

# The Way of Effortless Mindfulness

A REVOLUTIONARY GUIDE  
FOR LIVING AN AWAKENED LIFE

Loch Kelly

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# Introduction

**M**y life before I began to practice effortless mindfulness was completely different from the way it is now. Growing up, I was neither calm nor contemplative. I struggled with some form of dyslexia and ADD, and I had an underlying feeling that something wasn't quite right, that something was missing or out of balance. The only time I experienced relief from this background anxiety was while engaged in sports, feeling myself in my body and in "the zone." Once, during an ice hockey game in junior high school, the score was tied 1–1, and after the last time-out, I dropped into a sense of well-being, effortless focus, and connection with my teammates. It was as if time slowed down, and playing together in this concentrated way brought me into a profound sense of embodied joyful flow! It was after this taste of effortless mindfulness that I started wondering: *How did this happen, and could I find a way to intentionally access this joy of being in other parts of my life?*

As I grew up, I became increasingly curious about and hungry for other ways of experiencing this dimension of life. Like many in my generation, I tried reading spiritual books, traveling, romantic relationships, artistic pursuits, being in nature, and even sex, drugs, and rock and roll as I sought lasting happiness. My search eventually led me to graduate school in psychology and spirituality, where a new door opened. I received a travel fellowship to study at a university in Sri Lanka and at meditation centers in India and Nepal. There I met teachers who devoted their lives to meditation, awakening, and compassionate living. With one of these teachers, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, I was introduced to the advanced yet simple approach called *effortless mindfulness*, which is a different form of mindfulness from the kind that is so popular in the West today. Effortless mindfulness is a way of opening to a natural, wise, and loving awareness that is already present within us, which reveals qualities of well-being, clarity,

and compassionate action. It is a way of shifting out of the chattering mind and into the source of our mind, which is already awake and aware—where we can rest, engage, and feel unconditional love. Effortless mindfulness is a unique form of mindfulness that allows us to immediately open to clarity and love in the midst of our busy everyday lives. The way of effortless mindfulness is about both waking up and growing up, so it combines a unique meditative and psychological approach to healing trauma and living an awakened life.

Effortless mindfulness gave me a way of relieving my underlying suffering and connecting to an inner joy that I didn't even know existed. My life is freer and easier than it was before I discovered effortless mindfulness, and for this I am deeply grateful. One example I can share is that writing my first book, with my dyslexia and ADD, took me ten years. Given the title of this book, *The Way of Effortless Mindfulness*, it might not surprise you that I wrote it through the practice of effortless mindfulness. Though there was still the pain of writing with ADD, this book flowed out into form in just nine months. The gift of effortless mindfulness has been finding a new willingness to show up fully with my quirks and struggles. The more I'm able to let go, the greater the unconditional, loving support that has appeared within, around, and throughout my life. I experience deeper levels of vulnerability and courage by opening to parts of myself that I avoided in the past. I've been able to feel my interconnectedness with other living beings, and as a result, I've gained a new level of motivation to be of service.

Since my first encounter with effortless mindfulness over three decades ago, developing this practice within myself and teaching it to others has been my life's inspiration and vocation. This book is meant to be like a letter to a friend. It is an invitation. I am more of a coach or a guide than a preacher or a guru. I am here to share pointers and principles so you can find effortless mindfulness for yourself, as if to say, "Hey, the water is great! Come on in! Guess what? We can awaken together!" I am convinced that accessing the natural well-being of unconditional love is learnable and teachable and hope this book will help you find what is already yours.

## A Different Form of Mindfulness

Effortless mindfulness is a unique form of mindfulness. What most people in the West know as mindfulness, I call *deliberate mindfulness*. The teachings of deliberate mindfulness stem primarily from the Theravada and Zen traditions of South and East Asia and the initial practices of Tibetan Buddhism. Deliberate mindfulness has also been brought into secular settings in the United States through mindfulness practices for physical and psychological treatment and stress reduction, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). I love these practices because they provide a way of cultivating calm, patience, and intentional lovingkindness. I have taught deliberate mindfulness for decades as a teacher at New York Insight Meditation Center and have seen the practice help countless people. I deeply value deliberate mindfulness and its benefits. I am grateful for the popularity it is gaining in the West because it is allowing people to find greater peace of mind.

Effortless mindfulness, on the other hand, can be considered a different form of mindfulness, which is sometimes taught after having developed a deliberate mindfulness practice. It can also be a helpful alternative approach for those who have had difficulty with concentration practices or sitting meditation. Though often considered advanced, it can be a good starting place for people who are new to meditation. The effortless mindfulness practice begins with an opening to an already awake, optimal mind from which we can be effortlessly focused. The full unfolding leads to a life that is not more detached, however, but more embodied, intimate, courageous, and wise.

Effortless mindfulness has its roots in the world's wisdom traditions that are often described as *direct path*, *essence traditions*, or *nondual traditions*. The premise of the direct approach in all meditative traditions is that *the awake loving nature we are seeking is already here within us and can be accessed immediately*. The primary nondual tradition that the effortless mindfulness map and practices in this book draw from is called Sutra Mahamudra, which began in North India and links the three main traditions of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan. Sutra Mahamudra was primarily a movement of lay practitioners who developed a style of practice to facilitate awakening—a shift

and upgrade of awareness, mind, and identity—in the midst of everyday life. Effortless mindfulness is ideal for our contemporary Western culture in that it demonstrates that awakening is possible for anyone without having to leave home, friends, work, or family.

## **Benefits of Effortless Mindfulness**

In bringing effortless mindfulness into the contemporary Western context, I have grown increasingly interested in the particular obstacles and supports to living a genuine, awakened life. In this book, I present a way of working with the emotional, energetic, and psychological aspects of our human experience and identity. However, this book isn't about the philosophy of consciousness, mindfulness, or awakening. I present a theory and hypothesis, but also a set of practices so that you can experience the results for yourself. I have included plenty of meditations that are direct and experiential—glimpses into a whole new way of seeing and being. With effortless mindfulness, you'll uncover a sense of well-being that relieves suffering at its root.

Students who consistently practice effortless mindfulness describe a relief from judgmental thinking, a deep sense of safety and well-being, a sense of openness and interconnection, and an ability to welcome strong emotions with less worry, fear, and shame. They also experience more compassion for themselves and others; a greater motivation, clarity, and optimal functioning at work; and a new capacity for creativity and loving relationships.

I believe that no matter where you are on your life's journey or in your meditation practice, you'll find something of benefit in engaging effortless mindfulness. I am convinced, after decades of studying, practicing, seeing students' progress, and conversing with colleagues, that awakening is truly possible in the midst of our everyday lives. This is possible because the awake nature that we are seeking is already here and available within us. Awakening is part of our common human heritage, spanning all traditions and cultures. In fact, I see clear indications that awakening is the next natural stage of human development. I have seen how those who are awakening

have naturally begun to heal, teach, and support others, which seems to be part of a consciousness revolution.

Many of us are concerned about social, political, economic, and environmental issues on this planet. I believe that taking responsibility to find our own true sense of compassionate interconnectedness, and then helping others do the same, can be a radical collective healing that can bring a better future for all of us. My intention with this book is to bring a particular approach to awakening into our world so that it can transform our lives and communities.

### **The Flow and Structure of This Book**

*The Way of Effortless Mindfulness* is a unique, comprehensive guidebook to an advanced yet simple form of mindfulness that brings immediate and lasting benefits. It offers a systematic map to navigate consciousness. I begin by introducing ways of discovering an already awake awareness that is the source of your mind and identity through experimenting with micro-meditations or “mindful glimpses” and noticing the results. Each individual will find that different glimpses are more suited to them than others, and the unfolding is equally unique.

Part 1 of the book starts by introducing the fundamentals of effortless mindfulness. Then I compare and contrast effortless mindfulness with the more familiar deliberate mindfulness in order to give you a clear sense of this lesser-known style. I go on to introduce the Five Foundations of Effortless Mindfulness and a series of practices that are effortless-mindfulness versions of classical deliberate-mindfulness practices such as one-pointed focus, lovingkindness, and insight meditation.

Part 2 is a deeper dive into effortless mindfulness as a way of living an awakened life. Here I point to details of the map of awakening and give a series of mindful glimpses for each of the Five Foundations of Effortless Mindfulness. I am interested in offering a set of practices for effortless mindfulness just as there are standard deliberate-mindfulness practices. Some of my standard mindful glimpses are also available in my first book, *Shift into Freedom*, and in audio and video form, so you can listen to them after you read them.



Part 3 offers ways of further supporting awakening, along with an appendix that discusses some of the traps and detours that prevent us from unfolding and embodying awakening. I describe the integration of awakening and psychotherapy and conclude with tools and techniques to continue your journey of embodying effortless mindfulness.

This is a practice book to help you not only understand effortless mindfulness, but most importantly, to experience it and embody it—to live from effortless mindfulness. If you had picked up a book about how to ride a bicycle, intellectual explanations would not be the primary way to learn, and the same applies here. Instead, I encourage you to adopt a beginner's mind, open your heart, and enjoy the ride.

Part I  
Discovering



## The Next Stage of Mindfulness

Most of us love the feeling of effortless. Some of the happiest times in our lives happen when we flow with the silent music of life. The sight of a dancer, athlete, or bird moving with ease and grace inspires us. What if you could learn to shift into a level of mind in which suffering could be relieved and wisdom, love, and joy naturally uncovered? What if you could discover a reliable way to access a sense of safety and open-heartedness that shifts us out of the confusion we have been so tightly caught in? What if awakening—shifting your consciousness into a more compassionate way of seeing and being—were something you could learn? What if there were an art, a science, and even repeatable methods to live from effortless mindfulness? My experience is that there are! This reality has been reported by ancient wisdom traditions and by many people I've met, and it's possible for you.

Effortless mindfulness is both a natural capacity and a skillful way to connect with ourselves and others. It is a way of being mindful from a different level of mind than we are used to. There is more to effortless mindfulness than meditation. Effortless mindfulness is primarily an off-the-meditation-cushion way of weaving together contemplation and compassionate actions. Effortless mindfulness begins by opening to a natural spacious awareness in order to become more wise, embodied, and creative. A new ethical motivation springs from the realization of a loving interconnection with all of life.

When I teach effortless mindfulness, I'm often asked, "How do I know when I'm really doing it? What does effortless mindfulness feel like?" Each person experiences a different facet of the diamond

of effortless mindfulness as it shows its qualities to us freshly each time. A glimpse of effortless mindfulness might initially feel like any of the following:

- You feel relief.
- Your mind is wide open and without an agenda.
- Your thoughts are less prominent or have moved into the background.
- You are free of worry, fear, and judgment.
- You are able to effortlessly focus on something, without concentrating.
- Your center has moved from your head to your heart.
- You are resting as a field of seamless awareness that is outside and within your body.
- You feel aware from the Now and able to be aware of the past, present, or future when needed.
- Everything seems to be flowing easily, happening naturally without any effort.
- You experience a sense of joy and well-being not related to what is happening.
- You are aware from boundless, interconnected, loving presence rather than a detached point of view.
- You feel aware from nonconceptual awareness rather than thought.