

JON KABAT-ZINN

MINDFULNESS  
*for*  
BEGINNERS

reclaiming the present moment—  
and your life

Sounds True, Inc.  
Boulder, CO 80306

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Published 2012

Cover and book design by Karen Polaski  
Cover photo © Olga Lyubkina/Shutterstock

Printed in Canada

Kabat-Zinn, Jon.

Mindfulness for beginners : reclaiming the present moment—and your life / Jon Kabat-Zinn  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-60407-658-5

1. Meditation. 2. Awareness. I. Title.

BF637.M4K227 2012

158.1—dc23

2011035941

eBook ISBN: 978-1-60407-753-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PART I

ENTERING



## Beginner's Mind

It tends to be a momentous occasion to intentionally stop all your outward activity and, just as an experiment, sit or lie down and open to an interior stillness with no other agenda than to be present for the unfolding of your moments — perhaps for the first time in your adult life.



The people I know who have incorporated the practice of mindfulness into their lives remember quite vividly what drew them to it in the first place, including the feeling tone and life circumstances that led up to that moment of beginning. I certainly do. The emotional topology of the moment of beginning—or even of the moment of realizing that you want to connect with yourself in such a way—is rich and unique for each of us.

Suzuki Roshi, the Japanese Zen Master who founded the San Francisco Zen Center and touched the hearts of so many, is famous for having said, “In the beginner’s mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” Beginners come to new experiences not knowing so much and therefore open. This openness is very creative. It is an innate characteristic of the mind. The trick is never to lose it. That would require that you stay in the ever-emerging wonder of the present moment, which is always fresh. Of course you will lose beginner’s mind in one way, when you cease to be a beginner. But if you can remember from time to time that each moment is fresh and



## MINDFULNESS FOR BEGINNERS

new, maybe, just maybe, what you know will not get in the way of being open to what you don't know, which is always a larger field. Then a beginner's mind will be available in any moment you are open to it.

# The Breath

Take the breath, for instance.

We take it so much for granted. Unless, that is, you have a bad cold or can't breathe easily for some reason or another.

Then all of a sudden, the breath may become the only thing in the world you are interested in.



Yet the breath is coming in and going out of your body all the time. The fact is that we are being breathed. We drink in the air on each in-breath, giving it back to the world on each out-breath. Our lives depend on it. Suzuki Roshi referred to its coming in and going out over and over again as “a swinging door.” And since we can't leave home without this vital and mysterious “swinging door,” our breathing can serve as a convenient first object of attention to bring us back into the present moment, because we are only breathing now — the last breath is gone, the next one hasn't come yet — it is always a matter of this one. So it is an ideal anchor for our wayward attention. It keeps us in the present moment.

This is one of many reasons why paying attention to the sensations of breathing in the body serves as the first object of attention for beginning students in many different meditative traditions. But attending to the feeling of the breath in the body is not only a beginner's practice. It may be simple, but the Buddha himself taught that the breath has within it everything you

would ever need for cultivating the full range of your humanity, especially your capacity for wisdom and for compassion.

The reason, as we shall see shortly, is that paying attention to the breath is not primarily about the breath, nor is paying attention to any other object that we might choose as an object of attention primarily about that object. Objects of attention help us to attend with greater stability. Gradually we can come to feel what the attending itself is all about. It is about the relationship between what seems like the perceiver (you) and the perceived (whatever object you are attending to). These come together into one seamless, dynamical whole in awareness, because they were never fundamentally separate in the first place.

It is the awareness that is primary.

## Who Is Breathing?

It is a conceit to think that  
*you* are breathing, even though we say it all the time:  
“I am breathing.”

...

Of course you are breathing.

But let's face it. If it were really up to you to keep the breath going, you would have died long ago. You would have gotten distracted by this or that, sooner or later . . . and, whoops, dead. So in a sense, “you,” whoever you are, are not allowed anywhere near whatever it is that is responsible for your body breathing. The brain stem takes care of that very nicely. Same for the heartbeat and many other core aspects of our biology. We might have some influence on their expression, especially the breath, but it is not fair to say that we are really doing the breathing. It is far more mysterious and wondrous than that.

As you shall see, this brings into question just who *is* breathing, who is beginning to meditate and cultivate mindfulness, who is even reading these words? We shall be visiting these fundamental questions with a beginner's mind in order to understand what is really involved in the cultivation of mindfulness.

## The Hardest Work in the World

It is only fair for me to point out right from the start, again in the spirit of full disclosure, that the cultivation of mindfulness may just be the hardest work in the world.



Ironically, to grow into the fullness of who we actually already are is the challenge of a lifetime for each of us as human beings. No one can take on that work for us. It can only be our own undertaking in response to our own calling—and only if we care deeply about living the life that is authentically ours to live, in the face of everything that we may be called to engage with, being human.

At the same time, the *work* of cultivating mindfulness is also *play*. It is far too serious to take too seriously—and I say this in all seriousness!—if for no other reason than because it really is about our entire life. It makes sense for a lightness of being and playfulness to be key elements of the practice of mindfulness, because they are key elements of well-being.

Ultimately, mindfulness can become an effortless, seamless element of our life, a way for our very being to express itself authentically, with integrity. In this regard, no one's trajectory in cultivating mindfulness and the benefits that may come from it is the same as anyone else's. The challenge for each of us is to find out who *we* are and to live our way into our own calling. We do this by paying close attention to all aspects of life as they unfold in the

## THE HARDEST WORK IN THE WORLD

present moment. Obviously, no one else can undertake this work for you, just as no one can live your life for you — no one, that is, except you yourself.

What I have said so far may not make full sense to you. In fact, it can't possibly make complete sense until you take your own seat and extend that gesture over time — until you commit to engaging in the formal and informal cultivation of mindfulness, supported by the aspiration to look and to see for yourself how things might actually be behind the veil of appearances and the stories we are so skilled at telling ourselves about how things are — even though they may not be true at all, or are only partially true.

## Taking Care of This Moment

When it comes to mindfulness,  
each of us brings our own genius to adventures of this kind.  
Moreover, we cannot help but make use of and build on everything  
that has come before in our lives, even if much of it was —  
and perhaps still is — painful.



When it comes right down to it, our entire past, whatever it has been, however much pain and suffering it has included, becomes the very platform for doing the work of inhabiting the present moment with awareness, equanimity, clarity, and caring. You need the past that you have; it is raw clay on the potter's wheel. It is both the work and the adventure of a lifetime not to be trapped in either our past or our ideas and concepts, but rather to reclaim the only moment we ever really have, which is always this one. Taking care of this moment can have a remarkable effect on the next one and therefore on the future — yours and the world's. If you can be mindful in this moment, it is possible for the next moment to be hugely and creatively different — because you are aware and not imposing anything on it in advance.

# Mindfulness Is Awareness

As I suggested in the Introduction, my operational definition of mindfulness is that it is *paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally*.



Sometimes I like to add the phrase “as if your life depended on it,” because it does to such a profound extent.

But technically speaking, mindfulness is *what arises when* you pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, and as if your life depended on it. And what arises is nothing other than awareness itself.

Awareness is a capacity that we are all intimately familiar with and yet are simultaneously complete strangers to. So the training in mindfulness that we will be exploring together is really the cultivation of a resource that is already ours. It doesn’t require going anywhere, it doesn’t require getting anything, but it does require learning how to inhabit another domain of mind that we are, as a rule, fairly out of touch with. And that is what you might call the *being mode* of mind.