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Bestselling author of *Wherever You Go, There You Are* and *Coming To Our Senses*

FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING

How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation

THE MINDFULNESS CLASSIC – NOW REVISED AND UPDATED

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Published by Piatkus

ISBN: 978-1-405-51700-3

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Piatkus
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London, EC4Y 0DY

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Preface

This very readable and practical book will be helpful in many ways. I believe many people will profit from it. Reading it, you will see that meditation is something that deals with our daily life. The book can be described as a door opening both on the dharma (from the side of the world) and on the world (from the side of the dharma). When the dharma is really taking care of the problems of life, it is true dharma. And this is what I appreciate most about the book. I thank the author for having written it.

THICH NHAT HANH
PLUM VILLAGE, FRANCE
1989

As countless people have discovered over the past twenty-five years, mindfulness is the most reliable source of peace and joy. Anyone can do it. And it's become increasingly clear that not only our health and well-being as individuals, but our continuation as a civilization and a planet depend on it. This book's invitation for each one of us to wake up and savor every moment we are given to live has never been more needed than it is today.

THICH NHAT HANH
PLUM VILLAGE, FRANCE
2013

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Introduction to the Second Edition

Welcome to this new edition of *Full Catastrophe Living*. My intention in revising the book for the first time in twenty-five years has been to update it and, perhaps more importantly, to refine and deepen the meditation instructions and the description of mindfulness-based approaches to life and to suffering, given the many years that have elapsed since the first writing. The updating felt necessary because the scientific investigation of mindfulness and its effects on health and well-being has grown tremendously over this period. Still, the more I entered into the actual process of revising the text, the more it felt to me that the basic message and content of the book needed to remain essentially the same, simply amplified and deepened where appropriate. In spite of its seductiveness, I didn't want the tail of the exploding scientific evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness and how it might exert its effects to wag the dog of the interior adventure and potential value that mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) offers. In the end, the book remains what it was intended to be from the start—a practical guide to commonsensical ways in which to cultivate mindfulness and its deeply optimistic and transformative view of human nature.

Personally, from my very first exposure to the practice of mindfulness, I was astonished and heartened by its nurturing effects in my own life. That sense has not diminished over the past forty-five-plus years. It has only deepened and grown more reliable, like an old and trustworthy friendship, sustaining in even the hardest of times, and at the same time, hugely humbling.

At the time I was working on the original version of this book, my editor suggested that it would not be wise to put the word *catastrophe* in the title. He was concerned that it might repel many potential readers right from the start. So I tried hard, very hard, to come up with a different title. I thought of and discarded dozens. *Paying Attention: The Healing Power of Mindfulness* was high on the list. It certainly conveyed for me what the book was about. But the title *Full Catastrophe Living* just kept coming back over and over again. It simply wouldn't go away.

In the end, it wound up being okay. To this day, people come up to me and tell me that this book saved their life, or the life of a relative or friend. It happened again recently, at a Mindfulness in Education conference I was attending in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then again at a mindfulness conference in Chester, England, the following week. I am always deeply moved, often beyond words, as I try to take in the full import of what people are communicating back to me about its effects on their lives. Sometimes the stories are hard to hear—very hard—the suffering that led them to this book inconceivable. And yet, that was its original purpose, to touch something very special that lies within us, our capacity for embracing the actuality of things, often when it seems utterly impossible, in ways that are healing and transforming, even in the face of the full catastrophe of the human condition. Bill Moyers, who filmed our program as part of his public television series *Healing and the Mind*, told me that when he was covering the Oakland fire of 1991, a year after the book came out, he saw a man clutching a copy under his arm after his house burned down. And somehow New Yorkers seem to get the title right away.

Such responses affirm what I sensed from the very beginning of the work in the

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Stress Reduction Clinic, watching the effect that the practice of mindfulness had on our patients—many of whom were falling through the cracks of the health care system and not getting entirely better, if at all, from the various treatments they were receiving for their chronic medical conditions.* It was clear that there is something about the cultivation of mindfulness that is healing, that is transformative, and that can serve to give our lives back to us, not in some romantic pie-in-the-sky way, but because simply by virtue of being human, to quote William James, the father of American psychology, "… we all have reservoirs of life to draw upon of which we do not dream."

Like subterranean water, or vast oil deposits, or minerals buried deep within the rock of the planet, we are talking here of interior resources deep within ourselves, innate to us as human beings, resources that can be tapped and utilized, brought to the fore—such as our lifelong capacities for learning, for growing, for healing, and for transforming ourselves. And how might such transformation come about? It comes directly out of our ability to take a larger perspective, to realize that we are bigger than who we think we are. It comes directly out of recognizing and inhabiting the full dimensionality of our being, of being who and what we *actually* are. It turns out that these innate internal resources—that we can discover for ourselves and draw upon—all rest on our capacity for embodied awareness and on our ability to *cultivate* our relationship to that awareness. We go about this discovery and cultivation through paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.

I was familiar with this domain of being from my own experiences with meditation long before there was a science of mindfulness. And if a science of mindfulness had never emerged, meditation would still be just as important to me. Such meditative practices stand on their own. They have their own compelling logic, their own empirical validity, their own wisdom which can be known only from the inside, through their actual purposeful and intentional cultivation over time in one's own life. This book and the MBSR program it describes are offered as a framework and guide for navigating often unfamiliar and sometimes difficult territory with a degree of clarity and equanimity. You will find other potentially useful books listed in the Appendix. They are offered so that your journey within this domain, should you choose to make it a lifelong one, will have rich, varied, and continual support and nurturance, and so that you can benefit from multiple perspectives on the territory, its opportunities, and its challenges. For it is truly the journey and adventure of a lifetime lived fully—or maybe I should say, *wakefully*.

Since no map completely describes a territory, ultimately it has to be *experienced* in order for us to know it, navigate within it, and benefit from its unique gifts. It has to be *inhabited* or, at the very least, visited from time to time, so that we can experience it directly, firsthand, for ourselves.

In the case of mindfulness, that direct experiencing is nothing less than the great adventure of your life unfolding moment by moment, starting now, where you already are, wherever that is, however difficult or challenging your situation. As we often say to our patients in the Stress Reduction Clinic in our very first encounter with them:

> … from our point of view, as long as you are breathing, there is more right with you than wrong with you, no matter what is wrong. Over the next eight weeks, we are going to pour energy in the form of attention into what is right with you—much of which we never notice or take for granted, or don't fully develop in ourselves—and let the rest of the medical center and your health care team take care of what is "wrong," and just see what happens.

In this spirit, mindfulness, and in particular the MBSR program described in this book, is an invitation to become more familiar with the field of your own body, mind, heart, and life by paying attention in new, more systematic and more loving ways—and thereby discover important dimensions of your own life that you may not have noticed or that, for some reason, you have ignored until now.

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Paying attention in new ways is a very healthy and potentially healing thing to do, although, as you will come to see, it isn't really about *doing* at all, or about getting somewhere else. It is much more about *being*—about allowing yourself to be as you already are, and discovering the fullness and the vast potential within such an approach. Interestingly, the eight-week MBSR program is really just a beginning, or a new beginning. The real adventure is and has always been your whole life. In a sense, MBSR is only a way-station, and hopefully also a launching platform into a new way of being in relationship with things as they are. The practice of mindfulness has the potential to become a lifelong companion and ally. And whether you know it or not when you start, by engaging in these mindfulness practices you are also joining a worldwide community of others whose hearts have been drawn to this way of being, this way of interfacing with life and with the world.

Above all, this book is about the cultivation of mindfulness *through practice*. It is an engagement we will have to undertake with huge resolve and, at the same time, with the lightest of touches. Everything in this book we will touch on is meant to support you in that engagement.

It turns out that this book and the work of the Stress Reduction Clinic that it describes—the work of MBSR—were instrumental, along with the efforts of many others, in launching a new field within medicine, health care, and psychology, and, in parallel, a growing science of mindfulness and its effects on health and well-being at every level of our biology, psychology, and social connectedness. Mindfulness is also increasingly influencing many other fields, such as education, law, business, technology, leadership, sports, economics, and even politics, policy, and government. This is an exciting and promising development because of its potential healing benefits for our world.

In 2005, there were more than a hundred papers on mindfulness and its clinical applications in the scientific and medical literature. Now, in 2013, there are more than 1,500, plus an ever-increasing number of books on the subject. There is even a new scientific journal called *Mindfulness*. Other scientific journals have followed suit, publishing special issues or special sections on mindfulness. In fact, so high is professional interest in mindfulness, its clinical applications for health and well-being, and the mechanisms by which it might be exerting its effects, that the research in this area is expanding exponentially. What is more, the scientific findings and their implications for our well-being and for our understanding of the mind-body connection as well as stress, pain, and illness are becoming more intriguing by the day.

Still, this second edition has less to do with understanding the psychological mechanisms and neural pathways through which the cultivation of mindfulness might be affecting us—interesting as they may be—than it has to do with our ability to seize hold of our lives and life circumstances, with huge tenderness and kindness toward ourselves, and find ways to honor the full dimensionality of our possibilities for living sane, satisfying, and meaningful lives. None of us, hopefully, will be cultivating mindfulness for the sake of generating colorful brain scans, even though the practice of mindfulness may very well result in beneficial changes not just to the activity in certain regions of our brain, but in the very structure of the brain and its connectivity, along with other potential biological benefits that we will touch on. Such possible benefits take care of themselves. They arise naturally through the practice of mindfulness. Our motivation for cultivating mindfulness, should you choose to pursue it in your own life, will need to be much more basic: perhaps to live a more integrated and satisfying life, to be healthier and perhaps happier and wiser. Other motivations might include the desire to face and cope more effectively and compassionately with our own suffering and that of others, with the stress, pain, and illness in our lives—what I am calling here the *full catastrophe* of the human condition[*]—and to be the fully integrated and emotionally intelligent beings that we already are but sometimes lose touch with and drift away from.

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Over the course of my own meditation practice and of doing the work I do in the world, I have come to see the cultivation of mindfulness as a radical act—a radical act of sanity, of self-compassion, and, ultimately, of love. As you will see, it involves a willingness to drop in on yourself, to live more in the present moment, to stop at times and simply *be* rather than getting caught up in endless doing while forgetting who is doing all the doing, and why. It has to do with not "mis-taking" our thoughts for the truth of things, and not being so susceptible to getting caught in emotional storms, storms that so often only compound pain and suffering, our own and that of others. This approach to life is indeed a radical act of love on every level. And part of the beauty of it, as we shall see, is that you don't have to *do* anything other than to pay attention and stay awake and aware. These domains of being are already who and what you are.

Even though the meditation practice is really about being rather than doing, it can seem as if it is a major undertaking, and it is. After all, we have to make the time to practice and that does take some doing and requires intentionality and discipline, as we shall see. We sometimes put it this way to prospective participants before we admit them to the MBSR program:

> You don't have to like the daily meditation practice schedule; you just have to do it [on the disciplined schedule you are agreeing to by signing up and then doing the best you can]. Then, at the end of the eight weeks, you can tell us whether it was a waste of time or not. But in the interim, even if your mind is telling you constantly that it is stupid or a waste of time, practice anyway, and as wholeheartedly as possible, as if your life depended on it. Because it does—in more ways than you think.

A recent headline in *Science*, one of the most prestigious and high-impact scientific journals in the world, read: "A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind." Here is the first paragraph of that paper:

> Unlike other animals, human beings spend a lot of time thinking about what is not going on around them, and contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future, or will never happen at all. Indeed, "stimulus-independent thought" or "mind wandering" appears to be the brain's default mode of operation. Although this ability is a remarkable evolutionary achievement that allows people to learn, reason, and plan, it may have an emotional cost. Many philosophical and religious traditions teach that happiness is to be found by living in the moment, and practitioners are trained to resist mind wandering and "to be here now." These traditions suggest that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. Are they right?[*]

The Harvard researchers concluded, as the headline itself suggests, that indeed, those ancient traditions, which emphasize the power of the present moment and how to cultivate it, were onto something.

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The findings of this study have interesting and potentially profound implications for all of us. It was the first large-scale study of happiness in daily life ever conducted. To pull it off, the researchers developed an iPhone app to randomly sample responses from several thousand people to questions about their happiness, what they were doing at that particular moment, and mind wandering ("Are you thinking about something other than what you are currently doing?"). It turned out that people's minds wandered nearly half the time, according to Matthew Killingsworth, one of the study's authors, and that the mind wandering, especially when it involved negative or neutral thoughts, appears to contribute to people being less happy. His overall conclusion: "No matter what people are doing, they are much less happy when their minds are wandering than when their minds are focused," and "we should pay at least as much attention to where our minds are as to what our bodies are doing—yet for most of us, the focus of our thoughts isn't part of our daily planning … we ought to [also] ask, 'What am I going to do with my mind today?' "[*]

As you will see, becoming aware of what is on our minds from moment to moment, and of how our experience is transformed when we do, is precisely what mindfulness practice, MBSR, and this book are all about. And just for the record, mindfulness is not about forcing your mind not to wander. That would just give you a big headache. It is more about being aware of when the mind is wandering and, as best you can, and as gently as you can, redirecting your attention and reconnecting with what is most salient and important for you in that moment, in the here and now of your life unfolding.

Mindfulness is a skill that can be developed through practice, just like any other skill. You could also think of it as a muscle. The muscle of mindfulness grows both stronger and more supple and flexible as you use it. And like a muscle, it grows best when working with a certain amount of resistance to challenge it and thereby help it become stronger. Our bodies, our minds, and the stress of our daily lives certainly provide us with plenty of resistance to work with in that regard. Indeed, you might say they provide just the right conditions for developing our innate capacities for knowing our own mind and shaping its ability to stay present to what is most germane and important in our lives, and, by doing so, discover new dimensions of well-being and even happiness without having to change anything.

The very fact that studies such as this one, which make use of emergent consumer technologies to sample the experience of very large numbers of people in real time, are now being conducted with scientific rigor and published in top-tier journals is itself an indicator of a new era in the science of the mind. Recognizing that what is on our mind may have a greater influence on our sense of well-being than what we are doing in particular moments has profound implications for understanding our own humanness, and for shaping, in very practical and yet very personal, even intimate ways, our understanding of what is involved in being healthy and genuinely happy. The intimacy, of course, is with ourselves. This is the essence of mindfulness and its cultivation through MBSR.

Many streams within science—from genomics and proteomics to epigenetics and neuroscience—are revealing in new and indisputable ways that the world and *our own ways of being in relationship to it* exert significant and meaningful effects at every level of our being, including on our genes and chromosomes, on our cells and tissues, on specialized regions of our brain and the neural networks that link those regions, as well as on our thoughts and emotions and our social networks. All these dynamical elements of our lives, and many more as well, are interconnected. Together they constitute who we are and define our degrees of freedom to develop to our full human capacity—always unknown and always infinitely close.

What it means for each of us to be human, coupled with the Harvard researchers' question, "What am I going to do with my mind today?" lie at the heart of mindfulness as a way of being. Only, for our purposes here, I would rephrase that question slightly, putting it in the present tense: "How is it in my mind *right now*?" We can also extend the question to ask: "How is it in my heart right now?" And "How is it in my body right now?" We don't even have to ask using thought alone, for we are capable of *feeling* how it is in the mind, in the heart, in the body—right in this moment. This feeling, this

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apprehending, is another way of knowing for us, beyond merely thought-based knowing. We have a word for it in English: *awareness*. Making use of this innate capacity for knowing, we can investigate, inquire, and apprehend what is so for us in profoundly liberating ways.

To cultivate mindfulness, requires that we pay attention and inhabit the present moment, and make good use of what we see and feel and know and learn in the process. As you will see, I define mindfulness operationally as *the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally*. Awareness is not the same as thinking. It is a complementary form of intelligence, a way of knowing that is at least as wonderful and as powerful, if not more so, than thinking. What is more, we can hold our thoughts in awareness, and that gives us an entirely new perspective on them and on their content. And just as our thinking can be refined and developed, so our access to awareness can be refined and developed, although as a rule, we get precious little schooling in how to go about it, or even that it is possible. It can be developed through exercising our capacity for attention and discernment.

Moreover, when we speak of *mindfulness*, it is important to keep in mind that we equally mean *heartfulness*. In fact, in Asian languages, the word for "mind" and the word for "heart" are usually the same. So if you are not hearing or feeling the word *heartfulness* when you encounter or use the word *mindfulness*, you are in all likelihood missing its essence. Mindfulness is not merely a concept or a good idea. It is a way of being. And its synonym, *awareness*, is a kind of knowing that is simply bigger than thought and gives us many more options for how we might choose to be in relationship to whatever arises in our minds and hearts, our bodies and our lives. It is a more-than-conceptual knowing. It is more akin to wisdom, and to the freedom a wisdom perspective provides.

As you will see further on, when it comes to the cultivation of mindfulness, paying attention to our thoughts and emotions in the present moment is only one part of a larger picture. But it is an extremely important part. Recent work from the University of California, San Francisco, by Elissa Epel, Elizabeth Blackburn (Blackburn shared in the 2009 Nobel Prize for the discovery of the antiaging enzyme telomerase), and their colleagues is showing that our thoughts and emotions, especially highly stressful thoughts that involve worrying about the future or ruminating obsessively about the past, seem to influence the rate at which we age, right down to the level of our cells and our telomeres —the specialized DNA repeat sequences at the tips of all of our chromosomes that are essential for cell division and that shorten over time as we age. They and their colleagues showed that telomere shortening is much more rapid under conditions of chronic stress. But they also showed that *how we perceive that stress* makes all the difference in how quickly our telomeres degrade and shorten. And it can make many years' worth of difference. Importantly, this means we don't have to make the sources of our stress go away. In fact, some sources of stress in our lives will not go away. Still, research is showing that we can change our attitude, and thereby our relationship to our circumstances, in ways that can make a difference in our health and well-being, and possibly to our longevity.

The evidence to date suggests that longer telomeres are associated with the difference between a rating of how present you are ("In the past week, have you had moments when you felt totally focused on or engaged in doing what you are doing at the moment?") and a rating of how much mind wandering you experienced in the past week ("Not wanting to be where you are at the moment or doing what you are doing"). This calculated difference in the ratings on these two questions, which the researchers are provisionally calling "state of awareness," is very closely related to mindfulness.

Other studies that looked at levels of the enzyme telomerase rather than at telomere length suggest that our thoughts—especially when we perceive situations as threatening to our well-being, whether they are or not—can have an influence all the way down to the

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level of this one specific molecule, measured in immune cells circulating in the blood, which apparently plays a major role in how healthy we are and even in how long we might live. The implications of this research may prompt us to wake up a bit more and to pay more attention to the stress in our lives and to how we might shape our relationship to it over the long haul with greater intentionality and wisdom.

This book is about you and your life. It is about your mind and your body and how you might actually learn to be in wiser relationship to both. It is an invitation to experiment with the practice of mindfulness and its applications in everyday life. I wrote it primarily for our patients and for people like them everywhere—in other words, it was written for *regular people*. And by regular people, I basically mean you and me, anybody and everybody. For when you boil away the narrative of our travails and accomplishments and get down to the essence of being alive and having to deal with the enormity of what life throws at us, we are all just regular people, dealing with that enormity as best we can. And I am not just referring to the hard stuff and the unwanted in our lives—I mean *everything* that arises: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And the good is enormous—to my mind, enormous enough to deal with the bad and the ugly, the difficult and the impossible—and it is not just found outwardly, but inwardly as well. The practice of mindfulness involves finding, recognizing, and making use of that in us which is already okay, already beautiful, already whole by virtue of our being human— and drawing upon it to live our lives as if it really mattered *how* we stand in relationship to what arises, whatever it is.

Over the years, I have increasingly come to realize that mindfulness is essentially about relationality—in other words, *how we are in relationship to everything*, including our own minds and bodies, our thoughts and emotions, our past and what transpired to bring us, still breathing, into this moment—and how we can learn to live our way into every aspect of life with integrity, with kindness toward ourselves and others, and with wisdom. This is not easy. In fact, it is just about the hardest work in the world. It is difficult and messy at times, just as life is difficult and messy. But stop for a moment and reflect on the alternative. What are the implications of *not* fully embracing and inhabiting the life that is yours to live in the only moment you ever get to experience it? How much loss and grief and suffering might there be in that?

Coming back to the happiness iPhone app study for a moment, the Harvard researchers had a number of things to say that are germane to us as we embark on our own adventures in mindfulness and MBSR:

> "We know that people are happiest when they're appropriately challenged —when they're trying to achieve goals that are difficult but not out of reach. Challenge and threat are not the same thing. People blossom when challenged and wither when threatened."

MBSR is exceedingly challenging. In many ways, being in the present moment with a spacious orientation toward what is happening may really be the hardest work in the world for us humans. At the same time, it is also infinitely doable, as so many people around the world have demonstrated through their participation in MBSR programs and in then continuing to keep up the practice and cultivation of mindfulness as an integral part

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of their daily lives for years afterward. As you will see, the cultivation of greater mindfulness also gives us new ways of working with what we find threatening, and of learning how to respond intelligently to such perceived threats rather than react automatically and trigger potentially unhealthy consequences.

> "If I wanted to predict your happiness, and I could know only one thing about you, I wouldn't want to know your gender, religion, health, or income. I'd want to know about your social network—about your friends and family, and the strength of your bonds with them."

The strength of those bonds is also known to be highly associated with overall health and well-being. They get deeper and stronger with mindfulness, because mindfulness, as we've seen, is all about relationality and relationship—with yourself and with others.

> "We imagine that one or two big things will have a profound effect [on our happiness]. But it looks like happiness is the sum of hundreds of small things…. The small stuff matters."

Not only does the small stuff matter. The small stuff isn't so small. It turns out to be huge. Tiny shifts in viewpoint, in attitude, and in your efforts to be present can have enormous effects on your body, on your mind, and in the world. Even the tiniest manifestation of mindfulness in any moment might give rise to an intuition or insight that could be hugely transforming. If nurtured consistently, those nascent efforts to be more mindful often grow into a new and more robust, more stable way of being.

What are some of the little things we can do to increase happiness and well-being? According to Dan Gilbert, one of the authors of the happiness study:

> "The main things are to commit to some simple behaviors— meditating, exercising, getting enough sleep—and to practice altruism…. And nurture your social connections."

If what I said earlier about meditation being a radical act of love is true, then meditation itself is also a basic altruistic gesture of kindness and acceptance—starting with but not limited to yourself!

The world has changed hugely, unthinkably, since this book first appeared, perhaps more than it has ever changed before in a twenty-five-year interval. Just think of laptops, smart phones, the Internet, Google, Facebook, Twitter, ubiquitous wireless access to information and people, the impact of this ever-expanding digital revolution on just about everything we do, the speeding up of the pace of life, and our 24/7 lifestyles, to say nothing of the huge social, economic, and political changes that have occurred globally during this period. The ever-accelerating speed at which things are changing nowadays is not likely to abate. Its effects will be increasingly felt and will be increasingly unavoidable. You could say that the revolution in science and technology (and its effects on the way we live our lives) has hardly gotten started. Certainly the stress of adjusting to it on top of everything else will only mount in the coming decades.

This book and the MBSR program it describes are meant to serve as an effective counterbalance to all the ways we get pulled out of ourselves and wind up losing sight of

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what is most important. We are apt to get so caught up in the urgency of everything we have to do, and so caught up in our heads and in what we *think* is important, that it is easy to fall into a state of chronic tension, anxiety, and perpetual distraction that continually drives our lives and easily becomes our default mode of operating, our autopilot. Our stress is further compounded when we are faced with a serious medical condition, chronic pain, or a chronic disease, whether our own or that of a loved one. Mindfulness is now more relevant than ever as an effective and dependable counterbalance to strengthen our health and well-being, and perhaps our very sanity.

For while we are now blessed with 24/7 connectivity, which allows us to be in touch with anybody anywhere at any time, we may be finding, ironically enough, that it is more difficult than ever to actually be in touch with ourselves and with the inner landscape of our own lives. What is more, we may feel that we have less time in which to be in touch with ourselves, although each of us still gets the same twenty-four hours a day. It's just that we fill up those hours with so much *doing* that we scarcely have time for *being* anymore, or even for catching our breath, literally and metaphorically—to say nothing of time for knowing what we are doing as we are doing it, and why.

The first chapter of this book is called "You Have Only Moments to Live." This is an undeniable statement of fact. It will continue to be true, for all of us, no matter how digital the world becomes. Yet so much of the time, we are out of touch with the richness of the present moment and with the fact that inhabiting this moment with greater awareness shapes the moment that follows. Thus, if we can *sustain* our awareness, it shapes the future—and the quality of our lives and relationships, often in ways we simply cannot anticipate.

The only way we have of influencing the future is to own the present, however we find it. If we inhabit this moment with full awareness, the next moment will be very different because of our very presence in this one. Then we just might find imaginative ways to fully live the life that is actually ours to live.

Can we experience joy and satisfaction as well as suffering? What about being more at home in our own skin within the maelstrom? What about tasting ease of well-being, even genuine happiness? This is what is at stake here. This is the gift of the present moment, held in awareness, non-judgmentally, with a little kindness.

Before we launch into this exploration together, you might be interested to know that a number of recent studies of MBSR have shown highly intriguing and promising results. While, as we've said, mindfulness has its own internal logic and poetry, and offers many compelling reasons for you to bring it into your life and cultivate it systematically, the scientific findings outlined below, together with those presented elsewhere in the book might provide extra incentive, if any is needed, for following the MBSR curriculum with the commitment and resolve that our patients tend to bring to it.

- Researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University have shown, using fMRI brain scanning technology, that eight weeks of MBSR training leads to thickening of a number of different regions of the brain associated with learning and memory, emotion regulation, the sense of self, and perspective taking. They also found that the amygdala, a region deep in the brain that is responsible for appraising and reacting to perceived threats, was thinner after MBSR, and that the degree of thinning was related to the degree of improvement on a perceived stress scale.[*†] These preliminary findings show that at least certain regions of the brain respond to mindfulness meditation training by reorganizing their structure, an example of the phenomenon known as *neuroplasticity*. They also show that functions vital to our well-being and quality of life, such as perspective taking, attention regulation, learning and memory, emotion regulation,

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and threat appraisal, can be positively influenced by training in MBSR.

- Researchers at the University of Toronto, also using fMRI, found that people who had completed an MBSR program showed increases in neuronal activity in a brain network associated with embodied present-moment experience, and decreases in another brain network associated with the self as experienced across time (described as the "narrative network," because it usually involves the story of who we think we are). The latter network is the one most implicated in mind wandering, the trait that, as we just saw, plays such a big role in whether we are actually happy in the present moment or not. This study also showed that MBSR could unlink these two forms of self-referencing, which usually function in tandem.[*] These findings imply that by learning to inhabit the present moment in an embodied way, people can learn how not to get so caught up in the drama of their narrative self, or, for that matter, lost in thought or mind wandering—and when they do get lost in these ways, that they can recognize what is happening and return their attention to what is most salient and important in the present moment. They also suggest that non-judgmental awareness of our wandering mind may actually be a gateway to greater happiness and well-being right in the present moment, without anything at all having to change. These findings have important implications not only for people suffering from mood disorders, including anxiety and depression, but for all of us. They also offer a significant step toward clarifying what psychologists mean when they speak of "the self." Differentiating between these two brain networks—one with an ongoing "story of me" and one without—and showing how they work together and how mindfulness can influence their relationship to each other may shed at least a bit of light on the mystery of who and what we consider ourselves to be, and how we manage to live and function as an integrated whole being, grounded at least some of the time in self-knowing
- Researchers at the University of Wisconsin have shown that training a group of healthy volunteers in MBSR reduced the effect of psychological stress (caused by having to give a talk in front of a panel of unknown and emotionally impassive people) on a laboratory-induced inflammatory process that produced blistering of the skin. This study was the first to employ a carefully constructed comparison control condition (the Health Enhancement Program, or HEP) that matched MBSR in all respects except for the mindfulness practices themselves. The groups were indistinguishable on all self-reported measures of change in psychological stress and physical symptoms following MBSR or HEP. However, blister size was uniformly smaller in the MBSR group following training than in the HEP group. What is more, those individuals who spent more time practicing mindfulness showed a greater buffering of the effect of psychological stress on inflammation (blister size) than those who practiced less.[*] The authors relate these preliminary findings of so-called neurogenic inflammation to those we reported for patients with the skin disease, psoriasis, also a neurogenic inflammatory condition. That study, described in Chapter 13, showed that people who were meditating while receiving ultraviolet light therapy for their psoriasis healed at four times the rate of those receiving the light treatment by itself without meditating.[*]
- In a study we collaborated on with this same group at the University of Wisconsin, looking at the effects of MBSR delivered in a corporate setting during working hours with healthy but stressed employees rather than with medical patients, we found that the electrical activity in certain areas of the brain known to be involved in the expression of emotions (within the prefrontal cerebral cortex) shifted in the MBSR participants in a direction (right-sided to left-sided) that suggested that the meditators were handling emotions such as anxiety and frustration more effectively—in ways that we can think of as being more emotionally intelligent—than the control subjects, who were waiting to take the MBSR program after the study was completed but being tested in the lab on the same schedule and in the same ways as the MBSR group. The right-to-left brain shift in the MBSR group

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was still apparent four months after the program ended. This study also found that when the people in the study in both groups were given a flu vaccine at the end of the eight weeks of training, the MBSR group mounted a significantly stronger antibody response in their immune system in the following weeks than did the waiting list control subjects. The MBSR group also showed a consistent relationship between the degree of right-to-left brain shift and the amount of antibody produced in response to the vaccine. No such relationship was found in the control group.[‡] This was the first study to show that people could actually change, through MBSR training, in eight short weeks, a signature ratio of brain activity between the two sides of the prefrontal cortex, characteristic of emotional style, a ratio that had been thought of as a relatively fixed and invariant "set point" in adults. It was also the first MBSR study to show immune changes.

- A study conducted at UCLA and Carnegie Mellon University showed that participating in an MBSR program actually reduced loneliness, a major risk factor for health problems, especially in the elderly. The study, conducted in adults ranging in age from fifty-five to eighty-five, showed that in addition to reducing their loneliness, the program resulted in reduced expression of genes related to inflammation, measured in immune cells sampled from blood draws. It also resulted in lowering an indicator of inflammation known as C-reactive protein. These findings are potentially important because inflammation is increasingly thought to be a core element of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and Alzheimer's disease, [*] and because many different programs designed specifically to target social isolation and decrease loneliness have failed.

In summary, mindfulness is not merely a good idea or a nice philosophy. If it is to have any value for us at all, it needs to be embodied in our everyday lives, to whatever degree we can manage without forcing or straining—in other words, with a light and gentle touch, thereby nurturing self-acceptance, kindness, and self-compassion. Mindfulness meditation is increasingly becoming an integral part of both the American and the world landscape. It is with this recognition, and in this context and spirit, that I welcome you to this revised edition of *Full Catastrophe Living.*

May your mindfulness practice grow and flower and nourish your life from moment to moment and from day to day.

JON KABAT-ZINN
MAY 28, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

Stress, Pain, and Illness: Facing the Full Catastrophe

This book is an invitation to the reader to embark upon a journey of self-development, self-discovery, learning, and healing. It is based on thirty-four years of clinical experience with more than twenty thousand people who have begun this lifelong journey via their participation in an eight-week course known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) offered through the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts. Now, as of this writing, there are over 720 mindfulness-based programs modeled on MBSR in hospitals, medical centers, and clinics across the United States and around the world. Many more thousands of people have participated in these programs worldwide.

Since the founding of the clinic in 1979, MBSR has contributed steadily to a new and growing movement within medicine, psychiatry, and psychology that might best be called *participatory medicine*. Mindfulness-based programs have become an opportunity for people to engage more fully in their own movement toward greater levels of health and well-being as a complement to whatever medical treatments they may be receiving, starting of course from where they are at the moment they decide to take up this challenge: namely, to do something for themselves that no one else on the planet can do for them.

In 1979, MBSR was a new kind of clinical program in a new branch of medicine known as behavioral medicine or, more broadly now, *mind-body and integrative medicine*. From the perspective of mind-body medicine, mental and emotional factors, the ways in which we think and behave, can have a significant effect, for better or for worse, on our physical health and our capacity to recover from illness and injury and lead lives of high quality and satisfaction, even in the face of chronic disease, chronic pain conditions, and endemically stressful lifestyles.

This perspective, radical in 1979, is now axiomatic throughout medicine. So we can simply say at this juncture that MBSR is just one more aspect of the practice of good medicine. In this day and age, that means, as we just saw, that its use and value are supported by increasingly strong scientific evidence of its efficacy. That was much less the case when this book was first published. This edition summarizes some of the salient scientific evidence in support of mindfulness-based programs and their effectiveness for stress reduction, symptom regulation, and emotional balance in a wide variety of ways, in addition to its effects on the brain and immune system. It also touches on some of the ways in which mindfulness training has become integral both to good medical practice and to effective medical education.

The people who embark on this journey of self-development, self-discovery, learning, and healing that is MBSR do so in an effort to regain control of their health and to attain at least some peace of mind. They come referred by their doctors—or, increasingly now, self-referred—for a wide range of life problems and medical problems ranging from head-aches, high blood pressure, and back pain to heart disease, cancer, AIDS, and anxiety. They are young and old and in-between. What they learn in MBSR is *the how of taking care of themselves*, not as a replacement for their medical treatment but as a vitally important complement to it.

Over the years, numerous people have made inquiries about how they can learn what our patients learn in this eight-week course, which amounts to an intensive self-directed training program in the art of conscious living. This book is above all a response to those

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inquiries. It is meant to be a practical guide for anyone, well or ill, stressed or in pain, who seeks to transcend his or her limitations and move toward greater levels of health and well-being.

MBSR is based on rigorous and systematic training in mindfulness, a form of meditation originally developed in the Buddhist traditions of Asia. Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness. It is cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment's thought to. It is a systematic approach to developing new kinds of agency, control, and wisdom in our lives, based on our inner capacity for paying attention and on the awareness, insight, and compassion that naturally arise from paying attention in specific ways.

The Stress Reduction Clinic is not a rescue service in which people are passive recipients of support and therapeutic advice. Rather, the MBSR program is a vehicle for active learning, in which people can build on the strengths that they already have and, as we noted, come to do something for themselves to improve their own health and well-being, both physical and psychological.

As we just saw, in this learning process we assume from the start that as long as you are breathing, there is more right with you than wrong with you, no matter how ill or how despairing you may be feeling in a given moment. But if you hope to mobilize your inner capacities for growth and for healing and to take charge in your life on a new level, a certain kind of effort and energy on your part will be required. The way we put it is that it can be stressful to take the stress reduction program.

I sometimes explain this by saying that there are times when you have to light one fire to put out another. There are no drugs that will make you immune to stress or to pain, or that will by themselves magically solve your life's problems or promote healing. It will take conscious effort on your part to move in a direction of healing, inner peace, and well-being. This means learning to work with the very stress and pain that are causing you to suffer.

The stress in our lives is now so great and so insidious that more and more people are making the deliberate decision to understand it better and to find imaginative and creative ways to change how they are in relationship to it. This is especially relevant to those aspects of stress that cannot be entirely controlled but can be lived with differently if we learn to bring them into at least momentary balance and integrate them into a larger strategy for living in a healthier way. People who choose to work with stress in this way realize the futility of waiting for someone else to make things better for them. Such a personal commitment is all the more important if you are suffering from a chronic illness or disability that imposes additional stress in your life on top of the usual pressures of living.

The problem of stress does not admit to simpleminded solutions or quick fixes. At root, stress is a natural part of living from which there is no more escape than from the human condition itself. Yet some people try to avoid stress by walling themselves off from life experience; others attempt to anesthetize themselves one way or another to escape it. Of course, it is only sensible to avoid undergoing unnecessary pain and hardship. Certainly we all need to distance ourselves from our troubles now and again. But if escape and avoidance become our habitual ways of dealing with our problems, the problems just multiply. They don't magically go away. What does go away or gets covered over when we tune out our problems, run away from them, or simply go numb is our power to continue to learn and grow, to change and to heal. When it comes right down to it, facing our problems is usually the only way to get past them.

There is an art to facing difficulties in ways that lead to effective solutions and to inner peace and harmony. When we are able to mobilize our inner resources to face our problems artfully, we find we are usually able to orient ourselves in such a way that we can use the pressure of the problem itself to propel us through it, just as a sailor can position a sail to make the best use of the pressure of the wind to propel the boat. You can't sail straight into the wind, and if you only know how to sail with the wind at your back, you will only go where the wind blows you. But if you know how to use the wind's energy and are patient, you can sometimes get where you want to go. You can still be in control.

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If you hope to make use of the force of your own problems to propel you in this way, you will have to be tuned in, just as the sailor is tuned in to the feel of the boat, the water, the wind, and his or her course. You will have to learn how to handle yourself under all kinds of stressful conditions, not just when the weather is sunny and the wind blowing exactly the way you want it to.

We all accept that no one controls the weather. Good sailors learn to read it carefully and respect its power. They will avoid storms if possible, but when caught in one, they know when to take down the sails, batten down the hatches, drop anchor, and ride things out, controlling what is controllable and letting go of the rest. Training, practice, and a lot of first-hand experience in all sorts of weather are required to develop such skills so that they work for you when you need them. Developing skill and flexibility in facing and effectively navigating the various "weather conditions" in your life is what we mean by the art of conscious living.

The issue of control is central to coping with problems and with stress. There are many forces at work in the world that are totally beyond our control and others that we sometimes think are beyond our control but really aren't. To a great extent, our ability to influence our circumstances depends on how we see things. Our beliefs about ourselves and about our own capabilities as well as how we see the world and the forces at play in it all affect what we will find possible. How we see things affects how much energy we have for doing things and our choices about where to channel what energy we do have.

For instance, at those times when you are feeling completely overwhelmed by the pressures in your life and you see your own efforts as ineffectual, it is very easy to fall into patterns of what is called *depressive rumination*, in which your unexamined thought processes wind up generating increasingly persistent feelings of inadequacy, depression, and helplessness. Nothing will seem controllable or even worth trying to control. On the other hand, at those times when you are seeing the world as threatening but only potentially overwhelming, then feelings of insecurity and anxiety rather than depression may predominate, causing you to worry incessantly about all the things you think threaten or might threaten your sense of control and well-being. These could be real or imagined; it hardly matters in terms of the stress you will feel and the effect it will have on your life.

Feeling threatened can easily lead to feelings of anger and hostility and from there to outright aggressive behavior, driven by deep instincts to protect your position and maintain your sense of things being under control. When things do feel "under control," we might feel content for a moment. But when they go out of control again, or even *seem* to be getting out of control, our deepest insecurities can erupt. At such times we might even act in ways that are self-destructive and hurtful to others. And we will feel anything but content and at peace within ourselves.

If you have a chronic illness or a disability that prevents you from doing what you used to be able to do, whole areas of control may go up in smoke. And if your condition causes you physical pain that has not responded well to medical treatment, the distress you might be feeling can be compounded by emotional turmoil caused by knowing that your condition seems to be beyond even your doctor's control.

What is more, our worries about control are hardly limited to our major life problems. Some of our biggest stresses actually come from our reactions to the smallest, most insignificant events when they threaten our sense of control in one way or another: the car breaking down just when you have someplace important to go, your children not listening to you for the tenth time in as many minutes, long lines at the supermarket checkout.

It is not that easy to find a single word or phrase that really captures the broad range of experiences in life that cause us distress and pain and that promote in us an underlying sense of fear, insecurity, and loss of control. If we were to make a list, it would certainly include our own vulnerability, our wounds, whatever they may be, and our mortality. It

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might also include our collective capacity for cruelty and violence, as well as the colossal levels of ignorance, greed, delusion, and deception that seem to drive us and the world much of the time. What could we possibly call the sum total of our vulnerabilities and inadequacies, our limitations and weaknesses and foibles, the illnesses and injuries and disabilities we may have to live with, the personal defeats and failures we have felt or fear in the future, the injustices and exploitations we suffer or fear, the losses of people we love and of our own bodies sooner or later? It would have to be a metaphor that would not be maudlin, something that would also convey the understanding that it is not a disaster to be alive just because we feel fear and we suffer; it would have to convey the understanding that there is joy as well as suffering, hope as well as despair, calm as well as agitation, love as well as hatred, health as well as illness.

In groping to describe that aspect of the human condition that the patients in the stress clinic and, in fact, most of us at one time or another need to come to terms with and in some way transcend, I keep coming back to one line from the movie of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *Zorba the Greek*. Zorba's young companion (Alan Bates) turns to him at a certain point and inquires, "Zorba, have you ever been married?" to which Zorba (played by the great Anthony Quinn) replies, growling (paraphrasing somewhat), "Am I not a man? Of course I've been married. Wife, house, kids … the *full catastrophe*!"

It was not meant to be a lament, nor does it mean that being married or having children is a catastrophe. Zorba's response embodies a supreme appreciation for the richness of life and the inevitability of all its dilemmas, sorrows, traumas, tragedies, and ironies. His way is to "dance" in the gale of the full catastrophe, to celebrate life, to laugh with it and at himself, even in the face of personal failure and defeat. In doing so, he is never weighed down for long, never ultimately defeated either by the world or by his own considerable folly.

Anybody who knows the book can imagine that living with Zorba must in itself have been quite "the full catastrophe" for his wife and children. As is so often the case, the public hero that others admire can leave quite a trail of private hurt in his wake. Yet ever since I first heard it, I have felt that the phrase "the full catastrophe" captures something positive about the human spirit's ability to come to grips with what is most difficult in life and to find within it room to grow in strength and wisdom. For me, facing the full catastrophe means finding and coming to terms with what is deepest and best and ultimately, what is most human within ourselves. There is not one person on the planet who does not have his or her own version of the full catastrophe.

Catastrophe here does not mean disaster. Rather, it means the poignant enormity of our life experience. It includes crisis and disaster, the unthinkable and the unacceptable, but it also includes all the little things that go wrong and that add up. The phrase reminds us that life is always in flux, that everything we think is permanent is actually only temporary and constantly changing. This includes our ideas, our opinions, our relationships, our jobs, our possessions, our creations, our bodies, everything.

In this book, we will be learning and practicing the art of embracing the full catastrophe. We will be doing this so that rather than destroying us or robbing us of our power and our hope, the storms of life will strengthen us as they teach us about living, growing, and healing in a world of flux, change, and sometimes great pain. This art will involve learning to see ourselves and the world in new ways, learning to work in new ways with our bodies and our thoughts and feelings and perceptions, and learning to laugh at things a little more, including ourselves, as we practice finding and maintaining our balance as best we can.

In our era, the full catastrophe is very much in evidence on all fronts. A brief reading of any morning newspaper will drive home the impression of an unending stream of human suffering and misery in the world, much of it inflicted by one human being or group of human beings on another. If you listen with an attentive ear to what you hear on radio or television news programs, you will find yourself assaulted daily by a steady barrage of terrible and heartbreaking images of human violence and misery, reported in the always matter-of-fact tones of polished broadcast journalism, as if the suffering and death of people in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur, Central Africa, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Libya, Egypt, Cambodia, El Salvador, Northern Ireland, Chile, Nicaragua,

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Bolivia, Ethiopia, the Philippines, in Gaza or Jerusalem or Paris or Beijing or Boston, or Tucson, Aurora, or Newtown, and whatever community is next on that list—and the list, sadly, appears endless—were just part of the prevailing climatic conditions that follow on the local weather report in the same matter-of-fact tones, without so much as a nod to the incomprehensible juxtaposition of the two. Even if we don't read or listen to or watch the news, we are never far from the full catastrophe of living. The pressures we feel at work and at home, the problems we run into and the frustrations we feel, the balancing and juggling that are required to keep our heads above water in this increasingly fast-paced world, are all part of it. We might extend Zorba's list to include not only wife or husband, house and children, but also work, paying the bills, parents, lovers, in-laws, death, loss, poverty, illness, injury, injustice, anger, guilt, fear, dishonesty, confusion, and on and on. The list of stressful situations in our lives and of our reactions to them is very long. It is also constantly changing as new and unexpected events demanding some form of response continue to surface.

No one who works in a hospital can be unmoved by the infinite variations of the full catastrophe that are encountered every day. Each person who comes to the Stress Reduction Clinic has his or her own unique version, just as do all the people who work in the hospital. Although people are referred for training in MBSR with specific medical problems, including heart disease, cancer, lung disease, hypertension, headaches, chronic pain, seizures, sleep disorders, anxiety and panic attacks, stress-related digestive problems, skin problems, voice problems, and many more, the diagnostic labels they come with mask more about them as people than they reveal. The full catastrophe lies within the complex web of their past and present experiences and relationships, their hopes and their fears, and their views of what is happening to them. Each person, without exception, has a unique story that gives meaning and coherence to that person's perception of his or her life, illness, and pain, and what he or she believes is possible.

Often these stories are heartbreaking. Not infrequently, our patients come feeling that not only their bodies but their very lives are out of control. They feel overwhelmed by fears and worries, often caused or compounded by painful family relationships and histories, and also by tremendous feelings of loss. We hear accounts of physical and emotional suffering, of frustration with the medical system; poignant stories of people overwhelmed by feelings of anger or guilt, sometimes deeply lacking in self-confidence and self-esteem from having been beaten down by circumstances, often since childhood. And many times we see people who were or are literally beaten down through physical and psychological abuse.

Many of the people who come to the Stress Reduction Clinic have not seen much improvement in their physical condition despite years of medical treatment. Many do not even know where to turn for help anymore and come to the clinic as a last resort, often skeptical about it but willing to do anything to get some relief.

Yet by the time they have been in the program for a few weeks, the majority of these people are taking major steps toward transforming their relationship to their bodies and minds and to their problems. From week to week, there is a noticeable difference in their faces and their bodies. By the end of eight weeks, when the program comes to an end, their smiles and more relaxed bodies are evident to even the most casual observer. Although they were originally referred to the clinic to learn how to relax and to cope better with their stress, it is apparent that they have learned a lot more than that. Our outcome studies over many years, as well as participants' anecdotal reports, show that they often leave with fewer and less severe physical symptoms and with greater self-confidence, optimism, and assertiveness. They are more patient with and more accepting of themselves and their limitations and disabilities. They are more confident about their ability to handle physical and emotional pain, as well as the other forces in their lives. They are also less anxious, less depressed, and less angry. They feel more in control, even in very stressful situations that previously would have sent them spinning out of control. In a word, they are handling "the full catastrophe" of their lives, the entire range of life experience, including impending death in some cases, much more skillfully.

One man who came into the program had had a heart attack that had forced him to retire from his work. For forty years he had owned a large business and lived right next

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door to it. For forty years, as he described it, he worked every day, never taking a vacation. He loved his work. He was sent to stress reduction by his cardiologist following cardiac catheterization (a procedure for diagnosing coronary artery disease), angioplasty (a procedure for expanding the coronary artery at the point of narrowing), and participation in a cardiac rehabilitation program. As I walked by him in the waiting room, I saw a look of utter despair and bewilderment on his face. He seemed on the verge of tears. He was waiting for my colleague Saki Santorelli to see him, but his sadness was so apparent that I sat down and talked with him then and there. He said, half to me and half to the air, that he no longer wanted to live, that he didn't know what he was doing in the Stress Reduction Clinic, that his life was over—there was no more meaning in it, he had no joy in anything, not even his wife and children, and no desire to do anything anymore.

After eight weeks, this same man had an unmistakable sparkle in his eyes. When I met with him following the MBSR program, he told me that work had consumed his entire life without him realizing what he had been missing, and that it had damn near killed him in the process. He went on to say that he realized that he had never told his children he loved them when they were growing up but was going to get started now, while he still had the chance. He was hopeful and enthusiastic about his life and was able for the first time to think about selling his business. He also gave me a big hug when he left, probably the first he had ever given another man.

This man still had the same degree of heart disease that he had had when he started, but at that time he saw himself as a sick man. He was a depressed cardiac patient. In eight weeks he had become healthier and happier. He was enthusiastic about living, even though he still had heart disease and plenty of problems in his life. In his own mind he had gone from seeing himself as a heart patient to seeing himself as a whole person again.

What happened in between to bring about such a transformation? We can't say with certainty. Many different factors were involved. But he did take the MBSR program during that time, and he took it seriously. It crossed my mind that he would probably drop out after the first week because, on top of everything else, he had to travel fifty miles to come to the hospital, and when a person is depressed, that is hard to do. But he stayed and did the work we challenged him to do, even though at the beginning he had no idea of how it could possibly help him.

Another man, in his early seventies, came to the clinic with severe pain in his feet. He came to the first class in a wheelchair. His wife came with him to each class and sat outside the room for the two and a half hours it lasted. That first day, he told the class that the pain was so bad he just wanted to cut off his feet. He didn't see what meditating could possibly do for him, but things were so bad that he was willing to give anything a try. Everybody felt incredibly sorry for him.

Something about that first class must have touched him, because this man showed a remarkable determination to work with his pain in the weeks that followed. He came to the second class on crutches rather than in the wheelchair. After that he used only a cane. The transition from wheelchair to crutches to cane spoke volumes to us all as we watched him from week to week. He said at the end that the pain hadn't changed much but that his attitude toward his pain had changed a lot. He said it just seemed more bearable after he started meditating and that by the end of the program, his feet were less of a problem. When the eight weeks were over, his wife confirmed that he was much happier and more active.

A young physician's story comes to mind as another example of embracing the full catastrophe. She was sent to the program for high blood pressure and extreme anxiety. She was going through a difficult period in her life, which she described as full of anger, depression, and self-destructive tendencies. She had come from another part of the country to finish her residency training. She was feeling isolated and burned out. Her doctor had urged her to give MBSR a try, saying, "What can it hurt?" But she was scornful and dubious of a program that didn't actually "do something to you." And the fact that it involved meditation just made it worse. She didn't show up for the first class on the day she was scheduled, but Kathy Brady, one of the clinic secretaries, who had been through the program herself as a patient years before, had called her to find out why, and was so nice to her and sounded so concerned on the phone, she told me later, that she

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sheepishly showed up for another class the next evening.

As part of her job, this young doctor had to fly in the medical center helicopter on a regular basis to the scene of accidents and bring back severely injured patients. She hated the helicopter. It terrified her, and she always got nauseous flying in it. But by the end of eight weeks in the Stress Reduction Clinic, she was able to fly in the helicopter without getting nauseous. She still hated it with a passion, but she was able to tolerate it and get her job done. Her blood pressure came down to the point where she took herself off her medication to see if it would stay down (doctors can get away with this), and it did. By this time she was in the last few months of her residency training and was exhausted a good deal of the time. On top of that, she continued to be emotionally hypersensitive and reactive. But now she was much more aware of her fluctuating states of body and mind. She decided to repeat the entire course because she felt she was just getting into it when it ended. She did, and continued to keep up her meditation practice for many years afterward.

This doctor's experience in the Stress Reduction Clinic also led her to a newfound respect for patients in general and for her own patients in particular. During the program, she was among medical patients every week in class, not in her usual role as "the doctor" but as just another person with her own problems. She did the same things they were doing in the course week by week. She listened to them talking about their experiences with the meditation practices, and she watched them change over the weeks. She said she was astonished to see how much some people had suffered and what they were able to do for themselves with a little encouragement and training. She also came to respect the value of meditation as her view that people could only be helped by *doing something to them* yielded to what she was seeing. In fact, she came to see that she was no different from the other people in the class and that what she could do, they could do, and what they could do, she could also do.

Transformations similar to the ones these three people experienced occur frequently in the Stress Reduction Clinic. They are usually major turning points in the lives of our patients because they expand the range of what they thought was possible for them.

Usually people leave the program thanking us for their improvement. But actually the progress they make is entirely due to their own efforts. What they are really thanking us for is the opportunity to get in touch with their own inner strength and resources, and also for believing in them and not giving up on them, and for giving them the tools for making such transformations possible.

We take pleasure in pointing out to them that to get through the program, they had to not give up on themselves. They had to be willing to face the full catastrophe of their own lives, in both pleasant and unpleasant circumstances, when things were going the way they wanted and when they were not, when they felt things were under control and when they didn't, and to use these very experiences and their own thoughts and feelings as the raw materials for healing themselves. When they began, it was with thoughts that the program could or might or probably wouldn't do something for them. But what they found was that they could do something very important for themselves that no one else on the planet could possibly do for them.

In the above examples, each person took up the challenge we extended to them to live life as if each moment was important, as if each moment counted and could be worked with, even if it was a moment of pain, sadness, despair, or fear. This "work" involves above all the regular, disciplined cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness, or *mindfulness*—the complete "owning" and "inhabiting" of each moment of your experience, good, bad, or ugly. This is the essence of full catastrophe living.

All of us have the capacity to be mindful. All it involves is cultivating our ability to pay attention in the present moment as we suspend our judging, or at least, as we become aware of how much judging is usually going on within us. Cultivating mindfulness plays a

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central role in the changes that the people who come to the Stress Reduction Clinic experience. One way to think of this process of transformation is to think of mindfulness as a lens, taking the scattered and reactive energies of your mind and focusing them into a coherent source of energy for living, for problem solving, and for healing.

We routinely and unknowingly waste enormous amounts of energy in reacting automatically and unconsciously to the outside world and to our own inner experiences. Cultivating mindfulness means learning to tap into and focus our own wasted energies. In doing so, we learn to calm down enough to enter and dwell in extended moments of deep well-being and relaxation, of feeling whole and wholly integrated as a person. This tasting and inhabiting of one's own wholeness nourishes and restores both the body and the mind. At the same time, it makes it easier for us to see with greater clarity the way we actually live, and therefore how to make changes to enhance our health and the quality of our life. In addition, it helps us to channel our energy more effectively in stressful situations, or when we are feeling threatened or helpless. This energy comes from inside us, and is therefore always available to us to be put to use wisely, especially if we cultivate it through training and personal practice.

Cultivating mindfulness can lead to the discovery of deep realms of well-being, calmness, clarity, and insight within yourself. It is as if you were to come upon a new territory, previously unknown to you or only vaguely suspected, which contains a veritable wellspring of positive energy for self-understanding and healing. Moreover, it is easy to familiarize yourself with this territory and learn to inhabit it more frequently. The path to it in any moment lies no further than your own body and mind and your own breathing. This domain of pure being, of wakefulness, is always accessible to you. It is always here, independent of your problems. Whether you are facing heart disease or cancer or pain or just a very stressful life, its energies can be of great value to you.

The systematic cultivation of mindfulness has been called the heart of Buddhist meditation. It has flourished over the past 2, 600 years in both monastic and secular settings in many Asian countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the practice of this kind of meditation became much more wide-spread in the world. This was due in part to the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the decades of war in Southeast Asia, both of which made exiles of many Buddhist monks and teachers; in part to young Westerners who went to Asia to learn and practice meditation in monasteries and then became teachers in the West; and in part to Zen masters and other meditation teachers who came to the West to visit and teach, drawn by the remarkable level of interest in Western countries in meditative practices. This trend has only gotten stronger in the past thirty years.

Although, until recently, mindfulness meditation was most commonly taught and practiced within the context of Buddhism, its essence is and always has been universal. In this era, it is increasingly finding its way into the mainstream of society globally, now at a virtually exponential rate. Given the state of the world, that is a very good thing. You might say the world is starving for it, both literally and metaphorically. We will explore this subject further in Chapter 32, when we examine what we are calling *world stress.*

Mindfulness is basically just a particular way of paying attention and the awareness that arises through paying attention in that way. It is a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of self-inquiry and self-understanding. For this reason it can be learned and practiced, as is done in mindfulness-based programs throughout the world, without appealing to Asian culture or Buddhist authority to enrich it or authenticate it. Mindfulness stands on its own as a powerful vehicle for self-understanding and healing. In fact, one of the major strengths of MBSR and of all other specialized mindfulness-based programs such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is that they are not dependent on any belief system or ideology. Their potential benefits are therefore accessible for anyone to test for himself or herself. Yet it is no accident that mindfulness comes out of Buddhism, which has as its overriding concerns the relief of suffering and

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the dispelling of illusions. We will touch on the ramifications of this conjunction in the Afterword.

This book is designed to give the reader full access to the MBSR training program our patients engage in at the Stress Reduction Clinic. Above all, it is a manual for helping you to develop your own personal meditation practice and for learning how to use mindfulness to promote improved health and healing in your own life. Part I, "The Practice of Mindfulness," describes what takes place in the MBSR program and the experiences of people who have participated in it. It guides you through the major meditation practices we use in the clinic and gives explicit and easily followed directions for how to make practical and daily use of them, as well as how to integrate mindfulness into your everyday life activities. It also provides a detailed eight-week practice schedule so that, if you choose, you can follow the exact MBSR curriculum that our patients undergo, while you are reading other sections of the book to amplify and deepen your experience with the practice of mindfulness itself. This is the way we recommend you proceed.

Part II, "The Paradigm," provides a simple but revealing look at some of the latest research findings in medicine, psychology, and neuroscience as background for understanding how the practice of mindfulness is related to physical and mental health. This section develops an overall "philosophy of health" based on the notions of "wholeness" and "interconnectedness" and on what science and medicine are learning about the relationship of the mind to health and the process of healing.

The section called simply "Stress," Part III, discusses what stress is and how our awareness and understanding of it can help us to recognize it and deal with it more appropriately in this era that is so defined by the challenges of just getting through the day in our ever-more complex and fast-moving society. It includes a model for understanding the value of bringing moment-to-moment awareness to stressful situations in order to navigate and cope with them more effectively, minimizing the toll in wear and tear they exact from us and optimizing as best we can our well-being and health.

Part IV, "The Applications," provides detailed information and guidance for utilizing mindfulness in a wide range of specific areas that cause people significant distress, including medical symptoms, physical and emotional pain, anxiety and panic, time pressures, relationships, work, food, and events in the greater world.

The last section, "The Way of Awareness," Part V, will give you practical suggestions for maintaining momentum in the meditation practice once you understand the basics and have begun practicing, as well as for bringing mindfulness effectively into all aspects of your everyday life. It also contains information about how to find groups of people to practice with, as well as hospitals and community-based institutions that have programs nurturing meditative awareness. The Appendix contains several awareness calendars described in the text, an extensive reading list to support your continued practice and understanding of mindfulness, as well as a short listing of useful resources and websites for the same purpose.

If you wish to transform your relationship to stress, pain, and chronic illness by engaging fully in the MBSR program—whether over a period of eight weeks or on another schedule of your own devising—I encourage you to go through the book in concert with the Series 1 guided mindfulness meditation practice CDs (www.mindfulnesscds.com) that the patients in my classes use when practicing the formal meditations described here. Almost everybody finds it easier, when embarking for the first time on a daily meditation practice, to listen to an instructor-guided audio program and let it "carry them along" in the early stages, until they get the hang of it from the inside, rather than attempting to follow instructions from a book, however clear and detailed they may be. The CDs are an essential element of the MBSR curriculum and learning curve. They significantly increase your chances of giving the formal meditation practices a fair try—which basically means sticking with them on a daily basis over eight weeks—and

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your chances of connecting with the essence of mindfulness itself. Of course, once you understand what is involved, you can always practice on your own without my guidance whenever you feel like it, as many of our patients do. I hear from many people who continue to use these CDs regularly long after they have completed the eight-week MBSR curriculum, and I am invariably profoundly moved by their ongoing commitment to practice and by their stories of how the various practices have touched and transformed their lives.

But whether you use the CDs (also available as downloads and iPhone apps) or not, anybody who is interested in experiencing the kind of major shifts seen in the majority of participants in the Stress Reduction Clinic at UMass or in MBSR, wherever it is well taught, should understand that the medical patients and others who participate in the program make a strong commitment *to themselves* to engage in the formal mindfulness practices as described in this book on virtually a daily basis. Just making the time to engage in the MBSR curriculum in this way involves a major lifestyle change from the very outset. Our patients are required to practice with the CDs for forty-five minutes a day, six days a week, over the eight weeks. From follow-up studies, we know that most of them continue to practice on their own long after the eight weeks are over. For many, mindfulness rapidly becomes a way of being—and a way of life.

As you embark on your own journey of self-development and discovery of your inner resources for healing and for working with the full catastrophe, all you need to remember is to suspend judgment for the time being—including any strong attachment you might have to a desired outcome, however worthy and desirable and important it may be—and simply commit yourself to practice in a disciplined way, observing for yourself what is happening as you go along. What you will be learning will be coming primarily from inside you, from your own experience as your life unfolds from moment to moment, rather than from some external authority, teacher, or belief system. Our philosophy is that you are the world expert on your life, your body, and your mind, or at least you are in the best position to become that expert if you observe carefully. Part of the adventure of meditation is to use yourself as a laboratory to find out who you are and what you are capable of. As the legendary New York Yankees catcher Yogi Berra once put it in his unique and charmingly quirky way, “You can observe a lot by just watching.”

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I

The Practice of Mindfulness: Paying Attention

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1

You Have Only Moments to Live

Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had to do it over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day.

—NADINE STAIR, EIGHTY-FIVE YEARS OLD, LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

As I look around at the thirty or so people in this new class in the Stress Reduction Clinic, I marvel at what we are coming to engage in together. I assume they all must be wondering to some extent what the hell they are doing here in this room full of total strangers this morning. I see Edward's bright and kind face and ponder what he must be carrying around daily. He is a thirty-four-year-old insurance executive with AIDS. I see Peter, a forty-seven-year-old businessman who had a heart attack eighteen months ago and is here to learn how to take it easy so that he doesn't have another one. Next to Peter is Beverly, bright, cheerful, and talkative; sitting next to her is her husband. At forty-two Beverly's life changed radically when she had a cerebral aneurysm that burst, leaving her uncertain about how much she is her real self. Then there is Marge, forty-four years old, referred from the pain clinic. She had been an oncology nurse until she injured her back and both knees several years ago trying to prevent a patient from falling. Now she is in so much pain that she can't work and walks only with great effort, using a cane. She has already had surgery on one knee and now, on top of everything else, faces surgery for a mass in her abdomen. The doctors won't know for sure what it is until they operate. Her injury knocked her for a loop from which she has yet to recover. She feels wound up like a spring and has been exploding at the littlest things.

Next to Marge is Arthur, fifty-six, a policeman who suffers from severe migraine headaches and frequent panic attacks, and sitting next to him is Margaret, seventy-five, a retired schoolteacher who is having trouble sleeping. A French Canadian truck driver named Phil is on the other side of her. Phil was also referred here by the pain clinic. He injured himself lifting a pallet and is out on disability from chronic low-back pain. He will not be able to drive a truck anymore and needs to learn how to handle this pain better and figure out what other type of work he will be able to do to support his family, which includes four small children.

Next to Phil is Roger, a thirty-year-old carpenter who injured his back at work and is also in pain. According to his wife, he has been abusing pain medications for several years. She is enrolled in another class. She makes no bones about Roger being the major source of her stress. She is so fed up with him that she is certain they are going to get divorced. I wonder, as I look over at him, where his life will carry him and whether he will be able to do what is necessary to get his life on an even keel.

Hector sits facing me across the room. He wrestled professionally for years in Puerto Rico and has come here today because he has a hard time controlling his temper and is feeling the consequences of it in the form of violent outbursts and chest pains. His large frame is an imposing presence in the room.

Their doctors have sent them all here for stress reduction, and we have invited them to come together one morning a week at the medical center for the next eight weeks in

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this class. *For what, really?* I find myself asking as I look around the room. They don't know it as well as I do yet, but the level of collective suffering in the room this morning is immense. It is truly a gathering of people suffering not only physically but emotionally as well from the full catastrophe of their lives.

In a moment of wonder before the class gets under way, I marvel at our chutzpah in inviting all these people to embark on this journey. I find myself thinking, *What can we possibly do for the people gathered here this morning and for the 120 others who are beginning the MBSR program in different classes this week— young people and older people; single, married, or divorced; people who are working, others who are retired or on disability; people on Medicaid and people who are well off? How much can we influence the course of even one person's life? What can we possibly do for all these people in eight short weeks?*

The interesting thing about this work is that we don't really *do* anything for them. If we tried, I think, we would fail miserably. Instead we invite them to do something radically new for themselves, namely to experiment with living intentionally from moment to moment. When I was talking to a reporter, she said, "Oh, you mean to live for the moment." I said, "No, it isn't that. That has a hedonistic ring to it. I mean to live *in* the moment."

The work that goes on in the Stress Reduction Clinic is deceptively simple, so much so that it is difficult to grasp what it is really about unless you become involved in it personally. We start with where people are in their lives right now, no matter where that is. We are willing to work with them if they are ready and willing to engage in a certain kind of work with and *on* themselves. And we never give up on anyone, even if they get discouraged, have setbacks, or are "failing" in their own eyes. We see each moment as a new beginning, a new opportunity to start over, to tune in, to reconnect.

In some ways our job is hardly more than giving people permission to live their moments fully and completely and providing them with some tools for going about it systematically. We introduce them to ways that they can use to listen to their own bodies and minds and to begin trusting their own experience more. What we really offer people is a sense that there is a way of being, a way of looking at problems, a way of coming to terms with the full catastrophe that can make life more joyful and rich than it otherwise might be, and a sense also of being somehow more in control. We call this way of being *the way of awareness* or *the way of mindfulness.* The people gathered here this morning are about to encounter this new way of being and seeing as they embark on this journey in the Stress Reduction Clinic, this journey of mindfulness-based stress reduction. We will have occasion to meet them again and others as well along the way as we now embark upon our own exploration of mindfulness and healing.

If you were to look in on one of our classes at the hospital, the chances are you would find us with our eyes closed, sitting quietly or lying motionless on the floor. This can go on for anywhere from ten minutes to forty-five minutes at a stretch.

To the outside observer it might look strange, if not a little crazy. It looks like nothing is going on. And in a way nothing is. But it is a very rich and complex nothing. These people you would be looking in on are not just passing time daydreaming or sleeping. You cannot see what they are doing, but they are working hard. They are practicing *non-doing.* They are actively tuning in to each moment in an effort to remain awake and aware from one moment to the next. They are practicing mindfulness.

Another way to say it is that they are "practicing being." For once, they are purposefully stopping all the doing in their lives and relaxing into the present without trying to fill it up with anything. They are purposefully allowing body and mind to come to rest in the moment, no matter what is on their mind or how their body feels. They are tuning in to the basic experiences of living. They are simply allowing themselves to be in the moment with things exactly as they are, without trying to change anything.

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In order to be admitted to the stress clinic in the first place, each person had to agree to make a major personal commitment to spend some time every day practicing this "just being." The basic idea is to create an island of being in the sea of constant doing in which our lives are usually immersed, a time in which we allow all the doing to stop.

Learning how to suspend all your doing and shift over to *a being mode*, how to make time for yourself, how to slow down and nurture calmness and self-acceptance in yourself, learning to observe what your mind is up to from moment to moment, how to watch your thoughts and how to let go of them without getting caught up and driven by them, how to make room for new ways of seeing old problems and for perceiving the interconnectedness of things—these are some of the lessons of mindfulness. This kind of learning involves turning toward and settling into moments of being, and simply cultivating awareness.

The more systematically and regularly you practice, the more the power of mindfulness will grow and the more it will work for you. This book is meant to serve as a guide in this process, just as the weekly classes are a guide to the people who come to the Stress Reduction Clinic at the urging of their doctors.

As you know, a map is not the territory it portrays. In the same way, you should not mistake reading this book for the actual journey. That journey you have to live yourself, by cultivating mindfulness in your own life.

If you think about it for a moment, how could it be otherwise? Who could possibly do this kind of work for you? Your doctor? Your relatives or your friends? No matter how much other people want to help you and can help you in your efforts to move toward greater levels of health and well-being, the basic effort still has to come from you. After all, no one is living your life for you, and no one's care for you could or should replace the care you can give to yourself.

In this regard, cultivating mindfulness is not unlike the process of eating. It would be absurd to propose that someone else eat for you. And when you go to a restaurant, you don't eat the menu, mistaking it for the meal, nor are you nourished by listening to the waiter describe the food. You have to actually eat the food for it to nourish you. In the same way, you have to actually *practice* mindfulness, by which I mean cultivate it systematically in your own life, in order to reap its benefits and come to understand why it is so valuable.

Even if you send away for the CDs or download the guided meditations to support your efforts in practicing, you will still have to use them. CDs sit on shelves and gather dust very nicely. Audio files go unlistened to for ages. Nor is there any magic in them. Just listening to them from time to time will not help you much, although it can be relaxing. To benefit deeply from this work, you will have to *do* the CDs, as we say to our patients, not just listen to them. If there is magic anywhere, it is in you, not in any CD or in a particular practice.

Until recently, the very word *meditation* tended to evoke raised eyebrows and thoughts about mysticism and hocus-pocus in many people. In part, that was because people did not understand that meditation is really about paying attention. This is now more widely known. And since paying attention is something that everybody does, at least occasionally, meditation is not as foreign or irrelevant to our life experience as we might once have thought.

However, when we start paying attention a little more closely to the way our own mind actually works, as we do when we meditate, we are likely to find that much of the time our mind is more in the past or the future than it is in the present. This is the endemic mind wandering we all experience, which was investigated in the Harvard happiness iPhone app study. As a consequence, in any moment we may be only partially aware of what is actually occurring in the present. We can miss many of our moments because we are not fully here for them. This is true not just while we are meditating. Unawareness can dominate the mind in any moment; consequently, it can affect everything we do. We may find that much of the time we are really on automatic pilot, functioning mechanically without being fully aware of what we are doing or experiencing. It's as if we are not really at home a lot of the time or, put another way, only half awake.

You might verify for yourself whether this description applies to your mind the next

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time you are driving a car. It is a very common experience to drive someplace and have little or no awareness of what you saw along the way. You may have been on automatic pilot for much of the drive, not really fully there but there enough, one would hope, to drive safely and uneventfully.

Even if you deliberately try to concentrate on a particular task, whether it's driving or something else, you might find it difficult to be in the present for very long. Ordinarily our attention is easily distracted. The mind tends to wander. It drifts into thought and reverie.

Our thoughts are so overpowering, particularly in times of crisis or emotional upheaval, that they easily cloud our awareness of the present. Even in relatively relaxed moments they can carry our senses along with them whenever they take off, as when driving, we find ourselves looking intently at something we have passed long after we should have brought our attention back to the road in front of us. For that moment, we were not actually driving. We were on autopilot. The thinking mind was "captured" by a sense impression—a sight, a sound, something that attracted its attention—and was pulled away. It was back with the cow, or the tow truck, or whatever it was that caught our attention. As a consequence, at that moment, and for however long our attention was captured, we were literally "lost" in our thoughts and unaware of other sense impressions.

Is it not true that the same thing happens most of the time, whatever you are doing? Try observing how easily your awareness is carried away from the present moment by your thoughts, no matter where you find yourself, no matter what the circumstances. Notice how much of the time during the day you find yourself thinking about the past or about the future. You may be shocked at the result.

You can experience this pull of the thinking mind for yourself right now if you perform the following experiment. Close your eyes, sit so that your back is straight but not stiff, and become aware of your breathing. Don't try to control your breathing. Just let it happen and be aware of it, feeling how it feels, witnessing it as it flows in and out. Try being with your breath in this way for three minutes.

If, at some point, you think that it is foolish or boring to just sit here and watch your breath go in and out, note to yourself that this is just a thought, a judgment that your mind is creating. Then simply let go of it and bring your attention back to your breathing. If the feeling is very strong, try the following additional experiment, which we sometimes suggest to our patients who feel similarly bored with watching their breathing: take the thumb and first finger of either hand, clamp them tightly over your nose, keep your mouth closed, and notice how long it takes before your breathing becomes very interesting to you!

When you have completed three minutes of watching your breath go in and out, reflect on how you felt during this time and how much or how little your mind wandered away from your breathing. What do you think would have happened if you had continued for five or ten minutes, or for half an hour, or an hour?

For most of us, our minds tend to wander a lot and to jump quite rapidly from one thing to another. This makes it difficult to keep our attention focused on our breathing for any length of time unless we train ourselves to stabilize and calm our own mind. This little three-minute experiment can give you a taste of what meditation is. It is the process of observing body and mind intentionally, of letting your experiences unfold from moment to moment and accepting them *as they are*. It does not involve rejecting your thoughts, trying to clamp down on them or suppress them, or trying to regulate anything at all other than the focus and direction of your attention.

Yet it would be incorrect to think of meditation as a passive process. It takes a good deal of energy and effort to regulate your attention and to remain genuinely calm and non-reactive. But, paradoxically, mindfulness does not involve trying to get anywhere or feel anything special. Rather, it involves allowing yourself to be where you already are, to become more familiar with your actual experience moment by moment. So if you didn't feel particularly relaxed in these three minutes or if the thought of doing it for half an hour is inconceivable to you, you don't need to worry. The relaxation, the sense of being more at home in your own skin, comes by itself with continued practice. The point of this three-minute exercise was simply to try to pay attention to your breathing and to note what

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actually happened when you did. It was not to become more relaxed. The relaxation, the equanimity, the well-being emerge all by themselves when we attend wholeheartedly in this way.

If you start paying attention to where your mind is from moment to moment throughout the day, as the researchers in the iPhone app study suggested might be critically important for our quality of life, chances are you will find that considerable amounts of your time and energy are expended in clinging to memories, being absorbed in reverie, and regretting things that have already happened and are over. And you will probably find that as much or more energy is expended in anticipating, planning, worrying, and fantasizing about the future and what you want to happen or don't want to happen.

Because of this inner busyness, which is going on almost all the time, we are liable either to miss a lot of the texture of our life experience or to discount its value and meaning. For example, let's say you are not too preoccupied to look at a sunset, and are struck by the play of light and color among the clouds and in the sky. For that moment, you are just there with it, taking it in, really seeing it. Then thinking comes in and perhaps you find yourself saying something to a companion, either about the sunset and how beautiful it is or about something else that it reminded you of. In speaking, you disturb the direct experiencing of the moment. You have been drawn away from the sun and sky and the light. You have been captured by your own thought and by your impulse to voice it. Your comment breaks the silence. Or even if you don't say anything, the thought or memory that came up had already carried you away to some degree from the actual sunset in that moment. So now you are really enjoying the sunset in your head rather than the sunset that is actually happening. You may be *thinking* you are enjoying the sunset itself, but actually you are only experiencing it through the veil of your embellishments with past sunsets and other memories and ideas that this one triggered in you. All this may happen completely below the level of your conscious awareness. What is more, this entire episode might last only a moment or so. It will fade rapidly as one thing leads to the next.

Much of the time you may get away with being only partially conscious like this. At least it seems that way. But what you are missing is more important than you realize. If you are only partially conscious over a period of years, if you habitually run through your moments without being fully in them, you may miss some of the most precious experiences of your life, such as connecting with the people you love, or with sunsets or the crisp morning air.

Why? Because you were "too busy" and your mind too encumbered with what you *thought* was important in that moment to take the time to stop, to listen, to notice things. Perhaps you were going too fast to slow down, too fast to know the importance of making eye contact, of touching, of being in your body. When we are functioning in this mode, we may eat without really tasting, see without really seeing, hear without really hearing, touch without really feeling, and talk without really knowing what we are saying. And, of course, in the case of driving, if your mind or somebody else's happens to check out at the wrong moment, the immediate consequences can be dramatic and very unfortunate.

So the value of cultivating mindfulness is not just a matter of getting more out of sunsets. When unawareness dominates the mind, all our decisions and actions are affected by it. Unawareness can keep us from being in touch with our own body, its signals and messages. This in turn can create many physical problems for us, problems we don't even know we are generating ourselves. And living in a chronic state of unawareness can cause us to miss much of what is most beautiful and meaningful in our lives—and, as a consequence, be significantly less happy than we might be otherwise. What is more, as in the driving example, or in the case of alcohol and drug abuse or habits such as workaholism, our tendency toward unawareness may also be lethal, either rapidly or slowly.

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When you begin paying attention to what your mind is doing, you will probably find that there is a great deal of mental and emotional activity going on beneath the surface. These incessant thoughts and feelings can drain a lot of your energy. They can be obstacles to experiencing even brief moments of stillness and contentment.

When the mind is dominated by dissatisfaction and unawareness, which is much more often than most of us are willing to admit, it is difficult to feel calm or relaxed. Instead, we are likely to feel fragmented and driven. We will think this *and* that, we want this *and* that. Often the *this* and the *that* are in conflict. This mind state can severely affect our ability to do anything or even to see situations clearly. In such moments we may not know *what* we are thinking, feeling, or doing. What is worse, we probably won't know that we don't know. We may think we know what we are thinking and feeling and doing and what is happening. But it is an incomplete knowing at best. In reality we are being driven by our likes and dislikes, totally unaware of the tyranny of our own thoughts and the self-destructive behaviors they often result in.

Socrates was famous in Athens for saying, "Know thyself." It is said that one of his students said to him: "Socrates, you go around saying 'Know thyself,' but do you know yourself?" Socrates was said to have replied, "No, but I understand something about this not knowing."

As you embark upon your practice of mindfulness meditation, you will come to know something for yourself about your own not knowing. It is not that mindfulness is the "answer" to all life's problems. Rather, it is that all life's problems can be seen more clearly through the lens of a clear mind. Just being aware of the mind that thinks it knows all the time is a major step toward learning how to see through your opinions and perceive things as they actually are.

One very important domain of our lives and experience that we tend to miss, ignore, abuse, or lose control of as a result of being in the automatic pilot mode is our own body. We may be barely in touch with our body, unaware of how it is feeling most of the time. As a consequence, we can be insensitive to how our body is being affected by the environment, by our actions, and even by our thoughts and emotions. If we are unaware of these connections, we might easily feel that our body is out of control and we will have no idea why. As you will see in Chapter 21, physical symptoms are messages the body is giving us that allow us to know how it is doing and what its needs are. When we are more in touch with our body as a result of paying attention to it systematically, we will be far more attuned to what it is telling us and better equipped to respond appropriately. Learning to listen to your body is vital to improving your health and the quality of your life.

Even something as simple as relaxation can be frustratingly elusive if you are unaware of your body. The stress of daily living often produces tension that tends to localize in particular muscle groups, such as the shoulders, the jaw, and the forehead. In order to release this tension, you first have to know it is there. You have to feel it. Then you have to know how to shut off the automatic pilot and how to take over the controls of your own body and mind. As we will see further on, this involves zeroing in on your body with a focused mind, experiencing the sensations coming from within the muscles themselves, and sending them messages to let the tension dissolve and release. This is something that can be done at the time the tension is accumulating if you are mindful enough to sense it. There is no need to wait until it has built to the point that your body feels like a two-by-four. If you let it go that long, the tension will have become so ingrained that you will have probably forgotten what it feels like to be relaxed, and you may have little hope of ever feeling relaxed again.

One Vietnam war veteran who came to the clinic years ago with back pain put the dilemma in a nutshell. While testing his range of motion and flexibility, I noticed that he was very stiff and his legs were as hard as rocks, even when I asked him to relax them.

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They had been that way ever since he was wounded when he stepped on a booby trap in Vietnam. When his doctor told him that he needed to relax, he had responded, “Doc, telling me to relax is about as useful as telling me to be a surgeon.”

The point is, it didn’t do this man any good to be told to relax. He knew he needed to relax more. But he had to learn how to relax. He had to experience the process of letting go within his own body and mind. Once he started meditating, he was able to *learn* to relax, and his leg muscles eventually regained a healthy tone.

When something goes wrong with our body or our mind, we have the natural expectation that medicine can make it right, and often it can. But as we will see further on, our active collaboration is essential in almost all forms of medical treatment. It is particularly vital in the case of chronic diseases or conditions for which medicine has no cures. In such cases the quality of your life may greatly depend on your ability to know your own body and mind well enough to work at optimizing your own health within the bounds, always unknown, of what may be possible. Whatever your age, taking responsibility for learning more about your body by listening to it carefully and by cultivating your inner resources for healing and for maintaining health is the best way to hold up your end of this collaboration with your doctors and with medicine. This is where the meditation practice comes in. It gives power and substance to such efforts. It catalyzes the work of healing.

The first introduction to the meditation practice in MBSR always comes as a surprise to our patients. More often than not, people come with the idea that meditation means doing something unusual, something mystical and out of the ordinary, or, at the very least, something relaxing. To relieve them of these expectations right off the bat, we give everybody three raisins and we eat them one at a time, paying attention to what we are actually doing and experiencing from moment to moment. You might wish to try it yourself after you see how we go about it.

First we bring our attention to seeing one of the raisins, observing it carefully as if we had never seen one before. We feel its texture between our fingers and notice its colors and surfaces. We are also aware of any thoughts we might be having about raisins or food in general. We note any thoughts and feelings of liking or disliking raisins if they come up while we are looking at it. We then smell it for a while, and finally, with awareness, we bring it to our lips, being aware of the arm moving the hand to position it correctly, and of salivating as the mind and body anticipate eating. The process continues as we take it into our mouth and chew it slowly, experiencing the actual taste of one raisin. And when we feel ready to swallow, we watch the impulse to swallow as it comes up, so that even that is experienced consciously. We even imagine, or “sense,” that now our bodies are one raisin heavier. Then we do it again with another raisin, this time without any verbal guidance, in other words, in silence. And then with the third.

The response to this exercise is invariably positive, even among the people who don’t like raisins. People report that it is satisfying to eat this way for a change, that they actually experienced what a raisin tasted like for the first time that they could remember, and that even one raisin could be satisfying. Often someone makes the connection that if we ate like that all the time, we would eat less and have more pleasant and satisfying experiences of food. Some people usually comment that they caught themselves automatically moving to eat the other raisins before finishing the one that was in their mouth, and recognized in that moment that this is the way they normally eat.

Since many of us use food for emotional comfort, especially when we feel anxious or depressed or even just bored, this little exercise in slowing things down and paying careful attention to what we are doing illustrates how powerful, uncontrolled, and unhelpful many of our impulses are when it comes to food, and how simple and satisfying it can be and how much more in control we can feel when we bring awareness to what we are actually doing while we are doing it.

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can be very helpful in getting the most out of the process of meditation. Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment of why you are practicing in the first place. Keeping particular attitudes in mind is actually part of the training itself, a way of directing and channeling your energies so that they can be most effectively brought to bear in the work of growing and healing.

Seven attitudinal factors constitute the major pillars of mindfulness practice as we teach it in MBSR. They are non-judging, patience, a beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. These attitudes are to be cultivated consciously when you practice. They are not independent of each other. Each one relies on and influences the degree to which you are able to cultivate the others. Working on any one will rapidly lead you to the others. Since together they constitute the foundation upon which you will be able to build a strong meditation practice of your own, we are introducing them before you encounter the meditation practices themselves so that you can become familiar with these attitudes from the very beginning. Once you are engaged in the practice itself, this chapter will merit rereading to remind you of ways you might continue to fertilize this attitudinal soil so that your mindfulness practice will flourish.

THE ATTITUDINAL FOUNDATION OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

1. Non-judging

Mindfulness is cultivated by paying close attention to your moment-to-moment experience while, as best you can, not getting caught up in your ideas and opinions, likes and dislikes. This orientation allows us to see things more as they may actually be rather than through our own distorted lenses and agendas. To adopt such a stance toward your own experience requires that you become aware of the constant stream of judging and reacting to the inner and outer experiences that we are all normally caught up in, and learn to step back from it. When we begin practicing paying attention to the activity of our own mind, it is common to discover and to be surprised, even astonished, by the fact that we are constantly generating judgments about our experience. Almost everything we see is labeled and categorized by the mind. We react to everything we experience in terms of what we think its value is to us. Some things, people, and events are judged as "good" because they make us feel good for some reason. Others are equally quickly condemned as "bad" because they make us feel bad. The rest is categorized as "neutral" because we don't think it has much relevance. Neutral things, people, and events are almost completely tuned out of our consciousness. We usually find them the most boring to give attention to.

This habit of categorizing and judging our experience locks us into automatic reactions that we are not even aware of and that often have no objective basis at all. These judgments tend to dominate our minds, making it difficult for us ever to find any peace within ourselves, or to develop any discernment as to what may actually be going on, inwardly or outwardly. It's as if the mind were a yo-yo, going up and down on the string of our own judging thoughts all day long. If you doubt this description of your mind, just observe how much you are preoccupied with liking and disliking during, say, any given ten-minute period as you go about your business.

If we are to find a more effective way of handling the stress in our lives, the first thing we will need to do is to be aware of these automatic judgments so that we can see through our own usually unexperienced prejudices and fears and liberate ourselves from their tyranny.

When practicing mindfulness, it is important to recognize this judging quality of mind when it appears and assume a broader perspective by intentionally suspending judgment and assuming a stance of impartiality, reminding yourself to, as best you can, simply observe what is unfolding, including your reactions to it. When you find the mind judging, you don't have to stop it from doing that, and it would be unwise to try. All that

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is required is to be aware of it happening. No need to judge the judging and make matters even more complicated for yourself.

As an example, let's say you are practicing watching your breathing, as we did in the last chapter and as we will do a lot more in the next. At a certain point you may find your mind saying something like, "This is boring," or "This isn't working," or "I can't do this." These are judgments. When they come up in your mind, it is very important to recognize them as judgmental thinking and remind yourself that the practice involves suspending judgment and just watching *whatever* comes up, including your own judging thoughts, without pursuing them or acting on them in any way. Then go back to riding the waves of your breathing with full awareness once again.

2. Patience

Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that sometimes things must unfold in their own time. A child may try to help a butterfly to emerge by breaking open its chrysalis. Usually the butterfly doesn't benefit from this. Any adult knows that the butterfly can only emerge in its own time, that the process cannot be hurried.

In the same way, we cultivate patience toward our own minds and bodies when practicing mindfulness. We intentionally remind ourselves that there is no need to be impatient with ourselves because we find the mind judging all the time, or because we are tense or agitated or frightened, or because we have been practicing for some time and nothing positive seems to have happened. We give ourselves room to have these experiences. Why? Because we are having them anyway! When they come up, they are our reality; they are part of our life unfolding in this moment. So we treat ourselves as well as we would treat the butterfly. Why rush through some moments to get to other, "better" ones? After all, each one is your life in that moment.

When you practice being with yourself in this way, you are bound to find that your mind has "a mind of its own." We have already seen in Chapter 1 that one of its favorite activities is to wander into the past and the future and lose itself in thinking. Some of its thoughts are pleasant. Others are painful and anxiety-producing. In either case thinking itself exerts a strong pull on our awareness, eclipsing it. Much of the time our thoughts overwhelm our perception of the present moment. They may cause us to lose our connection to the present entirely.

Patience can be a particularly helpful quality to invoke when the mind is agitated. It can help us to accept this wandering tendency of the mind while reminding us that we don't have to get caught up in its travels. Practicing patience reminds us that we don't have to fill up our moments with activity and with more thinking in order for them to be rich. In fact, it helps us to remember that quite the opposite is true. To be patient is simply to be completely open to each moment, accepting it in its fullness, knowing that, like the butterfly, things can only unfold in their own time.

3. Beginner's Mind

The richness of present-moment experience is the richness of life itself. Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we "know" prevent us from seeing things as they really are. We tend to take the ordinary for granted and fail to grasp the extraordinariness of the ordinary. To see the richness of the present moment, we need to cultivate what has been called "beginner's mind," a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time.

This attitude will be particularly important when we engage in the formal meditation practices described in the following chapters. Whatever the particular practices we might be using, whether it is the body scan, the sitting meditation, or the yoga, we can resolve to bring our beginner's mind with us each time we practice, so that we can be free of our expectations based on our past experiences. An open, "beginner's" mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does. No moment is the same as any

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other. Each is unique and contains unique possibilities. Beginner's mind reminds us of this simple truth.

You might try to cultivate your own beginner's mind in your daily life as an experiment. The next time you see somebody who is familiar to you, ask yourself if you are seeing this person with fresh eyes, as he or she really is, or if you are only seeing the reflection of your own thoughts about this person, and your feelings as well. Try it with your children, your spouse, friends, and co-workers, and even with your dog or cat if you have one. Try it with problems when they arise. Try it when you are outdoors in nature. Are you able to see the sky, the stars, the trees, the water, and the rocks as they are right now, with a clear and uncluttered mind? Or are you actually seeing them only through the veil of your own thoughts, opinions, and emotions?

4. Trust

Developing a basic trust in yourself and your feelings is an integral part of meditation training. It is far better to trust in your intuition and your own authority, even if you make some "mistakes" along the way, than always to look outside yourself for guidance. If at any time something doesn't feel right to you, why not honor your feelings? Why should you discount them or write them off as invalid because some authority or some group of people thinks or says differently? This attitude of trusting yourself and your own basic wisdom and goodness is very important in all aspects of the meditation practice. It will be particularly useful in the yoga. When practicing yoga, you will have to honor your feelings when your body tells you to stop or to back off in a particular stretch. If you don't listen, you might injure yourself.

Some people who become involved in meditation get so caught up in the reputation and authority of their teachers that they don't honor their own feelings and intuition. They believe that their teacher must be a much wiser and more advanced person, so they think they should venerate the teacher as a model of perfect wisdom and do exactly what he or she says without question. This attitude is completely contrary to the spirit of meditation, which emphasizes being your own person and understanding what it means to be yourself. Anybody who is imitating somebody else, no matter who it is, is heading in the wrong direction.

It is impossible to become like somebody else. Your only hope is to become more fully yourself. That is the reason for practicing meditation in the first place. Teachers, books, CDs, and apps can only be guides and offer signposts and suggestions. It is important to be open and receptive to what you can learn from other sources, but ultimately you still have to live your own life, every moment of it. In practicing mindfulness, you are practicing taking responsibility for being yourself and learning to listen to and trust your own being. The more you cultivate this trust in yourself, the easier you will find it will be to trust other people more and to see their basic goodness as well.

5. Non-striving

Almost everything we do we do for a purpose, to get something or somewhere. But in meditation this attitude can be a real obstacle. That is because meditation is different from all other human activities. Although it takes a lot of work and energy of a certain kind, ultimately meditation is a non-doing. It has no goal other than for you to be yourself. The irony is that you already are. This sounds paradoxical and a little crazy. Yet this paradox and craziness may be pointing you toward a new way of seeing yourself, one in which you are trying less and being more. This comes from intentionally cultivating the attitude of non-striving.

For example, if you sit down to meditate and you think, "I am going to get relaxed, or get enlightened, or control my pain, or become a better person," then you have introduced an idea into your mind of where you should be, and along with it comes the notion that you are not okay right now. "If only I were calmer, or more intelligent, or a harder worker, or more this or more that, if only my heart were healthier or my knee were better, then I would be okay. But right now, I am not okay."

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This attitude undermines the cultivation of mindfulness, which involves simply paying attention to whatever is happening. If you are tense, then just pay attention to the tension. If you are in pain, then be with the pain as best you can. If you are criticizing yourself, then observe the activity of the judging mind. Just watch. Remember, we are simply allowing anything and everything that we experience from moment to moment to be here, because it already is. The invitation is to simply embrace it and hold it in awareness. You do not have to *do* anything with it.

People are either referred to the Stress Reduction Clinic by their doctors or come on their own because something is the matter. The first time they come, we ask them to identify three goals that they want to work toward in the program. But then, often to their surprise, we encourage them not to try to make any progress toward their goals over the eight weeks. In particular, if one of their goals is to lower their blood pressure or to reduce their pain or anxiety, they are instructed not to try to lower their blood pressure nor to try to make their pain or anxiety go away, but simply to stay in the present and carefully follow the meditation instructions.

As you will see shortly, in the meditative domain, the best way to achieve your goals is to back off from striving for results and instead to start focusing carefully on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment by moment. With patience and regular practice, movement toward your goals will take place by itself. This movement becomes an unfolding that you are inviting to happen within you.

6. Acceptance

Acceptance means seeing things as they actually are in the present. If you have a headache, accept that you have a headache. If you are overweight, why not accept it as a description of your body at this time? Sooner or later we have to come to terms with things as they are and accept them, whether it is a diagnosis of cancer or learning of someone's death. Often acceptance is reached only after we have gone through very emotion-filled periods of denial and then anger. These stages are a natural progression in the process of coming to terms with what is. They are all part of the healing process. In fact, my working definition of healing is *coming to terms with things as they are.*

However, putting aside for the moment the major calamities that usually take a great deal of time to heal from, in the course of our daily lives we often waste a lot of energy denying and resisting what is already fact. When we do that, we are basically trying to force situations to be the way we would like them to be, which only makes for more tension. This actually prevents positive change from occurring. We may be so busy denying and forcing and struggling that we have little energy left for healing and growing, and what little we have may be dissipated by our lack of awareness and intentionality.

If you are overweight and feel bad about your body, it's no good to wait until you are the weight you think you should be before you start liking your body and yourself. At a certain point, if you don't want to remain stuck in a frustrating vicious cycle, you might realize that it is all right to love yourself at the weight that you are now because this is the only time you can love yourself. Remember, now is the only time you have for anything. You have to accept yourself as you are before you can really change. Your choosing to do so becomes an act of self-compassion and intelligence.

When you start thinking this way, losing weight becomes less important. It also becomes a lot easier. By intentionally cultivating acceptance, you are creating the preconditions for healing.

Acceptance does not mean that you have to like everything or that you have to take a passive attitude toward everything and abandon your principles and values. It does not mean that you are satisfied with things as they are or that you are resigned to tolerating things as they "have to be." It does not mean that you should stop trying to break free of your self-destructive habits or to give up on your desire to change and grow, or that you should tolerate injustice, for instance, or avoid getting involved in changing the world around you because it is the way it is and therefore hopeless. It has nothing to do with passive resignation. Acceptance as we are speaking of it simply means that, sooner or later, you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are. This attitude sets

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the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening. You are much more likely to know what to do and have the inner conviction to act when you have a clear picture of what is actually happening versus when your vision is clouded by your mind's self-serving judgments and desires or its fears and prejudices.

In the meditation practice, we cultivate acceptance by taking each moment as it comes and being with it fully, as it is. We try not to impose our ideas about what we "should" be feeling or thinking or seeing in our experience. Instead, we just remind ourselves to be receptive and open to whatever we are feeling, thinking, or seeing, and to accept it because it is here right now. If we keep our attention focused on the present, we can be sure of one thing, namely, that whatever we are attending to in this moment will change, giving us the opportunity to practice accepting whatever it is that will emerge in the next moment. Clearly there is wisdom in cultivating acceptance.

7. Letting Go

They say that in India there is a particularly clever way of catching monkeys. As the story goes, hunters will cut a hole in a coconut that is just big enough for a monkey to put its hand through. Then they will drill two smaller holes in the other end, pass a wire through, and secure the coconut to the base of a tree. Then they slip a banana inside the coconut through the hole and hide. The monkey comes down, puts his hand in, and takes hold of the banana. The hole is cleverly crafted so that the open hand can go in but the fist cannot get out. All the monkey has to do to be free is to let go of the banana. But it seems most monkeys don't let go.

Often our minds get us caught in very much the same way in spite of all our intelligence. For this reason, cultivating the attitude of letting go, or non-attachment, is fundamental to the practice of mindfulness. When we start paying attention to our inner experience, we rapidly discover that there are certain thoughts, feelings, and situations that the mind seems to want to hold on to. If they are pleasant, we try to prolong these thoughts or feelings or situations, stretch them out, and conjure them up again and again.

Similarly, there are many thoughts and feelings and experiences that we try to get rid of or prevent ourselves from having because they are unpleasant, painful, or frightening in one way or another and we want to protect ourselves from them.

In the meditation practice we intentionally put aside the tendency to elevate some aspects of our experience and reject others. Instead we just let our experience be what it is, and practice observing it from moment to moment. Letting go is a way of letting things be, of accepting things as they are. When we observe our mind grasping and pushing away, we remind ourselves to let go of those impulses on purpose, just to see what will happen if we do. When we find ourselves judging our experience, we let go of those judging thoughts. We recognize them and we just don't pursue them any further. We let them be, and in doing so we let them go. Similarly, when thoughts of the past or of the future come up, we let go of them. We just watch—resting in awareness itself.

If we find it particularly difficult to let go of something because it has such a strong hold over our mind, we can direct our attention to what "holding on" feels like. Holding on, or "clinging," is the opposite of letting go. We can become an expert on our own attachments, whatever they may be and whatever their consequences in our lives, as well as how it feels in those moments when we finally do let go and what the consequences of that are. Being willing to look at the ways we hold on ultimately shows us a lot about the experience of its opposite. So whether we are "successful" at letting go or not, mindfulness continues to teach us if we are willing to look.

Letting go is not such a foreign experience. We do it every night when we go to sleep. We lie down on a padded surface, with the lights out, in a quiet place, and we let go of our mind and body. If you can't let go, you can't go to sleep.

Most of us have experienced times when the mind just would not shut down when we got into bed. This is one of the first signs of elevated stress. At these times we may be unable to free ourselves from certain thoughts because our involvement in them is just too powerful. If we try to force ourselves to sleep, it just makes things worse. So if you can go to sleep, you are already an expert in letting go. Now you just need to practice applying

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up your mind to do it and pick an appropriate time. Most people are inwardly disciplined already to a certain extent. Getting dinner on the table every night requires discipline. Getting up in the morning and going to work requires discipline. And taking time for yourself certainly does too. You are not going to be paid for it, and chances are you will not be enrolled in an MBSR program in which you know that everybody else is doing it and so feel some social pressure to keep up your end of things. You will have to do it for better reasons than those. Perhaps the ability to function more effectively under pressure, or to be healthier and feel better, or to be more relaxed, self-confident, and happy will suffice. Ultimately you have to decide for yourself why you are making such a commitment.

Some people have resistance to the whole idea of taking time for themselves. In the United States at least, the Puritan ethic has left a legacy of guilt when we do something for ourselves. Some people discover that they have a little voice inside that tells them that it is selfish or that they are undeserving of this kind of time and energy. Usually they recognize it as a message they were given very early on in their lives: "Live for others, not for yourself." "Help others; don't dwell on yourself."

If you do feel undeserving of taking time for yourself, why not look at that as part of your mindfulness practice? Where do such feelings come from? What are the thoughts behind them? Can you observe them with acceptance? Are they accurate?

Certainly the degree to which you can really be of help to others, if that is what you believe is most important, depends directly on how balanced you are yourself. Taking time to "tune" your own instrument and restore your energy reserves can hardly be considered selfish. *Intelligent* would be a more apt description.

Happily, once people start practicing mindfulness, most quickly get over the idea that it is "selfish" or "narcissistic" to take time for themselves. They come to see the difference that making some time to just be has on the quality of their lives and their self-esteem, as well as on their relationships.

We suggest that everyone find their own best time to practice. Mine is early in the morning. I like to get up an hour or so before I would other-wise and meditate and do yoga. I like the quiet of this time. It feels very good to be up and have nothing to do, by agreement with myself, except to dwell in the present, being with things as they are, my mind open and aware—and staying away from the Internet and all electronic devices, no matter how strong their pull. I know the phone won't ring at that hour. I know the rest of my family is asleep, so my meditation practice is not taking time away from them. When our children were young, for years the littlest one in the family always seemed to sense when there was awake energy in the house, no matter what time it was, and so there were periods when I had to push my meditation time back as far as 4:00 a.m. to be sure to get some uninterrupted time. As they got older, at times they would meditate or do yoga with me. I never pushed it. It was just something Daddy did, so it was natural for them to know about it and to do it with me from time to time.

Practicing meditation and yoga in the early morning invariably has a positive influence on the rest of the day for me. When I start off the day dwelling in stillness, resting in awareness, inhabiting and thereby nourishing the domain of being, and cultivating some degree of calmness and concentration, I seem to be more mindful and relaxed the rest of the day as well, and better able to recognize stress and handle it more effectively. When I tune in to my body and work it gently to stretch my joints and feel my muscles, my body feels more alive and vibrant than on the days I don't do it. I also know with much greater sensitivity what condition my body is in that day and what I might want to watch out for, such as my lower back or my neck if they are particularly stiff or painful that morning.

Some of our patients like to practice early in the morning, but a lot don't or can't. We leave it to each individual to experiment with times to practice and to choose the best one for his or her schedule. Practicing late at night is not recommended in the beginning, however, because it is very hard to keep up the alert attention required when you are tired.

In the first weeks of the stress reduction program, many people have trouble staying awake when they do the body scan (see Chapter 5), even when they do it in the daytime, because they get so relaxed. If I feel groggy when I wake up in the morning, I might

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splash cold water on my face until I know I am really awake. I don't want to meditate in a daze. I want to be alert. This may seem somewhat extreme, but really it is just affirming the value of being awake before engaging in a period of formal practice. It helps to remember that mindfulness is about being fully awake. It is not cultivated by relaxing to the point where unawareness and sleep take over. So we advocate doing anything necessary to wake up, even taking a cold shower if that is what it takes.

Your meditation practice will only be as powerful as your motivation to dispel the fog of your own lack of awareness. When you are in this fog, it is hard to remember the importance of practicing mindfulness, and it is hard to locate your attitudinal bearings. Confusion, fatigue, depression, and anxiety are powerful mental states that can undermine your best intentions to practice regularly. You can easily get caught up and then stuck in them and not even know it.

That is when your commitment to practice is of greatest value. It keeps you engaged in the process. The momentum of regular practice helps to maintain a certain mental stability and resilience even as you feel under tremendous pressure to get things done, or find yourself going through states of turmoil, confusion, lack of clarity, and procrastination. These are actually some of the most fruitful times to practice—not to get rid of your confusion or your feelings but just to be conscious and accepting of them.

Most people who come to the Stress Reduction Clinic, no matter what their medical problem is, tell us that they are really coming to attain peace of mind. This is an understandable goal, given their mental and physical pain. But to achieve peace of mind, people have to kindle a vision of what they really want for themselves and keep that vision alive in the face of inner and outer hardships, obstacles, and setbacks.

I used to think that meditation practice was so powerful in itself and so healing that as long as you devoted yourself to it on a regular basis, you would eventually see growth and change. But time has taught me that some kind of personal vision is also necessary. Perhaps it could be a vision of what or who you might be if you were to see more clearly into the ways in which your own mind might be limiting your possibilities for growth, even around what your body might be capable of if you were to accept and learn to work within its limitations of the moment. Such a personal vision or aspiration can be essential in carrying you through the inevitable periods of low motivation and give continuity to your practice.

For some, that vision might be one of vibrancy and health. For others, it might be one of relaxation, or kindness, or peacefulness, or harmony, or wisdom. Your vision should be what you believe is most fundamental to your ability to be your best self, to be at peace with yourself, to be fully integrated as a person, to be whole.

The price of wholeness is nothing less than a total commitment to recognizing your intrinsic wholeness and an unswerving belief in your capacity to embody it in any moment. In our view, you are already perfect just as you are, in the sense of already being perfectly who you are, including all the imperfections. The present moment is the perfect moment for opening to this dimension of your being, for embodying the full dimensionality of who you already are—in awareness. Carl Jung put it this way: "The attainment of wholeness requires one to stake one's whole being. Nothing less will do; there can be no easier conditions, no substitutes, no compromises."

With this perspective on the spirit and the attitudes that are most helpful to cultivate in your meditation practice, we are now ready to explore the practice itself.

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The Power of Breathing: Your Unsuspected Ally in the Healing Process

Poets and scientists alike are aware that our organism pulsates with the rhythms of its ancestry. Rhythm and pulsation are intrinsic to all life, from the beating of bacterial cilia to the alternating cycles of photosynthesis and respiration in plants, to the circadian rhythms of our own body and its biochemistry. These rhythms of the living world are embedded within the larger rhythms of the planet itself, the ebb and flow of the tides, the carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen cycles of the biosphere, the cycles of night and day, the seasons. Our very bodies are joined with the planet in a continual rhythmic exchange as matter and energy flow back and forth between our bodies and what we call "the environment." Someone once calculated that, on average, every seven years all the atoms in our body have come and gone, replaced by others from outside us. This in itself is interesting to think about. What am I if little of the substance of my body is the same in any decade of my life?

One way this exchange of matter and energy happens is through breathing. With each breath, we exchange carbon dioxide molecules from inside our bodies for oxygen molecules from the surrounding air. Waste disposal with each outbreath, renewal with each inbreath. If this process is interrupted for more than a few minutes, the brain becomes starved for oxygen and undergoes irreversible damage. And, of course, without the breath, we die.

The breath has a very important partner in its work, namely the heart. Think of it: this amazing muscle never stops pumping during our entire lifetime. It begins beating in us long before we are born and it just keeps on beating, day in and day out, year in and year out without a pause, without a rest for our entire life. And it can even be kept alive by artificial means for some time after we are dead.

As with the breath, the heartbeat is a fundamental life rhythm. The heart pumps the oxygen-rich blood from the lungs via the arteries and their smaller capillaries to all the cells of the body, supplying them with the oxygen they need to function. As the red blood cells give up their oxygen, they load up with the carbon dioxide that is the major waste product of all living tissue. The carbon dioxide is then transported back to the heart through the veins and from there pumped to the lungs, where it is discharged into the atmosphere on the outbreath. This is followed by another inbreath, which again oxygenates the hemoglobin carrier molecules that will be pumped throughout the body with the next contraction of the heart. This is literally the pulse of life in us, the rhythm of the primordial sea internalized, the ebb and flow of matter and energy in our bodies.

From the moment we are born to the moment we die, we breathe. The rhythm of our breathing varies considerably as a function of our activities and our feelings. It quickens with physical exertion or emotional upset, and it slows down during sleep or periods of relaxation. As an experiment, you might try to be aware of your breathing when you are excited, angry, surprised, and relaxed and notice how it changes. Sometimes our breathing is very regular. At other times it is irregular, even labored.

We have some measure of conscious control over our breathing. If we choose to, we can hold our breath for a short while or voluntarily control the rate and depth at which we

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breathe.

But slow or rapid, controlled or left to itself, the breath keeps going, day and night, year in, year out, through all the experiences and stages of life we traverse. Usually we take it completely for granted. We don't pay any attention to our breathing unless something happens to prevent us from breathing normally. That is, unless we start to meditate.

The breath plays an extremely important role in meditation and in healing. Breathing is an incredibly powerful ally and teacher in the work of meditation, although people who have no training in meditation think nothing of it and find it uninteresting.

The fundamental pulsations of the body are particularly fruitful to focus on during meditation because they are so intimately connected with the experience of being alive. While we could theoretically focus on our heart beating instead of on our breathing, the breath is much easier to be aware of. The fact that it is a rhythmic process and that it is constantly changing will make it even more valuable to us. In focusing on the breath when we meditate, we are learning right from the start to get comfortable with change. We see that we will have to be flexible. We will have to train ourselves to attend to a process that not only cycles and flows but also responds to our emotional state by changing its rhythm, sometimes quite dramatically.

Our breathing has the added virtue of being a very convenient process to support ongoing awareness in our daily lives. As long as we are alive, it is always with us. We can't leave home without it. It is always here to be attended to, no matter what we are doing or feeling or experiencing, no matter where we are. Tuning in to it brings us right into the here and now. It immediately anchors our awareness in the body, in a fundamental, rhythmic, flowing life process.

Some people have trouble breathing when they get anxious. They start to breathe faster and faster and more and more shallowly and wind up hyperventilating, that is, not getting enough oxygen and blowing off too much carbon dioxide. This brings on feelings of light-headedness, often accompanied by a feeling of pressure in the chest. When, all of a sudden, you feel like you are not getting in enough air, an overwhelming wave of fear or panic can arise. When you panic, of course, it just makes it that much harder to get control of your breathing.

People who experience episodes of hyperventilation can think they are having a heart attack and are going to die. Actually, the worst that can happen is that they will black out, which is dangerous enough. But passing out is the body's way of breaking the vicious cycle that begins when you feel unable to breathe, which leads to panic, which leads to a stronger feeling of being unable to breathe. When you pass out, your breathing returns to normal on its own. If you are unable to get your breathing under control, your body and brain will do it for you, if necessary by short-circuiting your consciousness for a while.

When patients who suffer from hyperventilation are sent to the stress reduction clinic, they are asked, along with everyone else, to focus on their breathing as the first step in getting into the formal meditation practice. For many, just the thought of focusing on their breathing produces feelings of anxiety; they may have a lot of trouble *watching* their breath without trying to regulate it. But with perseverance, most regain confidence in their breathing as they get more familiar with it in the meditation practice.

A thirty-seven-year-old firefighter named Gregg came to the clinic referred by a psychiatrist after a year-long history of hyperventilation episodes and unsuccessful drug treatments for anxiety. His problem started when he was overcome by smoke in a burning building. From that day on, every time he tried to put on his gas mask to go into a burning building, his breathing would become rapid and shallow and he would be unable to put on the mask. Several times he was rushed from fires to the emergency room of the local hospital because he thought he was having a heart attack. But it was always diagnosed as hyperventilation. At the time he was referred to the Stress Reduction Clinic, he had been unable to go into buildings to fight fires for over a year.

In the first class, Gregg, along with everybody else, was introduced to the basic approach of watching his breathing. As soon as he started focusing on the feeling of it moving in and out, he felt anxiety building. He was reluctant to run out of the room, so he held on and made it through the class somehow. He also managed to force himself to

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practice every day that week, mostly out of desperation, in spite of his discomfort and his fear. That first week practicing the body scan, which as you will soon see involves a lot of focusing on breathing, was torture for him. Every time he would tune in to his breathing, he would feel terrible, as if his breath were an enemy. He saw it as an undependable and potentially uncontrollable force that had already made it impossible for him to work, thus changing his relationship to his fellow firefighters and his view of himself as a man.

Yet after just two weeks of doggedly working with his breathing while doing the body scan, he discovered that he could put on his mask and go into burning buildings again.

Gregg later described to the class how this dramatic change came about. As he spent time watching it, he became more confident in his breathing. Even though he was unaware of it at first, he was relaxing a little during the body scan, and as he got more relaxed, his feelings about his breathing started to change. By spending time just watching his breath flowing in and out as he moved his focus of attention through his body, he began to know what his breathing actually felt like. At the same time, he found that he was getting less caught up in his thoughts and fears about his breathing. From his own direct experience, he came to see that his breathing was not his enemy and that he could even use it to relax.

It was not a big jump for him to practice being aware of his breathing at other times of the day and to use it in the same way to become calmer wherever he was. One day it occurred to him to try it at a fire. He had been going out with the trucks on occasion but had only been able to do support activities. As he put on the mask, he purposefully focused on his breathing, watching it, letting it be as it was, accepting the feeling of the mask as he put it on his face, just as he worked with accepting his breathing and whatever feelings he was experiencing when he practiced the body scan at home. What he discovered was that it was okay.

From that day on, Gregg was able to put on his mask and go into burning buildings without panicking or hyperventilating. He had several moments in the first three years after he took the program when he experienced fear of being trapped when he was in closed, smoky places. But when this happened, he was able to become aware of his fear, slow down his breathing, and maintain his balance of mind. He never had another hyperventilation episode.

The easiest and most effective way to begin cultivating mindfulness as a formal meditative practice is to simply focus your attention on your breathing and see what happens as you attempt to keep it there, just as we did in Chapter 1 but for longer than three minutes. There are a number of different places in the body where we can focus our attention on the sensations associated with breathing. Obviously one is the nostrils. If you are watching your breathing from here, you will be focusing on the feeling of the breath as it flows past the nostrils. Another place to focus on is the chest as it expands and contracts, and another is the belly, which, if it is relaxed, moves in and out with each breath.

No matter which location you choose, the idea is to be aware of the sensations that accompany your breathing at that particular place and to hold them in the forefront of your awareness from moment to moment. Doing this, we *feel* the air as it flows in and out past the nostrils; we *feel* the movement of the muscles associated with breathing; we *feel* the belly as it moves in and out.

Paying attention to your breathing means just paying attention. Nothing more. It doesn't mean that you should "push" or force your breathing, or try to make it deeper, or change its pattern or rhythm. The chances are your breath has been moving in and out of your body very well for years without your having thought about it at all. There is no need to try to *control* it now just because you have decided to pay attention to it. In fact, trying to control it is counterproductive. The effort we make in being mindful of the breathing is

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When we start paying attention to our breathing on a regular basis, our relationship to it changes dramatically. As we have already seen, tuning in to it helps us to gather our often unfocused energies and center ourselves. The breath reminds us to tune in to our body and to encounter the rest of our experience with mindfulness, in this very moment.

When we are mindful of our breathing, it automatically helps us to establish greater calmness in both the body and the mind. Then we are better able to be aware of our thoughts and feelings with a greater degree of calm and with a more discerning eye. We are able to see things more clearly and within a larger perspective, all because we are a little more awake, a little more aware. And with this awareness comes a feeling of having more room to move, of having more options, of being free to choose effective and appropriate responses in stressful situations rather than losing our equilibrium and sense of self as a result of feeling overwhelmed, thrown off balance by our own knee-jerk reactions.

This all comes from the simple practice of paying attention to your breathing when you dedicate yourself to practicing it regularly. In addition, you will discover that it is possible to direct your breath with great precision to various parts of your body in such a way that it will penetrate and soothe regions that are injured or in pain, at the same time that it calms and stabilizes the mind.

We also can use the breath to refine our innate capacity to rest for stretches of time in calmness and focused attention. Giving the mind *one thing* to keep track of—namely, the breath—to replace the whole range of things that it usually finds to preoccupy itself enhances our powers of concentration. Staying with the breath during meditation, no matter what, ultimately leads to deep experiences of calmness and awareness. It is as if the breath contains, folded into itself, a power that we can come to simply by giving ourselves over to it and following it as if it were a path.

This power is uncovered when we systematically bring awareness to the breath and sustain it for extended periods. With it comes a growing sense of the breath as a dependable ally. I suspect this is why our patients so often say that the breathing is the most important thing they get out of the course. Right in the simple old breath (I won't say "right beneath our noses") lies a completely overlooked source of power to transform our lives. All we need to do to make use of it is to deepen our attentional skills and our patience.

It is the very simplicity of the practice of mindfulness of breathing that gives it its power to disentangle us from the compulsive and habitual hold of the mind's many preoccupations. Yogis have known this for centuries. Breathing is the universal foundation for meditation practice.

Eventually, through ongoing practice, we may discover that it is not the breath that is actually the most important element in this equation—it is awareness itself that is most important and where the real transformative potential lies. The breath is simply an extremely useful object of attention in cultivating our ability to dwell in awareness and act out of embodied awareness. But it does have all the unique virtues we have been talking about, and many others as well, that make it a very special object of attention, one worthy of far greater intimacy and familiarity than we usually accord it. Plus, as our patients figure out for themselves, breathing as a primary object of attention can catalyze the discovery of the overriding importance of awareness itself. Breathing is no longer "just" breathing. Held in awareness, it is transformed, as is everything else. *It is all in how we are in relationship to experience.*

There are two major ways of practicing mindfulness of breathing. One involves the formal discipline of making a specific time in which you stop all activity, assume a special posture, and dwell for some time in moment-to-moment awareness of the inbreath and the outbreath, as described above. By practicing in this way regularly, you naturally deepen your ability to keep your attention on the breath for a sustained period of time. This will

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improve your ability to concentrate in general, as the mind becomes more focused and calmer, less reactive both to its own thoughts and to outside pressures. As you continue practicing, the calmness that comes with just being with your breathing over a period of time develops a stability of its own and becomes much more robust and dependable. Then, whatever practice you choose to engage in, and whatever object of attention you might choose to feature center-stage in the field of awareness, making time to meditate becomes nothing other than making time to come home to the deeper dimensions of your being, a time of inner peace and renewal.

The second way of practicing using the breath is to be mindful of it from time to time during the day, or even all day long, wherever you are and whatever you are doing. In this way the thread of meditative awareness, including the physical relaxation, the emotional calm, and the insight that come with it, is woven into every aspect of your daily life. We call this *informal meditation* practice. It is at least as valuable as the formal practice, but is easily neglected and loses much of its ability to stabilize the mind if it is not combined with regular formal meditation practice. The formal and informal practices using the breath complement and enrich each other. It is best to let them work together. Of course, the second way takes no time at all, just remembering. Then the real meditation practice becomes simply life itself, unfolding in awareness.

Mindfulness of breathing is central to all aspects of meditation practice. We will be using it when we practice the sitting meditation, the body scan, the yoga, and the walking meditation, which are all formal meditation practices. We will also be using it throughout the day as we practice developing a continuity of awareness in our lives. If you keep at it, the day will soon come when you will look upon your breathing as an old, familiar friend and a powerful ally in the healing process—and in living your life as if it really mattered, moment by moment by moment, and breath by breath by breath.

EXERCISE 1

1. Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, as best you can sit in a posture that embodies dignity, keeping the spine straight and letting your shoulders drop.
2. Allow your eyes to close, if it feels comfortable to you.
3. Allow your attention to gently alight on your belly, as if you were coming upon a shy animal sunning itself on a tree stump in a clearing in the forest. Feel your belly rise or expand gently on the inbreath, and fall or recede on the outbreath.
4. As best you can, maintain the focus on the various sensations associated with breathing, “being with” each inbreath for its full duration and “being with” each outbreath for its full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing.
5. Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that carried you away, and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and to the sensations associated with the breath coming in and with the breath going out.
6. If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your “job” is simply to notice what is on your mind at the moment that you come to realize that it is no longer on your breathing, and then to bring your attention back to the breath each and every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with. As best you can, continually rest in the awareness of the feeling of the breath moving in and out of the body, or come back to it over and over again.
7. Practice this exercise for fifteen minutes at a convenient time every day, whether you feel like it or not, for one week and see how it feels to incorporate a disciplined meditation practice into your life. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to do anything.

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Sitting Meditation: Nourishing the Domain of Being

In the first class in MBSR, each person gets a chance to say why he or she has come to the program and what he or she hopes to get from participating. Linda described feeling as if a large truck were always right on her heels, driving just faster than she can walk. It was an image people could relate to; the vividness of it sent a wave of acknowledging nods and smiles through the room.

"What do you think the truck actually is?" I asked. She responded that it was her impulses, her cravings (she was very overweight), her desires— in a word, her mind. Her mind was the truck. It was always right behind her, pushing her, driving her, allowing her no rest, no peace.

We have already mentioned how our behavior and our emotional states can be driven by the play of the mind's likes and dislikes, by our addictions and aversions. When you look, is it not accurate to say that your mind is constantly seeking satisfaction, making plans to ensure that things will go your way, trying to get what you want or think you need and at the same time trying to ward off the things you fear, the things you don't want to happen? As a consequence of this common play of our minds, don't we all tend to fill up our days with things that just *have* to be done and then run around desperately trying to do them all, while in the process not really enjoying much of the doing because we are too pressed for time, too rushed, too busy, too anxious? We can feel overwhelmed by our schedules, our responsibilities, and our roles at times, even when everything we are doing is important, even when we have chosen to do them all. We live immersed in a world of constant doing. Rarely are we in touch with who is doing the doing—or, put otherwise, with the world of being.

To get back in touch with being is not that difficult. We only need to remind ourselves to be mindful. Moments of mindfulness are moments of peace and stillness, even in the midst of activity. When your whole life is driven by doing, formal meditation practice can provide a refuge of sanity and stability that can be used to restore some balance and perspective. It can be a way of stopping the headlong momentum of all the doing, giving yourself some time to dwell in deep relaxation and well-being and to remember who you are. The formal practice can give you the strength and the self-knowledge to return to what you need or want to do and let the doing come out of your grounding in the domain of being. Then at least a certain degree of patience, inner stillness, clarity, and balance of mind will infuse what you are doing, and the busyness and pressure will be less onerous. In fact, they might just disappear entirely as you step out of clock time altogether and take up residence even for brief moments in the timeless quality of now.

Meditation is really a non-doing. It is the only human endeavor I know of that does not involve trying to get somewhere else but, rather, emphasizes being where you already are. Much of the time we are so carried away by all the doing, the striving, the planning, the reacting, the busyness— that when we stop just to feel where we are, it can seem a little peculiar at first. For one thing, we tend to have little awareness of the incessant and relentless activity of our own mind and how much we are driven by it. That is not too

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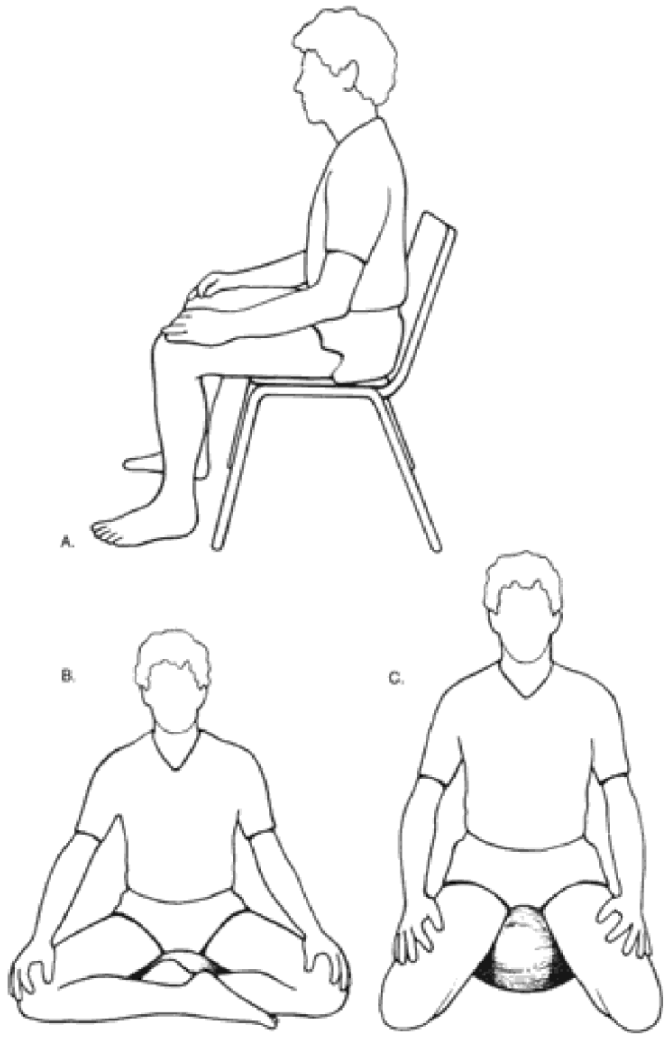

If you are genuinely committed to being more peaceful and relaxed, you might wonder why it is that your mind is so quick to be bored with being with itself and why your body is so restless and uncomfortable. You might wonder what is behind your impulses to fill each moment with something, what is behind your need to jump up and get going or be entertained whenever you have an "empty" moment. What drives the body and mind to reject being still?

In practicing meditation we don't try to answer such questions. Rather we just observe the impulse to get up or the thoughts and emotions that come into the mind. And instead of jumping up and doing whatever the mind decides is next on the agenda, we gently but firmly bring our attention back to the belly, back to the breathing, and just continue to watch and feel and ride on the waves of the breath, moment by moment by moment. We may ponder why the mind is like this for a moment or two, but basically we are practicing accepting each moment as it is without reacting to how it is. And so, we keep sitting, attending to the breath sensations and being the knowing that awareness already is.

THE BASIC MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

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The basic instructions for practicing the sitting meditation are very simple. We observe the breath as it flows in and out. We give full attention to the *feeling* of the breath as it comes in and full attention to the *feeling* of the breath as it goes out, just as we did in Chapters 1 and 3. And whenever we find that our attention has been carried elsewhere, wherever that may be, we simply note it, then let go and gently escort our attention back to the breath, back to the rising and falling of our own belly.

If you have been trying it, perhaps you will have already noticed that your mind tends to move around a lot. You may have contracted with yourself to keep your attention focused on the breath no matter what. But before long, you will undoubtedly find that the mind is off someplace else. It has forgotten the breath; it has been drawn away.

Each time you become aware of this while you are sitting, the instruction is to first note briefly what is on your mind or what carried you away from attending to the breath, and then to gently bring your attention back to your belly and back to your breathing, no matter what carried it away. If it moves off the breath a hundred times, then you just calmly and gently bring it back a hundred times.

By doing so, you are training your mind to be less reactive and more stable. You are making each moment count. You are taking each moment as it comes, not valuing any one above any other. In this way you are cultivating your natural ability to concentrate your mind. By repeatedly bringing your attention back to the breath each time it wanders off, concentration builds and deepens, much as muscles develop by repetitively lifting weights. Working regularly with (rather than struggling against) the resistance of your own mind builds inner strength. At the same time you are also developing patience and practicing being non-judgmental. You are not giving yourself a hard time because your mind wandered away from the breath. You simply and matter-of-factly return it to the breath, gently but firmly.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT YOUR BODY'S DISCOMFORT

As you will quickly see when you sit down to meditate, almost anything can carry your attention away from your breathing. One big source of distracting impulses is your body. As a rule, if you sit still for a while in any position, your body will become uncomfortable. Normally we are continually shifting our posture in response to this discomfort, without much, if any, awareness of it. But when practicing formal sitting meditation, it is actually useful to resist the first impulse to shift position in response to bodily discomfort. Instead, we direct our attention to these very sensations of discomfort and mentally welcome them.

Why? Because at the moment they come into awareness, these sensations of discomfort become part of our present-moment experience and thus worthy objects of observation and inquiry in and of themselves. They give us the opportunity to look directly at our automatic reactions and at the whole process of what happens as the mind loses its balance and becomes agitated as it is carried off and gets lost in the thought stream in one way or another, far away from any awareness of the breath.

In this way, the pain in your knee or the aching in your back or the tension in your shoulders, rather than being treated as distractions preventing you from staying with your breath, can be included in the field of your awareness and simply accepted without reacting to them as undesirable and trying to make them go away. This approach gives you an alternative way of seeing discomfort. Uncomfortable as they may be, these bodily sensations are now potential teachers and allies in learning about yourself. They can help you to develop your powers of concentration, calmness, and awareness rather than just being frustrating impediments to the goal of trying to keep your attention fixed on your breathing.

The cultivation of this kind of flexibility, which allows you to welcome *whatever* comes up and be with it rather than insisting on paying attention to only one thing, say the breath, is one of the most characteristic and valuable features of mindfulness meditation. This is the case because, as we noted earlier, it is not the breath that is most important

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