantasize is wonderful, the basis of all our creativity. It allows us to imagine new inventions, create new art and music, arrive at new scientific hypotheses, and to make plans for everything from new buildings to new chapters of our lives. Unfortunately, it can become an escape, an escape from whatever is uncomfortable about the present moment, an escape from the anxiety of not knowing what is actually moving toward us, an escape from the fear that the next moment (or hour or day or year) could bring us difficulties or even death. Incessant fantasizing and daydreaming are different from directed creativity. Creativity comes from resting the mind in neutral, allowing it to clear itself and provide a fresh canvas on which new ideas, equations, poems, melodies, or colorful strokes can appear.
When we allow the mind to rest in the present, full of what is actually happening right now, redirecting it away from repeated fruitless, energy-sapping excursions into the past, future, or fantasy realms, we are doing something very important. We are conserving the energy of the mind. It remains fresh and open, ready to respond to whatever appears before it.

This may sound trivial, but it is not. Ordinarily our mind does not rest. Even at night it is active, generating dreams from a mix of anxieties and the events of our life. We know that our body cannot function well without rest, so we give it at least a few hours to lie down and relax each night. We forget, though, that our mind needs rest, too. Where it finds rest is in the present moment, where it can lie down and relax into the flow of events.

Mindfulness practice reminds us not to fritter our mental energy away in trips to past and future, but to keep returning to this very place, to rest in what is happening in this very time.

2. Mindfulness trains and strengthens the mind.

We are all aware that the human body can be trained. We can become more flexible (gymnasts and acrobats), more graceful (ballet dancers), more skilled (piano players), and stronger (weight lifters). We are less aware that there are many aspects of mind that can be cultivated. Just before his enlightenment the Buddha described the qualities of mind and heart that he had developed over many years. He observed that his mind had become “concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, malleable, wieldy, rid of imperfections, imperturbable.” When we practice mindfulness, we learn to lift the mind up out of its habitual preoccupations and place it down in a place of our choosing in order to illuminate some aspect of our life. We are
training the mind to be light, powerful, and flexible but also able to concentrate on what we ask it to focus on.

The Buddha spoke of taming the mind. He said it was like taming a wild forest elephant. Just as an untamed elephant can do damage, trampling crops and injuring people, so the untamed, capricious mind can cause harm to us and those around us. Our human minds have a much larger capacity and power than we realize. Mindfulness is a potent tool for training the mind, allowing us to access and use the mind’s true potential for insight, kindness, and creativity.

The Buddha pointed out that when a wild elephant is first captured and led out of the jungle, it has to be tethered to a stake. In the case of our mind, that stake takes the form of whatever we attend to in our mindfulness practice—for example, the breath, a mouthful of food, or our posture. We anchor the mind by returning it over and over to one thing. This calms the mind and rids it of distractions.

A wild elephant has many wild habits. It runs away when humans approach. It attacks when frightened. Our mind is similar. When it senses danger, it runs away from the present. It might run to pleasant fantasies, to thoughts of future revenge, or just go numb. If it is frightened, it may attack other people in an angry outburst, or it may attack inwardly, in silent but corrosive self-criticism.

In the time of the Buddha, elephants were trained to go into battle, to obey commands without fleeing from the din and chaos of war. Similarly, a mind trained through mindfulness can stand steady under the rapidly changing conditions of modern life. Once our mind is tamed, we can remain calm and stable as we encounter the inevitable difficulties the world brings us. Eventually we don’t run from problems but see them as a way to test and strengthen our physical and mental stability.
Mindfulness helps us become aware of the mind’s habitual and conditioned patterns of escape and allows us to try an alternative way of being in the world. That alternative is resting our awareness in the actual events of the present moment, the sounds heard by the ear, the sensations felt by the skin, the colors and shapes taken in by the eyes. Mindfulness helps stabilize the heart and mind so they are not so badly tossed around by the unexpected things that arrive in our life. If we practice mindfulness patiently and long enough, eventually we become interested in everything that happens, curious about what we can learn even from adversity and, eventually, even from our own death.

3. **Mindfulness is good for the environment.**

Most of this mental activity, circling around endlessly in the realms of the past, future, and fantasy life, is not only pointless, it is destructive. How? It is fueled by an ecologically harmful fuel. That fuel is anxiety.

You might wonder, how is anxiety related to ecology? When we talk of ecology, we usually think of a world of physical relationships among living beings, such as the relationships among the bacteria, fungi, plants, and animals in a forest. But ecological relationships are based upon energy exchange, and anxiety is an energy.

We might be aware that if a mother is chronically anxious, it could affect her unborn child adversely, through changes in blood flow and in the nutrients and hormones that bathe the baby. In the same way when we are anxious, it affects the multitude of living “beings” inside of us—our heart, our liver, our gut, the billions of bacteria in our gut, our skin. The negative effects of our fear and anxiety are not confined to the container of our body. Our anxiety also affects every being
we come in contact with. Fear is a highly contagious state of mind, one that spreads quickly through families, communities, and whole nations.

Mindfulness involves resting our mind in a place where there is no anxiety, no fear. In fact, in that place we find the opposite. We discover resourcefulness, courage, and a quiet happiness.

Where is that “place”? It is not a geographic location. It is not a location in time. It is the flowing time and place of the present moment. Anxiety is fueled by thoughts of past and future. When we drop those thoughts, we drop anxiety and find ourselves at ease. How do we drop thoughts? We drop thoughts by temporarily withdrawing energy from the thinking function of the mind and redirecting it to the awareness function of the mind. This deliberate infusion of awareness is the essence of mindfulness. Relaxed, alert awareness is the antidote to anxiety and fear, both our own and others’. It is an ecologically beneficial way to live a human life; it changes the atmosphere for the better.

4. *Mindfulness creates intimacy.*

Our essential hunger is not for food but for intimacy. When intimacy is missing in our lives, we feel isolated from other beings, alone, vulnerable, and unloved in the world.

We habitually look to other people to fulfill our needs for intimacy. However, our partners and friends cannot always be there for us in the way we need. Luckily a profound experience of intimacy is always accessible to us—all it requires is that we turn around and move toward life. This will require courage. We have to intentionally open our senses, becoming deliberately aware of what is going on both inside our body and heart/mind, and also outside, in our environment.
Mindfulness is a deceptively simple tool for helping us to be aware. It is a practice that helps us wake up, be present, and live life more abundantly. It helps fill in the gaps in our day, the many times we go unconscious and are not present for big chunks of our life. It is also a practice that will help us close the frustrating gap, the invisible shield that seems to exist between ourselves and other people.

5. **Mindfulness stops our struggling and conquers fear.**

Mindfulness helps us stay present with experiences that aren’t pleasant. Our usual tendency is to try to arrange the world and other people so that we are comfortable. We spend a lot of energy trying to make the temperature around us just right, the lighting just right, the fragrance in the air just right, the food just right, our beds and chairs just the right softness, the colors of our walls just right, the grounds around our homes just right, and the people around us—our children, intimate partners, friends, coworkers, and even pets—just right.

But, try as we might, things don’t stay the way we want them. Sooner or later, our child throws a tantrum, dinner burns, the heating system breaks down, we become ill. If we are able to stay present and open, even to welcome experiences and people that aren’t comfortable for us, they will lose their power to frighten us and make us react or flee. If we can do this over and over again, we will have gained an amazing power, rare in the human world—to be happy despite constantly changing conditions.

6. **Mindfulness supports our spiritual life.**

Mindfulness tools are an invitation to bring attention to the many small activities of life. They are particularly helpful to
people who would like to nurture a spiritual life in the midst of all the distractions of modern living. Zen master Suzuki Roshi said, “Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine.” Mindfulness practice brings our awareness back to this body, this time, this place. This is exactly where we can be touched by the eternal presence we call the Divine. When we are mindful, we are appreciating each moment of the particular life we have been given. Mindfulness is a way of expressing our gratitude for a gift that we can never repay. Mindfulness can become a constant prayer of gratitude.

Christian mystics speak of a “life of continuous prayer.” What could this mean? How could it be possible when we are swept along in the speedy traffic of modern life, cutting corners continuously, without enough time to talk to our own family, let alone God?

True prayer is not petitioning, it is listening. Deep listening. When we listen deeply, we find that even the “sound” of our own thoughts is disruptive, even annoying. Letting go of thoughts, we enter a more profound inner stillness and receptivity. If this open silence can be held at our core, as our core, then we are no longer confused by trying to sort out and choose among our myriad competing inner voices. Our attention is no longer caught up in the emotional tangle within. It is directed outward. We are looking for the Divine in all appearances, listening to the Divine in all sounds, brushed by the Divine in all touches. As things move toward us, we respond appropriately, and then return to resting in inner silence. This is a life lived in faith, faith in the One Mind, a life of continuous prayer.

When we infuse one routine activity with mindfulness, then another and another, we are waking up to the mystery of each
moment, unknowable until it arrives. As things come forward, we are ready to receive and respond. We are receptive to what is being given to us, moment by moment, by the Great Presence. They are simple gifts, warmth spreading through our hands as we hold a cup of tea, thousands of tiny caresses as clothing touches our skin, the complex music of raindrops, one more breath. When we are able to give full attention to the living truth of each moment, we enter the gate to a life of continuous prayer.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT MINDFULNESS

Although mindfulness is highly touted, people may easily misunderstand it. First, they may mistakenly believe that to practice mindfulness means to think hard about something. In mindfulness we use the thinking power of the mind only to initiate the practice (“Be aware of your posture today”) and to remind us to return to the practice when the mind inevitably wanders during the day (“Return your awareness to your posture”). However, once we follow the mind’s instructions and begin to use the method, we can let go of thoughts. When the thinking mind quiets down, it shifts into open awareness. Then we are anchored in the body, alert and present.

The second misunderstanding about mindfulness is that it means doing everything very slowly. The speed at which we do things is not the point. It is possible to perform a task slowly and still be inattentive. Actually, when we move faster, we often need to become more attentive if we want to avoid errors. To use some of the mindfulness tools in this book, you may need to slow down—for example, while practicing mindful eating. For other exercises you will be asked to slow down
briefly, to bring the mind and body together before reengaging with your regular activities—for example, resting the mind for three breaths. Other tasks can be done at any speed, such as the exercise that involves paying attention to the bottoms of the feet while sitting, walking, or running.

A third common misunderstanding is to think of mindfulness as a program of time-limited exercises, such as a thirty-minute period of sitting meditation. Mindfulness is helpful to the extent that it spreads out into all the activities of our life, bringing the light of heightened awareness, curiosity, and a sense of discovery to the mundane activities of life, getting up in the morning, brushing teeth, walking through a door, answering a phone, listening to someone talk.

**EXERCISE**

**USE YOUR NONDOMINANT HAND**

The Exercise: Use your nondominant hand for some ordinary tasks each day. These could include brushing your teeth, combing your hair, or eating with the nondominant hand for at least part of each meal. If you’re up for a big challenge, try using the nondominant hand when writing or when eating with chopsticks.

**Reminding Yourself**

One way to remember this task throughout your day is to put a Band-Aid on your dominant hand. When you notice it, switch hands and use the nondominant hand. You could also tape a small sign on your bathroom mirror that says “Left Hand” (if you’re right-handed). Or tape a paper cutout of a hand to your mirror, refrigerator, or your desk—wherever you’re likely to see it.
Another approach is to tape something to the handle of your toothbrush, reminding you to brush your teeth with the nondominant hand.

**Discoveries**

This experiment always evokes laughter. We discover that the nondominant hand is quite clumsy. Using it brings us back to what Zen teachers call “beginner’s mind.” Our dominant hand might be forty years old, but the nondominant hand is much younger, perhaps about two or three years old. We have to learn all over again how to hold a fork and how to get it into our mouths without stabbing ourselves. We might begin to brush our teeth very awkwardly with the nondominant hand, and when we aren’t looking our dominant hand will reach out and take the toothbrush or fork away! It is just like a bossy older sister who says, “Hey, you little klutz, let me do it for you!”

Struggling to use the nondominant hand can awaken our compassion for anyone who is clumsy or unskilled, such as a person who has had disabilities, injuries, or a stroke. We briefly see how much we take for granted scores of simple movements that many people cannot make. Using chopsticks with the nondominant hand is a humbling experience. If you want to eat a meal in under an hour and not end up spilling food all over, you have to be very attentive.

**Deeper Lessons**

This task illustrates how strong and unconscious our habits are and how difficult they are to change without awareness and determination. This task helps us bring beginner’s mind to any activity—such as eating—that we do several times a day, often with only partial awareness.
Using the nondominant hand reveals our impatience. It can help us become more flexible and discover that we are never too old to learn new tricks. If we practice using the nondominant hand frequently, over time we can watch our skill develop. I have been practicing using my left hand for several years and I now forget which hand is the “right” hand to use. This could have practical benefits. If I lose the use of my dominant hand, as a number of my relatives did after strokes, I won’t be “left” helpless. When we develop a new skill, we realize that there are many other abilities lying dormant within us. This insight can arouse confidence that, with practice, we can transform ourselves in many ways, moving toward more flexibility and freedom in life. If we are willing to make the effort, over time, we can awaken the skills arising from the natural wisdom within us and let them function in our daily life.

Zen master Suzuki Roshi said, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” Mindfulness enables us to keep returning to the unlimited possibilities that are always emerging from the great birthing place of the present moment.

Final Words: To bring possibilities into your life, unfold beginner’s mind in all situations.

**EXERCISE**

**LEAVE NO TRACE**

The Exercise: Choose one room of your house and for one week try leaving no trace that you’ve used that space. The bathroom or kitchen works best for most people. If you’ve been doing something in that room, cooking a meal or taking
a shower, clean up in such a way that you leave no signs that you’ve been there, except perhaps the odor of food or fragrance of soap.

**Reminding Yourself**

Put a sign in the room you’ve chosen that says, “Leave No Trace.”

In Zen paintings turtles symbolize this practice of leaving no traces, because they sweep the sand with their tails as they creep along, wiping out their footprints. Instead of a written sign, you could also use small pictures of turtles as reminders.

**Discoveries**

Often, we leave rooms a bit messier than when we entered. We think, “I’ll clean it up later.” Later never comes, until the mess is unbearable, and we become irritated enough to undertake a thorough cleaning. Or we get annoyed at someone else for not doing their part in the housework. How much easier if we take care of things right away. Then we don’t have to feel growing annoyance at the gathering mess.

This task helps us become aware of the tendency to turn away from doing certain things, even small things that we could take care of during the day but somehow don’t have the motivation to do. We could pick up the trash on the sidewalk as we walk by, or the paper towel that missed the bin in the washroom. We could straighten the pillows on the couch after we get up, or wash our coffee cup instead of putting it in the sink, and we could put tools away even though we’ll be using them again tomorrow.

One person observed that becoming mindful about leaving no traces in one room spread out to include other areas.
Washing her dirty dishes immediately after eating led to making her bed immediately after arising, and then to cleaning the little hairs out of the drain right after a shower. We have to summon the initial energy, but thereafter, energy seems to breed more energy.

**Deeper Lessons**

This exercise puts a spotlight on our tendency to be lazy. The word *lazy* is a description, not a criticism. If we live less than wholeheartedly, we often leave messes for others to clean up. It is so easy to wash the dishes but not put them back in the cupboard. It is so easy to skip meditation or prayer when our life gets hectic.

This task also brings our awareness to the many small things that support our life and work all day long—the spoons and forks that feed us, the clothing that keeps us warm, the rooms that shelter us. When we wash, dry, sweep, fold, and put away our things with mindfulness, it becomes an expression of gratitude for their silent service.

Zen master Dogen wrote specific instructions for the cooks in his monastery. “Clean the chopsticks, ladles, and all other utensils; handle them with equal care and awareness, putting everything back where it naturally belongs.” There is something satisfying about washing things that are dirty and putting things in order, and about treating everything that serves us with care, whether plastic plates or delicate china. Our mind seems “cleaner” and our life less complicated when we’ve cleaned up the space and things around us. A friend told me about hauling pounds of old clothing, long-expired medication, and trash out of an elderly aunt’s house. He said, “At first she seemed worried, but then she relaxed, and with every bag we took out she seemed to get a year younger.”
The sense of satisfaction from leaving no traces may be a reflection of our deep desire to leave the world at least no worse than when we entered it, and hopefully, to leave it a bit better. Ideally the only traces we will leave will be the ways we have loved, inspired, taught, or served others. This is what will have the most positive effect on people in the future.

Final Words: First practice leaving no traces. Then practice leaving things better than you found them.


If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food* by Jan Chozen Bays (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2009).
For the follower of the buddhadharma, the teachings of Buddhism, there is a need for great emphasis on the practice of meditation. One must see the straightforward logic that mind is the cause of confusion and that by transcending confusion one attains the enlightened state. This can only take place through the practice of meditation. The Buddha himself experienced this, by working on his own mind; and what he learned has been handed down to us.

Mindfulness is a basic approach to the spiritual journey that is common to all traditions of Buddhism. But before we begin to look closely at that approach, we should have some idea of what is meant by spirituality itself. Some say that spirituality is a way of attaining a better kind of happiness, transcendental happiness. Others see it as a benevolent way to develop power over others. Still others say the point of spirituality is to acquire magical powers so we can change our bad world into a good world or purify the world through miracles. It seems that all of these points of view are irrelevant...
to the Buddhist approach. According to the buddhadharma, spirituality means relating with the working basis of one’s existence, which is one’s state of mind.

There is a problem with one’s basic life, one’s basic being. This problem is that we are involved in a continual struggle to survive, to maintain our position. We are continually trying to grasp onto some solid image of ourselves. And then we have to defend that particular fixed conception. So there is warfare, there is confusion, and there is passion and aggression; there are all kinds of conflicts. From the Buddhist point of view, the development of true spirituality is cutting through our basic fixation, that clinging, that stronghold of something-or-other, which is known as ego.

In order to do that we have to find out what ego is. What is this all about? Who are we? We have to look into our already existing state of mind. And we have to understand what practical step we can take to do that. We are not involved here in a metaphysical discussion about the purpose of life and the meaning of spirituality on an abstract level. We are looking at this question from the point of view of a working situation. We need to find some simple thing we can do in order to embark on the spiritual path.

People have difficulty beginning a spiritual practice because they put a lot of energy into looking for the best and easiest way to get into it. We might have to change our attitude and give up looking for the best or the easiest way. Actually, there is no choice. Whatever approach we take, we will have to deal with what we are already. We have to look at who we are. According to the Buddhist tradition, the working basis of the path and the energy involved in the path is the mind—one’s own mind, which is working in us all the time.
Spirituality is based on mind. In Buddhism, mind is what distinguishes sentient beings from rocks or trees or bodies of water. That which possesses discriminating awareness, that which possesses a sense of duality—which grasps or rejects something external—that is mind. Fundamentally, it is that which can associate with an “other”—with any “something” that is perceived as different from the perceiver. That is the definition of mind. The traditional Tibetan phrase defining mind means precisely that: “That which can think of the other, the projection, is mind.”

So by mind we mean something very specific. It is not just something very vague and creepy inside our heads or hearts, something that just happens as part of the way the wind blows and the grass grows. Rather, it is something very concrete. It contains perception—perception that is very uncomplicated, very basic, very precise. Mind develops its particular nature as that perception begins to linger on something other than oneself. Mind makes the fact of perceiving something else stand for the existence of oneself. That is the mental trick that constitutes mind. In fact, it should be the opposite. Since the perception starts from oneself, the logic should be: “I exist, therefore the other exists.” But somehow the hypocrisy of mind is developed to such an extent that mind lingers on the other as a way of getting the feedback that it itself exists, which is a fundamentally erroneous belief. It is the fact that the existence of self is questionable that motivates the trick of duality.

This mind is our working basis for the practice of meditation and the development of awareness. But mind is something more than the process of confirming self by the dualistic lingering on the other. Mind also includes what are known as emotions, which are the highlights of mental states. Mind
cannot exist without emotions. Daydreaming and discursive thoughts are not enough. Those alone would be too boring. The dualistic trick would wear too thin. So we tend to create waves of emotion which go up and down: passion, aggression, ignorance, pride—all kinds of emotions. In the beginning we create them deliberately, as a game of trying to prove to ourselves that we exist. But eventually the game becomes a hassle; it becomes more than a game and forces us to challenge ourselves more than we intended. It is like a hunter who, for the sport of practicing his shooting, decides to shoot one leg of a deer at a time. But the deer runs very fast, and it appears it might get away altogether. This becomes a total challenge to the hunter, who rushes after the deer, now trying to kill it completely, to shoot it in the heart. So the hunter has been challenged and feels defeated by his own game.

Emotions are like that. They are not a requirement for survival; they are a game we developed that went wrong at some point—it went sour. In the face of this predicament we feel terribly frustrated and absolutely helpless. Such frustration causes some people to fortify their relationship to the “other” by creating a god or other projections, such as saviors, gurus, and mahatmas. We create all kinds of projections as henchmen, hitmen, to enable us to redominate our territory. The implicit sense is that if we pay homage to such great beings, they will function as our helpers, as the guarantors of our ground.

So we have created a world that is bittersweet. Things are amusing but, at the same time, not so amusing. Sometimes things seem terribly funny but, on the other hand, terribly sad. Life has the quality of a game of ours that has trapped us. The setup of mind has created the whole thing. We might complain about the government or the economy of the country.
or the prime rate of interest, but those factors are secondary. The original process at the root of the problems is the competitiveness of seeing oneself only as a reflection of the other. Problematic situations arise automatically as expressions of that. They are our own production, our own neat work. And that is what is called mind.

According to the Buddhist tradition, there are eight types of consciousness and fifty-two types of conceptions and all kinds of other aspects of mind, about which we do not have to go into detail. All these aspects are based largely on the primeval dualistic approach. There are the spiritual aspects and the psychological aspects and all sorts of other aspects. All are bound up in the realm of duality, which is ego.

As far as meditation practice is concerned, in meditation we work on this thing, rather than on trying to sort out the problem from the outside. We work on the projector rather than the projection. We turn inward, instead of trying to sort out external problems of A, B, and C. We work on the creator of duality rather than the creation. That is beginning at the beginning.

According to the Buddhist tradition, there are three main aspects of mind, which in Tibetan are called sem, rikpa, and yi. The basic mind, the simple capacity for duality we have already described, is sem. Rikpa literally means “intelligence” or “brightness.” In colloquial Tibetan, if you say that somebody has rikpa, it means he is a clever, sharp fellow. This sharpness of rikpa is a kind of side function that develops from the basic mind; it is a kind of lawyer’s mentality that everybody develops. Rikpa looks at a problem from various angles and analyzes the possibilities of different ways of approaching it. It looks at a problem in every possible way—inside out and outside in.
The third aspect, yi, is traditionally classified as the sixth sense consciousness. The first five sense consciousnesses are sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch, and the sixth is yi. Yi is mental sensitivity. It is associated with the heart and is a kind of balancing factor that acts as a switchboard in relation to the other five sense consciousnesses. When you see a sight and hear a sound at the same time, the sight and sound are synchronized by the sixth sense to constitute aspects of a single event. Yi does a kind of automatic synchronization, or automatic computerization, of the whole process of sense experience. You can see, smell, hear, taste, and feel all at the same time, and all of those inputs are coherently workable. They make sense to you because of yi.

So yi is a sort of central-headquarters switchboard which coordinates experience into a coherent whole. In some sense it is the most important of all the three aspects of mind. It is not as intelligent in the sense of manipulation as sem. Sem has something of a political attitude toward one’s relationship with the world; it is somewhat strategy oriented. The sixth sense is more domestic in function. It just tries to maintain the coordination of experience so that all information comes through efficiently and there is no problem of being out of communication with anything that is going on. On the other hand, rikpa, which is the intelligence—the research worker, as it were—in this administration of mind, takes an overall view of one’s whole situation. It surveys the relationship between mind and the sixth sense and tries to search out all the possibilities of where things are going wrong, where things might go wrong, where things have gone wrong, how things could be put right. This research worker does not have the power actually to take action on the level of external relations. It is more like an adviser to the State Department.
These three principles of sem, rikpa, and yi are the most important for us to be aware of at this point. Many other aspects of mind are described in the traditional literature, but these three will suffice for our present understanding.

We should consider this understanding not so much as something that we have been told and therefore we should believe in. The experience described here can actually be felt personally. It can be worked on, related to. A certain part of our experience is organized by basic mind, a certain part by the sixth sense, and a certain part by intelligence. In order to understand the basic functions of mindfulness-awareness practice, I think it is very important for us to understand and realize these complexities of mind.

A gigantic world of mind exists to which we are almost totally unexposed. This whole world—this tent and this microphone, this light, this grass, the very pair of spectacles that we are wearing—is made by mind. Minds made this up, put these things together. Every bolt and nut was put in by somebody-or-other’s mind. This whole world is mind’s world, the product of mind. This is needless to say; I am sure everybody knows this. But we might remind ourselves of it so that we realize that meditation is not an exclusive activity that involves forgetting this world and getting into something else. By meditating, we are dealing with the very mind that devised our eyeglasses and put the lenses in the rims, and the very mind that put up this tent. Our coming here is the product of our minds. Each of us has different mental manifestations, which permit others to identify us and say, “This guy is named so-and-so, this girl is named so-and-so.” We can be identified as individuals because we have different mental approaches, which also shape the expressions of our physical features. Our physical characteristics are part of our mental activity as well. So this is a living world, mind’s
world. Realizing this, working with mind is no longer a remote or mysterious thing to do. It is no longer dealing with something that is hidden or somewhere else. Mind is right here. Mind is hanging out in the world. It is an open secret.

The method for beginning to relate directly with mind, which was taught by Lord Buddha and which has been in use for the past twenty-five hundred years, is the practice of mindfulness. There are four aspects to this practice, traditionally known as the four foundations of mindfulness.

**MINDFULNESS OF BODY**

Mindfulness of body, the first foundation of mindfulness, is connected with the need for a sense of being, a sense of groundedness.

To begin with, there is some problem about what we understand by *body*. We sit on chairs or on the ground; we eat; we sleep; we wear clothes. But the body we relate with in going through these activities is questionable. According to the tradition, the body we think we have is what is known as psychosomatic body. It is largely based on projections and concepts of body. This psychosomatic body contrasts with the enlightened person’s sense of body, which might be called “body-body.” This sense of body is free from conceptualizations. It is just simple and straightforward. There is a direct relationship with the earth. As for us, we do not actually have a relationship with the earth. We have some relationship with body, but it is very uncertain and erratic. We flicker back and forth between body and something else—fantasies, ideas. That seems to be our basic situation.

Even though the psychosomatic body is constituted by projections of body, it can be quite solid in terms of those
projections. We have expectations concerning the existence of this body, therefore we have to refuel it, entertain it, wash it. Through this psychosomatic body we are able to experience a sense of being. For instance, as you listen to this talk, you feel that you are sitting on the ground. Your buttocks are resting on the earth; therefore you can extend your legs and lean back a little so you have less strain on your body. All of this affects your sense of being. You have some sense of relaxation as opposed to how it would be if you were standing—standing on your feet, standing on your toes, or standing on your palms. The posture that you are adopting at the moment seems to be an agreeable one; in fact it is one of the most congenial postures that one could ever think of. So being in this posture, you can relax and listen—you can listen to something other than the demands of your body.

Sitting down now, you feel somewhat settled. On the other hand, if the ground were very damp, you would not feel so settled. Then you would begin to perch on the ground, like a bird on a branch. This would be another matter altogether. If you are intensely concerned with some event about to happen or if you are worried about some encounter you are about to have—for example, if you are being interviewed for a job by some executive—you don’t really sit on your chair, you perch on it. Perching happens when some demand is being made on you and you feel less of your body and more of your tension and nervousness. It involves a very different sense of body and of being than if you are just sitting, as you are doing now.

Right now you are sitting on the ground, and you are so completely sitting down that you have been able to shift gears and turn on your tape recorders, or even start taking notes, and you do not regard that as doing two things at once. You
sit there, you have totally flopped, so to speak, and, having done that, you can turn to your other perceptions—listening, looking, and so on.

But your sitting here at this point is not actually very much a matter of your body per se sitting on the ground; it is far more a matter of your psychosomatic body sitting on the ground. Sitting on the ground as you are—all facing in one direction, toward the speaker; being underneath the roof of the tent; being attracted to the light that is focused on the stage—all gives you a particular idea; it creates a certain style of participation, which is the condition of your psychosomatic body. You are somewhat involved in sitting per se, but at the same time you are not. Mind is doing it; concept is doing it. Your mind is shaping the situation in accordance with your body. Your mind is sitting on the ground. Your mind is taking notes. Your mind is wearing glasses. Your mind has such-and-such a hairdo; your mind is wearing such-and-such clothes. Everyone is creating a world according to the body situation, but largely out of contact with it. That is the psychosomatic process.

Mindfulness of body brings this all-pervasive mind-imitating-body activity into the practice of meditation. The practice of meditation has to take into account that mind continually shapes itself into bodylike attitudes. Consequently, since the time of Buddha, sitting meditation has been recommended and practiced, and it has proved to be the best way of dealing with this situation. The basic technique that goes with sitting meditation is working with the breath. You identify with the breath, particularly with the out-breath. The in-breath is just a gap, a space. During the in-breath you just wait. So you breathe out and then you dissolve and then there is a gap. Breathe out . . . dissolve . . . gap. An openness, an expansion, can take place constantly that way.
Mindfulness plays a very important role in this technique. In this case, mindfulness means that when you sit and meditate, you actually do sit. You actually do sit as far as the psychosomatic body is concerned. You feel the ground, body, breath, temperature. You don’t try specifically to watch and keep track of what is going on. You don’t try to formalize the sitting situation and make it into some special activity that you are performing. You just sit. And then you begin to feel that there is some sense of groundedness. This is not particularly a product of being deliberate, but it is more the force of the actual fact of being there. So you sit. And you sit. And you breathe. And you sit and you breathe. Sometimes you think, but still you are thinking sitting thoughts. The psychosomatic body is sitting, so your thoughts have a flat bottom.

Mindfulness of body is connected with the earth. It is an openness that has a base, a foundation. A quality of expansive awareness develops through mindfulness of body—a sense of being settled and of therefore being able to afford to open out.

Going along with this mindfulness requires a great deal of trust. Probably the beginning meditator will not be able simply to rest there, but will feel the need for a change. I remember someone who had just finished a retreat telling me how she had sat and felt her body and felt grounded. But then she had thought immediately how she should be doing something else. And she went on to tell me how the right book had “just jumped” into her lap, and she had started to read. At that point one doesn’t have a solid base anymore. One’s mind is beginning to grow little wings. Mindfulness of body has to do with trying to remain human, rather than becoming an animal or fly or etheric being. It means just trying to remain a human being, an ordinary human being.
The basic starting point for this is solidness, groundedness. When you sit, you actually sit. Even your floating thoughts begin to sit on their own bottoms. There are no particular problems. You have a sense of solidness and groundedness, and, at the same time, a sense of being.

Without this particular foundation of mindfulness, the rest of your meditation practice could be very airy-fairy—vacillating back and forth, trying this and trying that. You could be constantly tiptoeing on the surface of the universe, not actually getting a foothold anywhere. You could become an eternal hitchhiker. So with this first technique you develop some basic solidness. In mindfulness of body, there is a sense of finding some home ground.

**MINDFULNESS OF LIFE**

The application of mindfulness has to be precise. If we cling to our practice, we create stagnation. Therefore, in our application of the techniques of mindfulness, we must be aware of the fundamental tendency to cling, to survive. We come to this in the second foundation of mindfulness, which is mindfulness of life, or survival. Since we are dealing with the context of meditation, we encounter this tendency in the form of clinging to the meditative state. We experience the meditative state and it is momentarily tangible, but in that same moment it is also dissolving. Going along with this process means developing a sense of letting go of awareness as well as of contacting it. This basic technique of the second foundation of mindfulness could be described as touch-and-go: you are there—present, mindful—and then you let go.

A common misunderstanding is that the meditative state of mind has to be captured and then nursed and cherished. That
is definitely the wrong approach. If you try to domesticate your mind through meditation—try to possess it by holding on to the meditative state—the clear result will be regression on the path, with a loss of freshness and spontaneity. If you try to hold on without lapse all the time, then maintaining your awareness will begin to become a domestic hassle. It will become like painfully going through housework. There will be an underlying sense of resentment, and the practice of meditation will become confusing. You will begin to develop a love-hate relationship toward your practice, in which your concept of it seems good, but, at the same time, the demand this rigid concept makes on you is too painful.

So the technique of the mindfulness of life is based on touch-and-go. You focus your attention on the object of awareness, but then, in the same moment, you disown that awareness and go on. What is needed here is some sense of confidence—confidence that you do not have to securely own your mind, but that you can tune into its process spontaneously.

Mindfulness of life relates to the clinging tendency not only in connection with the meditative state, but, even more importantly, in connection with the level of raw anxiety about survival that manifests in us constantly, second by second, minute by minute. You breathe for survival; you lead your life for survival. The feeling is constantly present that you are trying to protect yourself from death. For the practical purposes of the second foundation, instead of regarding this survival mentality as something negative, instead of relating to it as ego-clinging as is done in the abstract philosophical overview of Buddhism, this particular practice switches logic around. In the second foundation, the survival struggle is regarded as a stepping-stone in the practice of meditation. Whenever you
have the sense of the survival instinct functioning, that can be transmuted into a sense of being, a sense of having already survived. Mindfulness becomes a basic acknowledgment of existing. This does not have the flavor of “Thank God, I have survived.” Instead, it is more objective, impartial: “I am alive, I am here, so be it.”

We may undertake the practice of meditation with a sense of purity or austerity. We somehow feel that by meditating we are doing the right thing, and we feel like good boys or good girls. Not only are we doing the right thing, but we are also getting away from the ugly world. We are becoming pure; we are renouncing the world and becoming like the yogis of the past. We don’t actually live and meditate in a cave, but we can regard the corner of the room that we have arranged for meditation as a cave. We can close our eyes and feel that we are meditating in a cave in the mountains. That kind of imagination makes us feel rather good. It feels fitting; it feels clean and secure.

This strong tendency is an attempt to isolate the practice of meditation from one’s actual living situation. We build up all kinds of extraneous concepts and images about it. It is satisfying to regard meditation as austere and above life. But mindfulness of life steers us in just the opposite direction. The approach of mindfulness of life is that if you are meditating in a room, you are meditating in a room. You don’t regard the room as a cave. If you are breathing, you are breathing, rather than convincing yourself you are a motionless rock. You keep your eyes open and simply let yourself be where you are. There are no imaginations involved with this approach. You just go through with your situation as it is. If your meditation place is in a rich setting, just be in the midst of it. If it is in a simple setting, just be in the midst of that. You are not trying
to get away from here to somewhere else. You are tuning in simply and directly to your process of life. This practice is the essence of here and now.

In this way, meditation becomes an actual part of life, rather than just a practice or exercise. It becomes inseparable from the instinct to live that accompanies all one’s existence. That instinct to live can be seen as containing awareness, meditation, mindfulness. It constantly tunes us in to what is happening. So the life force that keeps us alive and that manifests itself continually in our stream of consciousness itself becomes the practice of mindfulness. Such mindfulness brings clarity, skill, and intelligence. Experience is brought from the framework of intense psychosomatic confusion into that of the real body, because we are simply tuning into what is already happening, instead of projecting anything further.

Since mindfulness is part of one’s stream of consciousness, the practice of meditation cannot be regarded as something alien, as an emulation of some picturesque yogi who has a fixation on meditating all the time. Seen from the point of view of mindfulness of life, meditation is the total experience of any living being who has the instinct to survive. Therefore meditating—developing mindfulness—should not be regarded as a minority-group activity or as some specialized, eccentric pursuit. It is a worldwide approach that relates to all experience: it is tuning in to life.

We do not tune in as part of trying to live further. We do not approach mindfulness as a further elaboration of the survival instinct. Rather we just see the sense of survival as it is taking place in us already. You are here; you are living; let it be that way—that is mindfulness. Your heart pulsates and you breathe. All kinds of things are happening in you at once. Let mindfulness work with that, let that be mindfulness, let ever
beat of your heart, every breath, be mindfulness itself. You do not have to breathe specially; your breath is an expression of mindfulness. If you approach meditation in this way, it becomes very personal and very direct.

Having such an outlook and such a relationship with the practice of meditation brings enormous strength, enormous energy and power. But this only comes if one’s relationship to the present situation is accurate. Otherwise there is no strength because we are apart from the energy of that situation. The accuracy of mindfulness, on the other hand, brings not only strength, but a sense of dignity and delight. This is simply because we are doing something that is applicable that very moment. And we are doing it without any implications or motives. It is direct and right on the point.

But again it is necessary to say, once you have that experience of the presence of life, don’t hang onto it. Just touch and go. Touch that presence of life being lived, then go. You do not have to ignore it. “Go” does not mean that we have to turn our backs on the experience and shut ourselves off from it; it means just being in it without further analysis and without further reinforcement. Holding on to life, or trying to reassure oneself that it is so, has the sense of death rather than life. It is only because we have that sense of death that we want to make sure that we are alive. We would like to have an insurance policy. But if we feel that we are alive, that is good enough. We do not have to make sure that we actually do breathe, that we actually can be seen. We do not have to check to be sure we have a shadow. Just living is enough. If we don’t stop to reassure ourselves, living becomes very clear-cut, very alive, and very precise.

So mindfulness here does not mean pushing oneself toward something or hanging on to something. It means allowing
oneself to be there in the very moment of what is happening in one’s living process and then letting go.

**MINDFULNESS OF EFFORT**

The next foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of effort. The idea of *effort* is apparently problematical. Effort would seem to be at odds with the sense of being that arises from mindfulness of body. Also, pushing of any kind does not have an obvious place in the touch-and-go technique of the mindfulness of life. In either case, deliberate, heavy-handed effort would seem to endanger the open precision of the process of mindfulness. Still we cannot expect proper mindfulness to develop without some kind of exertion on our part. Effort is necessary. But the Buddhist notion of right effort is quite different from conventional definitions of effort.

One kind of conventional effort is oriented purely toward the achievement of a result: there is a sense of struggle and pushing, which is egged on by the sense of a goal. Such effort picks up momentum and begins to thrive on its own speed, like the run of a roadrunner. Another approach to effort is fraught with a sense of tremendous meaningfulness: there is no sense of uplift or inspiration in the work. Instead there is a strong feeling of being dutiful. One just slogs along, slowly and surely, trying to chew through obligations in the manner of a worm in a tree. A worm just chews through whatever comes in front of its mouth; the channel that its belly passes through is its total space.

Neither of these kinds of effort has a sense of openness or precision. The traditional Buddhist analogy for right effort is the walk of an elephant or tortoise. The elephant moves along surely, unstoppably, with great dignity. Like the worm, it is
not excitable, but unlike the worm, it has a panoramic view of the ground it is treading on. Though it is serious and slow, because of the elephant’s ability to survey the ground there is a sense of playfulness and intelligence in its movement.

In the case of meditation, trying to develop an inspiration that is based on wanting to forget one’s pain and on trying to make one’s practice thrive on a sense of continual accomplishment is quite immature. On the other hand, too much solemnity and dutifulness creates a lifeless and narrow outlook and a stale psychological environment. The style of right effort, as taught by the Buddha, is serious but not too serious. It takes advantage of the natural flow of instinct to bring the wandering mind constantly back to the mindfulness of breathing.

The crucial point in the bringing-back process is that it is not necessary to go through deliberate stages: first preparing to do it, then getting a hold on one’s attention, then finally dragging it back to the breathing as if we were trying to drag a naughty child back from doing something terrible. It is not a question of forcing the mind back to some particular object, but of bringing it back down from the dream world into reality. We are breathing, we are sitting. That is what we are doing, and we should be doing it completely, fully, wholeheartedly.

There is a kind of technique, or trick, here that is extremely effective and useful, not only for sitting meditation, but also in daily life, or meditation-in-action. The way of coming back is through what we might call the abstract watcher. This watcher is just simple self-consciousness, without aim or goal. When we encounter anything, the first flash that takes place is the bare sense of duality, of separateness. On that basis, we begin to evaluate, pick and choose, make
decisions, execute our will. The abstract watcher is just the basic sense of separateness—the plain cognition of being there before any of the rest develops. Instead of condemning this self-consciousness as dualistic, we take advantage of this tendency in our psychological system and use it as the basis of the mindfulness of effort. The experience is just a sudden flash of the watcher’s being there. At that point we don’t think, “I must get back to the breath” or “I must try and get away from these thoughts.” We don’t have to entertain a deliberate and logical movement of mind that repeats to itself the purpose of sitting practice. There is just suddenly a general sense that something is happening here and now, and we are brought back. Abruptly, immediately, without a name, without the application of any kind of concept, we have a quick glimpse of changing the tone. That is the core of the mindfulness of effort practice.

One of the reasons that ordinary effort becomes so dreary and stagnant is that our intention always develops a verbalization. Subconsciously, we actually verbalize: “I must go and help so-and-so because it is half-past one” or “This is a good thing for me to do; it is good for me to perform this duty.” Any kind of sense of duty we might have is always verbalized, though the speed of conceptual mind is so great that we may not even notice the verbalization. Still, the contents of the verbalization are clearly felt. This verbalization pins the effort to a fixed frame of reference, which makes it extremely tiresome. In contrast, the abstract effort we are talking about flashes in a fraction of a second, without any name or any idea with it. It is just a jerk, a sudden change of course which does not define its destination. The rest of the effort is just like an elephant’s walk—going slowly, step by step, observing the situation around us.
You could call this abstract self-consciousness \textit{leap} if you like, or \textit{jerk}, or \textit{sudden reminder}; or you could call it \textit{amazement}. Sometimes it could also be also felt as panic, unconditioned panic, because of the change of course—something comes to us and changes our whole course. If we work with this sudden jerk, and do so with no effort in the effort, then effort becomes self-existing. It stands on its own two feet, so to speak, rather than needing another effort to trigger it off. If the latter were the case, effort would have to be deliberately manufactured, which would run counter to the whole sense of meditation. Once you have had that sudden instant of mindfulness, the idea is not to try to maintain it. You should not hold on to it or try to cultivate it. Don’t entertain the messenger. Don’t nurse the reminder. Get back to meditation. Get into the message.

This kind of effort is extremely important. The sudden flash is a key to all Buddhist meditation, from the level of basic mindfulness to the highest levels of tantra. Such mindfulness of effort could definitely be considered the most important aspect of mindfulness practice. Mindfulness of body creates the general setting; it brings meditation into the psychosomatic setup of one’s life. Mindfulness of life makes meditation practice personal and intimate. Mindfulness of effort makes meditation workable: it connects the foundations of mindfulness to the path, to the spiritual journey. It is like the wheel of a chariot, which makes the connection between the chariot and the road, or like the oar of a boat. Mindfulness of effort actualizes the practice; it makes it move, proceed.

But we have a problem here. Mindfulness of effort cannot be deliberately manufactured; on the other hand, it is not enough just to hope that a flash will come to us and we will be reminded. We cannot just leave it up to “that thing”
to happen to us. We have to set some kind of general alarm system, so to speak, or prepare a general atmosphere. There must be a background of discipline which sets the tone of the sitting practice. Effort is important on this level also; it is the sense of not having the faintest indulgence toward any form of entertainment. We have to give something up. Unless we give up our reservations about taking the practice seriously, it is virtually impossible to have that kind of instantaneous effort dawn on us. So it is extremely important to have respect for the practice, a sense of appreciation, and a willingness to work hard.

Once we do have a sense of commitment to relating with things as they actually are, we have opened the way to the flash that reminds us: that, that, that. “That what?” does not apply any more. Just that, which triggers an entirely new state of consciousness and brings us back automatically to mindfulness of breathing or a general sense of being.

We work hard at not being diverted into entertainment. Still, in some sense, we can enjoy the very boring situation of the practice of sitting meditation. We can actually appreciate not having lavish resources of entertainment available. Because of having already included our boredom and ennui, we have nothing to run away from and we feel completely secure and grounded.

This basic sense of appreciation is another aspect of the background that makes it possible for the spontaneous flash of the reminder to occur more easily. This is said to be like falling in love. When we are in love with someone, because our whole attitude is open toward that person somehow or other we get a sudden flash of that person—not as a name or as a concept of what the person looks like; those are afterthoughts. We get an abstract flash of our lover as that. A flash
of *that* comes into our mind first. Then we might ponder on that flash, elaborate on it, enjoy our daydreams about it. But all this happens afterward. The flash is primal.

Openness always brings that kind of result. A traditional analogy is that of the hunter. The hunter does not have to think of a stag or a mountain goat or a bear or any specific animal; he is looking for *that*. When he walks and hears some sound, or senses some subtle possibility, he does not think of what animal he is going to find; just a feeling of *that* comes up. Anybody in any kind of complete involvement—on the level of the hunter, the lover, or the meditator—has the kind of openness that brings about sudden flashes. It is an almost magical sensation of thatness, without a name, without concept, without idea. This is the instant of effort, concentrated effort, and awareness follows after that. Having disowned that sudden experience, awareness very slowly comes and settles back to the earthy reality of just being there.

**MINDFULNESS OF MIND**

Often mindfulness is referred to as watchfulness. But that should not give the impression that mindfulness means watching something happening. Mindfulness means *being* watchful, rather than watching some *thing*. This implies a process of intelligent alertness, rather than the mechanical business of simply observing what happens. Particularly the fourth foundation—mindfulness of mind—has qualities of an aroused intelligence operating. The intelligence of the fourth foundation is a sense of light-handedness. If you open the windows and doors of a room the right amount, you can maintain the interior feeling of roomness and, at the same time, have freshness from outside. Mindfulness of mind brings that same kind of intelligent balance.
Without mind and its conflicts, we could not meditate or develop balance, or develop anything at all for that matter. Therefore, conflicts that arise from mind are regarded as a necessary part of the process of mindfulness. But at the same time, those conflicts have to be controlled enough so that we can come back to our mindfulness of breathing. A balance has to be maintained. There has to be a certain discipline so that we are neither totally lost in daydream nor missing the freshness and openness that come from not holding our attention too tightly. This balance is a state of wakefulness, mindfulness.

People with different temperaments bring different approaches to the practice of meditation. Some people are extremely orthodox, in fact dictatorial, with themselves. Others are extraordinarily loose; they just hang out, so to speak, in the meditation posture and let everything happen. Other people struggle back and forth between those two extremes, not knowing exactly what to do. How one approaches the sitting situation will depend on one’s moods and the type of person one is, obviously. But always a certain sense of accuracy is required, and a certain sense of freedom is required.

Mindfulness of mind means being with one’s mind. When you sit and meditate, you are there: you are being with your body, with your sense of life or survival, with your sense of effort, and at the same time, you are being with your mind. You are being there. Mindfulness of mind suggests a sense of presence and a sense of accuracy in terms of being there. You are there, therefore you can’t miss yourself. If you are not there, then you might miss yourself. But that also would be a double take: if you realize you are not there, that means you are there. That brings you back to where you are—back to square one.

The whole process is very simple, actually. Unfortunately, explaining the simplicity takes a lot of vocabulary, a lot of
grammar. However, it is a very simple matter. And that matter concerns you and your world. Nothing else. It does not particularly concern enlightenment, and it does not particularly concern metaphysical comprehension. In fact, this simple matter does not particularly concern the next minute, or the minute before this one. It only concerns the very small area where we are now.

Really we operate on a very small basis. We think we are great, broadly significant, and that we cover a whole large area. We see ourselves as having a history and a future, and here we are in our big-deal present. But if we look at ourselves clearly in this very moment, we see we are just grains of sand—just little people concerned only with this little dot which is called nowness.

We can only operate on one dot at a time, and mindfulness of mind approaches our experience in that way. We are there, and we approach ourselves on the very simple basis of that. That does not particularly have many dimensions, many perspectives; it is just a simple thing. Relating directly to this little dot of nowness is the right understanding of austerity. And if we work on this basis, it is possible to begin to see the truth of the matter, so to speak—to begin to see what nowness really means.

This experience is very revealing in that it is very personal. It is not personal in the sense of petty and mean. The idea is that this experience is your experience. You might be tempted to share it with somebody else, but then it becomes their experience, rather than what you wished for: your/their experience, jumbled together. You can never achieve that. People have different experiences of reality, which cannot be jumbled together. Invaders and dictators of all kinds have tried to make others have their experience, to make a big
concoction of minds controlled by one person. But that is impossible. Everyone who has tried to make that kind of spiritual pizza has failed. So you have to accept that your experience is personal. The personal experience of nowness is very much there and very obviously there. You cannot even throw it away!

In sitting practice, or in the awareness practice of everyday life, for that matter, you are not trying to solve a wide array of problems. You are looking at one situation that is very limited. It is so limited that there is not even room to be claustrophobic. If it is not there, it is not there. You missed it. If it is there, it is there. That is the pinpoint of mindfulness of mind, that simplicity of total up-to-dateness, total directness. Mind functions singly. Once. And once. One thing at a time. The practice of mindfulness of mind is to be there with that one-shot perception, constantly. You get a complete picture from which nothing is missing: that is happening, now that is happening, now that is happening. There is no escape. Even if you focus yourself on escaping, that is also a one-shot movement of which you could be mindful. You can be mindful of your escape—of your sexual fantasy or your aggression fantasy.

Things always happen one at a time, in a direct, simple movement of mind. Therefore, in the technique of mindfulness of mind, it is traditionally recommended that you be aware of each single-shot perception of mind as thinking: “I am thinking I hear a sound.” “I am thinking I smell a scent.” “I am thinking I feel hot.” “I am thinking I feel cold.” Each one of these is a total approach to experience—very precise, very direct, one single movement of mind. Things always happen in that direct way.

Often we tend to think that we are very clever and we can get away from that direct nature of things. We feel we can get
around that choiceless simplicity by approaching something from the back door—or from above, from the loft. We feel that we can prove ourselves to be extremely intelligent and resourceful that way. We are cunning and shifty. But somehow it does not work. When we think we are approaching something from the back door, we do not understand that it is an illusion that there is something else to approach. At that moment there is only the back-doorness. That one-shot back-doorness is the totality of what is. We are the back door. If we are approaching from the loft, you, me, everybody, all of us are up there. The whole thing is up there, rather than there being something else for us to go down and invade and control. There isn’t anything else at all. It is a one-shot deal. That one-shot reality is all there is. Obviously we can make up an illusion. We can imagine that we are conquering the universe by multiplying ourselves into hundreds of aspects and personalities: the conquering and the conquered. But that is like the dream state of someone who is actually asleep. There is only the one shot; everything happens only once. There is just that. Therefore mindfulness of mind is applicable.

So meditation practice has to be approached in a very simple and very basic way. That seems to be the only way that it will apply to our experience of what we actually are. That way, we do not get into the illusion that we can function as a hundred people at once. When we lose the simplicity we begin to be concerned about ourselves: “While I’m doing this, such-and-such is going to happen. What shall I do?” Thinking that more than that is happening, we get involved in hope and fear in relation to all kinds of things that are not actually happening. Really it does not work that way. While we are doing that, we are doing that. If something else happens, we are doing something else. But two things cannot happen at once;
it is impossible. It is easy to *imagine* that two things are happening at once, because our journey back and forth between the two may be very speedy. But even then we are doing only one thing at a time.

The idea of mindfulness of mind is to slow down the fickleness of jumping back and forth. We have to realize that we are not extraordinary mental acrobats. We are not all that well trained. And even an extraordinarily well-trained mind could not manage that many things at once—not even two. But because things are very simple and direct, we can focus on, be aware and mindful of, one thing at a time. That one-pointedness, that bare attention, seems to be the basic point.

It is necessary to take that logic all the way and realize that even to apply bare attention to what we are doing is impossible. If we try, we have two personalities: one personality is the bare attention; the other personality is doing things. Real bare attention is being there all at once. We do not apply bare attention *to* what we are doing; we are not mindful *of* what we are doing. That is impossible. Mindfulness is the act as well as the experience, happening at the same time. Obviously, we could have a somewhat dualistic attitude at the beginning, before we get into real mindfulness, that we are willing to be mindful, willing to surrender, willing to discipline ourselves. But then we do the thing; we just do it. It is like the famous Zen saying “When I eat, I eat; when I sleep, I sleep.” You just do it, with absolutely no implication behind what you are doing, not even of mindfulness.

When we begin to feel implications of mindfulness, we are beginning to split ourselves. Then we are faced with our resistance, and hundreds of other things seemingly begin to attack us, to bother us. Trying to be mindful by deliberately looking
at oneself involves too much watcher. Then we have lost the one-shot simplicity. Perhaps we could have a discussion.

**Student:** I don’t understand how sem works.

**Trungpa Rinpoche:** Sem is basic mind. But instead of using the word *mind* as a noun, it might be more helpful to think of it as a verb, as in “minding one’s business.” Sem is an active process, because you cannot have mind without an object of mind. Mind and its object are one process. Mind only functions in relation to a reference point. In other words, you cannot see anything in the dark. The function of sight is to see something that is not darkness—to see an object, in the light. In the same way, the function of mind is to have a reference point, a relative reference point which survives the mind, the minding process. That is happening right now, actually, everywhere.

**Student:** I was wondering if you could speak a little more about how mind, or “minding,” creates the world. Are you talking about creating in the sense that if we are not mindful of the world the world does not exist? I feel you’re saying something else besides that.

**Trungpa Rinpoche:** Well, mind is very simple perception: it can only survive on “other.” Otherwise it starves to death.

*S:* You mean the mind can only exist on things outside of itself?

**TR:** That is right. But there is also the possibility that mind can go too far in that direction. Mind cannot exist without the projection of a relative reference point; on the other hand, mind also cannot exist if it is too crowded with projections. That way it also loses its reference point. So mind has to maintain a certain balance. To begin with, mind looks for a
way to secure its survival. It looks for a mate, a friend; it creates the world. But when it begins to get too crowded—toomany connections, too much world—it rejects its projections; it creates a little niche somewhere and fights tooth and nail to maintain it in order to survive. Sometimes mind loses the game. It becomes psychotic, completely mad. You “lose your mind,” as we say: you cannot even function on an ordinary logical level. Such psychosis results from either of the two extremes: you are completely overcrowded by the whole projection of the world or, on the other hand, you lack anything for mind to work with. So mind can only exist in the neurosis of relative reference, not in psychosis. When it reaches the psychotic level, mind ceases to function as mind. It becomes something else, something poisonous.

Student: According to that model, how would meditation practice affect the relationship between mind and the world it’s doing battle with?

Trungpa Rinpoche: The purpose of meditation practice is to try to save oneself from psychosis.

S: But you still maintain the world? You still maintain the neurotic state, basically?

TR: Not that necessarily, either. There is an alternative mind that does not need the neurotic world. This is where the idea of enlightenment comes in. Enlightened mind can go further and further, beyond questions of relative reference. It does not have to keep up with this world. It reaches a point where it does not have to sharpen itself on this neurotic world any more. There is another level of experience which still has a reference point, but it is a reference point without demand, a reference point that does not need further reference points. That is called nonduality. This does not mean to
say that you dissolve into the world or the world becomes you. It’s not a question of oneness but rather a question of zeroness.

Student: Rinpoche, how does the notion of mind that you’ve talked about relate to the notion of ego and the strategies of maintaining ego?

Trungpa Rinpoche: Mind as we have been talking about it is ego. Ego can survive only in relation to a reference point, not by itself. But I am trying to make the whole thing quite simple and relate it directly to the practice of meditation. If we think practicing meditation is concerned with working with ego, that sounds like too big a deal. Whereas if we just work with mind, that is an actual, real thing to us. In order to wake up in the morning you have to know it is morning—there is light outside and you have awakened. Those simple things are a perfect example of basic ego. Ego survives and thrives on reference point. So sem is ego, yes.

Student: You talked about mind relating to externals only. What do you consider it when the mind is functioning in pure intellection or imagination, creating its own object, so to speak?

Trungpa Rinpoche: That is external.

S: But there could be nothing out there. You could be in a darkened cell imagining that you are hearing a symphony, for example; it exists only in your mind.

TR: Sure. That is outside. That seems to be the point. Maybe you are not really talking to me now. Maybe you are in a dark room and you are talking to your version of me. Somehow the physical visual situation is not that important a factor. Any mental object, mental content, is regarded as an external thing.
Student: In regard to the technique of breathing, is there any particular reason why we identify with the out-breath rather than the in-breath?

Trungpa Rinpoche: That’s a question of openness. You have to create some kind of gap, some area where there is less strain. Once you breathe out, you’re sure to breathe in again, so there’s room for relief of some kind. Nothing needs watching there.

Also, out-breathing is an expression of stepping out of your centralized system. Out-breathing has nothing to do with centralizing in your body, where usually everything is psychosomatically bottled up. Instead, by identifying with the out-breath you are sharing, you are giving something out.

Student: When you were talking about “flat-bottomed” ideas, you said that the flat bottom is what provides an openness, or a space, as opposed to having wings on your mind—flying thoughts or whatever. What makes the panic arise that made the retreatant you spoke of turn to her book, and that makes us run away from that sense of groundedness?

Trungpa Rinpoche: A lot of fear comes when things are too clearly defined. The situation becomes overwhelmingly sharp and direct and accurate, so that you would rather interpret it than simply acknowledge it. It is like when you say something very plain and direct to someone and you find him saying, “In other words, you are saying blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” Instead of relating directly to what has been said, he has a tendency to try to keep his twist. That seems to be a problem of shyness, of being shy of the bluntness of reality, of the “formness,” the “thingness” that exists in our world and that nobody wants to face. Facing that is the highest form of sanity and enlightened vision. That seems to be the basic point of certain descriptions in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, where it
Chögyam Trungpa describes a bright light coming toward you that you shy away from; you are frightened of it. Then there is a dull, seductive light coming from one of the six realms of neurotic existence, and you are attracted to that instead. You prefer the shadow to the reality. That is the kind of problem that exists. Often the reality is so blunt and outrageous and overwhelming that you feel facing it would be like sitting on a razor blade.

Student: You spoke of experiencing the body. There are a lot of techniques and practices for feeling the body, where you focus attention on a physical sensation, tension, or whatever you feel when you attempt to feel the physical body. I’m wondering what relation that kind of practice has to the practice with the breath that you described. Are those techniques a different thing, or would they reinforce the practice with the breath?

Trungpa Rinpoche: Your breath is your physical body from the point of view of this approach. There are all kinds of sensations that you experience along with the breath: pains, aches, itches, pleasurable feelings, and so on. You experience all those things along with the breath. Breath is the theme, and the other things go along with it. So the idea of the breathing technique is simply to be very precise about what you are experiencing. You relate to those sensations as they come up, along with your breath, without imagining that you are experiencing your body. Those experiences are not at all your body’s experiences. That is impossible. Actually, you are in no way in a position to experience your body. Those experiences are just thoughts: “I’m thinking I’m in pain.” It is the thought of pain, the thought of itch, and so forth.

S: So you are saying that the breathing technique is in a way a saner attitude than believing, “Now I’ll feel my body” and making a project out of that?
TR: The breathing technique is a literal one, a direct one. It faces what is actually the case rather than just trying to turn out some result.

Student: Before, you were saying that when we are sitting here and taking notes, or focusing on the speaker and relaxing, we have a psychosomatic notion of body. And psychosomatic, the way I understand it, is sort of an imagined thing, or something that has to do with one’s mind, with how the mind is affecting the body. Like when we say someone has a psychosomatic disease, it means their mind is having some effect on their body. How is that related to the fact that we’re sitting here relaxing and listening to a speaker? How is that a psychosomatic sense of body?

Trungpa Rinpoche: The point is that whatever we do in our lives, we don’t actually just do it; we are affected by mind. Maybe the body, the true body, is being pressured by the psychosomatic speed of the mind. You might say that there is a possibility that you are sitting here now properly, in a non-psychosomatic way. But still, the whole situation of sitting here was brought together, the whole incident was moved into place, by a psychosomatic driving force. So your sitting here was set up by the psychosomatic system, basically. If you have some kind of psychosomatic convulsion and you throw up—you actually do throw up stuff, which is not psychosomatic stuff but body stuff—it is nevertheless manifested in psychosomatic style. Its being thrown up was instigated by a psychosomatic process. That is the kind of situation we are in. Fundamentally our whole world is psychosomatic from that point of view. The whole process of living is composed of psychosomatic hangups. The desire to listen to the teachings comes from beginning to be aware of one’s hang-ups. Since
we have begun to be aware of our hang-ups we would like to create this further hang-up to clear up the existing hang-ups.

S: Instead of relating directly?

TR: Well, one never does that until one has some kind of flash of something on the level of enlightenment. Until that point everything one does is always by innuendo.

S: So any kind of disease or anything that’s affecting you is psychosomatic?

TR: It is not only disease that is psychosomatic. Your process of health is psychosomatic, already. Actually, disease is sort of an extra thing, like yeast growing on top of your back.

Student: Rinpoche, with regard to touch-and-go, if a fantasy arises, to what point do you allow that fantasy to develop before you let go of it?

Trungpa Rinpoche: Once it arises, that is already “touch.” Then let it be as it is. Then it goes. There is a peak point there. First, there is creation of the fantasy; then it reaches maturity; then it is beyond its prime; and then it slowly vanishes or tries to turn into something else.

S: Sometimes a fantasy will turn into a whole emotional plot which seems to get more and more complex.

TR: That is beating a dead horse. You just let it come, let it play out its impetus or energy, then just let it go. You have to taste it, then let it go. Having tasted it, it is not recommended to manipulate it any further.

S: When you speak of touch-and-go, evidently meditating, sitting practice, is the “touch.” Do you mean that there are also times when it’s inappropriate to be mindful in this manner? That in everyday life we should just let mindfulness go?

TR: I think there is some misunderstanding there. “Touch” and “go” always come together. It is like whenever there is
a one, there is a zero. The number series, starting with one, implies zero. Numbers do not make sense if there is no such thing as zero. “Touch” has no meaning without “go.” They are simultaneous. That simultaneity is mindfulness, which happens during both formal sitting practice and the postmeditation experience of everyday life.

**Student:** Previously you mentioned the retreatant who had the feeling of sitting on a razor blade when things became very clear, very distinct. Could you relate that experience to the sense of delight in the mindfulness of life?

**Trungpa Rinpoche:** It is the same experience, actually. Whenever there is a threat of death, that also brings a sense of life. It is like taking a pill because you fear that otherwise you might die. The pill is associated with the threat of death, but you take it with the attitude that it will enable you to live. Facing the moment clearly is like taking that pill: there is a fear of death and a love of life simultaneously.

**Student:** How does mindfulness of life inform ethical behavior, ethical action?

**Trungpa Rinpoche:** Things are done without mindfulness in the samsaric world; we thrive on that. Consequently, almost everything we do is somewhat disjointed: somehow things don’t click, they don’t fit; there is something illogical about our whole approach. We might be very reasonable, good people; still, behind the facade we are somewhat off. There is fundamental neurosis taking place all the time on our part, which in turn creates pain for other people as well as ourselves. People get hurt by that, and their reactions create more of the same. That is what we call the neurotic world, or samsara. Nobody is actually having a good time.
Even ostensibly good times are somewhat pushed. And the undercurrent of frustration from sensing that creates further indulgence.

Mindfulness of life is an entirely different approach, in which life is treated as precious, which is to say, mindfully. Things are seen in their own right rather than as aspects of the vicious cycle of neurosis. Everything is jointed rather than disjointed. One’s state of mind becomes coherent, so there is a basic workability concerning how to conduct one’s life, in a general sense. One begins to become literate in reading the style of the world, the pattern of the world. That is just the starting point; it is by no means the final stage. It is just the beginning of seeing how to read the world.

_Student:_ I really cannot imagine what experience would be like without all kinds of imagination and projections. I can’t get a sense of what it would be like to participate in the world just as it is, just as things are occurring and coming up.

_Trungpa Rinpoche:_ Are you interested in finding out?

_S:_ I guess so.

_TR:_ Well, it is very hard to do. The reason it is hard is that you are doing it. It is like looking for a lost horse. In order to look for it, you need to ride your lost horse. On the other hand, maybe you are riding on your lost horse, but still you are looking for it. It is something like that. It’s one of those.

You see, there is really no such thing as ultimate reality. If there was such a thing, for that reason alone that could not be it. That is the problem. So you are back to square one. And the only thing, it seems, that you can do is to practice. That is good enough.

_Student:_ In connection with the flash of waking up, in mindfulness of effort, I still don’t clearly understand where
you are supposed to come back from and what you are supposed to come back to.

Trungpa Rinpoche: Once that flash happens, you do not have to find out and appreciate where you came from. That is what I mean by, “Don’t entertain the messenger.” You also do not need an idea of where you are going. After the flash, your awareness is like a snowflake released from the clouds. It is going to settle down to the ground anyway. You have no choice.

Student: Sometimes being mindful of the exhalation seems to become too deliberate. It seems too much that the watcher is doing it from above, rather than the breathing and the mindfulness being simultaneous.

Trungpa Rinpoche: The touch-and-go approach is applicable here. You touch the exhalation and then disown the awareness even of that. If you are trying to have bare attention constantly, then you have a problem of being very rigid and dragging yourself along. So you touch with the breath and go with the breath. That way there is a sense of freshness, a change of air. It is like a pulsation, or like listening to a musical beat. If you are trying to keep with one beat you miss another. But if you touch and go you begin to hear the rhythm; and then you hear the entirety of the music, too. Another example is eating food: when you eat food you don’t taste it constantly, just now and then. It is the same way with any experience. We hover around our interest. Always we just touch the highlights of our interest. So the touch-and-go style of mindfulness practice is borrowed from the basic style of mind. If you go along with that, then there is no problem at all.

Student: I somewhat understand how mindfulness of mind is a oneshot movement. But then if effort comes in, that no longer seems simultaneous or spontaneous.
Trungpa Rinpoche: Effort comes in off and on—at the beginning, during, and at the end. For instance, you are holding that microphone because you had an interest in asking a question. Now while you are listening to the answer, you have forgotten that you are holding the microphone, but that original effort is still hanging over. You are still holding it, not dropping it. So a lot of journeys back and forth take place with one’s effort, rather than its being maintained constantly. Therefore you do not have to strain and push constantly. If you do, there is no practice, no meditation; the whole thing just becomes a big deal of effort. Shifting, alternating constantly, creates the space of meditation. If you are one hundred percent effortful, you blow the whole thing. There is nothing left but a tense lump of muscle sitting in the middle of a field. This happens all the time in life situations. It is like trying to knead dough. If you knead too hard you won’t have any dough left in your hand—you will just be pushing your hand against the board. But if you have the feeling that the purpose of kneading hard is to work with the dough, then you have some compromises taking place, some intelligence coming into play. Without that, effort alone just kills.

Student: Without exercising some kind of incredible deliberateness, my entire meditation practice seems to be fantasy. There seems to be hardly any time that I am relating with my breath. I am basically just sitting there daydreaming or else very deliberately, heavy-handedly trying to relate with my breath.

Trungpa Rinpoche: Well, go and sit.
S: What should I do when I sit?
TR: Sit.
S: That’s all? What about working with my breath?

If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy *Work, Sex, Money: Real Life on the Path of Mindfulness* by Chögyam Trungpa, ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian and Sherab Chödzin Kohn (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2011).
Meditation is not a means of forgetting the ego; it is a method of using the ego to observe and tame its own manifestations.

—Mark Epstein

Self-actualization is not a sudden happening or even the permanent result of long effort. The eleventh-century Tibetan Buddhist poet-saint Milarepa suggested: “Do not expect full realization; simply practice every day of your life.” A healthy person is not perfect but perfectible, not a done deal but a work in progress. Staying healthy takes discipline, work, and patience, which is why our life is a journey and perforce a heroic one. The neurotic ego wants to follow the path of least resistance. The spiritual Self wants to reveal new paths. It is not that practice makes perfect but that practice is perfect, combining effort with an openness to grace.

Authentic practice combines effort with an openness to grace, a free gift of progress or awakening that comes to us unbidden and unconjured from buddha mind. Bread takes the effort of kneading but also requires sitting quietly while the dough rises with a power all its own. We are not alone in our psychological or spiritual evolution. A higher power
than ego, wiser than our intellect and more enduring than our will, kicks in to assist us. Even now, as you read this, many bodhisattvas and saints are gathering to become your mighty companions on your heart’s path.

Mindfulness is an elegant Buddhist practice that brings our bare attention to what is going on in the here and now. It does this by freeing us of our mental habit of entertaining ourselves with ego-based fears, desires, expectations, evaluations, attachments, biases, defenses, and so on. The bridge from distractions back to the here and now is the physical experience of paying attention to our breathing. The classic sitting pose plays an important part in mindfulness meditation by encouraging us to stay still and become centered physically. Furthermore, sitting is earth-touching, and earth, because of its here-and-now concreteness, grounds and centers us in the face of compelling mental seductions. We sit as a practice for how we will act throughout the day. Mindfulness, however, involves more than sitting. It is moment-by-moment nonclinging to ego and calm presence in the simplicity that results when we experience reality without the clutter produced by the decorative arts of ego.

The word mindfulness is actually a misnomer since the act itself involves mind-emptying not mind-filling. It is the only nonaltered state of mind, the pure experience of our own reality. Meditation is the vehicle to mindfulness in all areas. Mindfulness meditation is not a religious event or a form of prayer. It is an exploration of how the mind works and how it can be stilled so as to reveal an inner spaciousness in which wisdom and compassion arise with ease.

Mindfulness is not meant to help us escape reality but to see it clearly, without the blinding overlays of ego. Meditation is not escapism; only the layers of ego are. To stay with that
vision leads to letting go while, ironically, escaping leads to holding on. In the haunted valley of human paradox, *we gain and go on by losing and letting go*, and mindfulness is the good shepherd within.

In mindfulness we do not repress or indulge any thoughts, only notice them and return to our breathing, gently guiding ourselves back to where we belong as a kindly parent does to a straying child. Meditation is entirely successful when we keep coming back to our breathing in a patient and nonjudgmental way. Mindful awareness is the condition of the fair and alert witness rather than the judge, jury, prosecutor, plaintiff, defendant, or defense attorney. We notice what happens in our minds and simply take it in as information. This does not mean stoicism or indifference, because then we would lose our vulnerability, an essential component of intimacy. To witness is not to stand aloof but to stand by. We then can act without compulsion or disquiet, relating to what is happening rather than becoming possessed by it.

There are two kinds of witnessing: compassionate and dispassionate. In compassionate witnessing we observe from a loving perspective. It is like looking at photos in a family album. We are suffused with a kindly feeling with no sense of grasping. We look and let go as we move on to what may appear on the next page. In dispassionate witnessing, on the other hand, we look with passive indifference. We are stolid and unmoved, with no expectancy for what comes next or appreciation of what has gone before. This is like looking at the scenery from a train window. We simply watch it go by without inner responsiveness. Mindful witnessing is compassionate witnessing, a committed presence free of fear or clinging.

Mindfulness is watchfulness more than watching: We look at reality as custodians of its truth. Sister Wendy Beckett says
great artists make great paintings because they have learned “to look without fixed ideas of what is fitting.” This is mindfulness. It can be either consciousness without content (pure awareness with no attention to any particular issue or feeling) or consciousness with content (attention without ego intrusions, called mindfulness of the mind). Generally, the latter style is the one I mean when I refer to mindfulness.

Mindfulness is thus a courageous venture because it is trusting that we have it in us to hold and tolerate our feelings, to grant them hospitality no matter how frightening they may seem, to live with them in equipoise. We then discover a strength within us that is the equivalent of self-discovery. From that self-esteem comes effective relating with others. Because mindfulness leads us to let go of ego by letting go of fear and grasping, it is an apt tool for healthy relating. It makes us present to others purely, without the buffers of the neurotic ego. We simply stay with someone as he is, noticing not judging. We take what a partner does as information without having to censure or blame. In doing this, we put space around an event rather than crowding it with our own beliefs, fears, and judgments. Such mindful presence frees us from constricting identification with another’s actions. A healthy relationship is one in which there are more and more such spacious moments.

Mindfulness is a path to giving others the five A’s—attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing—the essential components of love, respect, and support. The word mindfulness is a translation of Sanskrit words meaning “attend” and “stay.” Thus, we pay attention and we stay with someone in her feelings and in her here-and-now predicament. When I accept someone in this serene way, shifts occur in me, and both of us begin to discover the skillful means to more appreciative affection and commitment. To accept is also the first step toward
letting go of control and allowing freedom. Thus, this mindful acceptance is our working basis for relationships. *The five A's are the results of and conditions for mindfulness.*

Mindfulness is inherent in human nature. We were built to pay attention to reality. Indeed, paying attention is a survival technique. Over the years, though, we learn to escape and take refuge in illusory sanctuaries built by an ego frightened of reality. We notice that it is easier to believe what will make us feel better, and we feel entitled to expect that others will be what we need them to be. These are man-made chains that look like links to happiness. But once we commit ourselves to experience divested of ego wishes and attachments, we begin to act straightforwardly, becoming truthful with one another. We relax into the moment, and it becomes a source of immense curiosity. We do not have to do anything. We do not have to search in our bag of ego toys for something to face the moment with. We do not have to put our dukes up. We do not have to become the pawns of our fixations or our fixed conceptions of reality. We do not have to find a pigeonhole. We do not have to go on the defensive or devise a comeback. We can simply let things unfold, attending to reality as it is and staying through it as we are. This is a lot more relaxing than our habitual reactions, and we use the original equipment of the human psyche rather than the artificial contraptions concocted by ego over the centuries. This is why mindfulness is also called waking up.

A holding environment is necessary for all growth, both psychological and spiritual. Like kangaroos developing in a pouch, we experience being held within a family, a relationship, or a community—including a community of fellow recoverers or practitioners. At every stage of life, our inner self requires the nurturance of loving people attuned to our
feelings and responsive to our needs who can foster our inner resources of personal power, lovability, and serenity. Those who love us understand us and are available to us with an attention, appreciation, acceptance, and affection we can feel. They make room for us to be who we are.

Though it may sound odd to say so, mindfulness is itself a holding environment. When we sit, we are never alone because all the saints and bodhisattvas (enlightened beings) of the past and present are with us. Meditating mindfully means contact and continuity with a long tradition. To sit is to be assisted and held. When Buddha sat on the earth, it was as if he sat in a lap. It is the same for us.

Mindfulness is being an adult. It is unattainable for someone who lacks inner cohesion, personal continuity, and integration. Being a fair witness requires a healthy ego, because distance and objectivity are unavailable to someone with poor boundaries, no tolerance of ambiguity, and no sense of a personal center. Meditation may be threatening to someone who is unstable and in need of mirroring, the reassuring and validating reflection of one’s feelings by another person. The Buddha’s ruthless commitment to acknowledging impermanence will be terrifying and destructive to someone without a firm foundation as a separate and autonomous and intelligently protected self. Finally, the call to live in the present comes at the wrong time for someone who needs first to explore the past and be free of its stubborn grip. This is why both psychological work for individuation and spiritual practice for egolessness will always be required as dual requisites for the enlightenment of beings as beautifully and mysteriously designed as we.

Meditation is not to be attempted in any serious way if we are not psychologically ready for it. At the same time, we can
begin simple meditation daily as an adjunct to psychotherapeutic work. This book advocates working on the psychological and the spiritual simultaneously and in bite-size chunks. This is based on the fact that some spiritual attitudes contribute to psychological health and vice versa. For instance, the spiritual attitude of acceptance helps us bear necessary and appropriate grief, while the psychological ability of assertiveness helps us stand up for justice for ourselves and others and so increases our compassion. The Buddhist social activist and author Ken Jones says: “Systems of maturation like Buddhism teach that it is only through unflinchingly facing our afflictions and opening unreservedly to our feelings that we can come to experience an empowerment that is other than this trembling self [ego].”

When ego is deposed, mindfulness leads to the higher Self, Jung’s approximation of buddha mind. This Self is unconditional love, perennial wisdom, and healing power (the very qualities that foster evolution). We are never without it. To find ourselves spiritually is to acknowledge our destiny to use our ego skills to serve the purposes of the Self. Thus, we strive for intimacy with the whole universe, not just with one person. After all, we cannot expect from a partner what can only come from the Self/universe/higher power. This is why pursuing our own spiritual path is so important to the health of a relationship.

Mindfulness does not mean that we have no desires, simply that we are not possessed by them. We may feel fear and desire, but they no longer drive, shame, or stop us. Instead we hold them, without the elaborations our brain so habitually adds. We handle fear and enjoy desire and move past both of them with ease, like Ulysses, who heard the sirens’ song and sailed on. As the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa
Rinpoche said, “Go through it, give in to it, experience it . . . Then the most powerful energies become absolutely workable rather than taking you over, because there is nothing to take over if you are not putting up any resistance.”

A POSITIVE SPIN ON HOW IT WAS AND IS

It may seem like a sign of weakness to have needs. Actually, needs direct us to grow in the ways we were meant to. Childhood yearnings for attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and the experience of being allowed to be ourselves are not pathological but developmental. In trying to get a parent to pay attention to us, we were seeking what we needed for our healthy evolution. We were not being selfish but self-nurturing, and there’s no need to feel ashamed about it now.

Childhood forces influence present choices, for the past is on a continuum with the present. Early business that is still unfinished does not have to be a sign of immaturity; rather, it can signal continuity. Recurrence of childhood themes in adult relationships gives our life depth in that we are not superficially passing over life events but inhabiting them fully as they evolve. Our past becomes a problem only when it leads to a compulsion to repeat our losses or smuggles unconscious determinants into our decisions. Our work, then, is not to abolish our connection to the past but to take it into account without being at its mercy. The question is how much the past interferes with our chances at healthy relating and living in accord with our deepest needs, values, and wishes.

For better or for worse, our psychic development is the result of a lifelong continuum of relationships. The adult goal is to work through each of them. We wrestle with past relationships respectfully, like Jacob with the angel, until they
yield their blessing. The blessing is the revelation of what we missed or lost. Knowing that gives us momentum to let go of the past and find need fulfillment in ourselves and in other people who can love us in self-affirming ways. Such love restores or repairs the psychic structures that were lost or damaged in early life, and we begin to get a coherent sense of who we are, which in turn makes it possible for us to love others in the same powerful ways. We receive from others and thereby learn to give, for love teaches generosity. Thus, maturation consists not in leaving needs behind but in recruiting supportive others who can give age-appropriate and generous responses to our needs.

Among childhood habits, defenses in particular have been looked upon as signs of inadequacy and pathology. However, we need many of our defenses for psychological survival. We are defending ourselves from things for which we don’t yet feel ready—for example, closeness or full commitment. We learned to stand guard over our unique wishes and needs in early life if showing them was unsafe. We learned to defend the delicate and vulnerable core of ourselves from humiliation, depletion, or distrust. Those were skills, not deficits.

If we feel unsafe as children we may still feel that way and still be using our old defenses. We may run from or defend ourselves against intimacy now for fear of a replay of childhood betrayals that left us crouching behind a wall of fear. On this wall are graffiti that besiege our self-esteem: “Don’t let anyone get too close.” “Don’t commit all the way.” “No relationship will ever really work.” “No one can love you as you really need to be loved.” “Men/women can’t be trusted.” Our work as adults is to replace these governing principles of behavior with healthy and more optimistic ones. Governing principles that limit our full potential for lively energy—the
manifestation of our own unique life-force—are like the governor on a truck accelerator that prevents the truck from ever getting up to full speed.

Most of us have unrelenting longings for whatever was missing from our childhood. Every intimate bond will resurrect these archaic yearnings, along with the terrors and frustrations that accompany chronically unmet needs. But this puts us in an ideal position to revisit those thwarted needs, to revive our energy, and to reconstruct our inner world in accord with life-affirming principles. A solid bond in a relationship—as in religious faith—endures despite the impact of events, so our resistance is the only obstacle to the growth that can emerge from pain. As we mend the broken fabric of ourselves, what was arrested in the past is released. We are back in touch with who we really are and can live in accord with that rediscovered essence.

Every person needs the nourishment of food throughout life. Likewise, a psychologically healthy person needs the sustenance of the five A’s—attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing—all her life. It is true that unmet needs for the five A’s in childhood cannot be made up for later in life, in the sense that they cannot be fulfilled so absolutely, so immediately, or so unfailingly. That absolute, immediate fulfillment of needs by one person is appropriate only to infants. But needs can be fulfilled, in short or long installments, throughout life. The problem is not that we seek gratification but that we seek too much of it all at once. What we did not receive enough of before, we cannot receive enough of now; what we did receive enough of before, we can receive enough of now.

We do not outgrow our early needs. Rather they become less overwhelming, and we find less primitive ways to fulfill them. For example, an infant may need to be cradled and car-
ried, while an adult may be satisfied with a supportive remark and a kindly glance. Sometimes a lifelong need can be fulfilled by just such little moments of mindful love. However, we still need to be cradled at times.

If our emotional needs were fulfilled by our parents, we emerge from childhood with a trust that others can give us what we need. We can then receive love from others without distress or compulsion. Our needs are moderate. We can trust someone to help fulfill our needs while we help fulfill hers. This provides a foundation for a life of compassion and equanimity.

Mothers play the primary role in our growth. In the first phase of development, a mother is the container: She provides the holding environment in which we learn and feel the safety it takes to start to become ourselves. But eventually we need to separate from our mothers to establish an identity. Thus, the first stage of development confronts us with a paradox: The safety it requires is meant to help us go! If a mother’s embrace is too seductive or too tight, we might not be able to separate from her. If we heard and heeded the words “Don’t go!” we might eventually turn them into “I can’t go,” so that later, in an abusive adult relationship, we stay where it hurts.

In the second phase of parenting, the mother is a safe base. Now we say, “I can go and come back.” From the time we can crawl, we are separating, leaving the warm embrace to explore the unknown, though we still need to know that our mother is nearby, the safe harbor to which we can return. If this stage goes well for us, we don’t equate absence with abandonment or departure with loss. This developmental achievement is an expansion of object constancy, whereby we can let someone go and still believe he loves us and is available to us. In adolescence, the need to separate reaches a climax, but we still need the safe base to return to.
In the third phase, the mother becomes a coadult who loves us as a peer and respected advisor. Now we have fully separated and have established our own identity, and we live apart from our mother but still with undimmed mutual respect and support. The goal of the work of becoming an adult is, after all, not to reunite with Mother but to find in ourselves and others as much as we can find of what she was meant to provide: the five A's.

In the first phase, we have no sense of boundaries, of where we begin and where our mother ends. In the second phase, we establish boundaries, which may become rigid by adolescence. In the third phase, we honor one another’s boundaries. Interestingly, these phases of parenting resemble the three phases in an adult relationship: closeness in romance, distance in conflict, reunion in commitment. The archetypal heroic journey is an extended metaphor for human development, since it takes the hero through the same three phases: leaving the comforts of the familiar, finding a separate identity away from home, and returning home renewed and interdependent. Returning home is a metaphor for the integration in oneself of psychological and spiritual powers.

The mother with adult consciousness will not only soothe her child but show him how to soothe himself when she is absent or unavailable: “Whatever resources I have, I help you find within yourself.” Such a mother will show how her child’s natural gifts can be inner resources for self-soothing. For instance, a child who loves to draw can be reminded of the comfort he finds in that activity. (Creating art often soothes us because it offers contact with the anima, the feminine source of nurturance that exists within each of us.) What is found in the healthy style of parenting is also found in adult relating and in mature spirituality. In healthy intimate relationships
we do not seek more than 25 percent of our nurturance from a partner; we learn to find the rest within ourselves. Likewise, an authentic spiritual teacher is one who teaches practitioners to appreciate that enlightenment is an interior reality, not something to be drawn from the teacher. Thus, parent, partner, and teacher point us toward our own inner parent, inner partner, and inner guru.

We are all in intense love relationships from birth onward. Love keeps mother nearby. This is how humanity has survived. Baby’s love and smiles keep Mother attached to him so his survival can be assured. Thus, our cellular memory equates presence with safety and distance with danger. This is why the prospect of abandonment is so terrifying. At the same time, the play between mother and child is encoded in our memory as an essential ingredient of authentic love. In short, our higher powers and most cherished psychic structures of sensitivity and caring for one another derive from early love and mirroring, not from biological drives.

Can fathers provide the container for the holding and separating experience so crucial to growth? It seems unlikely. Their role is to protect us from being contained too long! Women can provide a safe place for us to express our feelings and make our unique choices. Men can show us a safe exit into the larger world. And if fathers are sometimes so demanding that they undermine a developing child’s freedom to be himself, this is where grandfathers can step in to give male nurturance mindfully, without expectation or demand.

We begin in a containing womb and then move to an embrace. Alchemy, the transformation of something into its opposite, also happens in a container. A vessel is required in which the lead of ego can be transformed into the gold of the higher Self. Only then can the giant of fear be faced and
conquered. Therapy or a support group might be an appropriate vessel when we face difficult transitions. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, can play this role for someone moving from addiction into sobriety. Our identity cannot grow in isolation, because we are dialogical by nature. “Only in the arms of someone can the first ‘I am’ be pronounced, or rather risked,” British psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott says.

The original emotional needs of life were fulfilled in the holding environments of the womb, our nursing mother’s arms, the warmth of our home, and parental protection, which are the requisite loci of serene development. In such a safe and embracing environment, children feel they are living in a folder of security that is also roomy enough for them to express feelings freely. They feel their parents can handle their feelings and mirror them back with acceptant love—in short, that there is room for their true self at the inn.

If their needs are unmet, on the other hand, they may have difficulty trusting a higher power or acknowledging the need for spirituality in adult life. (Higher power is my term for what I believe to be the perfect source of the five A’s.) Faith commitments call for trust in an invisible source of nurturance, and when visible sources of nurturance have let us down, we are less likely to trust the invisible sources. Yet Jung says the longing for the spiritual is as strong in us as the desire for sex. We therefore ignore an inner instinct when we totally deny the possibility of a power greater than ourselves. Another face of this same problem is religious fanaticism, or a negative, abusive religiousness that is full of guilt and obligation.

When we did not receive fulfillment in one or more of the five A’s, a bottomless pit was created in us, an unfulfillable yearning for the missing pieces of our puzzling and arid past. Mourning an unfulfilled childhood is painful. We fear grief be-
cause we know we will not be able to control its intensity, its duration, or its range, and so we look for ways around it. But engaging with our grief is a form of self-nurturance and liberation from neediness. Paradoxically, to enter our wounded feelings fully places us on the path to healthy intimacy.

Is this my problem? Have I been afraid to grieve what I did not get from Mom and Dad and so have demanded it from partners, strangers, and innocent bystanders? Am I unable to find it in myself because I have been investing all my energy in looking for it in someone else?

To retrieve the past and to undo the past are our paradoxical goals in relationships. No wonder they are so complex! Their complexity is not about the transactions between two adults but the fact that such transactions never begin: instead, two children are tugging at each other’s sleeve, shouting in unison, “Look what happened to me when I was a kid! Make it stop, and make it better for me!” In effect, we are asking an innocent bystander to repair a problem he has no knowledge of and little skill to repair. And all the time and energy that goes into that transaction distracts us from the first part of our work: repairing our own lives.

The cold ground of our psyche is like a cryogenic laboratory where our unmet needs from childhood remain frozen in their original state, awaiting healing and fulfillment, usually without revealing to us the full extent to which we felt forlorn and bereft. The path to love begins in our own past and its healing, then moves outward to relationships with others.

Even if our childhood needs were met, we may need to work on ourselves as adults. Nurturant parents make sure our childhood environment is safe and soothing, and as adults, we may keep looking for the people or things that can recreate that miracle. The recurrent fantasy of, or search for, the “perfect
“Partner” is a strong signal from our psyche that we have work to do on ourselves. For a healthy adult, there is no such thing as a perfect partner except temporarily or momentarily. No one source of happiness exists, nor can a partner make life perfect. (The fact that this happens in fairy tales says it all.) A relationship cannot be expected to fulfill all our needs; it only shows them to us and makes a modest contribution to their fulfillment. We ask: *Could it be that I would not have learned what I needed to learn if I had met the perfect partner?*

The perfect partner is the mirage we see after crossing the desert of insufficient love. Mirages happen because we lack water—that is, we lack something we have needed for a long time. They are normal, nothing to be ashamed of. We should notice them, take them as information about where our work lies, and then let them go. If we do this, we will come to the real oasis, nature’s gift to those who keep going, who were not stopped by the mirage.

Yet it is a given of life that nothing is permanently and finally satisfying. Despite this fact, many of us believe that somewhere there is a person or thing that *will* be permanently satisfying. Such a chimerical belief, and the restless, desperate seeking that follows from it, can become deeply disheartening and self-defeating. In mindfulness we can surrender to reality with all its impermanence and frustration, and from that position of surrender something wonderfully encouraging can happen. We find that we want a partner who walks beside us in the world, not one we hope will change its givens or provide an escape-hatch from them. *We find a pleasing balance between surrendering to the given of the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of life while at the same time maximizing our opportunity for contentment.* This is our discovery of the felicitous pass between the snowy peaks of delusion and
despair. From this point of view, moderate need fulfillment, experienced in days or even just moments, becomes satisfactory. Emily Dickinson, making every word count, called this “a glow / as intimate, as fugitive / as sunset on the snow.”

“Moderate” is the key word for giving and for receiving the five A’s. A nonstop flow of them would be quite annoying, even to an infant. Our fantasy mindset makes us long for just what we would soon flee. Hence, what seems like an unsatisfactory compromise is actually the adult’s best deal.

The hospitable sanctuary and the generous waters of an oasis can be enjoyed for one day or many, but not forever. Sooner or later they will cloy, and our hearts will long for what comes next. The desert and what lies beyond it, whatever their mystery and hardship, beckon, and they cannot be evaded or renounced. Journeying is built into us no matter how beautiful our home. The idea of change excites us no matter how pleasing our present circumstances. This may be what the poet George Herbert meant by the lines in which God says of the newly created Adam: “Yet let him keep the rest, / But . . . with repining restlessness, / Let him be rich and weary.”


If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy The Five Things We Cannot Change: And the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them by David Richo (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005).
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In 1980, at the age of twenty-six, I set aside my worldly ambitions—and cashed in all my savings—to attend a Buddhist seminary in Alberta, Canada, led by the renowned Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. In seminary we sat in meditation for seven to eight hours a day, studied Tibetan and Indian texts, and discussed timeless Buddhist teachings among ourselves and with Rinpoche. The training was rigorous and thorough, and the time spent in those long, regal stretches of the Canadian Rockies was delightful.

For me, a young, enthusiastic spiritual seeker, I felt that I had arrived at the inner sanctum. I was living the cloistered life, studying ancient teachings with a renowned master. Surely this was as momentous as life could get! I had left behind the world of materialism, and I was studying meditation techniques that would lead me to wisdom and bliss. However, despite my lofty ambitions, I was soon to discover that I was being trained for something much more practical and profound.
As the weeks passed I decided with firm conviction that I wanted to devote myself to spiritual study and meditation for the rest of my life. I contemplated the details of such a venture. Where would I live? How would I pay the bills? What bills would I even have? Could I wander from place to place, or should I find a monastery to take me in? How would my girlfriend feel about my living the life of a monk? She’d probably be relieved, I thought. It was all very exciting. I was convinced I was making the right choice.

Toward the end of seminary, I requested a meeting with Rinpoche, and I planned to let him know my intentions. One could never be quite certain what he would say, but I was pretty sure that he would give me advice on how to proceed. Maybe he would suggest that I join a monastery or direct me to go on an extended meditation retreat. Maybe he would see my true potential and send me to Sikkim to study at the feet of the Karmapa, one of the most revered teachers of Tibetan Buddhism!

As seminary drew to a close, we all gathered for a graduation celebration. Rinpoche joined us for the festivities and took a seat at the far end of the large, spacious ballroom. That evening the sadness of the many farewells, the budding Canadian spring, and the graduation party were mingling into a perfect ending to a truly defining time in my life, when a young man said to me, “Rinpoche will see you now.”

“Now,” I thought. “In the middle of a party?” I finally had my chance to speak with him, but I didn’t feel prepared.

I was escorted to Rinpoche and after the customary bow and then the typical silent, awkward moments, I began to explain my plans to become a full-time meditator. He patiently listened to my reasoning, smiling, nodding his head and studying my face. I explained to him that I had left my job,
given up my home, and cashed in my savings to come to sem-
inary. I was devoted to getting to the heart of the teachings,
committed to meditation, and prepared to spend the rest of
my life focused exclusively on the Buddhist path. Now I just
needed a little advice, a tip or two. So I asked: “How should
I proceed?”

“Go home and get a job,” he replied instantly. I stammered
and tried to get my footing; my mind was racing. “Maybe
he thinks I’m not good enough to be a monk. Or maybe he
thinks I am someone else. That’s not unusual; with so many
students, he could make a mistake like that.” I grabbed for a
story line—any story line. I didn’t expect him to tell me to get
lost—to go get a job!

Then I thought, “Maybe I haven’t been clear. Maybe he
misunderstood me.” I got control of myself and repeated my
rationale once again. And again, Rinpoche patiently listened
to my reasoning, sipping from his glass and sitting solidly in
his chair. Finally he sat back and with a wide, mischievous
grin said, “You can do it. Give it a try.” The interview was
over, and my monastic career was on the rocks. The tables
had been turned, and I was, in many respects, out in the cold.

So it was with mixed feelings that I left Canada and re-
turned to New York City. But my brief conversation with my
teacher marked the beginning of a spiritual adventure more
fulfilling than I could have imagined at the time. Instead of
seeking out a monastic life, I was to live in New York and
find my spiritual footing in the bowels of capitalism, on Wall
Street. Here I would come to learn that what I thought was
trivial, the so-called conventional world, was in fact sacred;
and what I had considered profound, the “spiritual path,” was
simply my own naive fantasy. I was to learn my spiritual les-
tsons at work, not in a monastery.
Throughout my twenty-two-year career on Wall Street and later in publishing, I gradually came to understand the wisdom of my teacher’s instruction. The daily grind, the successes and failures, the hard work and stress, all gradually unfolded as a profound teaching. And central to that teaching was the realization that the spiritual path is nothing other than living our very life, fully and confidently, in the immediate moment—and that nothing can be excluded, especially not our jobs. Scrubbing a floor, writing an e-mail, leading a country, feeding a hungry child, are all noble steps we take on our path to becoming completely who we are, where we are. Work becomes our spiritual journey when our destination is no longer just becoming more successful or more wealthy or getting a paycheck, promotion, or job security, but when we also work to resolve a most fundamental question: Can we be at home in our lives—can we be open, honest, and at ease under all circumstances, moment by moment?

Being at ease with ourselves at work can be a challenge indeed, because, try as we might, we cannot control work. It is chaotic, fickle, and messy. We may have a passion for becoming a superb doctor or a dedicated teacher. Or we may work hard at being an effective lawyer or outstanding dancer. But somehow complications always seem to get in the way: malpractice insurance, rebellious students, tough bar exams, tired ligaments. Work is never quite what we expect, and being successful at our jobs is never as simple as we hope.

Work’s untidy complications can be distressing, at times even alarming. Our work lives unfold amid countless uncertainties and upsets that leave many of us feeling disappointed, stressed out, and even under siege. Today’s business
culture would have us believe that such complications are mere roadblocks to achieving what really matters: a paycheck, promotion, profitability. Business requires, indeed, often fiercely demands, that the path to success be as smooth as possible.

But such is never the case. Success is often elusive and work by its very nature is unruly and at times unfair—and deep down we know it. We know that career troubles and conflicts are inevitable, that stubborn personalities and poor decisions are par for the course. Yet, oddly, we keep treating such difficulties as bothersome detours and unwelcome intrusions.

If we want work to be more than just an annoying imposition in our lives, if we are intrigued by the possibility of being both successful and spiritually engaged at work, we will need to pause and examine our basic attitude toward our jobs. Maybe we’re missing something. Maybe problems arise at work not as interruptions or intrusions, but as invitations to gain real wisdom. Perhaps, in some sense, work’s “complications” are exactly what we’re looking for.

At first glance, such a suggestion may appear strange. Yet, if we examine work closely, we will notice that whatever gets messy with our jobs demands that we slow down and pay attention. The difficulties go to the front of the line, so to speak, and stare us straight in the face. But all too often, rather than responding with the resourceful attention that the situation requires, we dig in and resist.

Sometimes we resist in small ways. Maybe we avoid a difficult coworker or make a harsh remark under our breath: “Here comes that knucklehead Frank again.” Sometimes our resistance becomes all-consuming: a lawsuit turns into a lifelong battle or an offhanded remark becomes an eternal grudge. By recoiling from any of work’s problems, we inevitably find
ourselves in hostile territory—often feeling lonely, imprisoned, confused, even at battle with our jobs, protecting ourselves from work rather than achieving its objectives.

The sober reality we face is this: resisting work’s difficulties and hoping for smooth sailing is pointless. Work, indeed all of life, is often disappointing and uncertain, and it is futile to expect otherwise. Being hostile toward any of life’s difficulties only amplifies our discomfort, and we end up at war with ourselves, arguing with our lives rather than living them.

I still work in the corporate world today, and I also teach Buddhist meditation and lead seminars on work as a spiritual practice. I often begin my seminars by asking participants to list three adjectives that best describe work for them. Inevitably, the responses are the same: “stressful,” “discouraging,” “difficult,” “worrisome,” “frustrating.” Occasionally a few positive adjectives are thrown in such as “challenging,” “stimulating,” or “creative.” But for the most part, work is experienced as a burden, a threat, an inconvenience—a place where we are held captive by life rather than free to enjoy it.

Fortunately, we can stop feeling imprisoned by work. We can stop hoping for smooth sailing, and we can stop experiencing work as hostile territory. We can, instead, discover a profound sense of freedom and fulfillment in our jobs. But in order to do such a thing we will need to make a simple and profound shift in how we engage work: rather than resist, we will need to slow down and open up.

Rather than rejecting work’s difficulties as bothersome interruptions, we can instead acknowledge work, with all its complications, as an invitation to wake up and live our lives honestly and fully. From this point of view, the problems that arise in our jobs are not inconvenient speed bumps or demoralizing battles but valuable experiences worthy of our
wise attention. We can learn to welcome whatever stare us in the face—whether disappointing, exhilarating, confusing, or routine—confidently and fully.

If we take a moment to slow down and open up to our work circumstances, we will discover that work is continually inviting us to help, not hide; to listen openly, not close up; to connect, not detach; to perfect our skillfulness, not put it in question. But in our impatience to succeed and become better, faster, and more profitable, we overlook the fact that work, with all its pressures and problems, is encouraging us to be engaged, resourceful, and alive—right here, right now. And, maybe that is what we’ve really wanted all along: to simply be awake at work.

Engaging our jobs intelligently and without resistance does not require that we redefine our entire approach to our livelihood. We can engage our jobs sanely and openly without giving up on success or disregarding our feelings or ambitions. What is required is surprisingly ordinary: simply to be who we are where we are, to subtly shift from getting somewhere fast to being somewhere completely. By taking such an approach, we discover not only a larger view of work but also a basic truth about being human: by genuinely being ourselves in the present moment, we naturally become alert, open, and unusually skillful.

When we are willing to shift from getting somewhere fast to being somewhere completely, we discover that we are not just making a living but we are living our lives on the job, right here, right now, in all the present moment’s vivid and remarkable immediacy. When we are on the job completely, we do not forget to live our lives. Whatever comes along is not dismissed as an annoyance or an obstacle, or pursued as a comfort or relief, on our way to somewhere else. Whatever
comes along *is our life*, and we actively appreciate it and respect it for being so.

To be awake at work is to acknowledge, maybe just briefly at first, that work only offers us the present moment, which is fleeting and fickle and constantly surprising. Work, with all its pressures and successes and confusion, unfolds on its terms not ours, and we can be awake as it unfolds or we can resist—a choice we can and will make moment by moment for the rest of our lives.

Whether we are rich or poor, Christian or Sufi, CEO or hairstylist, we can accept work’s invitation to wake up. We can learn how to engage every aspect of our lives as a spiritual practice and in turn live life confidently without fear or anxiety. But in order for our lives and jobs to be just such a spiritual path, rather than a fortress or a prison or a vacation, we must be willing to set out deliberately on a journey. This is an invitation to take such a journey. In many respects, these pages pass along my teacher’s invitation to “get a job”—to gently lay down our resistance and explore who we are at work. We are invited to bring along any baggage we feel fond of: management techniques, religious preferences, career ambitions, credentials and qualifications. Some of us may travel light, others may bring along a caravan. Along the way, we may discard some of these items, or we may discover some of them to be more useful than we had ever imagined. We will learn such lessons as we go.

Besides being an invitation, this will also serve as a guide. Many others have made this journey before and learned the terrain; their wisdom is available and useful. So this book passes along a few hints and suggestions. As in any guidebook, there are warnings of dangers on the road, suggestions on where and how to refresh ourselves, pointers on how to
work with surprises, and an occasional reminder on where to find the most scenic views. But most important, this will instruct us in the disciplines of traveling the path.

In order for us to journey with inspiration and delight, we will need to work with our minds. By this I mean making a gentle, firm, and utterly powerful gesture toward ourselves, not just once but throughout the entire journey, a gesture that cultivates sanity and well-being each step of the way. This gesture is mindfulness, and it is central to our ability to be awake at work. Mindfulness, in Buddhism and many other spiritual traditions, is essentially learning to be fully alert and available in the present moment. Whether we are pouring a cup of tea, changing a lightbulb or a diaper, or holding the hand of a dying friend, we glimpse through our mindfulness that our life is happening now and cannot be taken for granted. By being mindful, we face the ordinary, fresh immediacy of our experience and discover that simply being human is profound beyond our hopes and fears and preconceptions. Such mindfulness will be our vehicle for traveling the path; it will show us how to move forward and to trust ourselves step-by-step, moment by moment.

So, we embark on our journey. Our work now becomes our frontier, and we become pioneers of the unfamiliar. Gradually, we can stop struggling with our jobs and begin exploring them as uncharted territory. We can learn to acknowledge that anything can and does happen at work—which can be both shocking and delightful. When the phone rings, we may notice the fresh mind that we bring to such a simple and immediate invitation. When our boss is upset and overbearing, life will be uncomfortable. But we may also notice that we are sharply alert and intelligent at such moments—if we are mindful. And, by just showing up at work, we may also notice
that we have already begun our spiritual journey and work’s invitation to wake up is staring us right in the face.

CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS AT WORK

Learning to be awake at work is straightforward and very practical. It is not wishful thinking; we can’t just hope ourselves awake and leave the rest to chance, with the vague idea of attaining a state of bliss on the job. Nor is it some new “technology of the mind” that we enthusiastically inflict on ourselves and our colleagues. Awakening on the job is learning to drop our resistance and be intelligently and energetically alert to our lives at work. This process is very personal and demanding. It means learning to live our lives nobly and without fear, coming down to earth and into direct contact with our experience. This takes effort and discipline.

You may think of discipline as a boot-camp mentality or as a kind of punishment. Maybe discipline brings to mind images of denying yourself your favorite foods, running long distances, or saluting your superiors and performing your duty. However, in this case discipline is not punishment or denial or obligation. Rather, the discipline required to be awake at work is learning to be completely honest with ourselves and overcoming any pretense or deception about our work circumstances.

Such honesty requires that we approach our jobs with a sharp and clear-minded intelligence that is neither gullible nor hardheaded. Being disciplined at work requires that we stop kidding ourselves—stop trying to defend our jobs, our prestige, our smooth path to success—and commit to being attentive to and honest about our actual experience. This willingness sets the stage for engaging work skillfully as it un-
folds, without trying to secure our well-being or gather false guarantees. Such honest discipline is the essence of mindfulness, and it does not simply appear but must be cultivated over time.

Buddhism has a rich tradition of mindfulness practices that have been developed and handed down from teacher to student for centuries. The most common practice taught in most schools of Buddhism and some non-Buddhist traditions is called *mindfulness-awareness* meditation, or sitting meditation. In sitting meditation we learn to be still, directly experiencing our minds and hearts and the present moment. We explore very precisely and gently who and what we are, gradually seeing through our self-deceptions, becoming aware of our experience, and glimpsing a fundamental wakefulness that is in fact always available. With sitting meditation we begin to relate directly with the simple power and flexibility of being ourselves right here, right now.

Sitting is deceptively simple: We sit up straight, either in a chair or on a cushion on the floor, and remain attentive in the present moment. Our eyes are open, our hands are placed gently on our thighs or in our lap, and our gaze is soft and slightly downward. We breathe normally and sit still. Essentially, this is all we do. Just sit. It seems very simple, but a lot goes on.

When we sit still, we will inevitably notice the vividness of the moment, even if for just a brief second. Perhaps we may notice the sound of a fan or the wood grains of the floor. Maybe we detect the faint echo of traffic off in the distance or sense the cool humidity of the rain gently falling on the roof. When we sit, we glimpse the simple, clear *now*ness of sights, sounds, and physical sensations.

We may also notice that we are thinking. We may be recalling a TV show that we found memorable or rehearsing a
difficult conversation we are expecting to have with a loved one. Our thoughts may be restless and cranky, meandering and dull, or colorful and engrossing. This bright and shifting quality of the mind is not a problem; it is what we work with.

In sitting we attend to our thoughts and our sensations by cultivating a precise yet gentle awareness of the breath. When we notice we are thinking, we make a slight shift. We deliberately note our thinking and gently bring our attention back to our breath. In sitting meditation, we learn to lightly “ride” the breath in this way to stabilize our attention in the present moment. By sitting in such a way, we feel the rhythm of our minds and engage emotions and thoughts of all kinds. Rather than getting lost in our thoughts and emotions, however, we learn to touch our feelings and let go, bringing our attention back to our lives in the immediate moment, right here, right now.

Maybe you already have a mindfulness practice of some sort. If it is sitting meditation, you will probably be at home with many of the themes discussed here. If you are unfamiliar with mindfulness and meditation, that’s fine, too, because now you’ll have a chance to consider cultivating mindfulness in your life and especially on the job.

If you aspire to relate to work in a more open, wise, and enlivened way, I believe you will be greatly helped by taking up a regular sitting meditation practice. Many people before us have practiced sitting meditation and discovered a natural wisdom that transformed their lives, and such possibilities are open to us as well. For those who feel inspired to begin meditating, more extended instructions for getting started are offered in the appendix “Instructions for Mindfulness-Awareness Meditation” [available in the full book, Awake at Work—Ed.]. But whether you practice sitting meditation or not, the material
offered here will help you engage your job with courage and candor. Being mindful in our jobs will teach us to trust our natural talents and rediscover a sense of well-being at work.

Of course, being mindful won’t make our jobs any less messy. Cranky customers, computer viruses, and overly competitive colleagues don’t suddenly disappear because we are mindful and alert to the immediate moment. And neither does our resistance to work’s difficulties. We might still feel annoyed by “knucklehead Frank,” who criticized our sales presentation, or uneasy at the prospect of losing our job or resentful toward our employer. Being mindful in the immediate moment will never eliminate work’s real and never-ending problems or all our resistance to them.

But mindfulness does make us increasingly curious about our predicament. The more we attend to work in the immediate moment, the more our mindfulness begins to develop a keen edge of curiosity. We go about our jobs, but now we are more attentive to how work gets messy and how we resist. Our annoyance with our client or hesitations to be candid with our boss are no longer an irritating undertone but become sharply apparent and interesting to us. It’s as if we’re haunted by our heightened mindfulness. We are continually noticing more, pausing in the midst of the hectic pace, opening to the rawness of our daily work experiences, and becoming more and more candid with ourselves.

Developing mindfulness, then, is really our central task at work. But not because we prefer to develop ourselves spiritually rather than get the job done. Being mindful at work doesn’t turn our jobs into a Himalayan retreat or a meditation cushion. In fact, mindfulness becomes central because we finally want to do our jobs properly rather than protect ourselves from work’s unpleasantness. We are mindful at work—
indeed, in our entire lives—because once and for all we want to live life well, without anxiety and resentment.


If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy *The Mindful Leader: Awakening Your Natural Management Skills through Mindfulness Meditation* by Michael Carroll (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2007).
At the age of five, my daughter had trouble falling asleep. Young as she was, she often asked me: “When your body wants to sleep but your head says no, how do you get to sleep?” Sometimes she would still be awake at ten. Before long she was exhausted. And so was I. She kept getting out of bed, kept awake by all the crazy thoughts that were churning around in her head: about Tim, who did not want to play with her anymore; about the goldfish floating belly-up in its bowl; about somebody under the bed who was sure to murder her. Relaxation exercises, bedtime stories, a hot bath, an irritable admonition to “go to sleep like everyone else”—nothing worked. But then I realized that if she paid less heed to the troublesome thoughts that kept popping into her head and slowly shifted her attention from her head down to her belly, she might finally calm down. There were no thoughts in her belly, only her breath, which moved her belly with its gentle rise and fall. A gentle movement. A calming movement. A movement slowly rocking her to sleep.

My daughter is twenty-one now and still does the exercise.
Although simple, the exercise really helps you get out of your head and into your abdomen—where your thoughts cannot get to you, where all is quiet and calm.

Mindfulness—or deliberate, friendly attention—is beneficial not only for children. Parents also like to have a way to free themselves from their relentless stream of consciousness. Thoughts never stop. All you can do is stop interacting with them, stop listening to them.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is nothing other than present-moment awareness, an open and friendly willingness to understand what is going on in and around you. It means living in the present moment (which is not the same as thinking about the present moment) without judging or ignoring anything or getting carried away by the pressures of everyday life.

When you are present when waking up, when grocery shopping, with your children’s sweet smiles, and with every major and minor conflict, your mind is not elsewhere but right here. You save energy, as you are aware of what is happening while it is happening. This mindful, friendly presence changes your behavior as well as your attitude toward yourself and your children.

Mindfulness is feeling the sun on your skin, feeling the salty tears rolling down your cheeks, feeling a ripple of frustration in your body. Mindfulness is experiencing both joy and misery as and when they occur, without having to do something about it or having an immediate reaction or opinion. Mindfulness is directing your friendly awareness to the here and now, at every moment. But mindfulness practice involves some effort and intentionality.
WHY MINDFULNESS FOR KIDS?

Mindfulness for kids meets a great need for parents and children alike to find physical and mental calm in these demanding times. But calmness alone is not enough; awareness is also needed.

Several years ago I developed a program of mindfulness training for schoolchildren. The program is called Mindfulness Matters, and it is based on Jon Kabat-Zinn’s eight-week mindfulness program for adults. A total of three hundred children and twelve teachers at five schools took part in the eight-week pilots. They had a thirty-minute mindfulness session once a week and then did ten minutes of practice every day to work on what they had learned. The ten-minute sessions continued throughout the year. Both students and teachers responded with enthusiasm and noticed positive changes, such as a calmer atmosphere in the classroom, better concentration, and more openness. The kids became kinder to themselves and others, more confident, and less judgmental.

Kids are curious and inquisitive by nature. They are keen to learn things, tend to live in the moment, and can be extremely attentive. But like adults, kids are often too busy. They are tired, easily distracted, and restless. Many children do too much and have too little time to just “be.” They grow up fast. Sometimes they have to juggle a dozen balls at once: socially and emotionally, at home and in school. Add to this all the things they have to learn and memorize, and it soon becomes too much. They seem to be switched on all the time, but where is the “pause” button?

By practicing mindful presence and awareness, kids learn to pause for a moment, to catch their breath, and to get a sense of what they need at this moment in time. This allows
them to move out of automatic pilot mode, recognize impulses for what they are, and learn to accept that not all things in life are nice or cool. They learn to bring attention—friendly attention—to everything they do. They learn not to hide anything but instead to foster understanding of their own inner world as well as that of others.

By experiencing qualities such as attention, patience, trust, and acceptance at a young age, your children will be firmly rooted in the here and now, like saplings, with ample space to grow and be themselves.

WHICH KIDS BENEFIT FROM MINDFULNESS EXERCISES?

Mindfulness exercises are suitable for all kids age five and up who want to calm the churning thoughts in their head, learn to feel and understand their emotions, and improve their concentration. They also suit children who suffer from low self-esteem and need reassurance that it is okay to be themselves. A lot of kids are extremely insecure, thinking they are not good or cool enough. They worry and then deal with their distorted self-image by either withdrawing or drawing attention to themselves, by trying to please others or being selfish, or by bullying or acting tough. They become trapped in behavioral patterns that don’t serve them.

Mindfulness exercises are also suitable for children diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorders. Of course, these exercises cannot cure disorders, but most kids really enjoy doing the exercises and also benefit from them. Mindfulness is not a form of therapy, but it can be quite therapeutic, in that it can give kids a different approach to dealing with very real issues, such as an emotional storm or a compulsion to act on every impulse or thought.
Parenting with Greater Mindfulness

Most parents are naturally mindful of their children at times. Still, all parents will be familiar with phrases like “Dad, you’re not listening!” or “Mom, I’ve already told you a dozen times.” Sometimes you realize you are overreacting to something your child has just said. The angry words are out before you know it, against your better judgment. Or you feel you ought to be speaking in much plainer terms: no is no, and that’s that.

How is it that your reaction as a parent can be angrier, more unfriendly, or more disproportionate than intended? All of us carry old patterns from our own childhood. Some old pain may color your reaction to your thirteen-year-old son, who thinks your response when he tells you that he will come home whenever he feels like it is laughably old-fashioned: “All of my friends are free to choose how long they stay out.” Some old fear could prevent you from articulating clearly what you really think of the situation. Obviously there is no such thing as a quick and easy recipe for being a more mindful parent.

But we do have ingredients at our disposal that have traditionally led to feelings of mutual love and respect. The best-known ingredients are friendliness, understanding, openness, and acceptance. Caring touch, like a quick hug or a cuddle, is another one.

You cannot stop the waves

You cannot control the sea. You cannot stop the waves, but you can learn to surf on them. This is the central idea underlying mindfulness practice. People have problems. Such is life. We all experience sadness and stress, and there are always things we simply have to deal with.
When you are really present in such situations in life, without suppressing anything or simply wishing that they weren’t happening, you can see what might be needed. When you focus your attention and see the “waves” for what they really are, you can make better-informed choices and act accordingly. At such moments you become aware of your irritation as soon as it rears its head. And once you realize that you have run out of patience or that you are tempted to hit someone, you have a choice. You are then less likely to get carried away by either your own emotions or those of others. You can pause, wait, take a breather; look at the situation and note what you are feeling, thinking, or wanting to do. You become aware of the forces that whip up the waves, aware of your tendency to react automatically, and perhaps find that you are less preoccupied with how the waves “should have been.”

“The Pause Button” can help. Both children and parents benefit from a breather, one just long enough to prevent an automatic reaction.

Dan is the father of two extremely rambunctious kids. He tends to react with anger whenever his kids start screaming and nagging because they cannot have it their way. “I can get furious with the eldest when he interrupts yet another important telephone conversation by begging for candy. And I feel the same with the youngest when I have rushed to pick him up from school, only to be told: “I’m not coming with you. I’m going home with my friend John!”

When that happens, I cannot control my anger at all. I get completely caught up in it. Within seconds we are at loggerheads. I automatically raise my voice, grab him by the arm, and tell him to do as I want. I notice that
Raising Mindful Kids — 139

it does not make the slightest bit of difference. In fact, I’m ashamed of my behavior, because I really want to set the right example. But I just can’t do it. It’s wearing us all out.”

LEARNING TO SURF

The most important step in the process of learning to surf is stopping and observing. Stopping and looking closely at the situation enables you to respond differently to difficult circumstances. Your response can then be less driven by frustration or automatic behavior and can thus be milder and more understanding. You can begin to see that it is not the situation that is causing the problems but your reaction to it. As Dan, who has benefited from the pause button, now puts it: “I still get angry sometimes, often for the same reasons. But I have learned not to react immediately and automatically. I know I have a short fuse, and I accept that, so I take a few deliberate breaths in and out before I do or say anything. It makes a world of difference.”

Surfing is not an easy sport. You cannot make the waves any smaller or push them higher. They come and go at their own pace: sometimes they are high, sometimes low. Sometimes there are lots of them (a sick mother, divorced friends, imminent dismissal, and the like), and sometimes the surface of the water is smooth. By recognizing the waves in your life and not reacting immediately, you will find more peace.

OPENING TO REALITY

I had just given birth to my son. I was twenty-five, and the smell of newborn baby filled the house like the perfume of exotic
flowers. This was my first child, and it was love at first sight. The rosy cloud of motherhood was big and all-encompassing. He was so sweet and innocent. So imagine my amazement, my utter despair, when from day one my beloved boy wouldn’t stop crying. He was always red with anger and wet with tears.

As soon as I put him to bed, he’d start crying his eyes out. The noise was never-ending. My anger and frustration would mount, proportionate to the amount of noise he’d make. It took every last ounce of attention and patience I could muster to resist the urge to lash out at him out of sheer powerlessness. I did not want this to be happening. I wanted to shout “Stop it!”

The prolonged crying, the fact that I never had a moment’s peace, and the conclusion that I probably was not a good mother (why else would he be crying like this?) often drove me to distraction. It was only when I opened the door to my fatigue and my many doubts (“everyone can do this—everyone except me”) and began to accept that I had a colicky baby that I was able to adopt a different attitude.

I could finally open up to reality: a crying baby and me as his pale, run-down young mother heading for burnout. I had no choice but to accept that the rosy cloud and the concept of the perfect mother were not reality at this point in time. Quite the opposite. It was hard work, little sleep, and a struggle to breast-feed. I was far more insecure than I thought I would be. And my baby’s behavior was nowhere near as perfect as that of the ones in the parenting magazines.

As I acknowledged and accepted all of this, a weight fell from my shoulders. I stopped resisting what was happening and came to grips with what was: my crying baby needed my love just as much as a non-crying baby would. I would sniff and smell his soft skin and feel his heart beating against mine.
I fell in love all over again and became better at tolerating the crying. I would rock him for hours sometimes—skin on skin in a gentle, rocking motion—until the crying eased and even stopped occasionally. Relax, breathe, surrender, let go.

A wise maternity nurse taught me to rest while rocking the baby, to nurse while I ate, to take time for myself, and to stop fighting what was happening. “Bend with the wind,” was her advice, “like a young sapling.” This calmed me down, calmed me right down. It enabled me to be here, in the present, with the child I loved so much.

The last things to change were my ideas about the kind of mother I had to be or the kind of child my son should have been. I decided to do my level best simply to be a mother, whatever it might take, including all the ups and downs. Mindful and curious, I met the frequent surprises head-on and increasingly cast aside my tendency to judge. I no longer demanded things to be different from the way they were, and this marked the start of a long, loving relationship in which space, respect, humor, and openness blossomed and grew into two sturdy trees, both granting each other plenty of sunlight.

And look at my son now. He is a wonderful human being and now a parent himself.

PRESENCE, UNDERSTANDING, AND ACCEPTANCE

There are three fundamental qualities that have a relaxing effect on the often demanding task of parenting: presence, understanding, and acceptance. For you yourself as well as for your child. Providing an open, unprejudiced perspective, these qualities enable you to see your child and yourself the way you really are and not the way you expect or wish to
be (or others expect you to be). This can give your child a lifelong foundation for self-confidence, a safe nest to which she or he can return, time and time again, no matter what happens.

*Presence* enables you to be simply here—in contact with this moment. With these feelings and thoughts—open, curious, generous, and without an immediate opinion. Present with that small hand in yours. Present with the temper tantrum. Present with the daily school run. Present in all those moments of happiness, misfortune, routine, and everything in between. The more present you are, the less you miss. This is never a question of good or bad. Being fully present is enough.

*Understanding* enables you to better relate to your child and put yourself in their shoes, especially when things take an unexpected turn. Genuine interest in what is happening in your child’s inner world right now can give you an insight that you did not have before. What is going on inside your child at this moment in time? What is he or she thinking about? Understanding is seeing things from your child’s point of view. It’s also about taking a larger view and trying to see what your child may need from you.

*Acceptance* is the inner willingness to recognize your child’s thoughts and feelings the way you recognize your own—without wanting to change them or manipulate them, and without excluding or rejecting any aspect of either your child or yourself. Acceptance of all those moments when they fail to meet your expectations, yell when they ought to be quiet, forget to thank Grandma for her lovely present, appear to be ungrateful, or assume that you have extremely thick skin. But
it is also about accepting all those moments when you are not present or kind, when you do not have the patience of a saint, and you are less than an ideal parent.

Acceptance is not the same as “putting up with everything.” Instead, it is the profound realization that as a parent you don’t need to have an opinion on the feelings, thoughts, and actions of either your child or yourself. Acceptance originates in the profound realization that you and your children are not out for each other’s blood. Even lifelong unconditional love has its ups and downs. Practicing acceptance will give you endless opportunities to open your heart and welcome everything that arises and work with it as mindfully as you can.


If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy Momma Zen: Walking the Crooked Path of Motherhood by Karen Maezen Miller (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2007).
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Addiction is an energetic presence that controls our lives by interpreting our experience in terms of fear and desire. It has its own internal logic that must be seen and understood if it is to be overcome. Think of a young single mother of three small children who uses cocaine every night after the kids are in bed. It is a reward for all of her hard work, a brief respite from stress and desperation, something to look forward to. Misguided? Clearly, but that little voice that convinces her to continue on this track makes some sense. Life has been difficult and will continue to be. And “the difficult” must be heard, not merely silenced. Then there is the urge itself, which is a palpable experience in the body, albeit often operating outside of awareness, automatically and mindlessly. If these phenomena can be seen directly, there is the possibility of taking another path.

How to see clearly? Mindfulness can be a counterforce to the addictive process by bringing awareness to it as it unfolds. Addiction is habitual and predictable; mindfulness is creative and spontaneous. Addiction thrives in dark places...
that mindfulness can illuminate. Like a camera lens, it is a means of opening the aperture very wide or focusing it down narrowly and with great clarity. Addiction creates suffering, and mindfulness has the potential to untie the knots of suffering. Addiction starts as a means of escape but becomes a prison with extremely rigid rules. Mindfulness brings an attitude of flexibility and openness, a vehicle toward freedom and possibility.

MINDFULNESS DEFINED

Mindfulness is a skill and an attitude. It could be seen as the capacity to be fully engaged with life just as it is. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous addresses this in its comments on the subject of acceptance (about which I will have more to say soon).

Acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing or situation—some fact of my life—unacceptable to me and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God’s world by mistake. . . . Unless I accept life completely on life’s terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and my attitudes.

Along the same lines, a mindful attitude contains the recognition of the fact that whatever we want, life keeps doing what it wants. This is fairly simple but clearly not easy to
swallow. We tend to want things our own way and be upset when we lose, are criticized, or have feelings we don’t like. Then we tell stories, feel victimized, and are miserable. As we have seen, with enough of this we will get despondent and either become depressed or develop some addictive pattern to escape the pain.

Mindfulness is an alternative to this sort of reactive functioning, a means of seeing more clearly and approaching our lives with more dignity and maturity. I think of mindfulness as having four elements: (1) awareness, (2) of the mind-body process, (3) in the present moment, (4) with acceptance.

Awareness is a broad-based capacity of our nervous system. We might see it as an ongoing background function monitoring our inner and outer experience without evaluation or judgment. It is a witness state, a nonattached, objective point of reference. Awareness is happening all the time, even during sleep and in patients under general anesthesia or in a coma. I am currently typing but am aware it is a sunny day. I am also aware of feeling buoyed by this as well as a little sad that I am not outside. Meanwhile I pay attention, the best I can, to typing. Oops, now it is gray outside. I am now aware of feeling more comfortable being inside but not as upbeat. Every moment has pluses and minuses, and awareness silently records these without judgment.

Attention is related to awareness but has a somewhat different function. Awareness, as I am using it, combines the qualities of being conscious, alert, and watchful. Attention is defined as “concentration of the mental powers upon an object; a close or careful observing or listening.” As I am washing the dishes, I am aware of warm water on my hands, but I am directing my attention to cleaning a pot thoroughly. I could notice the pleasure of the warmth and stay with it for a short
while as my primary object of attention before returning to
the task. Or I might be vaguely aware of being annoyed with
this job: it wasn’t my turn to do the dishes, or why is someone
else not helping me with the dinner cleanup? My attention
might be on this annoyance, on the story line around it, or on
what I wish I were doing instead of washing the dishes.

I might be aware of these things or I might not. Often we
are not. The small upset fades but then goes underground,
becoming part of our story of how life is not fair or how
overwhelmed and alone we feel. Add this to the countless
slights and injustices in our families and in our lives and we
can see how resentment and a sense of victimhood can build.
Unchecked, this sort of process can lead to depression, even
suicide. We can begin to glimpse the value of being aware of
and directing attention to experiences like disappointment or
annoyance as a means to greater effectiveness in our relation-
ships and dealing with our emotional lives.

This raises the question of what we are actually aware of
or attentive to. Our mind-body is our means of perceiving the
world as well as our inner experience. In Buddhist psychology
there are six ways information enters our mind-body, or six
“sense doors.” These are the five senses we all know—seeing,
hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—as well as thinking.

The sense impression, a smell, for example, comes into
awareness. We then have an immediate reaction: pleasant, un-
pleasant, or neutral. If it is pleasant, we are generally drawn
to it or want more of it. This is why people bake cookies when
they have an open house to sell their home. If unpleasant,
we feel aversion and want to get away, as we might roll up
our windows on the New Jersey turnpike. If neutral, we will
ignore, space out, dissociate, or look for a more interesting
object of attention. The key point is that we are bombarded
by sensory stimuli and that this process is happening in every moment of our lives.

This is the third aspect of mindfulness, that it is happening now, in the present moment. In our day treatment program, the first group of the day has a check-in format lasting from sixty to seventy-five minutes. Every day a number of patients will come in upset or overwhelmed about something that happened yesterday or something that is about to happen later today or in the future. Many of them could tell a long story about their current concern as well as associations to the past; stuck patterns in relationship; and random, obsessive concerns. Since most of these patients are substance abusers in early recovery, their usual means of coping with intolerable experience, physical and emotional, has been taken away.

What we then see are the thought patterns or thinking addictions that they generally escape through drugs or alcohol. Since it is clear that we will not have time to hear a twenty-minute story from each person, the patients are accustomed to our stopping the narrative at some point and focusing on what is being experienced right now. Where in the body are you feeling this resentment (anxiety, depression, anger, sadness, or craving)? What is the quality of it? Does it change as you pay attention to it? Are there any other stories you are telling yourself about this?

Often with this line of inquiry, patients do not feel entirely better, but they begin to glimpse something. They begin to see the difference between living in the past or future versus living in the present. Though they might not like letting go of the story or the justification for their misery, it is clear there is a choice.

I might say, “Take a walk and notice your body in motion, the contact with the ground, or the weather. When you start
thinking, just notice that and return to the walking." Whether the person follows my suggestion or not, the painful experience will change. At some point, later that day or the next, he will feel better. He will also see the process of embodied awareness operating in others. Once someone realizes that he can take refuge in the present moment, it can become a new habit, replacing more maladaptive ones.

Acceptance is the fourth and most subtle aspect of mindfulness. Let’s start with what it is not. Acceptance does not mean that you like it. Often we don’t. If I plan a picnic and it rains, I am disappointed, what we might call “pain.” If I am also angry, cursing my bad luck or timing, that is suffering—the experience of wishing it were different. Mindfulness would enable me to see the difference, directly feeling sadness, regret, or discouragement in the body. It would also reveal that rain is happening, period. It is not happening to me. I might also see that while I could not control the weather, I am now freer to consider other ways to have fun with people I care about. Acceptance is an attitude with the motto “Pain is inevitable, misery optional.”

The treatment of addiction is, in a sense, a continuous meditation on the subject of acceptance. People seek help because their strategy of nonacceptance is not working. Moreover, they can finally see that it is the very holding on to this strategy that is now creating much more suffering than it is relieving. This awareness does not eliminate nonacceptance, but it allows a clearer evaluation of how avoiding experience through the use of substances works and does not work. Then, if the addict cannot accept sobriety at this point, that is just where she is—and that is what needs to be accepted.

For example, I might ask a new patient, “On a scale of zero to ten—zero being ‘I am going to use as soon as I leave here
today’ and ten being ‘I am totally committed to recovery and plan never to drink again’—where are you?” Whether he says nine or five is totally okay with me if I believe I am getting the truth. That’s our starting point for bringing awareness and acceptance to how things are right now.

Acceptance also does not mean condoning behavior that is hurtful to yourself or others, being a doormat, or suffering in silence. In this context, what acceptance connotes is the simple noticing of the flow of moment-to-moment experience with openness, embracing present reality just as it is. An idea like this just rolls off the tongue, but it is a lifelong discipline. We are besieged by thoughts, agendas, feelings, bodily sensations in a relentless stream. Here is an idea to consider and check out: We cannot control our thoughts and feelings. We certainly cannot control what other people do and think (though we try). We can control two things—where we direct our attention and our own actions.

Largely what we are exploring here is how to relate to all of our experiences in a way that is graceful and life affirming. As this openness of heart and mind is gradually cultivated, we are able to see with greater clarity that everything changes, even ourselves and the sources of our suffering. We are able to solve problems to the extent that we understand them. The ongoing development of mindful acceptance creates a positive movement of seeing how we suffer and being free to choose to let go. If we are not ready, so be it. Just accept that.

MINDFULNESS ORIGINS AND UNIVERSALITY

My own introduction to mindfulness came through learning about Buddhist psychology in meditation centers. The Buddha was a historical figure, named Siddhartha Gautama, who
lived more than twenty-five hundred years ago in northern India (near current-day Nepal). He was born a prince, and his father, the ruler of a small kingdom, wanted him to be a king and a warrior. As the legend goes, Siddhartha was surrounded from birth by opulence and sensual pleasure—flowers that were always replaced before they wilted and the finest food, clothing, and entertainments. As a young man, he likely had a harem. His father carefully controlled what Siddhartha experienced so as not to expose him to any pain or trouble.

As the story is told, the prince was eventually able to convince his driver to take him on a series of forays outside the palace without his father’s knowledge. It was on these trips that Siddhartha saw in succession an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a monk. These experiences demonstrated to him not only that illness and death were the fate of all beings, even himself, but that there was the possibility of looking more deeply into the matter of human suffering.

Siddhartha stole away, leaving his father, wife, and newborn son. Why he would make such a choice is something we all need to feel into for ourselves. He was twenty-nine years old and could have continued to access pleasurable experiences. But now he knew it would end, and besides, these pleasures had not brought him lasting happiness or fulfillment.

Siddhartha studied with two different teachers and developed great powers of concentration. But he was unsatisfied and left these teachers not having attained his goal of understanding suffering. He went to the opposite extreme of his previously pleasurable existence, performing severe ascetic practices. He did not care for his physical well-being or hygiene and suffered starvation, extreme pain, and heat and cold. Despite these travails and near death, he still felt no closer to understanding the nature of suffering.
Siddhartha realized that he would need strength to sit still enough to see into the nature of reality, so in a beautiful moment of connection, he accepted a bowl of rice porridge from a young girl. He resolved to sit under a tree and not get up until he understood why he and all human beings suffer.

As he sat, Siddhartha was assailed by many deeply troubling and frightening images as well as ones that were quite pleasant and seductive. He saw these to be transitory productions of his own mind, insubstantial and impermanent. If he believed the thoughts or visions, he would suffer; if not, he was free. When Siddhartha finally opened his eyes, he was the Buddha, the awakened one. He then proceeded to teach what he had learned to his followers over the next forty-five years. Since the Buddha’s time, many have followed his teachings, but no particular beliefs are required. “Don’t take my word for it, see for yourself,” he effectively said.

The practices that we will learn here are quite simple and compatible with any belief system. In fact, mindfulness can be found in many Western, Eastern, and native religions and practices. In Judaism, for example, there are many blessings that are said around daily, weekly, and monthly cycles as well as on holidays. There are blessings before eating, washing the hands, lighting candles; upon awakening and going to sleep; for mourning; and many others. All of these are moments of mindfulness.

This well-known prayer was written by the Christian philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardships as a pathway to peace. Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you in the next.¹

The Serenity Prayer, which is equally adaptable to purely secular settings, is essentially mindfulness—knowing the difference between what I can and cannot change, whether to act or not act, speak or be silent. Can I stand firmly in the middle of my experience, see it clearly, and make a choice?

Mystics and poets from countless traditions have employed mindful awareness to bring attention to the preciousness of being still in the present moment. Here is one short, beautiful example:

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn
A cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.
If your mind isn’t clouded by unnecessary things,
This is the best season of your life.⁴

—wu-men

Embodied awareness is a critical accompaniment to peak performance in athletics, theater, music, dance, public speaking, and virtually any field of human endeavor. Mindfulness can be developed by and manifest in housewives, parents, auto mechanics, teachers, coaches, shopkeepers, farmers, anyone without any formal training in meditation—anyone who has learned the art of being still and listening without judgment. Those people are likely not reading this book. For me
and the rest of us who need a bit more help, let’s look at how mindfulness operates.

MINDFULNESS AND STRESS

Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program (currently called the Center for Mindfulness) at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. Jon is now well known and a seminal figure in the integration of mindfulness practice into health care, peak performance, and daily life. However, back then he was just a very smart guy with a PhD in molecular biology, a longtime Zen student, and yoga teacher who did not know exactly what to do with his career. He was teaching at the medical school and hit upon the idea of teaching meditation, yoga, and daily mindfulness to patients who had not gotten better with traditional Western medicine.

This included patients with chronic pain or cardiac, respiratory, gastrointestinal, endocrine, neurological, orthopedic, or other stress-related disorders. Eventually the clinic was referred patients with HIV infection, dermatologic issues, and psychiatric problems that had not responded to standard psychotherapy and medicine, as well as many others. You can imagine that doctors at their wits’ end were glad to have a place to send their patients, who, with no other good options, were willing to go.

More than thirty years down the road, thousands of patients have benefited from mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) training, and many have continued to practice long after the end of their classes. Thousands more have been trained as MBSR teachers, and hundreds of programs are now operating worldwide. At the Stress Reduction Program
of the medical center, people got better not from the elimination of their symptoms but by changing their relationship to them.

Consider chronic back pain that is secondary to an injury, resulting in a disability. There is the pain itself, the fear that it will always be there, the anxiety about money, the stories coming out of not knowing what is going to happen, the anger, the self-blame, the depression, the victim mentality, more stories, more pain, and so on. The patient/sufferer is totally trapped in his or her head, in negativity, alone, not able to be open to the help or emotional support offered.

MBSR training begins to untangle all of this by focusing on moment-to-moment experience, presented in some simple exercises and homework assignments. Patients are asked to practice meditation or yoga exercises for forty-five to sixty minutes per day, and the homework emphasizes mindfulness in daily life. These experiences gradually help the patient to begin to deconstruct the experience of pain, which is now a series of sensations, many admittedly unpleasant but changing over time.

Thoughts and emotions are similarly seen as transient phenomena. The stories are now stories, not the truth. This type of seeing creates space around the pain, which is still there but is often diminished because there is not nearly so much tension in the body. There is also less fear, negativity, worry, sense of being overwhelmed—and when these states do appear, they can be seen and worked with in a new way. Less tension allows families to relax, relationships to improve, and a greater acceptance of life as it unfolds.

Stress has been defined as “any stimulus, as fear or pain, that disturbs or interferes with normal physiological equilibrium of an organism; physical, mental, or emotional strain or
Mindfulness and Addiction

“Tension.” Stress happens by virtue of having a mind-body that needs to be clothed and fed, that gets old and sick, that has attachments of the heart. In other words, if you have a mind-body, it is part of the deal. Our problems come not so much from stress itself as from stress reactivity. In the back-pain example, the pain is unpleasant, but much of the misery comes from all of the inner noise.

Addiction is both the antidote to stress and the cause—a complex insanity that precludes clear seeing and understanding. Mindfulness is able to observe and distinguish both the benefits of substance abuse in dealing with everyday stressors and the downside. When people are clean, stress does not end. However, similar to the patient with chronic pain who is able to see into his or her tension, storytelling, and victim mentality, the addict has a new set of tools. Anger is just anger, sadness just sadness, fear, cravings, discouragement, stress—all insubstantial passing phenomena that become more workable with moment-to-moment attention.

Steps to Mindfulness

In the mid-nineties, I spent two years with the UMass Prison Project, a federally funded initiative of the Stress Reduction Program, where we applied MBSR principles to working with inmates that had gotten into trouble with their impulses—mainly violence, stealing, and substance abuse. Ricky had been in prison before, where he had had a chance to reflect on his life, and he was determined not to repeat the same mistake. However, once released, he was out one night at a bar and felt “disrespected” by something that was said. Afterward, Ricky did not remember everything, but he had beaten the guy so badly that he wound up back in
prison for another eight years. Clearly, there was something he needed to learn if he did not want to spend his life there. The four steps to mindfulness we taught the inmates apply to all of us who are frequently caught by our impulses and reactions. 5

1. Stopping

My father once told me that time is more valuable than money because you cannot save it. Indeed, the clock is ticking and our experience is continually unfolding. Monday turns into Friday and then Monday again. Time may seem to move quickly or slowly, and we may like it or not, but we cannot control it.

When life is unpleasant, we feel stressed, irritated, or bored and want to react or escape. Often we are successful if we, for example, turn on the TV, eat, or smoke a cigarette. However, there are two problems with this strategy: (1) the benefit is short-term and we will need to escape again soon, and (2) we become attached to the tendency to run from experience instead of facing it. Stopping means that we direct our attention into the here and now. This is not our natural inclination, but we might consider trying it when what we have been doing is not working.

Gina was an alcoholic who came into day treatment extremely depressed. A manager at a biotech company, she had been laid off, had relapsed, and had to move back home with her parents. Gina’s frustration and sense of failure were to a large extent directed toward her father, whom she did not respect. She saw him as “weak,” as he had bullied her as a child but was never aggressive with her brothers or anyone who might one day be tougher than he was. Although he was now trying to be nice to her, she remained unforgiving.
During her first week in treatment, she began to work with breath awareness as a means of grounding herself and soon found herself to be generally less tense and angry. One warm afternoon, Gina was walking home from the program and began to imagine that her father would, yet again, not have opened the windows in the house as she repeatedly had asked him to. She noticed that she was getting increasingly upset and decided to stop and take four deep breaths. Although her anger did not go away immediately, she was no longer pouring gasoline on the fire.

2. Seeing

Stopping and looking allow us to actually see what is there, which is impossible if we stay in our heads or on automatic pilot. In the example above, Gina glimpsed something that caused her to stop. Since she had spent significant time during the past week not being so angry, when anger came up so strongly, it got her attention. As Yogi Berra said, “You can learn a lot just by watching.” Gina saw that she was telling a story that was upsetting her and that it was fueled by her grudge against her father. She could feel herself revving up and looking forward to blasting him as soon as she got home.

Gina could see that she was creating her current reality from her past experience. To her credit, she was able to put aside the question of whether her prediction would be correct or not, and this allowed her to stop justifying her vendetta. As the cloud of judgment-fueled anger gradually passed, the tension in her neck and shoulders also diminished.

3. Self-understanding

As Gina continued to observe her body sensations, emotions, and thoughts, she calmed down even further and began to
see something new: that she was playing out her childhood trauma with her father and that she was determined to win this time. His lack of cooperation with her, which she interpreted as disrespect, activated her vulnerability in the form of fear and then rage. As she followed the story, she could feel a sense of power in blowing up, followed by guilt or sadness—common triggers to alcohol relapse. Gina began to understand how her being tyrannical had both benefits and liabilities but had caused everyone a great deal of pain, particularly her.

Stopping and seeing create a natural interest to look further, though we might not be pleased by what we learn. Self-understanding or insight is often bad news about me but good news about my capacity to take responsibility for my life. Gina’s ability to see the sadness under her anger freed her from continually acting out the old drama, which was more fantasy than truth.

4. Choosing

Making a choice is the crowning achievement of this process of mindfulness, which is much more than simple awareness. Rather, it is a means to skillful action and can be understood through knowing the difference between reacting and responding. Reacting is automatic, much like a reflex. Responding suggests the consideration of alternatives and making the best decision possible under the circumstances. There is an element of “look before you leap,” but responding need not involve thinking and may happen very quickly.

Consider the difference between being spontaneous and being impulsive. Spontaneity (this word has the same root as respond) implies a freedom of action born of the rapid integration of data from cognitive, sensory, and/or motor sources,
an ability to improvise. Impulsivity, on the other hand, is automatic or reactive, generally not leading to productive or creative outcomes.

Gina’s experience, which I have described, unfolded over a ten- to fifteen-minute walk home, and it helped to ground her between two alternatives—mindlessly playing out the childhood scenario versus staying open to the truth. Her exploration allowed her to see the benefits both of fueling her grudge and raging and of centering herself. In choosing the latter, she felt quite sad but also calmer and able to see the situation more clearly, including:

- It is her parents’ house, not hers.
- Her father was spacey, not trying to disrespect her.
- He had mellowed and was trying in his own way to make amends to her.
- In being tyrannical, she was retaliating, “giving him a taste of his own medicine.”
- She was the one being poisoned.

When Gina arrived at home, the windows were not open. She calmly noted how warm it was in the house, and her father apologized, saying he would try to remember next time. When Gina was asked what would usually happen, she said, “I would yell at him and he would just get away from me.”

One of the prison inmates, who had been openly contemptuous of the meditation practices, told this story: “They were shaking down my cell. There was no reason for it; I hadn’t done anything. I could have killed those guys, but I have gotten into trouble with my temper before, so I just sat outside on my mattress. Then I lay down and started to do a body scan. I was still really angry, but it distracted me, and I think I
knew I was doing a good thing. It took a while, but I did calm down. They were just about done, and I wasn’t even mad anymore. That was a new one for me.”

MINDFULNESS AND RESPECT

Working in prison taught me many lessons, possibly the most important being the link between stress and disrespect. At times they appeared to be synonymous. I was hanging around one day after class, waiting to speak to the program coordinator, when an inmate and a correctional officer came into the room. The inmate was Ricky, who had been reincarcerated for assault and battery and for whom disrespect was an issue. He was doing his job, sweeping up and talking with the CO, who casually used the phrase “a maggot like you.”

I should not have been stunned by this, but I was. This kind of thing was clearly going on all the time. Ricky, who was in my class at the time, just smiled and then gave me a look that said, “This guy is an idiot, but don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything stupid.” Indeed, he said nothing, went about his business, and maintained his dignity.

As stress is associated with disrespect (“to regard or treat with contempt or rudeness”), mindfulness can become a platform for respect (“to show regard or consideration for”). Assertiveness training, or mindful communication, is a means toward skillful speech and action. Initially this can be disorienting to a family member or partner used to disrespect, but in the day treatment setting, patients are encouraged to try and they are often surprised by the results.

One man, Raphael, detailed a pattern of nasty exchanges with his girlfriend, until one day when she said “You’re such an asshole” in the heat of the moment. “You may not agree
with me,” he countered, “but you can no longer speak to me like that.” This was the fruit of Tom’s mindfulness training: the ability to ground himself, to feel how painful these conversations were, and to have the clarity that he was no longer willing to live this way. His girlfriend’s response was positive, but he could not have controlled that. What he could control was where he directed his attention and whether his speech conveyed respect for himself and for their relationship.

_Mindfulness and Truth_

As I have said, mindfulness is a skill and an attitude, a vehicle for seeing clearly, but not the end result. The goals of practice are wise choices that prioritize truth over deception. Lying, “the intent to deceive or create a false impression,” is deeply ingrained in all aspects of the addictive process. It affects relationships with dealers, using buddies, family, partners, bosses, coworkers. What is most damaging in this pattern of intrigue is the lying to oneself.

In my experience, the best liars are the ones that do not even know they are lying. This sort of ignorance is effective for a while but is eventually disastrous. Often people come into treatment because they can no longer believe or trust what they think, which can be so confusing and scary that seeking help may be the only alternative, short of suicide.

Once one is sober and more clearheaded, mindfulness training helps create a larger perspective. Lying is still a possibility but no longer a reflex. If your mother-in-law asks if she looks fat in her new dress, lying may be the best alternative. Poker is a game about deception. In most cases, however, the truth works best. The addict discovers that lying creates enormous mistrust, tension, loss of contact with loved ones, and the need to devise ongoing strategies to cover one’s tracks.
In early recovery, being more straight up with people brings some relief to the addict, but she often finds herself still “on probation,” literally having to prove herself. This sort of oversight and limits on movement—for example, having to be home at a certain time—is often resented, particularly by young adults who are “not children.” However, once the patient (often with some help) glimpses her own responsibility for the condition of probation, there is some relaxation and even interest in what is going to happen next.

One young woman, Julia, was living with her parents, who did not allow her to take the car because of her past history of driving drunk and lying to them about it. They were frustrated with her but mostly afraid to give her too much freedom. Julia complained bitterly about her parents’ treating her like a child. “I’m sober and going to treatment, can’t they trust me?” Apparently not. At home Julia was angry and sullen, accusing her parents of punishing her, which in part they were. She judged them as being “tight assed” and “rigid.” Not only was this not working for her, but she was feeling even more helpless, angry, and distant from the people who most cared about her.

However, because she was regularly grounding herself and not escaping with alcohol or drugs, Julia was able to see her victim thinking operating. Then, when we looked more closely at her judgments, we saw that it was she who was rigid, in her insistence on getting what she wanted even at the cost of lying. Julia could see that her parents had no defense against her lying except to become more restrictive. They, too, felt helpless. I am not shy about informing these often quite bright young people that they have no idea how hard it is to be a good parent.

With this understanding, Julia was able to approach her parents with more humility. She acknowledged the pain she
had caused them by lying. It was she who did not trust them. This changed everything. Just two weeks into her treatment, Julia was allowed the car at night and was driving her younger siblings around as well. She saw for herself that once she let go of the judgment and anger she was directing toward her parents, they could feel her maturity and a greater degree of trust.

What Julia had done was to become more honest with herself, in part by seeing her inner stories and returning to the truth of the present moment, where she was feeling scared, sad, and alone. As she slowed down and stopped blaming, she was also able to see the lawfulness of her behavior and its consequences. She was then encouraged to be even more open and transparent with her parents, which allowed her to access their wisdom as well as increase the experience of mutual respect. This is similar to what Gina was able to accomplish when she saw a bigger picture, spoke respectfully to her father, and softened the hard feelings between them. The truth does hurt for a while, but it is also the medicine that heals.

MINDFULNESS AND AUTHORITY

Gina’s experience is instructive here as well. The immediate “addiction” she was dealing with was the compulsion to blow up at her father as a protection against the childhood vulnerability underneath. In this scenario, she often drank as a means of handling the combination of rage, guilt, and desperation that would inevitably follow. When Gina responded to her feelings instead of reacting, she took charge of the situation in a new way. In effect, she was the author (“creator or originator”) of a new reality. Her behavior was also authentic (“worthy of trust, reliance, or belief,” from the Greek authentikos, meaning genuine or authoritative).
Authority is defined as “the power to judge, act, or command.” For our purposes, this is an internal matter, but it may be useful to look at a concrete example of authority, a ship’s captain. The commanding officer has a goal (a destination, winning a battle, transport, exploration, commerce) and personnel to do the job. There are senior officers who plot a course, steer, and consult about strategy and the ship’s maintenance. There are also sailors who clean up, maintain the engines or sails, cook, and so forth, and midlevel officers who manage them and report to superiors.

In modern times, the captain is also getting radio and electronic communication from his superiors and consultants. The captain’s quite daunting task is to observe all of this, listen with awareness of people’s motivations and to what is not being said, decide where to direct his energy at any given time, and above all, simultaneously hold the goal of his mission and the welfare of all under his command.

The practice of mindfulness, both formally (for example, sitting or walking meditation) and informally (awareness of moment-to-moment experience), facilitates our capacity to make more informed choices toward our own life goals. This happens via the four-step process of (1) stopping, developing the inner stability to stay still in the face of multiple and shifting contexts, agendas, opinions, desires and needs; (2) seeing, clearly observing those parameters; (3) building self-understanding, evaluating the existing conditions based on those observations, past experience, and current capacities; and (4) choosing, applying the best wisdom, both intellectual and instinctual, that we have at the moment to the situation at hand.

Sound difficult? Clearly so, but it is also exactly what Gina did when she took four breaths. It is what Julia was
able to accomplish by being more present with her body and feelings and less involved with her stories and justifications. It is what we see with countless patients in early recovery, who have been triggered by life circumstances to drink or use and are now making a choice instead of just reacting in the old ways.

Then there are actually two more steps: (5) accepting the results (whether they gratified an addictive urge or not) and (6) bringing that understanding into the next moment. This is a path to what I would call adulthood. It is quite challenging, because it entails taking charge of all that comes our way, including our mistakes and misfortunes that are not our fault. Among the baby boomers, adulthood was derided and delayed, but at this point in my own life, it clearly seems better than the alternative.

I have had many lessons on the subject of authority. For example, I had the theory that if you loved your kids enough, they would cooperate. That one did not quite pan out. So if it is not about being nice and not about being intimidating, what are the conditions that lead to cooperation and respect? The answer, I believe, is cooperation and respect. Authority that listens from a grounded place and is honest and respectful is effective.

Adulthood could be seen as the opposite of victimhood. A great athlete does not get derailed by an error, a bad bounce, or a bad call by an official. Instead, he or she refocuses on the next play and never trashes a teammate. The question for drug addicts and all of us is, can we accept our situation just as it is right now without whining or wishing it to be other? I know of no better means to this than living in our bodies one moment at a time. As we stay grounded in the midst of our feelings, impulses, desires, agendas, prohibitions, rules, and the shifting nature of our circumstances, we are in the
best position to evaluate our situation. Then we can choose to speak or act or not.

This sort of authority not only allows each of us to live more skillfully but also naturally inducts those around us—whether they be partners, kids, friends, family, coworkers, bosses, fellow motorists, dogs, anyone—into a different energetic state. This could take the form of teaching one’s kids to be less reactive; neutralizing disrespect, as in the case of Raphael with his girlfriend; or merely defusing a difficult situation at work or on the road with a simple act of courtesy or good manners. We know these things intuitively and from experience. As we practice mindfulness, we begin to increasingly create and manifest dignity, respect, and compassion in our lives. Seeing is believing.

**EXERCISE**

**MINDFULNESS OF SENSATION**

Addiction plays havoc with the senses while attempting to control experience—which ironically leaves the addict increasingly powerless. Our goal here will be to be aware of sense perceptions, one at a time, without the usual labeling or commentary. This builds our capacity to be more fully present and alive. After you read the instructions, the meditation will take five to ten minutes.

Start by sitting in a chair with a posture that is relaxed, upright, comfortable, and dignified. Take three slow breaths into your belly. Notice the touch points where your body meets the floor, the chair, or itself. Allow yourself to feel the effects of gravity, touch, and pressure. Take a minute to notice the quality of the sensations as well as how they shift and change.
Next, bring your attention to the experience of the air around you—warm, cool, just right, still, or moving. Do your hands, face, and exposed skin feel different from the rest of your body? Are some areas more sensitive to temperature than others? Is there a preference for warm or cool? Just notice without judgment.

Now open your awareness to the world of sound. You can hear sounds emanating from your body, from inside the room, and from outside. Notice the sound of your breath, the heating system, machine noises, vehicles, birds. There will likely be a tendency to identify each one and enjoy some sounds while disliking others. You might notice some appreciation for a working furnace or annoyance at your neighbor who allows his dog to bark incessantly. As best you can, let these thoughts pass by and return to simplicity of hearing. How does it feel to accept what you cannot change?

Finally, look around. Notice the objects in the room. Again, see them as if for the first time, letting go of their story lines. Look out the window if there is one. Notice the light, colors, shapes, any movement or change.

How is it to simply be present with each sensation moment to moment?

NOTES


5. Saki Santorelli, current executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Worcester, Mass., is credited with naming these steps; personal communication with author.


If you liked this reading, you might also enjoy *Ordinary Recovery: Mindfulness, Addiction, and the Path of Lifelong Sobriety* by William Alexander (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010).
Recently a friend sent me an e-mail with some photos attached. “You’ll love these,” she wrote. When I opened the photos, I chuckled with delight and shot back to her, “Yes, I love these pictures—so much so that I’ve already written a book about them!”

The photos circulating around the Internet were of a polar bear and a dog playing together. I first saw them in a National Geographic magazine many years ago and was captivated by the story. A dog named Churchill was tied up to a stake in the ice. His owner spotted a starving bear, just out of hibernation, through the window of his cabin. He watched in horror as the bear approached his dog. Feeling powerless to protect his pet from certain death, he grabbed his camera and snapped pictures of the scene unfolding before his eyes. But to his amazement, what he ended up witnessing was how Churchill saved his own life.

As the bear lumbered toward him, Churchill crouched down and wagged his tail. In spite of his ravenous hunger, the bear responded to the signal and switched from predator...
to playmate. One of the photos shows Churchill and the bear embraced in an affectionate hug as they tumbled and rolled around on the ice. Then the huge polar bear turned and ambled away. Over the next few days, the bear returned to the site several times to play with his new friend.

The *National Geographic* photo essay came into my life at the right moment. I had been preparing to teach a series of workshops on mindful communication, where students would learn practical skills in bringing awareness, insight, compassion, and choice to their communications. In preparation, I was paying close attention to my own interactions, especially with the difficult people in my life.

When I first saw the *National Geographic* photos, I was observing the defensive strategies I used with the hungry bears in my life. Would Robert, the bully coworker coming down the hallway, turn into a teddy bear if I adjusted the signals I was sending? Not likely. But I decided to give tail wagging a try anyway.

In some ways, Robert fit the image of a starving polar bear as he stalked the office, commanding attention and emotionally devouring the rest of us with his crude jokes and predictable opinions. Normally, when he walked into the room, I cringed and put on my mask, which only locked the two of us into another episode in our predator-prey relationship. But it occurred to me that I could arouse a feeling of friendliness rather than cower. Over the following days and weeks, I discovered that I could interrupt my defensive reactions to Robert by bringing up the mental image of Churchill and the polar bear. This interruption in my defensiveness allowed me to relax. In one such moment, I flashed back to my little brother at age four dressed up as a cowboy wearing a sheriff’s badge. A wave of sisterly affection came over me, and with
it, a new image of Robert. I saw him as a lonely, confused man who was always hungry because he had no idea how to nourish himself through friendship. Imagining his isolation made me feel sad. Letting my guard down even for a moment or two allowed me to notice the vulnerable messages Robert was really communicating behind his bravado. I still did not agree with his bullying tactics, but he became a real human being to me—wounded and frightened, just like the rest of us.

As Robert came more into focus for me, positive details about him started to emerge. I appreciated that he was always on time for work even though his eyes looked tired and swollen, as if he’d been up too late the night before. I noticed that he had good taste in clothes and that his shirts were always clean and ironed. Gradually, I formed a more respectful image of Robert, and my fear of him lessened significantly. I felt my resistance to him dissolve, and felt some compassion grow. Not only did I feel better about Robert, I felt better about myself. Over time I noticed that Robert seemed to pause by the door of my office more often than he used to, even though he had nothing in particular to say. I had the impression that he was, without knowing why, drawn toward the small amount of warmth I was generating—like a cat to a sunny window ledge.

By merely paying attention to my interactions with Robert, I had learned two lessons. First, I realized how I distort my view of other people when I’m reacting defensively. I also saw that when I can open up and see another person in a fresh way, my own self-image transforms. On the surface, these two insights might not seem to be that big a deal. Not as exciting as a dog and a hungry bear rolling around in play. But learning how to switch out of defensiveness into a more humorous, receptive state of mind is a big deal—it is the key to happy, harmonious relationships and communities.
I once heard the saying that love and fear can’t inhabit the same room at the same time. The truth of this saying has held up over the years in practicing mindful communication. It’s easy to feel loving and kind when we’re open. I often remind my clients that good intentions, like well-written wedding vows, are meaningless when we’re in love. They only have power when fear enters the room. The hard work of practicing mindful communication is that it brings us face-to-face with our anxieties about relationships. These anxieties are rooted in much deeper, core fears about ourselves, about our value as human beings. The good news is that if we are willing to stay present and relate to these core fears, we discover that the power of love is much greater than the power of fear. Gaining confidence in this discovery, we find that any relationship can be transformed into a path of self-discovery. Simply being mindful of our open and closed patterns of conversation will increase our awareness and insight. We begin to notice the effect our communication style has on other people. We start to see that a fear-based attitude toward a person can blind us to who he or she really is.

**THE THREE LIGHTS**

In my mindful-communication workshops, the metaphor we use to notice whether communication is closed, open, or somewhere in-between, is the changing traffic light. When the channel of communication closes down, we imagine the light has turned red. When communications feels open again, we say the light has turned green. When communication feels in-between, or on the verge of closing down, we say the light has turned yellow. Participants find that the changing-traffic-light imagery helps them identify their var-
ious styles of communication, and to recognize the consequences of each.

We use the green and red lights to highlight open and closed patterns because this isn’t something we normally track. Once those are clear, we zero in on the in-between stage of the yellow light. Following is a brief overview of what the lights mean.

The red light indicates that communication has shut down. If we imagine a conversation to be like a two-way flow of traffic, with a balance of information coming from both directions, the red light signals that traffic has stopped. At least one person is not listening. This shutdown can be brief or prolonged. For example, when we feel misunderstood and say, “Could we stop for a moment to make sure we’re on the same track?” we may be responding to a brief flash of the red light. A prolonged example can occur when we’re in a long-term relationship with someone who is highly defended and opinionated, unable to accept who we are or what we have to say. So the red light can also be used to mark those times when we’re open, but the person we’re trying to communicate with remains closed, sending a “No Trespassing” message. We also use the red-light signal to understand how we ourselves shut down. When our defensive barriers go up, we block the flow of information from our environment and replace it with mental story lines, projections, fears, and reactions. In all cases, the value of the red light is to serve as a reminder to stop when communication has shut down.

The green light symbolizes openness, when the two-way traffic is flowing in a conversation. It is genuine dialogue, when we go beyond our familiar ideas into uncharted new territory. It is also genuine friendship, when we accept, appreciate, and love others for who they are. On our personal journey, the green light marks brief moments of openness that
we can remember and use as guidelines for communication. When we’re open, we can listen—to ourselves, to the environment around us, and to other people. Openness shows us three natural gifts that all human beings are born with:

- Awake body, the ability to pay attention
- Tender heart, the ability to empathize with others
- Open mind, the ability to be honest, curious, and insightful.

These three green-light faculties are the basis for mindfulness practice.
The yellow light describes the period in between the green and red light, the gap of groundlessness that occurs just before communication shuts down. We’ve been caught off guard and we feel embarrassed, irritated, or disappointed by an unexpected event. Below the surface of these reactions, deeper fears and self-doubts are exposed. If we can meet these fears with gentle insight, using mindfulness practice, we can intercept our red-light triggers.

Working with the yellow light is an advanced skill in the practice of mindful communication. Normally we begin by simply noticing the red and green lights—how we open up when we feel emotionally safe, and how we shut down when we feel afraid. Paying attention to these patterns without judging them increases our self-awareness and gives us greater control of our conversations. After we’ve spent some time observing our patterns of opening up and closing down, we can zero in on this most important area, the stage in between. Mindfulness teaches us how to hold steady when we feel hurt or disappointed. It gives us the power to refrain from making matters worse during those episodes when negative reactions rise up because things aren’t going as we planned. Let’s go back to my relationship with Robert to learn more.

The Red Light: Defensive Reactions

During an important business meeting, or in the middle of a painful argument with our partner, mindful-communication training can help us recognize when the channel of communication has shut down. With that awareness we remain silent instead of blurting out something we’ll later regret. When I let Robert intimidate me, my red light came on. I became defensive and closed down. When we react to fear by shutting down the channel of communication, we’ve put up a defensive
barrier that divides us from the world. In our mind, we justify our defensiveness by holding on to unexamined opinions. We tell ourselves that relationships are not that important. We undervalue other people and put our self-interest first. In short, our values shift to “me-first.” Closed communication patterns are controlling and mistrustful. We see others as frozen objects that have importance only if they meet our needs.

The problem with closed communication is that it increases our distress rather than protecting us. Regardless of how self-assured we may feel or appear on the surface, the sense of isolation that our defensive barrier triggers is subconsciously terrifying. If we are indeed isolated individuals, how do we meet our own needs? How do we get our supplies? How do we ward off enemies? Suppressing these inner fears makes us even more rigid and out of touch with the flow of energy in our body, mind, and heart. We tighten our muscles and thoughts; we harden our hearts.

Feeling isolated makes us emotionally hungry, so we look to other people to rescue or entertain us. We manipulate them to get what we need. Because our strategies can’t possibly succeed, we become disappointed with people. We suffer, and we cause others to suffer.

Let’s make sure we’re clear about the difference between healthy self-protection and the fear-based barriers we’re talking about. When the light is red, we confuse the two. Genuine self-protection can only be found through openness. When we shift to “me-first,” thinking, it’s in our self-interest to ignore the impact our words have on others, and we fail to notice that things only get worse and that the protection we’re seeking gets farther out of reach.

We’re born with sensitive receptors in our body, heart, and mind that keep us tuned into the flow of energy and life going
on around us and within us. Each of us already has this na-
tural communication system that feeds us information all the
time. So when we close down and become defensive—for a few
minutes, a few days, months, or even a lifetime—we’re cutting
ourselves off, not only from others but also from our natural
ability to communicate. Mindful communication trains us to
become aware of when we’ve stopped using our innate com-
munication wisdom, a state symbolized by the red light.

The Green Light: Openness

When I was able to open up and reconnect with my resources,
and to reconnect to Robert as a playmate, my green light came
on. Paying attention to our communication patterns helps
us realize the value of openness. Communicating mindfully
brings a greater sense of warmth and honesty to our relation-
ships. Genuine friendship depends on self-acceptance, which
is made possible with mindfulness practice.

The green light symbolizes nowness. Mindfulness allows
us to notice this. It is the mind’s ability to remember what
we’re doing, to wake up again when our attention wanders
too far away from the present moment. Without mindfulness,
we’d be unable to drive a car or read a printed page. But like
the muscles of our body, the mental power of mindfulness
becomes stronger with training and weaker with neglect.

Mindfulness can transform relationships. We nurture rela-
tionships by paying attention and we protect them by being
mindful of what we say when negativity arises. Like Churchill
the dog, staying connected to others, even to our enemies, is
a more successful strategy than hiding behind an imaginary
barrier and going it alone.

When we are with a good friend, we don’t regard our indi-
vidual needs to be in opposition to the needs of that person.
We experience a “we-first” state of mind because we appreciate that our individual survival depends on the well-being of our relationships. We express this sense of connectedness to others in open communication patterns. Open communication tunes us in to whatever is going on in the present moment, whether it is comfortable or not. Openness is heartfelt, willing to share the joy and pain of others. Because we’re not blocked by our own opinions, our conversations with others explore new worlds of experience. We learn, change, and expand.

*The Yellow Light: The Crisis of Uncertainty*

“I don’t understand the yellow light,” said my friend Kerry’s four-year-old daughter one day from the backseat of the car. “I know red means stop and green means go. But when the light is yellow, some people speed up and others slow down.”

In mindful-communication training, the symbolic yellow light is a reminder to slow down and take a closer look at what happens when something unexpected occurs, when we feel uncertain. What we’re more accustomed to doing is to race right through a yellow in-between state, and then smack right into a red closed state.

When my defensive reactions to Robert became so painful that I began to be curious about them, my yellow light came on. In practicing mindful communication, eventually we ask ourselves, “What exactly causes me to switch from open to closed and then open again?” We begin to discover the state of mind that exists in between open and closed—symbolized by the yellow light. In-between is a place we normally don’t want to enter. We find ourselves there when the ground falls out from beneath our feet, when we feel surprised, embarrassed, disappointed—on the verge of shutting down. At this moment, we might feel a sudden loss of trust, an unexpected flash
of self-consciousness. Learning to hold steady and be curious at this point is essential to the practice of mindful communication. Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön, who has been an invaluable mentor for me in this work, uses the word shenpa to describe the undercurrent of energy that we feel in this yellow zone. She gives us the instruction to “hold our seat.”

If our barriers truly had value, there would be no point to this practice. But our defensive barriers weaken us, like someone who is so afraid of germs that they wear a surgical mask and gloves all the time. Practicing mindfulness is a more effective way to stay healthy. It strengthens our emotional immune system, so that we are less affected by the small, everyday problems in our relationships.

The in-between state of mind is a critical time for bringing peace into our homes and workplaces. For instance, Jason and Debra wanted to practice mindful communication because they were stuck in negative reactions to each other. They had met three years earlier during a fund-raising drive for a public radio station. Debra was immediately attracted to the small man with a shy smile who was carrying a huge African drum through the crowd. By the end of the evening, after hearing him perform, Debra was in love. When she saw him again the next day, Debra asked Jason if he wanted to go on a daylong kayaking trip with her. He hesitated for a moment as if he were on the edge of a high diving board. Debra had all the qualities he loved in a woman. She was smart, independent, and sexy. He knew this relationship had the potential to be deep, but would it be safe? He took a leap, said yes, and they’d been together ever since.

Three years later, they hit a rough spot. They felt constantly irritated by each other. The very qualities that had initially attracted them had turned toxic. Debra’s independence made
her seem aloof and unpredictable. Jason’s creativity and playfulness made him seem superficial and immature. But they didn’t want to abandon their relationship, at least not yet. At the end of our consultation they were surprised by the homework assignment: perform three random acts of kindness for each other every day for the next week. There would be time later to build a better communication bridge, but first Jason and Debra needed to restore an atmosphere of appreciation and gratitude in their relationship.

Small acts of kindness that are either shared or withheld when the yellow light is flashing can make or break a relationship. Once we’re in the red zone, it’s too late to engage in acts of kindness—we’re too mistrustful. I’ve seen this over and over again. When I work with couples, they typically reach a critical point when they could save their relationship by switching from me-first to we-first thinking. The switch happens if they think about their children, pets, or anything that brings a larger picture to mind. Even a temporary mood of gratitude and shared interest can provide a safety net when things fall apart.

Rather than leaving it up to chance, Debra and Jason made wish lists of small gifts of kindness that made them feel grateful, and attached them to the fridge with a magnet. The agreement was that if the other person offered one of these gifts, the other would say thank-you. The lists included some of the everyday tasks they had taken for granted:

- I appreciate it when you call from work during the day just to say hi.
- I appreciate it when you make dinner or pack my lunch for me.
- I appreciate it when you give me half an hour of quiet time alone.
I appreciate it when you come with me to a film that I want to see, even if you think you won’t like it.

I appreciate it when you do my laundry for me.

I appreciate the way you relate to my family, remembering their birthdays for me.

Feeling gratitude for everyday kindesses made Debra and Jason more interested in moving farther into dialogue with each other. They realized the value of keeping a we-first approach of mutual respect when they went on to talk about their differences. In contrast, they saw how their me-first reactions triggered greater mistrust. Debra put it this way:

This exercise reminded me of my grandmother’s expression, “You can get more with honey than with vinegar.” No matter how angry I am about Jason’s behavior, I don’t want to make things worse with my reactions. I know if I start criticizing him, it will backfire and hurt our relationship even more. So now I start off by thanking him for something positive he’s done, and this seems to change the whole tone of what I’m about to say next, not only for him but for me too.

Kindness, gentleness, and gratitude make our yellow-light reactions workable. A we-first approach allows us to be more sensitive to our own anxieties and more patient with others. For instance, I became more sympathetic to Robert after examining my own awkward, self-defeating attempts to guard myself from imaginary threats.

There are also miracle moments when we can open up and wag our tails to play. We break the spell of focusing only on our personal agendas and awaken to genuine relationship.
Such abrupt shifts seem to come out of nowhere in the middle of our most ego-crunching experiences—such as admitting that we’ve made a mistake.

The yellow-light zone is a moment of choice. When I’m in that zone, I can hear my mind debating which direction to go: do I go back and apologize or continue to hold a grudge? Depending on how much friendliness I bring, I could tip in either direction. The happiness of my marriage hangs on this balance.

When I think back to the ongoing communication process I have with my husband, I realize that our twenty-three-year marriage has been a series of turning points. At these turning points the path of our relationship could have led toward heaven or hell. Our happiness is the result of thousands of small flashes of the yellow light, where we were able to transform disappointments and arguments into opportunities for unmasking, intimacy, and joy.

**USING THE THREE LIGHTS AS GUIDELINES**

Mindful-communication training isn’t directed at intimate relationships alone. It is a personal journey that uses the sensitive emotional ups and downs of everyday conversations as a path of self-discovery. The awareness of our natural communication system is a thread that runs through every moment of our lives. Practicing mindfulness helps us notice this truth. We can observe ourselves opening and closing in small ways throughout the day. A stranger emerges from a crowded sidewalk and asks us for directions. We sit down with a coworker over coffee to discuss a work project. We manage to pull our child away from the computer long enough to ask how school went today, hoping for more than a one-word reply. The conversation that takes place during a job interview can change
the direction of our lives; the words we exchange with the cashier at our local coffee shop might seem less important—but every interaction creates an emotional imprint on us. Even in a crowd of strangers, we human beings are always influencing one another, one way or another. Some people can uplift our spirits without saying a word, such as the janitor humming a tune while he mops the floor in a large office building. Others can deflate our mood with one cynical remark.

The Intention to Be We-First

Most of the people who attend mindful-communication retreats and workshops are motivated by the wish to genuinely help others. There is a palpable sadness in the room when we describe how powerless we feel on the other side of the closed-communication door when someone we love has cut us off. Feeling the depths of this sadness is a useful starting point for our work together. Realizing that we feel powerless to help others is like hitting bottom. We’re ready to let go of the strategies we’ve been using to try to control each other and try something new.

The dysfunctional me-first approach is like a rogue state that militarizes its borders while the citizens inside are starving. We defend ourselves as if we were isolated individuals, cut off from the world around us. Intellectually we might disagree with this view, but emotionally this is what happens when our barriers go up. When I wall myself off, I have only three preoccupations: to get my needs met, to push away or punish anyone who threatens me, and to ignore feedback. According to the psychology of mindfulness, these three impulses—craving, aggression, and ignorance—are responsible for creating the illusion of the false self. This false self makes us feel like we’re a big, solid rock in the middle of a river, resisting the flow. The great sadness that motivates us to practice mindful communication
comes from seeing how much suffering these familiar me-first communication patterns cause.

Sadness and the longing to help others are like jet fuel for practicing mindful communication. The slogan “Go with the green light” refers to a certain kind of power we’ve been overlooking until now. Under all circumstances, even with an enemy approaching, we can draw from the power of relationship instead of reacting defensively. This is the power of we-first.

We-first is shorthand for the paradigm shift that happens when we open up. It means that we can identify with relationship itself rather than with our individualism. Another word for this is selflessness. Many of us are skeptical about the word selflessness because we associate it with being a martyr or a goody-goody. But openness shows us a positive kind of selflessness, a win-win view in which the way to help ourselves is by helping others. My teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche describes genuine selflessness as the final stage in a long journey of opening communication:

It takes a long time to take our fences down. The first step is to learn to love ourselves, make friends with ourselves, not torture ourselves anymore. And the second step is to communicate to people, to establish a relationship and gradually help them. It takes a long time and a long process of disciplined patience. If we learn to not make a nuisance of ourselves and then to open ourselves to other people, then we are ready for the third stage—selfless help.¹

One important lesson I’ve learned from practicing these teachings is that they are deceptively easy to talk about and extraordinarily challenging to put into action.
Years ago, my twelve-year-old son and I packed up the car in Boulder, Colorado, and headed for Alaska. There are many coastal villages and towns in Alaska that you cannot reach by road, including the capital city of Juneau, so the ferry system is called the Alaska Marine Highway. When we reached Bellingham, Washington, we were told it would take two days and three nights for the boat to wind its way up the coast to Juneau, taking the Inside Passage route, which cannot be navigated by larger vessels. On the third night I set my alarm clock for three A.M. so that we’d be sure not to miss the Wrangell Narrows, a treacherous twenty-two mile channel through the Alexander Archipelago.

“Wake up, Sheehan, I have a surprise for you,” I said with a nudge. He mumbled something, rolled over, and then, on second thought, roused himself for the adventure. We huddled in a blanket on the deck in the chilly, dark mist and watched the silhouette of the shoreline gradually emerge as the ship approached the dangerous corridor between the islands. It was an eerie, dreamlike atmosphere that felt like Dante’s journey into Hades. The ship’s engine had slowed, and it felt like we were drifting. Then, out of the blackness, lights appeared, blinking green and then red.

“Wow, that is so cool!” my son exclaimed for both of us.

Over the next few hours, the ship was carefully guided through the narrows by about sixty navigational lights posted on buoys. I told Sheehan that these lights meant the difference between life and death for thousands of fishing boats and small ships. As we slipped along through the dark sea, following the guidance of the lights, I felt a surge of gratitude for my teachers.

For decades I’d been fortunate to receive a steady stream of profound and paradoxical teachings on mindfulness from
some of the greatest meditation masters in the world. Like the
explorers and navigators who created a safe passage through
these hazardous waters, my teachers have charted the jour-
ney that has shown me what to cultivate and what to refrain
from in my relationships. They are like blinking green and red
lights in the darkness for travelers like me.

The qualities of openness are like flashes of light in a dark
night. These qualities are radically different from what’s val-
ued by our dominant society: mindlessness and speed. It’s
hard to slow down enough to discover the open quality of
communication. Instead, we’re mostly concerned with strat-
egies to get what we need. Our fear-based society is preoc-
cupied by a me-first view, and this is shown by the insatiable
hunger of our consumerism, our continuous paranoia over
unseen enemies, and the numbing way we’re encouraged to
lose ourselves in mindless entertainment. These influences are
the rocky shoals that make the practice of mindful relation-
ship so perilous.

Fear-based environments make us lose perspective, which is
why we need the guidance of enlightened teachers. What we’re
told is normal may actually be toxic, and this can be very hard
to see. It’s like the fable about the village well that became
poisoned. Everyone who drank the water from this well went
crazy, one by one. If you were to go to a village where every-
one was crazy, you’d begin to doubt your own sanity too.

Using that analogy, when we wake up to the truth of inter-
dependence, we see the craziness of our strategies to promote
ourselves by harming others. Mindless communication means
that anything goes when we’re protecting or promoting our
own interests. However, suppose that in the middle of an ar-
gement, we find ourselves about to unleash a secret verbal
weapon against someone and instead ask ourselves, “Do I re-
ally want to cause permanent harm to this relationship?” At such a moment, it’s as if the influence of the poisoned well has worn off—we’re having a moment of sanity. Practicing mindful communication is like remembering to drink fresh water from a well that isn’t poisoned. It is like having an enlightened teacher whisper in our ear.

*New Ideas*

To understand the view of we-first, we need to look for different systems of thought and cultures that aren’t fear-based. As Albert Einstein famously said, “Problems cannot be solved by the level of awareness that created them.” Look around and find those people who are engaged in solutions rather than creating problems. Who are the ones in your life who operate from that level of awareness?

I was introduced to the idea of “we-first” by my father. On my eleventh birthday, a seventy-five-pound golden lab named Smallwood joined our family. That dog made a memorable entrance. From the moment he leaped through the front door, nothing went as planned. He was so strong and cheerful that his wagging tail knocked my toddler sister flat on her back. With Smallwood’s arrival, a new chapter opened in my life, for I began going for evening walks with the dog and my dad. After the dishes were done, we’d slip out of the hot, noisy house and into the foggy, twilit streets of our neighborhood. Over the next couple of years, during these walks, my dad introduced me to the great ideas he was reading about.

Dad was enthusiastic about the writings of Erich Fromm, Viktor Frankl, Eric Berne, Rollo May, and others. All of these great thinkers were talking in one way or another about the power of love and openness. Dad described Martin Buber’s philosophy, which compared two kinds of communication:
genuine dialogue, which he named “I/Thou,” which is open, and its opposite, “I/it,” which is closed. When we’re closed, we turn others into “it,” into an object. Similar ideas were expressed by psychologist Carl Rogers, who described healing communication as “unconditional positive regard.” Later, physicist David Bohm defined genuine dialogue as “a stream of meaning that flows among, through us and between us.”

When I listened to my dad describing all these new ideas, I realized that “openness” is a kind of paradigm shift from another way of being. I understood that there was a human state of mind of unconditional warmth and curiosity that was available when our barriers dissolve. This openness brings a sense of sacredness and respect to our lives. Buber honored this we-first style of relationship by using the word Thou.

In contrast to I/Thou communication, Buber says that when we turn away from this openness, we’re in the paradigm of I/it. We lose the magic and dehumanize our relationships, turning people into objects to be manipulated in some way. Disconnecting like this, we reduce everything to an object, cutting ourselves off even from our own body, heart, and mind. This me-first system is how we justify activities that destroy the natural world and perpetuate fear-based societies.

The 1960s were an unsettled time of change, a time of conflict, war, and social revolution. New ideas about the power of love and openness were a catalyst for my generation. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.” During those walks with my dad I felt a new kind of spirituality dawning, a comprehensive view of sacredness that included psychology and relationships. It deepened my understanding of open communication. For me, closing the door on an evening of television and stepping outside with my dad
was a rite of passage, a transformational dialogue that continues to this day.

Since then, I’ve encountered more great teachers who have dedicated their lives to charting the dangerous passage through fear-based systems. They show us that a gentle, enlightened society isn’t some future goal. When we open, it manifests on the spot. By example, these teachers show us what selflessness looks like. They point out the natural qualities that are inherent in each of us. They also give paradoxical instructions, showing us that the way to open communication is through compassionately understanding its opposite—how we shut down.

Like navigational lights that shine in the dark, the insights from our teachers provide a sharp contrast to our confusion. They show us how to be compassionate with our sense of failure. Let’s face it, if there were a shortcut that bypassed the embarrassment of seeing our own foibles, I’m sure we’d all take it. But such a shortcut would also shortchange us, because our genuine powers of communication can only arise by making a relationship with our habits of mindlessness rather than pretending they aren’t there. They cannot be gained any other way. By definition, mindlessness is hard to see. So, even though it’s embarrassing, it’s good news to discover that it’s an open secret. Our external conversations broadcast the confused story lines that go on in our mind.

To bring these conversations into our practice, we use three slogans that summarize the instructions on what to cultivate, what to refrain from, and how to work with the core fears that surface in between:

1. Go with the green light. The first instruction describes setting the intention to be more open, which means being less self-absorbed and more available for others. When we’re
open, we’re cultivating friendship with ourselves as the basis for a we-first approach to relationships, respecting our connection to other people regardless of the ups and downs that occur in our communication.

2. *Stop when the light is red.* The second instruction is to refrain from harmful communication patterns. Using mindfulness, we can replace me-first barriers with a more skillful way of protecting ourselves without damaging our relationships. The first step is to learn to recognize closed conversation patterns—the red light—and then to learn to stop and let go instead of pushing forward into the danger zone. Stopping at the red light gives us the space to be curious about what happens when communication shuts down. In this space we can learn to replace defensive habits with a more realistic way of responding when problems arise.

3. *Be careful when the light is yellow.* Refraining from harmful communication makes it possible to explore the vulnerable doubts and fears that lie beneath our red-light habits. The yellow light symbolizes the triggers that normally lead to shutting down. Like ice thawing in the warmth of the sun, these fears melt when we join them with warmth and inquisitiveness. We need to be careful about the voices we listen to during these sensitive transition times so that we can make room for our fears while at the same time not buying into them. To do this, we seek support from people who share a similar we-first intention.

Understanding this process shows us that mindful communication depends on making room to observe our own red-light patterns rather than judging them as bad. At the same time, we gently refrain from acting them out. The threefold instruction of the slogans is how we reclaim the parts of ourselves
that we’ve rejected and gradually extend that friendliness to others. In the process, we restore greater harmony to our families and communities.

THE FIVE KEYS

The five keys to mindful communication are methods for genuinely helping others by relating to our fears and misunderstandings and working patiently with our communication challenges. They are as follows:

1. The key to mindful presence: awake body, tender heart, open mind. Mindlessness keeps us depressed and anxious, too restless to listen, even to ourselves. By making a relationship with this restlessness, we reconnect with our own basic healthiness, sanity, and goodness, which enables us to function as healers.

2. The key to mindful listening: encouragement. Discovering how we mindlessly build ourselves up by putting others down, we can learn to cultivate genuine confidence instead of arrogance. Recovering our own self-worth opens the door to seeing value in others. This is the path of the nurturing leader or parent who can see the “heart of gold” in others and envision their potential.

3. The key to mindful speech: gentleness. By refraining from the two extremes of exaggerating and silencing, we can use mindfulness to uproot aggressive communication patterns and gently refocus our attention on things as they are.

4. The key to mindful relationships: unconditional friendliness. Mindfulness is blocked by the conditions we bring to relationships. When we recognize this red-light pattern, we start to see our hidden agendas and realize how challenging it is
to accept others as they are. The path of working with disappointment unmask our unrealistic expectations and exposes destructive relationship patterns. As we do this, our capacity for unconditional friendliness expands.

5. *The key to mindful action: playfulness.* Communicating mindfully is not like walking down the street to work. It’s more like dancing with your lover in the kitchen, but your lover is the present moment. Responding skillfully is the result of being synchronized with our natural communication system of open mind, tender heart, and awake body. We know what to do because each next step in this dance is revealed to us as we go along. We learn how to do this by relating with our control issues. When we’re competing with reality, trying to master or conquer it, we’re pushing against something that feels separate from ourselves.

NOTES


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Awake in the World: Teachings from Yoga and Buddhism for Living an Engaged Life, by Michael Stone

Buddhism for Busy People: Finding Happiness in an Uncertain World, by David Michie

The Healing Power of the Breath: Simple Techniques to Reduce Stress and Anxiety, Enhance Concentration, and Balance Your Emotions, by Richard Brown, MD, and Patricia Gerbarg, MD

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The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD: An 8-Step Program for Strengthening Attention, Managing Emotions, and Achieving Your Goals, by Lidia Zylowska, MD
Further Readings

The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life, edited by Barry Boyce and the editors of the Shambhala Sun

The Mindful Way through Pregnancy: Meditation, Yoga, and Journaling for Expectant Mothers, edited by Susan Piver

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