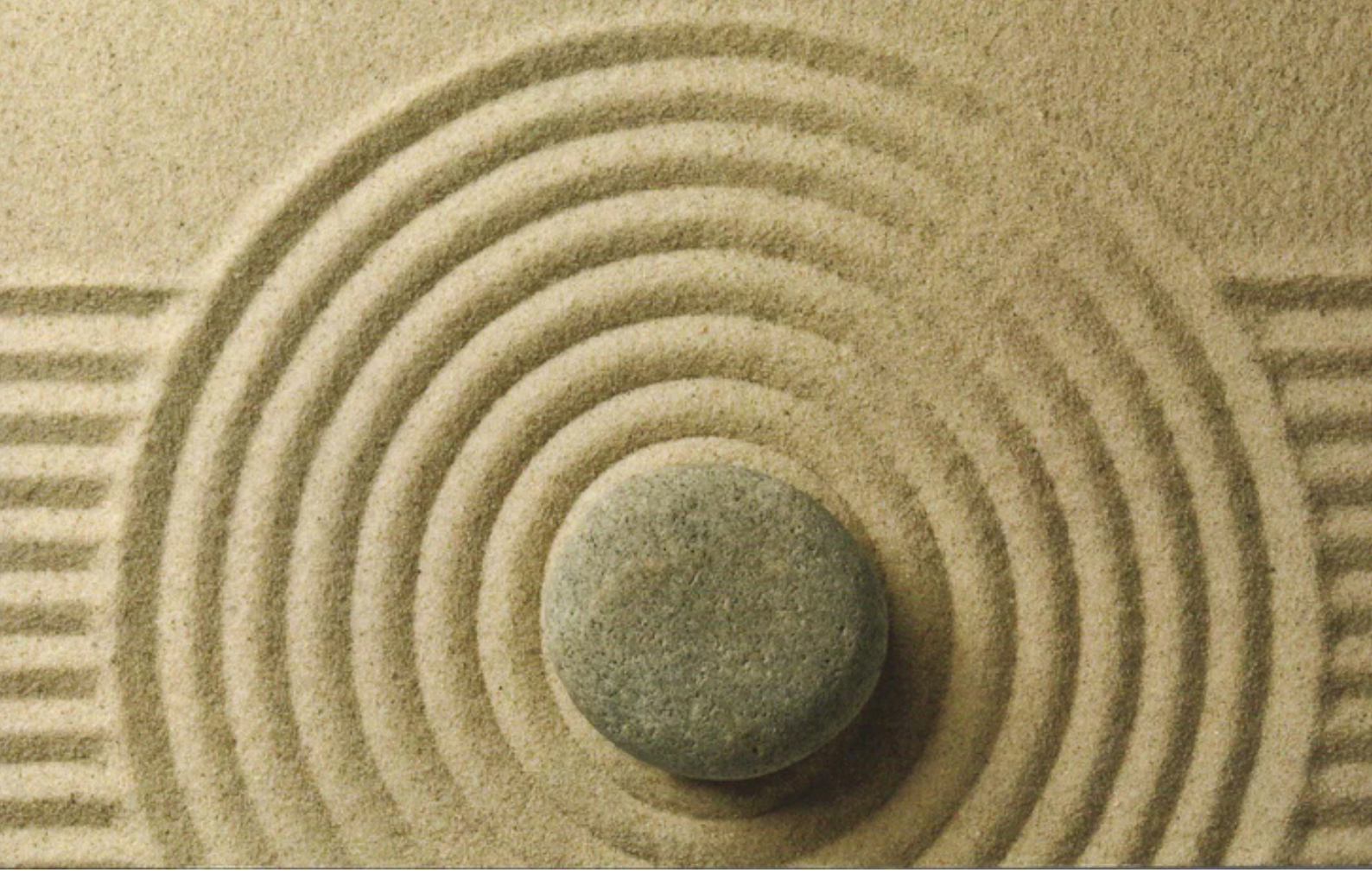


JON KABAT-ZINN

MINDFULNESS
for
BEGINNERS

reclaiming the
present moment—
and your life



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for the perpetual beginner in each of us

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Introduction



W elcome to the practice of mindfulness. You may not know it, but if you are coming to the systematic cultivation of mindfulness for the first time, you may very well be on the threshold of a momentous shift in your life, something subtle and, at the same time, potentially huge and important, which just might change your life. Or, to put it differently, you may discover that cultivating mindfulness has a way of giving your life back to yourself, as many people who get involved with mindfulness practice through mindfulness-based stress reduction tell us it has for them. If mindfulness does wind up changing your life in some profound way, it will not be because of this book, although it could possibly be instrumental, and I hope it will be. But any change that comes about in your life will be primarily because of your own efforts — and perhaps in part because of the mysterious impulses that draw us to things before we really know what they are: intimations of what might be emanating from a deep intuition that we discover is truly trustworthy.

Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. It is one of many forms of meditation, if you think of meditation as any way in which we engage in (1) systematically regulating our attention and energy (2) thereby influencing and possibly transforming the quality of our experience (3) in the service of realizing the full range of our humanity and of (4) our relationships to others and the world.

Ultimately, I see mindfulness as a love affair — with life, with reality and imagination, with the beauty of your own being, with your heart and body and mind, and with the world. If that sounds like a lot to take in, it is. And that is why it can be so valuable to experiment systematically with cultivating mindfulness in your life, and why your intuition to enter into this way of being in relationship to your experience is so healthy.

In the spirit of full disclosure, this book started off as a Sounds True

audio program — one that people found useful over the years. One CD included guided meditation practices, and these are the guided meditations that you will find accompanying this book and described in Part 5. As you will come to learn, if you don't know it already, the transformative potential of meditation in general and mindfulness in particular lies in engaging in ongoing practice.

There are two complementary ways to do this: formally and informally. Formally means engaging in making some time every day to practice — in this case with the guided meditations. Informally means letting the practice spill over into every aspect of your waking life in an uncontrived and natural way. These two modes of embodied practice go hand in hand and support each other, and ultimately become one seamless whole, which we could call living with awareness or wakefulness. My hope is that you will make use of the guided meditations on a regular basis as a launching platform for an ongoing exploration of both formal and informal mindfulness practice, and see what happens over the ensuing days, weeks, months, and years.

As we shall see, the very intention to practice with consistency and gentleness — whether you feel like it or not on any given day — is a powerful and healing discipline. Without such motivation, especially at the beginning, it is difficult for mindfulness to take root and go beyond being a mere concept or script, no matter how attractive it might be to you philosophically.

The first CD in the original audio program described the practice of mindfulness and explained why it might be valuable to engage in its cultivation to begin with. That material nucleated the text of this book, which now goes far beyond the original program and content in terms of scope, detail, and depth. Still, I have kept more or less to the original order of topics. I have also kept the voicing mostly in the first- and second-person singular and the first-person plural, on purpose, in the hope that it will maintain the quality of a conversation and mutual inquiry.

In both the text and in the audio program, we will be exploring together the subject of mindfulness as if you'd never heard about it and had no idea what it is or, for that matter, why it might be worth integrating into your life. Primarily, we will be exploring the heart of mindfulness practice and how to cultivate it in your everyday life. We will also touch briefly on what its various health benefits might be in terms of dealing with stress, pain, and illness, and on how people with medical conditions

make use of mindfulness practices in the context of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs. We will point out new and exciting areas of scientific research showing that mindfulness training in the form of MBSR actually seems to change both the structure and the functioning of the brain in interesting and important ways, and what some of the implications of this might be for how we relate to our thoughts and our emotions, especially our most reactive ones.

Of necessity, we will only touch on many of these topics. Their elaboration and flowering is an ongoing adventure — and the work of a lifetime. You can think of this volume as the front door to a magnificent edifice, like, say, the Louvre. Only the edifice is yourself and your life and your potential as a human being. The invitation is to enter and then explore, in your own way and at your own pace, the richness and depth of what is available to you — in this case, awareness in all its concrete and specific manifestations.

My hope is that this book will provide you with an adequate conceptual framework for understanding why it makes sense to engage wholeheartedly and on a regular basis in something that seems so much like nothing. While mindfulness and the current high levels of public and scientific interest in it may indeed appear to some to be much ado about nothing, I think it is much more accurate to describe it as *much ado about what might seem like almost nothing that turns out to be just about everything*. We are going to experience firsthand that “almost nothing.” It contains a whole universe of life-enhancing possibilities.

Mindfulness as a practice provides endless opportunities to cultivate greater intimacy with your own mind and to tap into and develop your deep interior resources for learning, growing, healing, and potentially for transforming your understanding of who you are and how you might live more wisely and with greater well-being, meaning, and happiness in this world.

Once you establish a robust platform of practice using this book and its guided meditations, there are practically endless resources available if you want to explore mindfulness further. Connecting with the writings of superb teachers, past and present, can be invaluable at one point or another as your mindfulness practice matures and deepens. And if you make the effort to go on retreat with some of the great teachers of today, that could also be an essential catalyst in strengthening and deepening your practice. I highly recommend it.

Much of what I will be saying here is mapped out in much greater detail in other books that I have written, in particular *Full Catastrophe Living; Wherever You Go, There You Are*; and *Coming to Our Senses*. *Mindfulness for Beginners* is meant to provide a straightforward, convenient portal into the essentials of mindfulness practice, including its formal cultivation and the essence of applying it in everyday life. Both will wind up being part of your ongoing work if you decide to say “yes” to the invitation.

The chapters here are by design brief rather than comprehensive. They are meant to stimulate reflection and encourage you to practice. Over time, as your practice takes root and deepens, as it will if you keep at it, these words may take on different meanings for you. Just as no two moments are the same and no two breaths are the same, each time you reflect on a chapter and bring what it is pointing to into the laboratory of your meditation practice and your life, it is likely to strike you differently. As you will come to know through your direct experience, there is a certain trajectory of deepening in the practice that will carry you along like a river. As you are carried along by the momentum of practice, you may discover, over time, an interesting conjunction between your own experience and what the words here are pointing to.

In launching yourself into the practice, you might want to experiment with choosing a particular guided meditation and playing with it for a few days to see how it feels and what it evokes in you. It is not just a matter of listening to it. The invitation is to participate, to give yourself over to the practice wholeheartedly moment by moment by moment as best you can. You can then use the text to round out the experience by investigating and questioning your understanding of what you are actually asking of yourself as you make the effort to pay close attention to aspects of life we so often ignore entirely or discount as trivial and unimportant.

In a very real sense, you are embarking on what I hope will be an ongoing adventure of inquiry and discovery about the nature of your mind and heart and how you might live with greater presence, openheartedness, and authenticity — not merely for yourself, but for your interconnected embeddedness with those you love, with all beings, and with the world itself. The world in all its aspects may be the greatest beneficiary of your care and attention in this regard.

Deep listening is the essence of mindfulness — a cultivating of intimacy with your own life unfolding, as if it really mattered. And it does.

More than you think. And more than you can possibly think.

So, as you embark on this adventure in living, may your mindfulness practice grow and flower and nourish your life and work from moment to moment and from day to day.

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 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 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.