

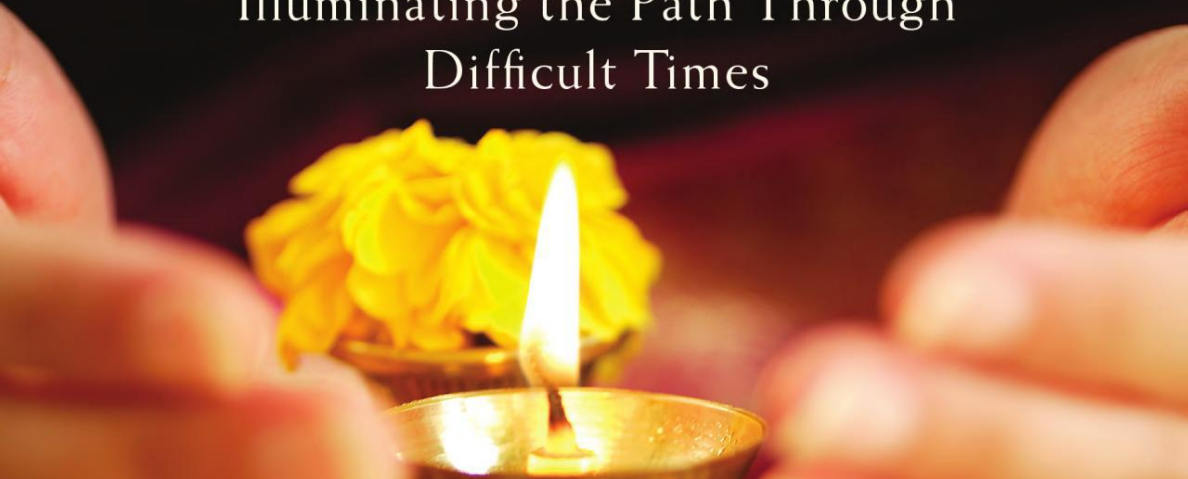
Jack Kornfield

Author of

*A Path with Heart* and  
*After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*

A  
Lamp  
in the  
Darkness

Illuminating the Path Through  
Difficult Times



Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn

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## Foreword

**E**ntry points onto the path of Dharma are ubiquitously available yet mysteriously unpredictable as to when and where they appear to us. I imagine that just about every person who has ever been touched by the practice of mindfulness remembers with clarity and gratitude that first moment of connection with these teachings—which is never simply an introduction to the healing and transformative possibilities of the Dharma, but also, in essence, proffers a gentle reintroduction to oneself and to the possibilities for a veritable flourishing of one’s life and heart.

This book is such an entry point. It is a beckoning source of both light and warmth, as its title suggests, inviting us into the cultivation of mindfulness and heartfulness through practice. It is the gift of a master teacher who has been responsible in large measure, along with a relatively small group of colleagues, for the introduction of mindfulness meditation practice in all its forms into American and Western culture over the past forty years.

Jack Kornfield is one of the great mindfulness teachers of the present day. His skill in inspiring people to practice is unsurpassed, as is the precision of his meditation instructions and the breadth and depth of his understanding. Beyond all that, he is best known and loved for the qualities of his heart, for his gentleness and kindness, for his compassion and caring, and for his willingness to be vulnerable and quintessentially real. The vast scope of Jack’s rich and varied embodiment of wisdom, which is tailored to our present day and circumstance, is artfully condensed in this volume, a new portal through which to enter the world of meditative awareness and what it has to offer, especially in times of great difficulty when the mind so easily falls into darkness and feelings of unworthiness.

And the beauty of it is that not only can we read Jack’s words, but that he is present through his verbal guidance on the audio versions of the

meditation instructions. His voice rounds out and amplifies the gift of non-separation, where one comes to see that the deepest and most fundamental connection is not with the teacher, however great and skillful he might be, but with oneself in one's own fullness, a fullness that is not often recognized at first. In the poet T. S. Eliot's words, it is a fullness that is "Not known, because not looked for"—but finally, hopefully, "heard, half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea." That stillness, that recognition, that clarity, that potential for reconnecting in the deepest of ways with one's own beauty, one's own genius, however much unrecognized or denied, is what is offered here in these highly nuanced practices aimed at giving yourself back to yourself, which is what so many people say is what they receive from their mindfulness practice.

With that in mind, may this entry point be one of miracle and wonder for you. May your experience of the practice lead to a re-befriending of yourself and a reigniting of passion for the life that is yours to live and for the path that is yours to walk—day and night, through thick and thin—in all the seasons of a life.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD,  
author of *Wherever You Go, There You Are* and  
*Mindfulness for Beginners*  
June 2011

# Introduction

## *An Invitation to Awaken*

I saw a cartoon in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that showed a family crossing the Sahara desert on camels. The father was on the first camel with his rugs and bags, the mother on the second, and three children were on smaller camels behind them. The last little girl and the father were obviously having a dialogue and the father looked back and shouted to her, “Stop asking if we’re almost there yet—we’re nomads for crying out loud!”

Every life is filled with change and insecurity, and every life includes loss and suffering and difficulties that arise regularly. We are all nomads in this ever-changing world, and we need ways to ground ourselves and remain centered no matter what happens.

When we encounter difficult times in our lives, it is not just the outer changes, but often our own state of mind that causes us the most difficulty. Grief and anxiety, fear and loss, and other turbulent emotions that we carry with us—and the stories we tell ourselves about the pains and trials of our lives—can contribute to our suffering and illness—until we learn how to release them.

Often, our initial strategy is to simply run away. But we find that our troubles follow us. Paradoxically, one of the best ways to heal from emotional betrayal and abuse, from injury and illness and trauma, is to turn toward that which is injured within us. In fact, when we bring a caring and fearless attention to that which is injured and difficult, these very circumstances often offer us important lessons and even surprising gifts that will transform our lives.



*Do not be afraid to  
face your difficulty.*

*Turn toward it.*

*Lean into the wind.*

*Hold your ground.*

It is important to remember that the healing journey is not always about overcoming the difficulties we're experiencing or about getting well, at least not completely. It sometimes requires learning to accept more fully the way things are, bringing a wise and compassionate spirit to the circumstances of our lives. We all have the capacity to heal, but we have to discover what form that healing is to take.

By working with the teachings and meditations included in this book and audio, you will begin to trust the life force within you and learn the skills you need to transform your difficulties into a lamp that will guide you—and others—through the rest of your life.

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Wisdom of Our Difficulties

*There is praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute. Did you think this would not happen to you?*

The Buddha

If you're reading these words, you've probably hit hard times. Perhaps you've lost a loved one, or maybe you've lost your job, or received a difficult diagnosis, or someone close to you has. Maybe you're divorcing or you're in bankruptcy or you've been injured, or your life is falling apart in any number of ways. Maybe daily life itself has become too much for you . . . or not enough. But even in the best of times there's plenty to worry about: seemingly endless wars and violence, racism, our accelerating environmental destruction. In difficult times, personally or collectively, we often begin to wonder not only how we can get through this difficult patch: we begin to question existence itself.

### YOU ARE NOT ALONE

One of the most difficult things about hard times is that we often feel that we are going through them alone. But we are not alone. In fact, your life itself is only possible because of the thousands of generations before you, survivors who have carried the lamp of humanity through difficult times from one generation to another. Even Jesus had hard times, and Buddha did as well. At times they were hounded, threatened, physically attacked, and

*It's not about you.  
It's about us.  
Life is difficult  
for everyone.*

despised. Yet their gifts outshone all their difficulties. And now, as you read these words, you can feel yourself as part of the stream of humanity walking together, finding ways to carry the lamp of wisdom and courage and compassion through difficult times.

Several years ago I was giving a talk on compassion with Pema Chödrön in a large hall in San Francisco filled with at least three thousand participants. At one point a young woman stood up and spoke in the most raw and painful way about her partner's suicide several weeks before. She was experiencing a gamut of complex emotions, such as agonizing grief and confusion, guilt and anger, loss and fear. As I listened to her I could feel her loneliness, and so I asked the group when she finished, "How many of you in this room have experienced the suicide of someone in your family, or someone really close to you?" More than two hundred people stood up. I asked her to look around the room at the eyes of those who had gone through a similar tragedy and survived. As they gazed at one another, everyone in the room could feel the presence of true compassion, as if we were in a great temple. We all felt the suffering that is part of our humanity, and part of the mystery that we share. But it's not only in great difficulties like the suicide of a loved one that we touch this truth: in the midst of our daily confusions, self-doubts, conflicts, and fears, we need support, reminders to trust in ourselves. We can trust. We were designed to journey through the full measure of beauty and sorrows in life and survive.

## YOUR DIFFICULTIES ARE YOUR PATH

Grief and loss and suffering, even depression and spiritual crisis—the dark nights of the soul—only worsen when we try to ignore or deny or avoid them. The healing journey begins when we face them and learn how to work with them.

When we stop fighting against our difficulties and find the strength to meet our demons and difficulties head on, we often find that we emerge stronger and more humble and grounded than we were before. To survive our difficulties is to become initiated into the fraternity of wisdom.

The real tragedy is when we refuse to acknowledge and respect our own suffering, and instead spread it unconsciously to others. As the Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel has written, “Suffering confers neither privileges nor rights; it all depends on how one uses it. If you use it to increase the anguish of others, you are degrading, even betraying it. . . . And yet the day will come . . . when we shall all understand that suffering can elevate man as well as diminish him.”<sup>1</sup>

*The warrior in  
your heart says  
stand your ground.  
Feel the survival  
of a thousand  
years of ancestors  
in your muscles  
and your blood.  
You have all the  
support you need  
in your bones.*

## AWAKEN THE ONE WHO KNOWS

The practices included in *A Lamp in the Darkness* are not positive thinking, quick fixes, or simplistic self-help strategies to navigate temporary difficult times. The practices here are profound tools for doing the work of the soul. They awaken your inner knowing. If you pay careful attention in the midst of your crises, you will begin to sense a witnessing consciousness, a wise presence inside of you that could be called “the one who knows.” This knowing presence is consciousness itself, present in every moment of your life, even when it feels far away from you. Even in the toughest times of illness and loss, in your deepest depressions and griefs, underneath even your most catastrophic challenges and fears, the one who knows in you remains calm and clear. It already accepts whatever is going on. It sees beyond the immediate situation to something much larger. It knows that whatever change has come—no matter how much of a surprise it is to you—was

*Loss and betrayal tear  
open the heart.  
Look through this  
gate for the wisdom  
that lies there.  
What matters now?  
What would the wise  
ones do now?*

going to happen. It knows that whatever is, *is*—whether we accept it or not. The one who knows is even often able to see grim humor in the most difficult situations. And it knows long before we do that the end of our suffering begins when we turn to face our suffering and embrace its truth and healing wisdom.

But how we can find this “one who knows” in the midst of our most overwhelming difficulties? Go to the mirror. Look at your face. You will see someone who looks older than you looked several years ago, although inside you don’t feel any older. This is because it is only your body that has aged. The timeless awareness through which you see your body is the one who knows. Your body is only a temporary vessel for this awareness. It is a physical container for the undying consciousness of the one who knows.

## LIVE IN THE PRESENT

You can learn to trust the one who knows, to experience consciousness as the space of awareness that is unchanging, independent of circumstance. It is open and clear and wise. Resting in the one who knows you can step outside of time, outside of endless worries about the future and the reruns of the past. The one who knows abides in the present moment.

The present moment is all we have, and it becomes the doorway to true calm, your healing refuge. The only place you can love, or heal, or awaken is here and now, the eternal present. Create life a day at a time. You cannot know the future. It is a mystery. But you can plant beautiful seeds here and now and learn to tend them with the love and courage and survival instinct that is inborn in you. Somerset Maugham once said, “There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one

knows what they are.” He wrote marvelous novels, the only way we can, a page at a time.

Whether your suffering stems from cancer or divorce or loss or conflict, the one who knows understands that it is only in the present that you can heal. The one who knows has the courage to acknowledge the way things are, and to care and love and trust, no matter what. The one who knows sees the bigger picture behind every illness, loss, and death. Wisdom knows that although you may feel that your life or another’s life is ending, new life is always growing in and around you. The universe continues to expand, the Earth continues to turn through the seasons, the soil continues to bring forth new growth. Even in the moment of your eventual death, mothers will be giving birth, bringing new hope, love, difficulty, and possibility into the world.

Becoming aware and mindful, resting in the one who knows in the midst of your struggles, is not some magical cure. Your problems will not automatically and easily disappear. Being anxious and sad, angry and fearful, hurt, lost, and even despairing in difficult times is part of the natural process of suffering. Even being overwhelmed by challenging emotions is a natural part of the journey. If you judge yourself against some impossible ideal of how you think you “should” be feeling and acting as you struggle, you’ll only add to your suffering.

Being alive is finding ourselves in the midst of a great and mysterious paradox. The one who knows realizes that there are ten thousand joys and sorrows in every life, and at one time or another we will be touched by all of them. We will all experience birth and death, success and loss, love

*If you can sit quietly after difficult news; if in financial downturns you remain perfectly calm; if you can see your neighbors travel to fantastic places without a twinge of jealousy; if you can happily eat whatever is put on your plate; if you can fall asleep after a day of running around without a drink or a pill; if you can always find contentment just where you are: you are probably a dog.*

*Right now, how  
can these difficult  
emotions and thoughts  
and sensations become  
your path  
to liberation?*

and heartbreak, joy and despair. And in every moment of your life there are millions of humans just like you all over the world who are being confronted by situations that are equally overwhelming and are struggling to somehow learn how to survive them. As George Washington Carver said, “How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong . . . because some day in life you will have been all of these.”

## YOU WILL SURVIVE

One of the world’s greatest examples of how to survive difficult times is Nelson Mandela, the first president of modern South Africa. After twenty-seven years of imprisonment on Robben Island, he remained unbowed and dignified, gracious, tender and kind, and curious about everything that was happening around him. The one who knows inside him never took what was happening to him personally. In this way he was able to maintain his freedom even while in bondage, to retain his dignity even in the most degrading conditions, to continue practicing compassion in the face of hostility, and to respond to the hatefulness that surrounded him with an unwavering love. Although a solitary man jailed in a distant country, Nelson Mandela has become an inspiration for millions of people suffering through less dramatic but equally challenging situations. The one who knows in Nelson Mandela is the same one who knows inside you. You were born with the same potential for wisdom, the same insight, the same strength and love, all that you need to carry you through the difficulties that you encounter.

To heal, you must remember who you really are. Then no matter what happens to you, you can rely on this innate courage, you can trust your

own wise heart because nothing and no one can take them from you. You are free like Nelson Mandela.

One of my spiritual teachers, the Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, used to ask me, “Which has had more value in your life, where have you grown more and learned more, where have you become more wise, where have you learned patience, understanding, equanimity, and forgiveness—in your hard times, or the good ones?” When we come to understand the paradox that what we most value in our lives was often born out of conflict and struggle, we can begin to get a glimmer that perhaps one day we may begin to embrace our difficulties and find grace in them, even if that day is not today.

*As you become intimate with your suffering, your heart grows tender.*

Even the worst losses become workable over time. They become part of your life story and destiny; they become an important part of who you have become. Through surviving our difficulties, tenderness and compassion naturally arise. Your hardships are not only something intensely personal and intimate but also something you share with the entire world. Everything you have survived is responsible for who you are today. It is part of your heritage and cannot be taken from you; it lives in you in the same mysterious way that everything and everyone you have ever lost remains alive and present in your heart.

It’s important to remember that even with the best of healing practices, your personal healing may not be easy. Turning to face difficult times can bring us face to face with the larger pains and fears beneath our grieving, or open a well of loneliness we have been running from our whole lives. But the practices in this program are designed to work with it all, to return you to acceptance and forgiveness and compassion—especially for yourself, so that you can hold everything in *yourself* with great mercy through these difficult times.



*You may not see  
it now, but this  
very difficulty will  
strengthen you. Your  
heart will grow wiser,  
your spirit stronger.  
You already know  
this. You can even  
begin to see the ways  
that this is true.*

## OPEN TO VASTNESS

These practices will reconnect you to a bigger perspective of space and timelessness, so you can see everything with the eyes of the one who knows life's vastness and mystery.

You've had many tastes of the ever-present mystery and beauty of existence: when you've fallen in love or been present at the birth of a child, or in the timeless silence when you first saw the Grand Canyon or looked through a telescope at the stars and galaxies. In those moments your concerns were not with your difficulties. You were a conscious part of the miraculous eternal present moment.

Eternity is here, always, waiting in the present moment.

We must learn how to return to the reality of the present moment even in our most difficult times. In the present moment we can learn to see clearly and kindly. With the great power of this mindfulness, we can become fully present to the unbearable beauty and the inevitable tragedy that makes up every human life. And we can honorably and fully experience this one and only life that we have been given, with all its ups and downs. In my own life, I try to remember the words many of us have heard from the Ojibway Indians: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky."

## TRUST

The practices offered here are given with an open hand. They can bring healing and transformation to both your body and your mind. They will give you the tools for trusting the natural unfolding of your life and reconnect you to the unstoppable power of renewal that is always waiting to break through, no matter what your current difficulties. Try each of them and

trust yourself to know which ones suit your heart and your current predicament. Perhaps others will become more useful to you at other times.

Remember, too, that although these practices can bring genuine healing from your present difficulties, more difficulties will come. It is the nature of life for difficulties to arise, and there are new challenging times yet ahead. This is our human lot, and our calling. It is how we grow. As Michael Jordan said, “I’ve missed more than nine thousand shots in my basketball career, I’ve lost almost three hundred games, twenty-six times I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over again in my life, but I still keep going out on the court. And that’s why I succeed.”

By learning the skills in this book, I hope that when future difficulties arise, your path of healing will not be as long or dark. For just as it is certain that each life will include suffering, it is also true that in every moment there is the possibility of transcending your difficulties to discover the heart’s eternal freedom. Your unshakable spirit waits to rearise. For, as the poet Pablo Neruda has written, “You can pick all the flowers, but you can’t stop the spring.”

*As you go through this difficult time, sense how many other people on this earth are facing the same problems: loss, conflict, divorce. Feel your common humanity with them. When you can awaken sympathy, courage often follows.*



## CHAPTER TWO

# The Earth Is My Witness

*Make your mind like the earth which receives all things steadily.*

The Buddha

**Y**ears ago, a crew of Russian cosmonauts ran into trouble in their space station. After a long and frightening period of uncertainty, they eventually found a way to safely return to Earth. When their capsule finally landed, they got out and knelt down and kissed the ground.

The Earth that they kissed is every living thing's true home. It is from the elements of the Earth that we are given birth, and it is the fruits of the Earth that nurture us so that we can live and grow. The Earth is the foundation for our houses, for our communities, for our civilizations. It is on the surface of Earth that we walk, and it is on the solidity of the Earth that we lie down to sleep. And eventually, when we cease to live, we will return to the Earth, in one way or another.

On the night when Buddha vowed to remain in meditation until he became enlightened, it was on the Earth that he took his seat. And as he sat under the bodhi tree, all of his fears and doubts, all of his temptations and desires arose in him. The story tells that these difficulties arose in the form of Mara, an Indian demon who personifies doubt, difficulty, evil, terror, and temptation. And when the armies of Mara were at their strongest and the temptations were at their greatest, Mara challenged Buddha's worthiness, asking him, "Who do you think you are to sit on this spot and seek enlightenment?" Reconnecting with his dedication and compassion, Buddha reached down and put his hand

*The path through  
trouble is always  
made a step at a time,  
a breath at a time, a  
day at a time.*

upon the Earth and said, “The Earth is my witness.” In his extremity, Buddha called upon Earth to be the true witness to his value as a human being and his right to awaken upon that seat, supported by the Earth itself.

When our inherent value and dignity as human beings is witnessed, whether by the Earth or by those around us, it can transform our life. A math teacher in Indiana once had a class filled with raucous and difficult students, as every teacher has had at some time in their career. On one of those particularly trying days right before vacation, she realized that no one was going to be learning much math, so she stopped the class and wrote on the board the names of the thirty-one students and asked everyone to copy them onto a sheet of paper. Then, after they had all copied them down, she gave them fifteen minutes to write next to each student’s name something that they admired about that person. She then collected the pages and dismissed the class. Some months later when the class was again having a hard time paying attention, she stopped the class and said, “I have something to pass out to you.” She had cut the pages apart and pasted under each student’s name the admiring comments that their classmates had written.

Several years after that, she received a call from the mother of one of her favorite students. After graduating high school, he had enlisted in the army and was killed in the Middle East. His mother asked if his favorite teacher would come to the funeral. At the end of the ceremony when they stood around the gravesite to honor his life, his mother walked up to the teacher and said, “My son had very few things with him when they found his body, but this was in his pocket.” She took out the piece of paper that had the list of thirty-one good things written about him by his classmates. It had obviously been folded and unfolded many times. Then the young woman standing next to the teacher, who had been a student in the same class, said;

“Oh, yes, I carry mine too. I look at it when things get hard,” and pulled hers out of her wallet. And another young man nearby said, “I made mine part of my wedding vows.”

Being reminded of our dignity and value is the ground for wisdom and compassion to arise. With this presence we will have the courage to touch our pain, our losses, our fears, our wounds and illnesses. When we experience feelings of unworthiness, frustration, and sorrow, our difficulties, struggles, and challenges can be held with dignity and awareness.

In the practice of “The Earth Is My Witness,” we will learn how to take a seat on the Earth and become the mindful witness of all that arises. Meditation teacher Tamara Engle, while sick with cancer, wrote about the dignity and trust she learned from this practice of mindful witnessing:

My days are short and as I grow weaker, I experience so much gratitude for my meditation. Not only the joy and ease it brought, but the hard parts. For every bored and restless sitting and every fearful fantasy, and every pain and ache I sat through, and every itch I witnessed and did not scratch, was a training for kindness. A training for the muscles, for bearing witness, for the trusting spirit that carries me now, even as I face my death.<sup>1</sup>

We have the capacity to take our seat under our own tree of enlightenment in the midst of all things in this world and to be present for them with clear eyes and an open heart. In the midst of your difficulty, you will learn the true strength of meditation. Zen master Suzuki Roshi has written:

Suppose your children are suffering from a hopeless disease, you do not know what to do, you cannot lie in bed. Normally the most comfortable place for you would be a warm comfortable bed, but now because of your mental agony, you cannot rest. You

*Neither avoid  
nor overreact.  
Tend what you  
are given. Stay  
centered in yourself.*

*Be the potter of your  
life. Center yourself  
on the wheel. Find  
the still point.*

may walk up and down, in and out, but this does not help. Actually, the best way to relieve your suffering is to sit . . . even in such a confused state of mind and bad posture.<sup>2</sup>

To carry the lamp through the darkness you need firm footing—ways to become centered and stable and grounded in the midst of your most challenging difficulties. The practice of “The Earth Is My Witness” starts with taking your seat. Established in the here and now, you can begin to become the witness to things as they are.

As you take your seat in this meditation, your mind and body will experience the power of accepting things as they are, no matter how painful or challenging. In practicing in the midst of your difficulties, you will find your inner strength, the courage that has brought you this far. This is all you’ll need to overcome your present difficulties as well.

## *Meditation Practice* The Earth Is My Witness



**This meditation is included as Track One on the audio portion of this program.**

**Sit in a way that is comfortable and stable**, with a sense of ease and dignity. Be still and alert, mindful as you take your seat on the Earth.

After you've taken your seat and feel stable, take several deep breaths to release any obvious tension you're carrying, so that you can be even more fully present.

Like Buddha on the night of his enlightenment, consciously acknowledge your place on the Earth. Let the Earth become witness to your right to be here as a human being. Feel yourself grounded and stable in your posture. Feel the support of the Earth as you sit upon it, and at the same time feel yourself as a part of the Earth, solid like a mountain and rooted as if your roots go down into the Earth, all the way to the center of the Earth.

Now, in the first part of this practice, release your burdens as you sit firmly seated on the Earth, solid like a mountain. Begin to release the burdens and difficulties that you carry, and let them return to the Earth.

Bring your attention first to your head. Become aware of the great river of thoughts, plans, and memories, the expectations and fears. Let all these drain down through your body back into the Earth. Feel any tension in your face—the unwept tears behind your eyes, the tension of fear and anger in your jaw—and let this too drain down through your body back into the Earth.

Now roll your head in a circle and feel all the cares carried in your neck begin to flow down through your body and back into the Earth. Now release whatever weight you



carry in your shoulders—the backpack of tensions, the heaviness, the tightness—let them flow down through your body and back into the Earth.

Now relax your arms and feel how they've carried your struggles, your needs, your conflicts, your difficulties. Release all of their tension down through your elbows, your wrists, your hands, your fingers, and as you touch the Earth, let the tensions you have held drain out of your body back into the Earth.

Now bring your attention to the front and back of your chest, and your great heart within. Feel the burdens, aches, betrayals, and longings you carry there, and one by one release these too into the Earth. Take your time. Let your heart soften and your chest open and feel your breath come freely to fill the open space.

Move down now to your stomach and sense all that you hold there—all of the tightness around your anxiety and worry—and let it all release and drain down through your body into the Earth.

Now bring your attention down through your spine to your pelvis and genital area. Feel how your pelvis supports your torso, just as the Earth holds you. Notice how your spine and genitals and pelvis also carry tensions, burdens, fears, traumas, and conflicts. Let them all go and gradually drain through you and into the Earth.

Now bring your attention to your thighs and legs and feet that have carried and moved you and have absorbed so many of your tensions and burdens and difficulties. Slowly let these tensions and burdens and difficulties too drain into the Earth.

When you have released whatever tension you can from the whole of your body, sweep your attention from top to bottom. Feel the new clarity and steadiness and strength. Your body becomes present, unified, solid like a mountain. Let it rest on the Earth as if a part of the Earth. Become aware of the deep calm and restfulness that grows in your body as it clears. Let your mind quiet, and your heart open into silence and stillness. With the Earth as your witness, you can now sit as centered as Buddha—halfway between heaven and Earth in human form.

In the next part of this meditation, you sit like a Buddha, becoming a compassionate witness to all things. Start by resting in the space of mindful awareness. With this steady witnessing, become aware of the changing sensations in your body. Relax with them. After a time, notice the waves of your feelings and thoughts and the coming and going of sounds in your environment. Let all these experiences rise and fall like waves of the ocean while you rest in awareness itself. To steady this witnessing, notice the natural wave of the breath underneath all the other waves. Notice how your breath breathes itself. Feel its natural rhythm, its coolness in your nostrils, its tingling in the back of your throat, the rise and fall of your chest and belly.

*It's not what you planned, but this is your life. You're still here. Listen. Something new is coming.*

And as you feel your breath come and go, let all the other waves of experience—the sensations, feelings, and thoughts—rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath. Become the witness of the breath and all that rises and passes away around the breath. If a strong experience carries your awareness away from your breath, let go of the breath and witness this new wave with the same spacious attention that you've given to your breath. As if to bow to it, name it gently: sadness or excitement, longing, planning, remembering, fear, tingling or coolness in the body, or sounds in your environment. Whatever arises, receive it with mindful and kind attention. Name it gently and feel the wave move through your body and mind, and then watch it pass away. And when it passes away, return to the breath and rest again in the open space of awareness. Let the body be solid like a mountain and the mind open like the sky. Rest on the Earth like a Buddha, and become acquainted with your capacity to witness all that arises, to remain centered and stable and steady in the midst of it all.

Return to this practice as often as it serves you. Make the practice of “The Earth Is My Witness” a way to steady and nourish yourself, to quiet your mind, to open your heart, to become wise in the midst of all of the changes you experience in your life.



## CHAPTER THREE

# Shared Compassion

*Hold yourself as a mother holds her beloved child.*

The Buddha

One recent student of mindfulness was a young army lieutenant who had been remanded to an eight-week class of mindfulness training by his commanding officer because of his inability to control his temper. After about six weeks of learning the practice of mindfulness and bringing a kind and compassionate attention to his experience, he found himself in a hurry, shopping at a local supermarket on his way home one evening. The market was crowded and the checkout lines were long. He had a full cart and noticed that the woman in front of him had only one item in her basket. This lieutenant was the kind of person who wanted things to be done right. She was in the wrong line. She was supposed to be in the express line. Worse than that, she was carrying a baby in her arms, and when she got up to the checkout clerk she held the baby up and the clerk began to coo and talk to the woman about the baby. And then, the woman handed the baby across the counter so that the clerk could hold him! A long line of people was waiting. The annoyance the lieutenant had been feeling built to a point where he was about to lose control and say something in anger to the two women. But after six weeks of training in mindful awareness, a part of him became aware that he was triggered.

The lieutenant decided to use this as an opportunity to try some of the mindfulness and attention practices he'd been learning. Bringing his

*It is never too late  
to begin again. You  
can always make a  
fresh start.*

attention to his breath, he began to experience a sense of spaciousness and release from his feelings of being overcome by his strong emotions. He did not push the irritation away; rather, he became aware of his anger and by honoring and accepting it, he felt enough of a release from his strong feelings to notice the waves of pain and heat and energy and judgment that were filling his body.

And, after taking a few more deep breaths, he felt a kindness begin to flood him and surround his pain and suffering until they slowly diminished. As he became filled with compassion, he looked up and realized that even though the woman was chattering and holding up the line, the child was cute and the three of them seemed to be enjoying this pleasant social moment. So when he got up to the checkout counter he'd calmed down enough to say graciously, "That was kind of a cute kid, wasn't it?" And the checkout clerk looked up at him and said, "Oh, do you think so? He's my boy. You see, my husband was in the army and he was killed in the Middle East last year. Now I have to work and my mom stays home to take care of my baby. She tries to bring him in once a day so I can see him."

We are so quick to judge one another. And just as we are hard on others we are even harder on ourselves. With mindfulness, our natural compassion grows. We can see that we are all carrying our own burden of tears. You and everyone you meet are sharing in some measure of the pain present on the planet. You are called upon to witness this pain—in yourself and others—with compassion. But how can we do this when we live in a time where it seems we have lost contact with the power of mercy and compassion, when we have closed off to the suffering of ourselves and others?

We have to begin to sense the tears for ourselves before we can cry for others. These tears are actually a great gift. They are the same moisture that brings new life out of the dry earth every spring. For the Lakota Sioux,