

GOOD MORNING, I LOVE YOU

Mindfulness +
Self-Compassion
Practices to Rewire Your
Brain for Calm, Clarity + Joy

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PART 1

What You Practice Grows Stronger



A MONK'S WHISPER

What you practice grows stronger.

a British monk I met in Thailand

It is never too late to rewire your brain and transform your life. I know this is possible for you because I experienced it. The practices contained in this book offer a roadmap for strengthening the brain's circuitry of deep calm, contentment, and clarity. Best of all, you can begin wherever you are. As the fifteenth-century Indian poet Kabir says, "Wherever you are *is* the entry point."

My entry point came at my lowest moment: I was seventeen, lying in a hospital bed, a metal rod in my spine, watching my life as I knew it dissolve before my eyes.

I seemed to be living the dream in beautiful Laguna Beach, California. I'd been crowned homecoming princess, had led our volleyball team to win a state championship, and had just received early admission to Duke University to play volleyball on their NCAA volleyball team.

A few months before graduation I was sitting on the examining table in my orthopedic surgeon's office, waiting for him to come in and do the routine checkup I'd had countless times to monitor my scoliosis. I'd had this spine curvature since birth, but it hadn't interfered with my life. My doctor

and I had forged a close relationship, and I was eager to tell him about the volleyball championship and Duke.

I vaulted off the table the moment the door opened—but the look on my doctor's face stopped me short.

“Shauna, the X-rays show that your scoliosis has gotten worse. The bones in your spine are going to puncture your lungs unless we do something. We need to operate.”

I was stunned, whiplashed by his words. And then: a rising tide of terror.

The weeks before the surgery were an eternity in purgatory. I was haunted by the image of that large metal rod going into my spine. My mind was locked into a future of dread and despair.

When I woke after the operation, I went from purgatory to hell: I was in excruciating pain and could barely move. I realized that my life as I knew it—and my future as I had dreamt it—were gone.

Throughout months of rehabilitation, I struggled to live in a stranger's body, and worse still, a stranger's mind. Gone was the spunky, athletic teen. In her place was a meek, frightened little girl. Every movement was awkward and painful.

But my mind tortured me most. I lay there, feeling ever more hopeless and terrified: *Will I always be in pain? I'm never going to play volleyball again. No one at college will like me. Who will ever love me? No one will be attracted to this broken body with huge, red scars.*

I tried to push through it. I forced myself to think positive thoughts, but they couldn't quell the tremendous fear and pain within. I tried distracting myself with visits from friends and by watching movies, but nothing quieted the worries raging in my head.

Then hope arrived from a place I least expected. Although my father and I shared a deep love, we were often at odds and fought about almost everything.

Our relationship changed after my surgery. I'll never forget the day he walked into my room, eyes filled with fatherly love and concern, and handed me a book. It was a copy of *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a pioneer in the field of mindfulness.

I gasped as I read the opening paragraph: "Whatever has happened to you, it has already happened. The important question is, how are you going to handle it?"¹

I read on, often through tears, as this wise book revealed a possibility that had eluded me for months: *I could be happy again*. My resilience, shrouded by months of fear and pain, began to waken. I felt a flicker of hope—hope that I could heal.

I read every book, article, and essay on mindfulness that I could find. The more I read and practiced, the more I began to notice small changes. Instead of dwelling on the past or obsessing about the future, I started to discover little moments of peace in the present.

These little moments—the in-between moments—began to matter: when my mom opened the window and the smell of ocean air enveloped me, when the last ray of sunlight retreated for the night. I even heard magic as my dad played his silver flute, which only a few months earlier had routinely embarrassed me in front of my friends.

As my mind settled, the pain in my body began to shift. My relationship to the sensations was different. It was no longer "my pain"; rather, it became "the pain." And when I didn't exacerbate things with my fears, I began to notice moments of peace. Although the pain remained, I suffered less.

My progress was gradual, sometimes almost imperceptible, but I felt each improvement acutely. Every tiny gain motivated me to keep going.

My mom still tears up when she recounts the moment, four months after surgery, when she knew I would be okay. I was

home, still in a hospital bed, but my scars were healing well, and I was finally walking without help.

On a whim, I announced I was going to the beach for a swim. I shed the frumpy grey sweatsuit that had been my uniform and donned my favorite blue swimsuit. Mom watched my emaciated body gingerly navigating the shifting sands as I made my way toward the water. She remembers holding her breath as my fire-engine red scars eased into the brisk whitewash of waves.

In the moment after the water washed over my head, just before I emerged to open my eyes, I felt a spark of life flash through me. A sense of rebirth and the strength to begin again. In that moment, somehow, my mom and I both knew I was going to be okay.

That swim was the start of a metamorphosis. Even though my daily progress was still barely visible, my faith, joy, and hope were restored. I knew that despite everything that had happened, and whatever might happen, there was something inside me that was indestructible. My journey had begun.

Flash forward four years: I'm riding on a rickety motorcycle through sticky tropical heat, arms in a death grip around my friend Robyn's waist as we careen down a winding gravel road with near-zero visibility. It is our third day in Thailand. We're looking for a temple hidden under a waterfall.

I had met Robyn at Duke, where we were both enrolled in Dr. Craighead's infamous 8:00 am Abnormal Psych course. I was a diligent freshman and she was a "cool" sophomore, but we were kindred spirits and formed what would become a life-long friendship through conversations about psychology, boys, and the meaning of life.

During my final year at Duke, Robyn called me from London, where she was working. She was planning a trek to Nepal and Thailand and wanted me to join.

Join my best friend on an adventure where I could continue my study of mindfulness, in a place where it had been practiced for centuries? I shouted an enthusiastic “yes!”

Despite the sweat stinging our eyes as we zoomed down the road, Robyn somehow spotted the tiny wooden sign marking the trail to the waterfall monastery.

Swatting away bugs and hacking our way through the lush jungle in our outfits of sarongs and flip-flops wasn't easy, but finally we saw it: the sun illuminating iridescent water cascading down a roaring waterfall. That meant the monastery lay just ahead.

We scrambled down slippery, moss-covered stone stairs. At the bottom stood a monk in saffron robes. Without a hint of surprise at our arrival, he welcomed us and invited us to meditate with him. As we tiptoed into the humble stone building, the scent of incense enveloped us. Formidable, vine-covered walls enclosed a modest altar with a small Buddha statue and a single burning candle, surrounded by an assortment of meditation cushions.

My mind raced. *Omigod, this is the real thing: a real monk, a real temple, real meditation cushions!* Then the meditation session began.

To this day, I can feel how my body and breath expanded the moment I closed my eyes. Time disappeared as a quilt of ease, clarity, and calm swaddled my mind. And then something astonishing happened. For the first time since my surgery nearly four years earlier, I felt complete comfort in my body. No pain. No fear. The boundaries of my body dissolved. I felt connected to everything with an absolute sense of peace.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the session. I looked over at Robyn. She held up her watch and mouthed, “It's been an hour!” It had felt like an instant.

As I left the temple, still wrapped in bliss, the monk looked into my eyes and whispered two simple but potent words: “Keep practicing.”

One week later, on the strength of the monk’s whisper, I walked through the gates of a Thai monastery to begin my first meditation retreat. The monks didn’t speak much English, and I didn’t speak any Thai, but I knew mindfulness was about being present, and after my experience at the waterfall monastery, I felt confident and excited to begin.

The first morning, we gathered in the large meditation hall overlooking a beautiful pond filled with lotus flowers. I couldn’t imagine a more perfect setting for beginning my first retreat.

The initial instructions, given in rudimentary English, were simple and straightforward: feel the breath going in and out of my nose. I began. One breath. Two breaths. My mind wandered off. I brought it back. One breath. Darn! It wandered again.

Until now, much of my study of mindfulness had been theoretical. The real thing was proving far different from what I had imagined. I’d expected meditation to be similar to the peaceful and healing experience I’d had at the waterfall temple. Yet here I was, struggling just to keep my mind present. It was sucked into the past: *If only I had _____.* *I wish I hadn’t _____.* Or it vaulted into the future: *What if _____?* *How will I ever _____?* *What will I do when _____?*

The more I tried to force my mind to be still, the more my attention darted from one thought to another. I finally understood the meaning of “monkey mind,” a term I’d often seen in mindfulness readings to describe how our mind swings from thought to thought like a monkey swinging from limb to limb. My hopes for having the “perfect” meditation retreat in this “perfect” setting came crashing down.

Given the language barrier, and the fact that it was a silent retreat, I was unable to talk to the monks about my struggles. Left to my own devices, I dove into an abyss of self-judgment: *What is wrong with you? You are terrible at this. Why are you even here? You think you're so spiritual. You're a fake.*

Worse still, I started judging everyone around me, even the monks: *Why are they just sitting here? Shouldn't they be doing something?*

Fortunately, an English-speaking monk from London arrived the next day and I was granted a meeting with him. When I shared how hard I was trying, and how terribly my mindfulness practice was going, he responded with a heartfelt chuckle: “Oh, dear, you're not practicing mindfulness. You're practicing judgment, impatience, and frustration.”

Then he said five words that I will never forget: “What you practice grows stronger.”

This monk grasped bedrock truths about the brain that neuroscientists were just beginning to discover at the time: whatever we practice moment by moment physically alters our brain. *What we practice grows stronger.*

The monk went on to explain that if we practice mindfulness with judgment, we are growing judgment. If we practice with frustration, we are growing frustration. He taught me that mindfulness isn't just about paying attention. It's about *how* we pay attention.

› *Mindfulness isn't just about paying attention. It's about **how** we pay attention.*

True mindfulness involves an attitude of kindness and curiosity. This wise monk explained that the practice of mindfulness was like feeling the loving embrace of a dear friend, welcoming all of our experience. Even the messy, imperfect parts.

What I only glimpsed at that time—but became the focus of my research and my life’s work—is that cultivating an attitude of kindness and compassion is the “secret sauce” of mindfulness.

To be clear, this attitude of kindness isn’t about letting ourselves off the hook or papering over difficult things. Instead, it’s a way to become truly accountable for all of our emotions, thoughts, and actions. We learn to understand and heal rather than blame and shame.

In short, I now understood that *how* we pay attention—our **attitude**—was as important as our **attention** itself.

But there’s a third element of mindfulness I had yet to learn. Toward the end of the week, the monk pointed out that we are practicing something all the time—not just when we’re meditating, but in every moment. This means we are growing something all the time.

So, the most important question becomes: What do you want to grow? This is your **intention**: what you care most about—your personal values, goals, and aspirations.

› *We are practicing something all the time—not just when we’re meditating, but in every moment. This means we are growing something all the time. So the most important question becomes: What do you want to grow?*

Gradually, with the monk's help, my practice shifted. I began to observe my judgmental voice, instead of believing it. I stopped trying to control my experiences, instead approaching them with curiosity, interest, and kindness. I began to relax a bit more into my experience, instead of trying to "do it right." I realized that mindfulness practice was exactly that: it was about **practice, not perfection.**

As I said goodbye to the monastery and began my journey home, I felt deeply happy. Not the ephemeral happiness based on external events, but rather a deep sense of contentment arising from shifts in my internal landscape. Only later would I learn that researchers were proving in the lab what I had discovered in the monastery: **External** changes will not make us happier long-term, but **internal** changes can.

In Search of the Science— and a New Model of Mindfulness

I returned to the US determined to understand what I had experienced and share it with others. After graduating from Duke, I spent the ensuing six years studying the science behind mindfulness, focusing on the importance of incorporating *intention* and *attitude* to the practice.

Over twenty years of clinical work and scientific study, I've witnessed the positive effects of mindfulness and compassion practices on thousands of people—from hard-driving CEOs to stressed-out college students, from overwhelmed new mothers to women with breast cancer, from anxious young children to military veterans with PTSD to patients in palliative care.

Although the field continues to evolve with new research and insights, there are two key findings that we see again and again:

1. **The practice of mindfulness works.** It's good for you. It strengthens immune function, reduces stress, improves sleep, and offers countless other benefits to you and your family, workplace, and community.
2. **Having the right attitude and intention is essential.** Kindness and curiosity serve as basic building blocks for meaningful and lasting change.

This second finding is often overlooked, yet it's essential to unlocking the full power of our mindfulness practice. In my work with people from all walks of life, I have found one surprising constant: irrespective of our economic, educational, social, or personal circumstances, all of us struggle with self-judgment and self-criticism—an underlying sense of “I'm not good enough.”

Worse still, when we see our shortcomings or have made a mistake, we tend to beat ourselves up, thinking this will help us improve. But self-flagellation is entirely counterproductive. Not only does it feel awful, research shows that shame doesn't help us learn new behaviors and change. Shame cannot work, because it shuts down the centers of the brain responsible for learning and growth.

› *Shame cannot work, because it shuts down the centers of the brain responsible for learning and growth.*