

CHAPTER 1

THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

I began my journey of mindfulness training ten years ago after reading the following words by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh: *“When I drink my tea mindfully, I can see the universe in my tea.”*

Although I did not understand the meaning of his words, I did sense the wisdom. I was a long way from an established mindfulness practice, but something inside me stirred. I knew at a very deep level I had found something I had been searching for, and I became a Buddhist.

Buddhist teachings provide specific instructions so that we may obtain presence and insight. In my tea there is the element of the sunshine because without sunshine I would have no tea. There is also the element of the cloud and the minerals from Mother Earth. There is the element of my work because without money I could not buy tea. The work of the tea farmer is also there. There are many elements in the tea and if we learn to see with wisdom, we not only enjoy our morning tea in a much more profound manner, we understand ourselves.

You do not have to become a Buddhist to benefit from the teachings. The wisdom is not copyrighted. The Buddha said many times that you were not required to believe any doctrine. His instructions were to apply the teachings and if they improve your life, use them. If you do not benefit from the teachings, do not use them. I am grateful for finding this practice, which has helped me a great deal. I am more happy and peaceful now. I am thankful for this precious human life that I have been given, and more mindful of what I do with it. When I make a mistake or become lazy I have a better map for correcting my course. My relationships have also improved because I understand the complicated dance between me and my beloved with a great deal more wisdom and compassion.

Mindfulness revolutionizes. It has the capacity to revolutionize you and it has the capacity to revolutionize our world. I drink my tea differently than I did ten years ago. Before I practiced mindfulness, I absently practiced mindlessness and forgetfulness. I would drink my tea in the morning while checking my email, making a shopping list, and watching the news, all at the same time. I did not taste or enjoy my tea. In our fast-paced world, we proudly call this “multitasking.” Being proud of multitasking is ignorant. It is the same as being proud of not showing up to live your own life. Where is your

attention when you are multitasking? Scattered. Nowhere. Everywhere. My tea is gone, and I have no recollection of drinking it. I never tasted it. I did not enjoy the experience. When we live mindlessly, we grow a sense of boredom or dissatisfaction with our lives. This is because we are only giving our life half of our attention. As mindlessness and forgetfulness becomes stronger and habituated, we sleepwalk through life.

After beginning a mindfulness practice, and as my awareness grew stronger, I realized that not only had I been drinking my tea mindlessly, most of my consuming was mindless. I would look down at an empty bag of potato chips, and not remember eating one bite. Everything we do with mindlessness has a karmic effect. If I eat potato chips mindlessly, the consequences are not so big. Only my cholesterol level and my mass. Other types of mindless behaviors, thinking patterns, and emotional reactions have large karmic effects. If I allow the mental process of worrying to be cultivated perhaps I become ill and develop an anxiety disorder.

There are endless applications of mindfulness. I organically began my practice with mindful consumption. I realized my ears, eyes, mouth, and mind consumed. What I watch on TV or read is a type of consumption. It sends ideas and images into my conscious and subconscious mind. The images our children see on video games and the Internet send images into their minds. The consumption of trashy and violent movies or video games desensitizes us. Young people may become very confused and are no longer able to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome behaviors.

I invite you to begin living mindfully. You can begin by listening mindfully, which is a very deep practice. Maybe you are listening to resolve a misunderstanding with your beloved. There is a cause/effect relationship that is dependent on how you listen. If your listening has the qualities of impatience, anger, and judgment, the effect is the escalation of arguing. If you listen with patience, peace, and openness, the result is better understanding and the relationship is transformed.

I am not always successful, but I intend to live in a manner that makes me feel refreshed, vitalized, alive, and conscious. I see that living my life mindlessly, in a trance of sleepwalking, has heavy consequences. I feel numb and heavy. I miss the delightful, unexpected, mysterious, and sublime pieces of wisdom that eventually link together chains of deep understanding. We walk past the precious jewels that are on the ground right at our feet. When I am not mindful, I notice that my life is flavored with a slow drip of impatience and dissatisfaction. I impatiently complete the task at hand so that I can rush to the next "thing" that I am craving, only to find that next thing unsatisfactory too.

Living my life more mindfully has had wonderful consequences. The dull becomes the profound, impatience transforms to patience, and ignorance into knowing. We are no longer bored or dissatisfied because we have gained an understanding into the true nature of ourselves and others. We slowly habituate patience and tolerance. With this energy, we can begin to transform our suffering and the suffering of others.

ELEMENTS OF MINDFULNESS

Consciously choosing the object of our awareness is an important feature of mindfulness. You may choose a beneficial object of awareness, such as conditions in your life that cultivate satisfaction and equanimity, or nonbeneficial objects of awareness that cultivate anger and dissatisfaction. There are essential features to the practice of mindfulness. The concept of mindfulness has become trendy and overused until it has lost its meanings: much like what we have done to the concept of God. One cannot be engaged in an unwholesome or unkind act and do so mindfully. To say “I mindfully cussed that person out” reflects a wrong understanding of mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness well has the following features.

The Present Moment

Stay in the present moment, as opposed to worrying about the future or lamenting about the past. Mindfulness brings a sense of reunion, as if the mind and body are reunited. When our mind and body are together we feel grounded. When we are not grounded our body is in the present, while our mind is in the future or in the past. It is not possible to touch life in the past or future. You can only touch life right now. An object of awareness related to physical processes such as breathing helps anchor us in the here and now. Touch the experience of being alive by touching the breath coming and going. Consolidate your body and mind and be here. As you begin your practice, you may be surprised by how frequently you leave the present moment. After you notice you have left the present moment, usually on a wave of thoughts, come back to now. With practice, you find that the length of time you are not present will diminish and you touch your life more fully. The majority of our life is spent on the journey, not the destination. The wedding, graduation, birth of a baby, promotion, etc., are but mere moments. Enjoy the journey by fostering peace and acceptance of the present moment.

Awareness

Our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions start an avalanche of responses in the body, which in turn control our mental, emotional, and physical health. Don't allow thoughts to pull you down a rabbit hole of mind chatter. The object of our awareness always

grows stronger and is the aspect of our mind that we cultivate. If we focus on all the possible dreadful things that might go wrong in the future, we cultivate anxiety. Your narrative, the voice in your head that consistently critiques and judges, prevents you from seeing reality. When we practice mindfulness, we consciously choose where we place our awareness. The object of our awareness is used as a tool to ameliorate mental conditions and foster mental health mind states such as peace, wholesomeness, and wisdom. Beneficial objects of mindfulness include the mindfulness of the body, thoughts, feelings, or consciousness.

Lovingkindness

The culmination of our highest levels of thoughts, words, and deeds will speak with lovingkindness. We engage with understanding, love, gentleness, and generosity. The suffering of our sisters and brothers is the same as our suffering. When we are mindful, we see the inner-connectedness of our suffering and respond with compassion. This is a mindful response, and our highest manifestation.

Cultivate Curiosity

Our capacity to practice mindfulness is strengthened by curiosity. Are you curious about reality? Reality is revealed as we recognize our wrong perceptions and wrong understanding. Do you understand who you truly are? You have been creating a false sense of self due to the influence of your culture, family, personality traits, and ego.

Bring the Body and Mind Together

When you are walking, eating, listening, talking, and working know that you are walking, eating, listening, talking, or working. If your mind is concentrated, know that it is concentrated. If it is not concentrated know this too. Know if your mental processes are congruent with your physical processes. If we want to be a loving and kind person, a focus on the shortcomings of others is not congruent with that desire. Understanding the suffering of others is congruent with that desire. There is a union of mind and body in mindfulness.

Accept What Is Present

All of it. The parts you like and dislike. Accepting what is present instead of feeling aversion to it reduces suffering. Acceptance is a deep spiritual practice. When we rid ourselves of likes and dislikes we are liberated. The thing you “like” will eventually be taken from you, leave, end, or die according to the nature of the object. The same is true for the thing you don’t like. It will eventually end or leave. An interesting

phenomenon to notice is that our likes often become a dislike, and a dislike becomes a like. The rotating nature of our likes and dislikes is an interesting object of consciousness. When our body and mind are attached to the aversion or clinging, we increase our suffering.

Progress

If you are practicing well, with correct effort, you will notice you begin to live better. Very often the first benefits we realize are a decrease in racing thoughts. When our mind is less turbulent our physical health improves. Results of your practice will yield fruit that reflects the object of your awareness. If you want to lose weight, make mindful consumption the object of your mindfulness. If you want to improve relationships, mindful listening and speaking is the correct object of mindfulness. Mindfulness of your true nature will foster great wisdom and understanding and reduce all manners of suffering.

Your Potential for happiness

Mindfulness is an essential practice for our mental wellness because it allows us to experience the exquisite and delicate conditions around us. Understanding your true nature cultivates understanding, patience, peace, and gratitude. Mindfulness lessens or alleviates the suffering produced by hindrances. With our minds purified we touch wonder and joy again. We think more clearly and calmly. We come to know our own true nature and the nature of others. We see the exquisite beauty, vulnerability, strength, and potential of human nature. An energy of gratitude, grace, and joy begins to well up in us. We also recognize weaknesses, mistakes, and ignorance in ourselves and others. This too is part of our human nature and allows for forgiveness, acceptance, and grace to live in our hearts and minds.

There are 7.5 billion people in the world and not one of them is exactly like you. You are special and unique. Within you there is potential. A tiny acorn has the potential to become a mighty oak tree. This is amazing. You might say a miracle. This little, tiny, round object has the ability and intelligence to become a magnificent tree. You have enormous potential in you, much more than an acorn. An acorn can only become an oak tree, but you can become many things. You already have manifested many things. But have you done so mindfully? This is the most important question.

Your highest potential contains your own special flavor of wisdom, love, and expression. When you allow and trust your unique true nature to express and unfold, don't be alarmed if it is different from the masses. It may even seem "odd." This is a hint that you

are on the right track. You will feel energetic, alert, and alive when you allow your true nature to manifest. Because of the enormous potential contained in a human life, we have many options. An acorn has fewer options. We can choose to create a beautiful masterpiece or something ugly and useless. We can either manifest wholesome or unwholesome. By wholesome I don't necessary mean goody two shoes. Perhaps you are an anarchist. That is fine, but you will reach your full anarchist potential if you do so mindfully.

You are always influencing your environment, work, or community, and this influence has karmic effects. Your environment and the world desperately need the highest expression of you and the unique gifts you offer. We need your ideas, your patience, your energy, insights and talents. We need your mindfulness. Human beings around the world and in your community are suffering. Perhaps your family is suffering. Our planet is being destroyed and our institutions are a mess. The world needs you. Allow mindfulness to grow your capacities and your talents. When you touch your capacities, you feel them stirring and you feel happy. You touch them again and again and eventually you transform. There is strength and wisdom in you. This is true, or you could not have survived the difficulties you have endured. Perhaps your strength and wisdom have not been developed nor given proper attention or mindfulness. Perhaps you have forgotten how to touch these qualities, but they are still there. They are still a part of your nature.

A good muse for understanding mindfulness and happiness is children. There is a sense of spaciousness and spontaneity in how a child loves and lives. Every experience is new and fresh for a child. Children live with the quality of lovingkindness from one moment to the next. You have this capacity in you. How could you not? I am assuming if you are reading this book, at some point in your life you were a child. Therefore, childlike qualities of ease, wonderment, lovingkindness, and spontaneity are in you. These qualities are part of your true nature. Can't you feel them stirring as you read the words? Just by acknowledging their presence and touching them, they begin to stir if you allow them to.

Suffering

In addition to the happiness and peace we realize from our practice, mindfulness helps us to cope with the suffering we are sure to experience. There are innumerable conditions that cause suffering in this lifetime. For one, we have a human body, and the nature of this body is to decay. This decaying process will create suffering. If you understand the nature of your body, you know that it is impermanent, and decay is

inevitable. Mindful awareness of the true nature of the body allows us to age, and even die, with peace. Perhaps you will live your life differently if you know there is an expiration date on your eyesight, hearing, ability to walk, and clean yourself after using the bathroom. The wisdom of impermanence allows us to feel gratitude, an important quality that allows happiness to grow.

Mindful awareness of the true nature of phenomena reduces clinging. The true nature of all phenomena and conditions is impermanence. Your health, beauty, financial status, relationships, thoughts, emotions, likes/dislikes are all impermanent. If you have a baby, the nature of the baby is to grow and develop. If you have a baby and are full of despair when the baby grows up, you have ignorance about the true nature of babies. If you take a bite of an apple, and then feel sad because it does not taste like a grape, you do not understand the nature of an apple. If you decide to get a puppy, and then become frustrated when you must take her outside to the bathroom, you do not understand the nature of puppies. Mindfulness is the essential tool to help us understand our true nature. With the wisdom that is cultivated through mindfulness we make better decisions, improve relationships, realize our potential, and it reduces the suffering that comes from clinging.

If we cultivate hindrances such as aversion and clinging, our propensity to judge grows stronger. Our internal dialog has the same rigid sternness as a disapproving and authoritative parent. The critical voice that judges without mercy or awareness has the essence of fear and breeds doubt and self-loathing. Critical Voice Disease should be a recognized mental health disease. I believe Critical Voice Disease is epidemic and is an underlying condition for many people who suffer from mental illnesses. A critical voice continuously judges and condemns, clouding awareness of our true nature with a veil of wrong views and perceptions.

Mindfulness practices allow us to see our true nature clearly. The impact of judgmental narratives becomes less intense. We perceive with a heart and mind unencumbered with false views. Mindfulness allows us to experience our lives as new and fresh, which prevents the hindrances of restlessness and worry to arise. If we are mindful, we know that despite the appearance of redundancy and repetitiveness we never cross the same stream twice. Wrong views and perceptions may make dread and aversion arise because we believe every day is the same monotonous list of chores, conversations, and experiences. This may be true. Our day-to-day activities may be repetitive. However, moment to moment we are changing. We are choosing to either cultivate wholesome or unwholesome aspects of our nature. Perhaps you frequently must listen to mindless and

repetitive chatter from someone you work with. You can practice maintaining a calm mind and body when you are in their presence, or you can cultivate a judgmental attitude while you are listening. The situation is repetitive. Your response to the experience is not repetitive. It is always changing because you are always cultivating. Are you cultivating peacefulness and calm despite the slight irritation and judgment, or are you cultivating peace and calmness? If you are cultivating equanimity, then you are developing skills that will be greatly beneficial to you. Eventually you find you are happy more often. The little annoyances of life do not have the capacity to alter your peace of mind.

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER VS MENTAL PROCESSES

Mental illness has reached epidemic proportions. In his groundbreaking accounting of the rise of mental illness, Robert Whitaker reports that in “1955, 1 in every 468 Americans was hospitalized due to a mental illness. In 1987, there were 1.25 million people receiving an SSI or SSDI disability payment because of mental illness, or 1 in every 184 Americans . . . In 2007, the disability rate was 1 in every 76 Americans. That’s more than double the rate in 1987, and six times the rate in 1955” (Whitaker 2010, 6–7). We must be careful not to over-diagnose mental health disorders and over-prescribe potentially dangerous psychotropic medications when they are not needed. Our minds are capable of wrong interpretations, perceptions, and beliefs. Distinguishing wrong mental formations from a mental illness is sometimes a gray area, and we should be mindful that we do not pathologize our individual thinking anomalies or we will all be diagnosed with a mental health illness. Our minds are susceptible to wrong perceptions and belief formations. The wrong perceptions and beliefs are construed by the mind because this is what a human mind does. This is the nature of your mind.

I have a snake phobia. I look for signs of snakes when I am walking in the woods, in my yard, and in the garage, with an intense hypervigilance. Sticks and shadows begin to look like snakes. Am I psychotic? I do not think so, although when I have jumped and screamed at a stick, some people might look at me and think I am.

At times a person’s behavior is so bizarre, dangerous, and maladaptive that we must consider mental diagnosis, which serves as an essential element of understanding the etiology of the disease and provides a standard practice for treatment. Mental health diagnosis helps practitioners across different disciplines identify and respond to a cluster of symptoms. The brain is an organ, after all. However, we have become very heavy-handed in our society with labeling thinking anomalies as mental health

disorders. The criteria that delineate mental processes and mental disorders are often subjective. Diagnosing mental health conditions is very different from diagnosing physical conditions, which are more often a result of objective measurements.

CASE STUDY: ANNE'S DIAGNOSIS

Anne, a young college student, came to see me with complaints of anxiety and racing thoughts. She was constantly behind on assignments and fatigued due to frequent "all-nighters." During her assessment we discovered poor executive functioning skills, and a tendency to minimize the amount of time and work her assignments would need for completion. Her symptoms greatly improved once she began prioritizing, organized her workspace and paced herself. With mindfulness and meditation practice her racing thoughts greatly subsided. She had been to see a psychiatrist prior to counseling. The psychiatrist diagnosed Anne with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), based on the client's complaints, and she received medication for both. Anne experienced side effects from the medication including nausea, insomnia, and increased nervousness. I don't think Anne had ADD or GAD. I believe she suffered from terrible executive functioning disorder. She procrastinated until the last minute and juggled last-minute deadlines feeling fatigued and anxious.

When we become anxious, neural activity shifts from the neocortex located behind the forehead, to the brain stem located in the back of the head. The brain stem is also referred to as the lizard brain because primitive species such as lizards have similar anatomical brain structures. Lizards do not have a neocortex, which from a neurobiological standpoint explains why they do not write good essays. The difficulty Anne experienced when she was trying to complete her school assignments symptomatically mimicked ADD and GAD, but the triggering issue was poor executive functioning skills including procrastinating homework until the last minute, which triggered anxiety, which in turn triggered an inability to concentrate while in the lizard brain.

Individuals given an incorrect mental health diagnosis have many karmic effects. Young people are particularly susceptible because of their preexisting fragile ego structure. Developmentally, teenagers are trying to figure out who they are, and where they fit in the world. They are coping with a confusing and bewildering identity crisis. When

diagnosed with a mental health disorder, there is a risk that a young person will internalize an internal narrative that defines them as incapable, unable, and sick. A mental health diagnosis casts an enormous cloud over their identity and self-concept. Diagnosis often empowers behavioral and thinking patterns that exacerbate the very symptoms that are the conditions for their suffering. It is easy to think in terms of their illness, which is now sanctioned to reinforce bad thinking patterns because it is endorsed by a “professional.” This is wrong and reductionist thinking. The reductionist thinking pattern reinforces their condition. Although diagnosing mental health conditions is often a subjective process, there are clusters of symptoms that intensify to a point that to deny a mental health illness would be irresponsible. The severity of some mental health disorders are life or death conditions. However, we must try to be mindful when our conditions of mental health suffering are caused by wrong thinking as opposed to a mental health disease or disorder.

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