

**I'M  
MINDFUL,  
NOW  
WHAT?**

**Moving Beyond Mindfulness to  
Meet the Modern World**

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## Introduction

The mindfulness revolution is in full swing. Countless people—from scientists, scholars, and mental health workers to the average practitioner—are touting its benefits. I am one of those people. For over forty-five years I have practiced mindfulness meditation and reaped its extraordinary rewards.<sup>1</sup> I begin and end every day with meditation, engage in annual retreats, and teach it around the world. Twenty years ago my passion for this ancient art led me into a traditional Tibetan Buddhist three-year retreat, which remains the most transformative event of my life.

This wasn't the normal three-year retreat designed for monastics but a creative five-year program developed for the modern Westerner that alternated one year in secluded retreat with one year back in the world. It was a brilliant way to mix meditation with life and stretch the meditative mind into post-retreat. But this was not an easy five years. The blistering discipline put the five years of my doctoral studies to shame. During the years of strict retreat, I practiced meditation fourteen hours a day and even slept sitting up in the traditional meditation box. This innovative container, what I came to call “ego's coffin,” is an effective support for the practice of the nocturnal meditations (described in chapter 8). The retreat provided the systematic training, crafted over thousands of years by some of the world's greatest contemplatives, to enter a kind of lifetime retreat in the midst of daily life.

It was like going to a meditation university. I took extended “courses” in dozens of meditations that allowed me to discover dimensions of mind and heart I had no idea even existed. The off years were just as fruitful because they gave me the opportunity to stabilize and incorporate the practices and prepare for the upcoming year. The time off also showed me the limitations of retreat, the many “near enemies” of deep meditative practice, and how easy it is to slide into “spiritual bypassing.” This term was coined by the psychologist John Welwood and refers to how readily we can use meditation and spirituality to bypass the challenges

of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> If we're not careful, meditation can easily turn into a subtle cop-out.

I left the retreat center, called Sopa Chöling (literally translated as “dharma place of patience” or “dharma place of forbearance”), with tears of gratitude for the magnitude of what I had been given.<sup>3</sup> As my good fortune became evident while still in retreat, I found myself saying, *There should be thousands of people in line to do this training!* A three-year retreat is traditionally done in silence, sequestered from the world, and controlled by dozens of monastic vows. Shaving my head and donning robes, I surrendered to the time-honored discipline. Retreatants are rightly advised to stay quiet about what happens in retreat and practice humility. Intensive meditation is a private affair, to be kept within the family. As they caution in the Taoist tradition, “He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know.”

While I deeply respect this traditional approach and have honored this unspoken contract for the past twenty years, I also believe it is possible to share some of this meditative technology with a world that is being conquered by materialism and consumerism. Otherwise, what's the point of meditative practice? To self-improve out of reality? To follow your bliss into heavenly states while the rest of the world goes to hell? If we can't take these remarkable meditative tools and apply them to a world in such desperate need, meditation becomes an insidious form of escape and a nasty case of spiritual bypassing. It becomes increasingly irrelevant in a world that is on fire.

A three-year retreat is secretive in nature but not in spirit. The spirit of engaging in this intensive training is to step out and help the world. You step back to work on yourself before you step forward to benefit others. I'm acutely aware of the slippery slope of even talking this way, and that by professing my homage to traditional codes of silence and the need for humility I'm sneaking in self-aggrandizement and proclaiming authority. So while I honor the traditions and respect the code of silence, I must acknowledge that we live in untraditional times. If contemplatives don't step forward to share the inner technologies that can change the world, the traditions, like civilization itself, may go extinct.<sup>4</sup> This sharing

is already happening. Some of the meditations offered in this book are tiptoeing into the public domain, but I know of no single volume that brings them all together while providing a constructive critique of the mindfulness revolution.

The tipping point for me came when I finally grasped the inconvenient truth that this planet, and everyone who inhabits it, is in serious trouble.<sup>5</sup> If we don't wake up individually, and then collectively, *Homo sapiens* will become one of the 95 percent of species that has historically gone extinct. It's often said that the biggest problem in this modern age is that we have unrivaled technologies with untold power but a level of awareness that is not correlative to that power. The technologies are then used to harm others and abuse the planet, which is tantamount to suicide. The counteracting meditative technologies offered in the pages ahead are designed to nurture that correlative awareness so we can use conventional technology with an intelligence equal to its power.

Our charter in this book is, therefore, threefold: to celebrate the power of mindfulness and point out its limitations; to introduce you to the meditations that build upon mindfulness and address the question, "Now what?"; and to do all of this in the service of helping others and the fragile planet we share.

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Over the past ten years I have written seven books, all of which circumambulate the central theme of meditation.<sup>6</sup> There's an introduction to meditation, a volume about the promise and peril of deep spiritual practice, a book about working with physical and emotional pain, three books on meditations you can do while you sleep and dream, and a book about meditations that prepare you for death. The purpose of the book you currently hold in your hands is not to give you an exhaustive look at all these practices but to provide a survey of what is possible in the world of meditation and introduce you to the wonders of your own mind.

Even though it's a survey, this book does not skim. The endnotes provide additional depth for the deep divers. If you're new to meditation,

I recommend you skip these references for now and return to them on a second reading. The heart of this book is about going further and deeper, so each reader will have to find their comfort levels with how far they want to go.

To honor the depth and nuance of mindfulness itself, we'll start by looking at the terminology commonly used and make sure we're all on the same page. What exactly is *mindfulness*, *awareness*, and *insight meditation*, for example? Different people use the same words, thinking they always refer to the same thing. But these are multivalent terms, and confusion is rampant. If you find yourself getting bogged down in this (or any) section, just skim it.

While you can learn a fair amount from a book, if you're new to meditation it helps to have a meditation instructor. Can you really learn how to play golf or the piano from a book? I will, therefore, list in the endnotes some of the communities that engage in these mentor-student practices as part of their curriculum. This part of the book will fall short, of course, and I apologize to the many capable organizations and individuals that are omitted.<sup>7</sup>

While I remain an open student of all the wisdom streams, I study and practice mostly in the Buddhist tradition. When people ask me what tradition I follow, I often say I'm a "curioust." I'm deeply curious about the human condition, the nature of the mind, and any method that allows me to explore it. Remember that the Buddha wasn't a Buddhist, just as Christ wasn't a Christian or Muhammad a Muslim. These were intensely curious individuals who looked deeply within themselves and came back to share what they discovered. No one has exclusive rights on the mind or a patent on truth.

I have taken refuge as a Buddhist because of the adage "Chase two rabbits, catch none." At a certain point it helps to commit. Buddhism speaks to me, but it may not speak to you. I could strip all the practices in this book down to their clinical essence, as some skillful researchers and spiritual teachers have done in their presentations of meditation or spirituality.<sup>8</sup> This might invite a broader audience, those who are allergic to any "ism" or those who are more spiritual than religious.<sup>9</sup> As viable



as that paring down may be, it borders on being disingenuous. My bias is to honor the traditions from which these practices arose and then culturally translate them into the modern world. Just as there are literal translators who strive to convert one language to another, cultural translators work to convert a body of teachings from one culture to another, or from one time period into another. This form of translation is an essential part of our journey.

I have personally engaged in each of the practices in this book for decades, so I will draw on that experience, conjoined with my study of the literature and the teachings I have received from meditation masters who have accomplished these practices. While my approach is mostly based on the Buddhist tradition, it is also integral in spirit and, therefore, casts a wide net.

I have neither the capacity nor the hubris to study and practice the meditations from countless other wisdom traditions, then somehow condense them into bite-size chunks for everybody. However, I do think an open-minded reader will be able to work with these meditations and, when necessary, adapt them to their own idiosyncrasies. In the end, any form of learning and transformation involves translation at multiple levels. You are the final translator. You are the one who has to bring these teachings into your mind and heart, into a vocabulary that speaks to you, and then into your life.

## CHAPTER 1

### Mindfulness and the Foundations

Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen;  
simply wait. Do not even wait; be quite still and solitary.  
The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked;  
it has no choice; it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.

—Franz Kafka

**W**hen people think of meditation, they tend to only focus on mindfulness. In reality, *meditation* is a catch-all term for a variety of practices, much like *sports* refers to dozens of physical activities. As we expand our horizons beyond mindfulness, it's important that we enhance our understanding of meditation altogether. As we journey into other practices, we'll *transcend but include* mindfulness. In other words, mindfulness is the infrastructure of meditation upon which many of the practices in this book are established. Without a basis of mindfulness, every other practice will be built on shaky ground. So while the practices herein go beyond mindfulness, they always include it. It's like growing from age eighteen to age nineteen. You don't get rid of what you experienced at eighteen; you transcend but include it.

In nearly half a century of practicing meditation, I have discovered that each succeeding practice I learn has strengthened and augmented the preceding practice. For example, when I was studying physics, I was pleasantly surprised to see how my study of linear algebra and differential equations helped me understand basic algebra, and how Calculus III

helped me incorporate Calculus II, which helped me digest Calculus I. Similarly, the following meditations not only transcend and include mindfulness but they also stabilize and enhance it. Learning other forms of meditation will help you develop your mindfulness, and ironically, by “leaving” mindfulness, you will find more of it, and you will find it more valuable, more applicable, more profound.

Before we transcend mindfulness, let’s make sure we understand it. The English term *mindfulness* was first used by Thomas Williams Rhys Davids in 1881 as a translation of the Pali word *sati*. Common renderings of *sati* are “attention,” “retention,” “awareness,” and “discernment.”<sup>1</sup> In Sanskrit this word translates to *smṛti*, which means “memory” and refers to the ability to remain focused on something without distraction or forgetfulness. This is closely allied to the Tibetan rendition *trenpa*, “to recollect.” The scholars Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr. write that mindfulness “contributes to control of the mind by eliminating distraction and helping the meditator gain mastery of his thought processes. . . . The emphasis on mindfulness is one of the most distinctive features of Buddhist meditation theory.”<sup>2</sup>

Many people think that mindfulness came from Buddhism, but it predates the Buddha by at least a thousand years. It arose from the ancient mists of Indian history and took shape in Hinduism, which goes back some four thousand years. There is no discernable origin or founder of Hinduism and therefore no way to pinpoint the exact birth of mindfulness. What is clear is that the Buddha did not invent it. He inherited mindfulness from ancient Indian thought.

In the modern West, mindfulness gained traction with the innovative work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who skillfully introduced it to countless people with his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs. His definition of mindfulness remains a workable one: “The awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience.”<sup>3</sup> The noted translator of Tibetan sacred texts Larry Mermelstein writes that

mindfulness means “to remember, to bring to mind.” In meditation it has the important applied meaning of “to be present.” To be present means that you can actually *remember* that you are here, right now. And what are we with right here, now, all the time? Our mind. And if our mind is fully present, then we are “mindful.” The function of mindfulness can be defined as the ability to hold the mind to an object, whether that object is your breath, your sense perceptions, or the arising, abiding, and ceasing of your thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

Mindfulness is often used synonymously with the word *awareness*, but while intimately connected, they are not quite the same. Awareness watches over mindfulness to ensure it remains present. When we get distracted from the object of mindfulness—whether it’s our breath, a candle, a mantra, or any other hitching post—and drift into mindlessness, it’s awareness that detects this straying and alerts the mind to come back to being mindful. Mindfulness and awareness work hand in hand in the contemplative traditions to keep the mind in the present moment and bring it back when it strays.<sup>5</sup> In the Tibetan tradition, they are so intimately wedded that they’re often condensed into one term: *tren-shé* (mindfulness-awareness).

Mindfulness-awareness is like puppy training, and our approach to the practice should be in that playful and loving spirit. Instructing your puppy mind to “Stay . . . stay” is akin to mindfulness. When it disobeys and starts to stray, awareness notices that movement and returns the pup back to its stationary position. When the puppy strays, you don’t chastise it. You gently but precisely bring it back to its training position.

In short, *mindfulness* is a polysemous term with many definitions, not only between traditions but even within them. For example, the Tibetan Buddhist use can be different from that of Zen or Theravada Buddhism. The plot thickens when scientists step in and translate the term in scientific language.<sup>6</sup>

The nuances get technical, and scholars continue to debate mindfulness and its precise meaning (using their favorite ancient texts as support), not only within Buddhism but between the many contemplative traditions altogether.<sup>7</sup> Let's keep things simple and rest on the general spirit of the aforementioned definitions, and this final one from B. Alan Wallace, a noted authority on attention and mindfulness from the Indic and Tibetan traditions: "Mindfulness is defined as the mental faculty of maintaining attention, without forgetfulness or distraction, on a familiar object."

While mindfulness is used in many religious and spiritual traditions, it is not itself religious or spiritual. It's a technique, dare we say a "technology," for taming the mind.<sup>8</sup> Anybody with a mind can practice mindfulness, and no tradition can claim it as its own. Can anybody claim exclusive rights to attention, mental discipline, or even caring? These are universal principles available to all.

The Buddhist tradition makes the important distinction between Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*, as represented in the seventh factor of the Eightfold Noble Path), and Wrong Mindfulness (*miccha sati*). The attention of a sniper is not of the same quality as the mindfulness of a surgeon or a saint. Right Mindfulness is guided by wholesome intentions, ethical principles, and discipline. The Buddhist scholar Andrew Olendzki writes, "Mindfulness is an inherently wholesome or healthy mental factor, so it cannot function at any moment when the mind is under the influence of greed or hatred, even in the mildest versions of favoring or opposing. Anytime you want or don't want things to be a certain way, the mind is not being mindful."<sup>9</sup>

Right Mindfulness is sometimes translated as "correct mindfulness," and "correct" means understanding how inextricably connected mindfulness is to other healthy aspects of the mind. It is difficult to tease out a single definition of mindfulness because a correct definition has to include the retinue that always accompanies mindfulness. Mindfulness is like one instrument in a well-tuned ensemble. It never plays alone.

Buddhist psychology, or Abhidharma, states that when mindfulness is present, a number of other factors naturally come into play. So "correct

mindfulness” is more than the solo practice of bare attention. The scholar Sarah Shaw says that the other “instruments” in the orchestration of mindfulness include an ethical quality, a regard for consequences, self-respect, a sense of balance, and confidence.<sup>10</sup>

Countless books continue to proclaim the benefits of mindfulness, and over seventeen thousand scientific articles have been published.<sup>11</sup> It is beyond our scope to list the many physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits of mindfulness. The suggested readings in the endnotes will direct you to a number of these sources.

## SHADOW SIDES

While the actual practice of mindfulness works, the growing mindfulness revolution, like any movement, has drawbacks. Wherever you find light, you will find shadows. And the brighter the light, the sharper the shadow. Our charter in this book concerns the limitations of mindfulness as an actual practice and with the shadow side of the mindfulness revolution. But we have to acknowledge some of the other social and cultural shadows.<sup>12</sup> As with the term *mindfulness* itself, there are many other players in this mindful orchestra. The philosopher David R. Loy and the professor Ronald Purser point out just a few:

Uncoupling mindfulness from its ethical and religious Buddhist context is understandable as an expedient move to make such training a viable product on the open market. But the rush to secularize and commodify mindfulness into a marketable technique may be leading to an unfortunate denaturing of this ancient practice, which was intended for far more than relieving a headache, reducing blood pressure, or helping executives become better focused and more productive. While a stripped-down, secularized technique—what some critics are now calling “McMindfulness”—may make it more palatable to the corporate world, decontextualizing mindfulness from its original liberative and transformative purpose, as well