



The Joy of
Mindful Writing
Notes to Inspire Creative Awareness

Joy Kenward



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INTRODUCTION

When we write, we are speaking — silently and yet with potential power. The writer, sitting alone at a desk, has the universe at the tip of her pen. Through writing, we can transport ourselves and others to the very stars. Using mindfulness in writing provides the opportunity of accessing a deep well of creative awareness. Our whole lives can benefit from this as we begin to experience the joy of written expression through our own creative voice.





MINDFULNESS, THE GENTLE TEACHER

For a child, the business of learning to read and write can feel like a chore. Depending on the teacher, those early classes can make the difference between being able to write fluidly and with confidence or keeping our creative voice muffled inside our heads.

WHEN I WAS TEN YEARS OLD, my class teacher, Mr Lewis, signed my little autograph album, adding the words, ‘When you write that book, send me a copy!’ This came as a real surprise to me, because I had problems with dyslexia. Although this meant I was a late reader, by the time I was in his class I was reading with enthusiasm. However, writing and spelling were difficult for me. But Mr Lewis was a gifted teacher. He had seen through the poor spelling and messy handwriting, and he had the grace to encourage an imaginative child who loved stories and poetry. The autograph album must have been discarded years ago, but I still have the page with Mr Lewis’s autograph – blue ballpoint on yellow paper. It’s one of my treasured possessions.

I Dream of Becoming a Writer

After this early encouragement, I decided that I would become a writer. I began stories in my head, jotted down bits of poems, started ‘novels’. But most of my creative ideas stayed in my head; they never quite got onto the page. Over



the years, I began to overcome the dyslexia that had marred my early attempts at written expression. It wasn't easy; I never could spell naturally. Every word had to be learned individually. But I was lucky with my parents, who helped me patiently with my reading and writing. They encouraged me calmly to concentrate on the sound and shape of each word, to hold a pencil comfortably, to express myself with confidence even if I was unsure of correct spellings. Without knowing it then, I was to recognize this gentle approach many years later as I became aware of mindfulness.

When I left school, someone advised me to learn to type. 'With typing skills you'll always be able to obtain work,' she said. I had ideas of a more creative career, but I lacked confidence, and so I took her advice. It was to prove invaluable to me. Working in an office might not seem the ideal grounding for a creative writer, but it meant I had to write every day. In time, my spelling improved and I began to express myself with ease in my writing – even if it was only politely requesting a customer to pay the bill. And – gift of gifts for a writer – I became a fast and accurate typist. Now that I had the skills and a head full of ideas, what was preventing me from writing it all out in my true creative voice? I still dreamed of being a writer at some time in the future. But in reality, it just wasn't happening.

I had ideas of a more creative career, but I lacked confidence



Writing in the Present Moment

It occurred to me only recently that I didn't start writing until just about the same time that I began to meditate. This was after half a lifetime of talking about being a writer. I still carried my childhood hopes that I would write; I believed I could; I thought about it a lot. But somehow it never quite materialized.

One benefit of meditation is that it provides a sense of present-moment awareness. Meditation helped me to be more interested in 'now' than in the future. Therefore, it became natural for me to carry out what I hoped and believed I could do. And so I began to write and, soon afterwards, to teach creative writing, both of which continue to be a source of great pleasure for me.

Whereas meditation is a highly beneficial pause in life, as valuable to our minds as sleep is to our bodies, mindfulness brings a kind of meditation into our active lives.

Living with Awareness

Mindfulness is about living in a very conscious way. Through mindfulness, we approach our lives and activities with true awareness. This helps us to concentrate deeply upon whatever we wish to focus our attention, and gives us the skills to overcome distractions. For writers, mindfulness allows us to give full attention to our writing, without being distracted by self-judgement, or what I think of as 'the self-doubter'.



‘The self-doubter’ tells us we are wasting our time; that our writing has no value; that we would be better occupied cleaning the windows; that we might as well be watching TV; that just one more game of solitaire won’t make any difference. Such thoughts dwell on lack of confidence, negativity and despondency, rather than giving precedence to the task in hand – the art of writing – which is a valuable task, deserving of our full attention.

A Book for All

This book is by no means only for beginners; I hope it will be of interest to authors and poets who willingly seek new ways of developing their writing, as well as to others who would like to express their thoughts in writing more easily. It is an invitation to work alongside me, perhaps trying for yourself some of the activities I will suggest at various points in the book. When speaking of writers throughout the book, I have opted to use the feminine (for no other reason than that I am female) but, of course, the points I am making address all writers equally.

This is a practical book, giving at least equal consideration to meditative techniques as to writing exercises. This is because I believe that whether we want our writing to be commercially successful, or to allow us to communicate more clearly, or simply to clarify our thoughts and beliefs, writing mindfully can enhance our lives.



CHAPTER ONE



A MINDFUL APPROACH

The act of writing is full of space.

There is the marvellous space of an empty page, pregnant with possibilities, and the physical space we create between sections or paragraphs. The imaginative space that exists in the action of a story, poem or play can take us to new worlds. And sometimes there's a rather long space when we can't think of what to write next. If we take time to contemplate such spaces quietly, without judgement or fear, they will not seem overwhelming, and we can feel peaceful and adventurous at the same time.





WAITING TO WRITE

The space of non-writing time can be full of promise – a pause before active creativity. For me, this waiting space is an opportunity for meditation, when I can calmly and mindfully contemplate the time-space in which I find myself. I call this ‘waiting to write’.

MINDFULNESS IS ABOUT LIVING in a very conscious way. For a writer about to begin a piece of work, this means fully attending to the present moment, including the release of any pride or regrets attached to our previous efforts that might have succeeded or not been well received. It also includes detaching ourselves from anxieties and ambitions about the future. Through mindfulness, we approach our lives and activities with present-moment awareness and without judgement, concentrating deeply on the task in hand. This a joyful way of being for anyone. And it is a wonderful advantage for a writer. But it is not always easy.

I personally came to understand mindfulness through meditation. A friend suggested meditation when I was feeling anxious. I agreed to try it, but actually, I was puzzled. ‘What is meditation?’, I thought. Soon after, I went into my local bookshop and found a little book called *What is Meditation?* I knew that was the one for me. The book is by Osho, a mystic with Buddhist and Hindu roots. That book taught me, in very simple terms, the basics of mindfulness meditation.



Beginning with five minutes every day, it soon felt easy and natural to increase the time I spent meditating. Now it's an important part of my life. When I'm meditating regularly, everything runs more smoothly, I feel less anxious, more serene and (magically) I seem to have a lot more time.

Time to Write

Many people intend to write. But without mindfulness, this intention will often remain just that – an intention – and is never actually carried out. Nearly every student joining my Beginners' classes tells me that they've been meaning to write for a long time. They've had ideas but never quite started; or they've started but the whole thing fizzled out. The reasons are various, but they are generally on a theme of time – being too busy, procrastination, not having enough hours in the day. For whatever reason, time seems to be the problem.

TRY IT NOW

As you are now, with this book in your hand, bring your attention to your own breathing. Take a few slow, gentle breaths, noticing the air flowing through your nostrils or your mouth. Feel the differences in temperature as it passes in and out of your body. While you breathe, be aware of the weight and texture of this book. For these moments, it's just you, your breath and the book, with no other thoughts to disturb you. That is peace. That is mindfulness.



But is this true? It can be easy to blame lack of time when what we really lack is confidence. It is very often self-doubt that actually stops us writing. If we are able to accept that we feel self-doubt, we might also accept that there are ways to find time to write.

The Self-Doubt Block

Even for experienced writers, an idea that began well might suddenly and unaccountably become obstructed; out of the blue they feel 'blocked'. Perhaps they've begun a story, but find it difficult to proceed; they know what they want to say, but can't quite express it in the fullest way. The creative flow dries up or begins to run off course. They've lost confidence.

Writing is an extension of thinking. At its best it flows, dances, marches or twirls to the pace of our most conscious and creative imagination. Alone in our heads, at our desk, composing and writing freely, this can be easy, peaceful and beautiful. But it is when we actually have to express our thoughts to others that we often encounter difficulty. That's when we become uncertain about using the appropriate words and the correct spelling and grammar; about impressing, helping or affecting others. Self-doubt enters the writing space and fills our minds with negative thoughts.

*Moving on in life always includes
acceptance*



Controlling the Mind

Because writing is so very close to thinking, we need to be able to see beyond any negative thoughts and get closer to the joyful heart of our own creativity. This is where practising mindfulness meditation can help. Before we write, we need to have a practical and positive relationship with our mind, one in which we accept feelings such as self-doubt, but remain in control. This is not a strict kind of control, but a peaceful freedom that recognizes problems and yet resolutely concentrates on our central intention, which is to write.

Moving on in life always includes acceptance. When I began to teach, I worried about my dyslexia. How could I set myself up as a teacher of creative writing when I often forgot how to spell a word, especially when writing on a large whiteboard in front of a class? Mindfulness helped me to accept this problem and to see beyond it to my central intention, which was to help and inspire students with their creative writing.

At the beginning of a course, I would tell the students about my dyslexia and explain to them that I sometimes needed help with spelling, inviting anyone to speak up if they noticed it. They became used to occasionally calling out spelling suggestions when I was stuck. Together we would discuss the construction and sound of words, and explore the wealth of dictionaries and other reference data available to us. Those classes became a collaboration of learning, where no one judged each other's perceived limitations. In fact, my dyslexia



MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

A 'WAITING TO WRITE' MEDITATION



Next time you feel 'blocked' as a writer, try this simple exercise:

- Sit quietly, relaxed, but with your back as upright as possible, supported with cushions, if necessary.
- Close your eyes.
- Notice your breathing. As the air enters your nostrils, it will feel a little cool; as it exhales, it will feel a little warmer. Try to notice this without comment or judgement.
- Thoughts will come into your mind – for example, 'What does any of this have to do with my writer's block?'
- Notice the thought. Accept it without judgement.
- Notice the emotion that comes with the thought. How does it feel? Give your attention to the feeling without naming or judging it.
- Now bring your attention back to your breath.
- Every time a thought comes into your mind, accept the thought, notice how it feels without judgement, and bring your attention back to the breath.

With perseverance, ten minutes of this meditation every day will help; half an hour would be much better. At the least, it will help you to feel relaxed and more in control of your mind and emotions. At best, you will soon be writing freely, without anxiety.



became a blessing, because any students who had similar problems saw me as someone who had overcome this long-standing difficulty to the extent of writing a number of novels and qualifying as a teacher. This helped to give them belief in their ability and confidence to rise above problems of their own.

MATERIALS

All our creative ideas begin in the mind, but writing itself starts with the action of making marks on a page. Choosing the right writing materials can make the difference between writing effortlessly or feeling cramped and uncomfortable – which, of course, affects the ease with which our writing flows.

MANY WRITERS HOPE THAT THEIR finished writing will be in the form of a printed work. Ideally, this would be a book that has been edited and designed by a publisher, and produced in large numbers (hopefully) by a professional printer. We may spend some time imagining our beautifully illustrated, skilfully created, prize-winning novel taking up room on bookshop shelves and bedside tables all over the world. We spend less time considering the importance of the original materials of writing – our own pens, notebooks, laptops and similar – which are actually essential to the creation of our writing and the ease with which it flows.



In the same way, we often worry about our appearance — our clothes, hairstyle, shoes and other superficialities. And yet, when we take time to really consider, we know that the workings of our bodies, the health of our internal organs, the protection afforded by our skin, are significantly more important than our physical appearance. They are, of course, absolutely essential to our very lives. In meditation, we often concentrate on our breath because it is the one vital action of our bodies that we can easily be aware of. Without our breath, we could literally do nothing.

Mindfulness teaches us to notice what is fundamental to our being; to notice and to gently give time and respect to it. And mindfulness can also teach us to value the tools of our writing trade: to choose them with care, and to afford them the attention and respect that they deserve. As our breath supports and allows our very life, so our pens and paper give substance to our creative writing efforts. We can't expect to always be thinking about our breath or our writing materials, but we can decide to give them regular mindful attention, especially when we are beginning a writing session.

Beginning Again

Whether you are an experienced writer, beginner or anything in between, I would like to suggest that you allow yourself now to 'begin again' with your writing materials, choosing them mindfully, watchfully, with respect and concentration.