

The Mindful Way
to Free Yourself
from Suffering

VIDYAMALA BURCH

LIVING WELL
WITH PAIN & ILLNESS

SOUNDS TRUE
BOULDER, COLORADO

Praise for *Living Well with Pain and Illness*

“The cultivation of mindfulness can make a profound difference in how we relate to pain and whether chronic pain conditions need to turn into endless suffering and misery. This has been known over the past 2,600 years and is now being supported by studies in both medicine and neuroscience. In this book, Vidyamala makes the practice of befriending your experience through mindfulness, however unpleasant or pleasant it may be, both commonsensical and compelling. I admire her tremendously. This is a beautiful and very important book. It could save your life — and give it back to you.”

JON KABAT-ZINN, PHD, AUTHOR OF *FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING*
AND *COMING TO OUR SENSES*

“This is a wonderful work, one of those books where you know within a few pages that it is going to be worth stopping everything else in order to make time to read it. The book is a moving and compelling invitation to bring a radically new way of working with the fact of our pain. It is a book of enormous tenderness and honesty. Here is wise guidance on how we can move beyond our natural resistance to our pain to a willingness to be with it, and how we can live with greater ease by turning toward what we most fear about our pain and suffering.”

MARK WILLIAMS, COAUTHOR OF *MINDFULNESS-BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY FOR DEPRESSION* AND *THE MINDFUL WAY THROUGH DEPRESSION* AND PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND WELLCOME PRINCIPAL RESEARCH FELLOW, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, UK

“Vidyamala Burch has practiced mindfulness for many years, and she has applied the practice to the relief of physical suffering. She has now embodied the fruits of her extensive experience in a very readable and useful book. I hope that *Living Well with Pain and Illness* will have a wide circulation in a world where, despite all our progress, there is still so much suffering, some of it unnecessary.”

URGYEN SANGHARAKSHITA

“It is one thing to have our pain and emotions and another to be ruled by them, one thing to live our life and another to live in our thoughts about our life, one thing to make choices according to what we hold as important and another to helplessly act as our habits will have us do. This wonderful book helps us to appreciate these differences. The act of reading it alone may bring a small measure of space, life, freedom, warmth, and gentleness to your life. Following the direction it suggests could bring you much more and radically change your life for the better.”

LANCE M. MCCRACKEN, PHD, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND CLINICAL LEAD,
BATH CENTER FOR PAIN SERVICES, ROYAL NATIONAL HOSPITAL FOR RHEUMATIC
DISEASES AND CENTER OF PAIN RESEARCH, SCHOOL FOR HEALTH,
UNIVERSITY OF BATH

“This is an excellent self-help book for sufferers of chronic illnesses. It guides the reader in how to deal with pain, illness, frustrations, anxieties, and even life itself. Vidyamala has written a beautiful, profound, yet easy to understand book on how to live happily, regardless of what state of pain or difficulty you are in. A definite must-read for my patients, students, and colleagues in health care. A milestone book on living mindfulness fully.”

TONY FERNANDO, MD, PSYCHIATRIST, UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND, FACULTY OF
MEDICAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES, NEW ZEALAND

“In describing her own journey with pain, Vidyamala has written a definitive guide to the practice of meditation with pain and illness. She explains how we have a choice as to whether or not we suffer with pain, and she teaches us a quiet and reflective attitude of acceptance and kindness toward ourselves and others. Vidyamala describes how, through becoming more aware of our body and its sensations, the pain diminishes. I am happy to recommend this useful book to the members of my support group.”

JAN SADLER, AUTHOR OF *PAIN RELIEF WITHOUT DRUGS* AND THE PAIN SUPPORT WEBSITE, PAIN SUPPORT.CO.UK

“This book, while acknowledging the complexity of living with pain and illness, suggests creative ways to live with these challenges. Vidyamala draws not only from her own experience with chronic pain but also from the experiences of her many students who have learned, through Breathworks, to live with their pain more skillfully using mindfulness. She demonstrates skills and understanding that can help us all move through life with greater ease whatever our ‘particular version of the human predicament’ may be.”

PAMELA ERDMANN, MD, SENIOR TEACHER, CENTER FOR MINDFULNESS, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SCHOOL, AND HONORARY LECTURER, UNIVERSITY OF WALES, BANGOR, UK

“Vidyamala has made an insightful contribution to the current dialogue between mindfulness and the fields of medicine and psychology. Rooted in her own experience, this book will be a great support both to those living with pain and those endeavoring to find new ways of working with pain and illness.”

CHRISTINA FELDMAN, AUTHOR OF *COMPASSION* AND COFOUNDER OF GAIA HOUSE



*Do not look back, my friend
No one knows how the world ever began.
Do not fear the future, nothing lasts forever.
If you dwell on the past or the future
You will miss the moment.*

RUMI, *HIDDEN MUSIC*, TRANSLATED BY
MARYAM MAFI AND AZIMA MALITA KOLIN

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Foreword



Pain is such a universal experience, and yet, for all its familiarity, there is a vast amount about it that we don't understand and for which we barely have adequate concepts. I have worked in the field of pain (mainly in group treatment using cognitive behavioral methods) for over twenty years and have contributed to the research literature on the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral methods. I have learned a tremendous amount from several thousand patients treated at INPUT Pain Management Unit at St. Thomas's Hospital in London, where I directed research activities, and from studying the research literature and evidence. But being introduced to Vidyamala and her work, as she describes it in this book, has added a new dimension to my thinking about the psychology of pain.

Most of the difficulties in conceptualizing pain arise from the profound dualism of Western thinking, in which an autonomous spirit floats free, observing and organizing the body in which it officially resides. This way of thinking spreads confusion and undermines an integrated understanding of ourselves. By drawing on non-Western philosophies, we may find more effective ways to represent, inevitably in a simplified way, the extraordinarily complex and recursive processes underlying the experiences of pain. *Living Well with Pain and Illness* takes such ideas, and some of the practices and stances that accompany them, and applies them to the problems of living with pain in a way that is deeply inspirational, and at the same time, completely practical. The spirit of scientific curiosity, of accountability, of honesty, and of

wanting to build on the best of current understanding, is exemplified in this book. This spirit distinguishes the philosophy and practice of mindfulness and meditative methods as applied to pain from many of the alternative and complementary treatment methods with which it is sometimes grouped.

Pain arises from a warning system that is superbly efficient; it is immediate, and it demands our attention. Even so, it is not only driven by warnings of external dangers. What we experience as pain is a balance between, on the one hand, signals of what is happening outside and inside our bodies and, on the other, what our brains judge to be priorities and worth our attention. As with any complex system, this balance can get disrupted, generating false alarms, amplifying pain, overestimating threat, diverting attention to a pain that is already too familiar. The pain is absolutely real, but there is some room to maneuver around or to disengage from the threat, the distress, and the insistence of the pain experience. This maneuvering can be summarized as changing the relationship with pain.

I met Vidyamala in 2004, several years after she had written to me asking about how to best evaluate her work with Breathworks, and hoping to share insights in pain management. Hers seems to be a model approach: it is not enough to convince yourself that your approach is working; you need evidence as well. Her work was driven by patients and her own scientific curiosity, and her description of that work was expressed with passion, as was her wish to be accountable for the quality of the work, both to patients and to the wider pain-treatment field.

Evidence is accumulating for the efficacy of this way of managing pain. One of the earliest studies on mindfulness, by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his group,¹ involved people with chronic/persistent pain, but it was several decades later that the research literature started to develop, notably with studies from the Bath Pain Management Center.² From the start, Vidyamala and her colleagues have taken a thoughtful stance

toward evaluating their group work, and particularly toward trying to understand the processes by which mindfulness changes the experience of pain and its impact on the person with pain. She reminds us that the term “rehabilitation” means “re-inhabiting,” and all the methods in this book help the person with pain to re-inhabit his or her body with greater harmony and ease, no matter how painful the body may feel, rather than trying to fight it or block out its messages.

People with pain, who are too often characterized in the medical literature in terms of inactivity, avoidance, caution, and withdrawal from everyday life, often describe their experience in terms of “fighting the pain” or “trying not to give in to the pain.” However, they can never “win” outright, and so they most often feel as if life is a permanent battlefield. This book describes instead how to negotiate peace with pain, to understand and find common ground—even, one might say, to plant flowers there. There are not only helpful descriptions and discussions of meditation and related practices in the context of persistent pain, but also an honest account of overcoming resistance and perverse attitudes, and thoughtful sections about physical positions that take account of pain. Vidyamala fully acknowledges the difficulties of pain rather than telling a tale of false comfort. She wrote the book in paced spells at the computer, because the time she can sit is limited by the buildup of pain, demonstrating acceptance and kindness. Her struggles are described with humor, affection, and understanding, and it is clear that she truly listens to the struggles of other people.

This is one of the most generous and empathic books I have read. Nobody with an open mind could fail to learn from it. Readers with and without pain will recognize eloquent descriptions of the traps we fall into when we struggle to avoid what we don’t want in our lives. Vidyamala brings an intuitive voice to a thoughtful, thorough, but not uncritical description of mindfulness and meditation theory and practice. She uses her own experiences, particularly her experience of

her own pain, but without a trace of self-absorption or solipsism. The way she describes living with pain is anything but separate and mystical: it is very alive, connected, aware of the self and of others. I remember particularly how this came across at a packed workshop at the British Pain Society meeting in 2006. Vidyamala and her colleagues Gary and Sona held the complete attention of doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists, nurses, and others as they described their work, answered questions, and took the audience through some mindfulness exercises.

When she first contacted me in 2001, Vidyamala wrote: “I do love this work and am often very moved and inspired by the people I meet,” and that was exactly what emerged from talking to her — a completely authentic desire to share, a capacity to integrate the details of people’s struggles with pain with the larger picture of pain and the various dimensions in which help was constructed, and a drive to provide the highest possible standard of help that she and her colleagues could manage. The work of Vidyamala and her close colleagues comes from not only their beliefs, but from a deep emotional commitment to easing the suffering of anyone who lives with pain of any sort. This book comes from the same spirit.

DR. AMANDA C. DE C. WILLIAMS
READER IN CLINICAL HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY
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Introduction: Using This Book



In a small independent bookshop in London in 1990, I picked up a book called *Who Dies?*¹ It included exercises to help people approach illness and death with dignified awareness by turning *toward* their experience, and one chapter dealt specifically with ways to work with physical pain. I read it avidly. Already I had lived with constant pain for fourteen years following a spinal injury, and as I read, I felt tremendous relief. For the first time I'd found an approach to living with pain that I intuitively knew to be true.

Although I'd already been meditating for several years, this was the first time that I'd come across explicit guidance in how to meditate with physical pain. What was so radical and compelling was the message of opening to the pain in a kindly and accepting way rather than continually trying to defeat and overcome it. I embraced this message and began to apply it to my situation, for I knew my deeply entrenched habit of battling my pain simply caused more pain — and I wanted that fight to end.

This book is dedicated to anyone who finds him- or herself in the situation of that embattled young woman and who wants new ways to live with pain and illness or other long-term difficulties, regardless of their cause. I've written it in the hope that it will help you in the way that I was helped by *Who Dies?* and other books — as well as by the teachers with whom I've had the good fortune to study during my twenty years of mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is a special kind of awareness that is attentive and warmly engaged with each moment

of life, and for me, it has been a lifesaver. It has shown me how I can be creative with my mental and emotional states rather than reactive. This has helped me to lay down my weapons and come to terms with my situation with maturity and peace. I still have pain, but the pain of fighting that pain has eased, and my quality of life has improved beyond recognition.

In 2004 I cofounded Breathworks, a nonprofit organization that offers mindfulness-based strategies to others living with pain, illness, and stress. We teach the methods introduced in this book, usually to groups of ten to fifteen people who meet for eight weekly sessions. The people I meet always inspire me. When human beings confront real difficulty and have no option but to dig deep within, inner nobility often comes forth. I continually learn lessons myself as I watch people inch their way, week by week, back to a life that feels worth living.

Over the years of running Breathworks, I'm often asked for materials by people unable to attend a course that would enable them to benefit from the magic of mindfulness. This book is in part a response to those requests, and I hope you will find it interesting and practically useful. I've also written it with a strong sense of how I myself felt all those years ago when I first faced the loneliness of disability and chronic pain with few skills to help me. Over subsequent years I have made many mistakes, but I have also learned many valuable lessons, and if this book can help even a few people find an easier way through their own journey with pain and illness, then I will feel it has been well worth writing.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The book is divided into sections covering the underlying principles of a mindful approach to living with pain and illness, as well as practical guidance and exercises.

Principles

- Part 1 starts with my own story of living with pain. It looks at the nature of pain and describes how we can find a new relationship with it using mindfulness.
- Part 2 explores mindfulness and how it can bring wholeness, even if your body is injured or ill.

Practical Guidance

- Part 3 shows you how to come home to your body through breath awareness and mindful movement.
- Part 4 explores meditation in more detail and offers useful tips.
- Part 5 introduces three formal meditation practices.
- Part 6 looks at how you can take mindfulness into your daily life.

From my own experience, I've learned the importance of applying mindfulness to the whole of my life. The benefits will be lessened if you meditate but lose awareness during the day or don't bring mindfulness to how you move your body or are habitually gripped by destructive habits of thinking and speaking. So the mindfulness program introduced here covers all aspects of your life: breath and body awareness, mindful movement, transforming your mind and emotions with meditation, and bringing mindfulness to your daily life. No one practices mindfulness perfectly, but if you bring mindfulness to all the moments of the day, no matter how imperfect each moment may be, this will open the door to a dramatically improved life.

The main focus of the book is physical pain, but the mindfulness techniques are relevant to illness of any sort. They will help you manage your energy and fatigue and improve your quality of life. The techniques are also relevant to mental and emotional suffering, such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

Living with pain myself, I know how off-putting it is to be confronted by a long, densely written, and heavy book. With that in mind I have written this in a convenient format and divided the book into short sections, so you can dip in and out of it at your own pace. You may want to start with the exploration of the breath and movement in part 3, or perhaps the meditation practices in part 5, but the other chapters will help you understand more fully what you're doing.

Making mindfulness an integral part of your life takes practice. Appendix 1 includes a weekly guide outlining how you can systematically learn the various practices in this book. This will help you get the most from the program and develop a satisfying and sustainable schedule of learning over several weeks.

It also helps to be guided in these practices. I recommend that alongside the book you use the “led” meditations that I've recorded, and these are available via the Sounds True website: soundstrue.com/burch. Listening to these exercises will bring to life the relevant aspect of mindfulness in a more vivid and meaningful way than simply reading about it, so I strongly encourage you to make time to listen to these tracks. You will also gain the most benefit from mindfulness if you follow a systematic program of practice, so it becomes an integral part of your life.

The Latin expression *carpe diem* (meaning “seize the day”) is an attitude that is often vividly present for those of us whose lives have been stripped down to essentials through suffering. I hope this book helps you seize all the moments of all the days in your life, with all the love in your heart.