

THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

WHEREVER  
YOU GO,  
THERE YOU  
ARE

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION  
IN EVERYDAY LIFE

JON KABAT-ZINN

AUTHOR OF *FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING*  
AND *COMING TO OUR SENSES*

AS FEATURED IN  
BILL MOYERS'S *HEALING AND THE MIND*

**10th Anniversary Edition**

# **Wherever You Go, There You Are**

**Mindfulness Meditation In Everyday Life**

**Jon Kabat-Zinn**



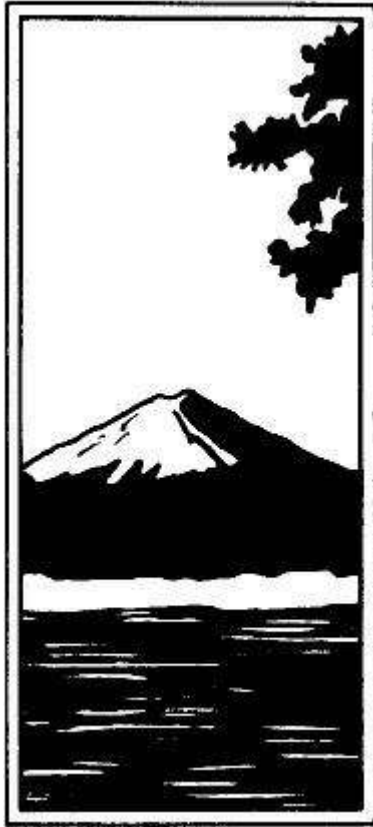
*For Myla, Will, Naushon, and Serena, wherever  
you go*

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## Introduction

Guess what? When it comes right down to it, wherever you go, there you are. Whatever you wind up doing, that's what you've wound up doing. Whatever you are thinking right now, *that's* what's on your mind. Whatever has happened to you, it has already happened. The important question is, how are you going to handle it? In other words, "Now what?"

Like it or not, this moment is all we really have to work with. Yet we all too easily conduct our lives as if forgetting momentarily that we are *here*, where we already are, and that we are *in* what we are already in. In every moment, we find ourselves at the crossroad of here and now. But when the cloud of forgetfulness over where we are now sets in, in that very moment we get lost. "Now what?" becomes a real problem.

By lost, I mean that we momentarily lose touch with ourselves and with the full extent of our possibilities. Instead, we fall into a robotlike way of seeing and thinking and doing. In those moments, we break contact with what is deepest in ourselves and affords us perhaps our greatest opportunities for creativity, learning, and growing. If we are not careful, those clouded moments can stretch out and become most of our lives.

To allow ourselves to be truly in touch with where we already are, no matter where that is, we have got to pause in our experience long enough to let the present moment sink in; long enough to actually *feel* the present moment, to see it in its fullness, to hold it in awareness and thereby come to know and understand it better. Only then can we accept the truth of this moment of our life, learn from it, and move on. Instead, it often seems as if we are preoccupied with the past, with what has already happened, or with a future that hasn't arrived yet. We look for someplace else to stand, where we hope things will be better, happier, more the way we want them to be, or the way they used to be. Most of the time we are only partially aware of this inner tension, if we are aware of it at all. What is more, we are also only partially aware at best of exactly what we are doing in and



with our lives, and the effects our actions and, more subtly, our thoughts have on what we see and don't see, what we do and don't do.

For instance, we usually fall, quite unawares, into assuming that what we are thinking—the ideas and opinions that we harbor at any given time—are “the truth” about what is “out there” in the world and “in here” in our minds. Most of the time, it just isn't so.

We pay a high price for this mistaken and unexamined assumption, for our almost willful ignoring of the richness of our present moments. The fallout accumulates silently, coloring our lives without our knowing it or being able to do something about it. We may never quite be where we actually are, never quite touch the fullness of our possibilities. Instead, we lock ourselves into a personal fiction that we already know who we are, that we know where we are and where we are going, that we know what is happening—all the while remaining enshrouded in thoughts, fantasies, and impulses, mostly about the past and about the future, about what we want and like, and what we fear and don't like, which spin out continuously, veiling our direction and the very ground we are standing on.

The book you have in your hands is about waking up from such dreams and from the nightmares they often turn into. Not knowing that you are even in such a dream is what the Buddhists call “ignorance,” or mindlessness. Being in touch with this not knowing is called “mindfulness.” The work of waking up from these dreams is the work of meditation, the systematic cultivation of wakefulness, of present-moment awareness. This waking up goes hand in hand with what we might call “wisdom,” a seeing more deeply into cause and effect and the interconnectedness of things, so that we are no longer caught in a dreamdictated reality of our own creation. To find our way, we will need to pay more attention to this moment. It is the only time that we have in which to live, grow, feel, and change. We will need to become more aware of and take precautions against the incredible pull of the Scylla and Charybdis of past and future, and the dreamworld they offer us in place of our lives.

When we speak of meditation, it is important for you to know that this is not some weird cryptic activity, as our popular culture might have it. It does not involve becoming some kind of zombie, vegetable, self-absorbed narcissist, navel gazer, “space cadet,” cultist, devotee, mystic, or Eastern philosopher. Meditation is simply about being yourself and knowing something about who that is. It is about coming to realize that you are on a path whether you like it or not, namely, the path that is your life.

Meditation may help us see that this path we call our life has direction; that it is always unfolding, moment by moment; and that what happens now, in this moment, influences what happens next.

If what happens now does influence what happens next, then doesn't it makes sense to look around a bit from time to time so that you are more in touch with what is happening now, so that you can take your inner and outer bearings and perceive with clarity the path that you are actually on and the direction in which you are going? If you do so, maybe you will be in a better position to chart a course for yourself that is truer to your inner being—a soul path, a path with heart, *your* path with a capital P. If not, the sheer momentum of your unconsciousness in this moment just colors the next moment. The days, months, and years quickly go by unnoticed, unused, unappreciated.

It is all too easy to remain on something of a fog-enshrouded, slippery slope right into our graves; or, in the fog-dispelling clarity which on occasion precedes the moment of death, to wake up and realize that what we had thought all those years about how life was to be lived and what was important were at best unexamined half-truths based on fear or ignorance, only our own life-limiting ideas, and not the truth or the way our life had to be at all.

No one else can do this job of waking up for us, although our family and friends do sometimes try desperately to get through to us, to help us see more clearly or break out of our own blindnesses. But waking up is ultimately something that each one of us can only do for ourselves. When it comes down to it, wherever *you* go, there *you* are. It's your life that is unfolding.

At the end of a long life dedicated to teaching mindfulness, the Buddha, who probably had his share of followers who were hoping he might make it easier for them to find their own paths, summed it up for his disciples this way: "Be a light unto yourself."

In my previous book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, I tried to make the path of mindfulness accessible to mainstream Americans so that it would not feel Buddhist or mystical so much as sensible. Mindfulness has to do above all with attention and awareness, which are universal human qualities. But in our society, we tend to take these capacities for granted and don't think to develop them systematically in the service of selfunderstanding and wisdom. Meditation is the process by which we go about deepening our attention and awareness, refining them, and putting them to greater practical use in our lives.

*Full Catastrophe Living* can be thought of as a navigational chart, intended for people facing physical or emotional pain or reeling from the effects of too much stress. The aim was to challenge the reader to realize, through his or her direct experiences of paying attention to things we all so often ignore, that there might be very real reasons for integrating mindfulness into the fabric of one's life.

Not that I was suggesting that mindfulness is some kind of a cure-all or dime-store solution to life's problems. Far from it. I don't know of any magical solutions and, frankly, I am not looking for one. A full life is painted with broad brush strokes. Many paths can lead to understanding and wisdom. Each of us has different needs to address and things worth pursuing over the course of a lifetime. Each of us has to chart our own course, and it has to fit what we are ready for.

You certainly have to be ready for meditation. You have to come to it at the right time in your life, at a point where you are ready to listen carefully to your own voice, to your own heart, to your own breathing—to just be present for them and with them, without having to go anywhere or make anything better or different. This is hard work.

I wrote *Full Catastrophe Living* thinking of the people referred to us as patients in our stress reduction clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. I was moved to do so by the remarkable transformations in mind and body that many people report as they put aside trying to change the severe problems that brought them to the clinic in the first place, and engage over an eight-week period in the intensive discipline of opening and listening that characterizes the practice of mindfulness.

As a navigational chart, *Full Catastrophe Living* had to supply enough detail so that someone in significant need could plot his or her own course with care. It had to speak to the pressing needs of people with serious medical problems and chronic pain, as well as to those suffering in different kinds of stressful situations. For these reasons, it had to include a good deal of information on stress and illness, health and healing, as well as extensive instructions on how to meditate.

This book is different. It is meant to provide brief and easy access to the essence of mindfulness meditation and its applications, for people whose lives may or may not be dominated by immediate problems of stress, pain, and illness. It is offered particularly for those who resist structured programs and for people who don't like to be told what to do but are curious enough about mindfulness and its relevance to try to piece things together for themselves with a few hints and suggestions here and there.

At the same time, this book is also offered to those who are already practicing meditation and wish to expand, deepen, and reinforce their commitment to a life of greater awareness and insight. Here, in brief chapters, the focus is on the spirit of mindfulness, both in our formal attempts at practice and in our efforts to bring it into all aspects of our daily lives. Each chapter is a glimpse through one face of the multifaceted diamond of mindfulness. The chapters are related to each other by tiny rotations of the crystal. Some may sound similar to others, but each facet is also different, unique.

This exploration of the diamond of mindfulness is offered for all those who would chart a course toward greater sanity and wisdom in their lives. What is required is a willingness to look deeply at one's present moments, no matter what they hold, in a spirit of generosity, kindness toward oneself, and openness toward what might be possible.

Part One explores the rationale and background for taking on or deepening a personal practice of mindfulness. It challenges the reader to experiment with introducing mindfulness into his or her life in a number of different ways. Part Two explores some basic aspects of formal meditation practice. Formal practice refers to specific periods of time in which we purposefully stop other activity and engage in particular methods of cultivating mindfulness and concentration. Part Three explores a range of applications and perspectives on mindfulness. Certain chapters in all three parts end with explicit suggestions for incorporating aspects of both formal and informal mindfulness practice into one's life. These are found under the heading "TRY."

This volume contains sufficient instructions to engage in meditation practice on one's own, without the use of other materials or supports. However, many people find it helpful to use audiotapes in the beginning to support the daily discipline of a formal meditation practice, and to guide them in the instructions until they get the hang of it and wish to practice on their own. Others find that even after years of practice, it is helpful on occasion to make use of tapes. To this end, a new series of mindfulness meditation practice tapes (Series 2) has been prepared in conjunction with this book. These tapes range in length from ten minutes to half an hour; they give the reader who is new to mindfulness practice a range of techniques to experiment with, as well as room to decide what length of formal practice is appropriate for a given time and place. The Series 2 tapes are listed in the order form at the back of this book, along with the 45-minute tapes from Series 1 which accompany *Full Catastrophe Living*.

## Part One

### *The Bloom of the Present Moment*

Only that day dawns to which we are awake. HENRY

DAVID THOREAU, *Walden*

## *What Is Mindfulness?*

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice which has profound relevance for our present-day lives. This relevance has nothing to do with Buddhism per se or with becoming a Buddhist, but it has everything to do with waking up and living in harmony with oneself and with the world. It has to do with examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive. Most of all, it has to do with being in touch.

From the Buddhist perspective, our ordinary waking state of consciousness is seen as being severely limited and limiting, resembling in many respects an extended dream rather than wakefulness. Meditation helps us wake up from this sleep of automaticity and unconsciousness, thereby making it possible for us to live our lives with access to the full spectrum of our conscious and unconscious possibilities. Sages, yogis, and Zen masters have been exploring this territory systematically for thousands of years; in the process they have learned something which may now be profoundly beneficial in the West to counterbalance our cultural orientation toward controlling and subduing nature rather than honoring that we are an intimate part of it. Their collective experience suggests that by investigating inwardly our own nature as beings and, particularly, the nature of our own minds through careful and systematic self-observation, we may be able to live lives of greater satisfaction, harmony, and wisdom. It also offers a view of the world which is complementary to the predominantly reductionist and materialistic one currently dominating Western thought and institutions. But this view is neither particularly “Eastern” nor mystical. Thoreau saw the same problem with our ordinary mind state in New England in 1846 and wrote with great passion about its unfortunate consequences.

Mindfulness has been called the heart of Buddhist meditation. Fundamentally, mindfulness is a simple concept. Its power lies in its practice and its applications. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality. It wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present for many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives but also fail to

realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation.

A diminished awareness of the present moment inevitably creates other problems for us as well through our unconscious and automatic actions and behaviors, often driven by deepseated fears and insecurities. These problems tend to build over time if they are not attended to and can eventually leave us feeling stuck and out of touch. Over time, we may lose confidence in our ability to redirect our energies in ways that would lead to greater satisfaction and happiness, perhaps even to greater health.

Mindfulness provides a simple but powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back into touch with our own wisdom and vitality. It is a way to take charge of the direction and quality of our own lives, including our relationships within the family, our relationship to work and to the larger world and planet, and most fundamentally, our relationship with ourselves as a person.

The key to this path, which lies at the root of Buddhism, Taoism, and yoga, and which we also find in the works of people like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and in Native American wisdom, is an appreciation for the present moment and the cultivation of an intimate relationship with it through a continual attending to it with care and discernment. It is the direct opposite of taking life for granted.

The habit of ignoring our present moments in favor of others yet to come leads directly to a pervasive lack of awareness of the web of life in which we are embedded. This includes a lack of awareness and understanding of our own mind and how it influences our perceptions and our actions. It severely limits our perspective on what it means to be a person and how we are connected to each other and to the world around us. Religion has traditionally been the domain of such fundamental inquiries within a spiritual framework, but mindfulness has little to do with religion, except in the most fundamental meaning of the word, as an attempt to appreciate the deep mystery of being alive and to acknowledge being vitally connected to all that exists.

When we commit ourselves to paying attention in an open way, without falling prey to our own likes and dislikes, opinions and prejudices, projections and expectations, new possibilities open up and we have a chance to free ourselves from the straitjacket of unconsciousness.

I like to think of mindfulness simply as the art of conscious living. You don't have to be a Buddhist or a yogi to practice it. In fact, if you know anything about Buddhism, you will know that the most important point is

to be yourself and not try to become anything that you are not already. Buddhism is fundamentally about being in touch with your own deepest nature and letting it flow out of you unimpeded. It has to do with waking up and seeing things as they are. In fact, the word “Buddha” simply means one who has awakened to his or her own true nature.

So, mindfulness will not conflict with any beliefs or traditions—religious or for that matter scientific—nor is it trying to sell you anything, especially not a new belief system or ideology. It is simply a practical way to be more in touch with the fullness of your being through a systematic process of self-observation, self-inquiry, and mindful action. There is nothing cold, analytical, or unfeeling about it. The overall tenor of mindfulness practice is gentle, appreciative, and nurturing. Another way to think of it would be “heartfulness.”

A student once said: “When I was a Buddhist, it drove my parents and friends crazy, but when I am a buddha, nobody is upset at all.”



## *Simple but Not Easy*

While it may be simple to practice mindfulness, it is not necessarily easy. Mindfulness requires effort and discipline for the simple reason that the forces that work against our being mindful, namely, our habitual unawareness and automaticity, are exceedingly tenacious. They are so strong and so much out of our consciousness that an inner commitment and a certain kind of work are necessary just to keep up our attempts to capture our moments in awareness and sustain mindfulness. But it is an intrinsically satisfying work because it puts us in touch with many aspects of our lives that are habitually overlooked and lost to us.

It is also enlightening and liberating work. It is enlightening in that it literally allows us to see more clearly, and therefore come to understand more deeply, areas in our lives that we were out of touch with or unwilling to look at. This may include encountering deep emotions—such as grief, sadness, woundedness, anger, and fear—that we might not ordinarily allow ourselves to hold in awareness or express consciously. Mindfulness can also help us to appreciate feelings such as joy, peacefulness, and happiness which often go by fleetingly and unacknowledged. It is liberating in that it leads to new ways of being in our own skin and in the world, which can free us from the ruts we so often fall into. It is empowering as well, because paying attention in this way opens channels to deep reservoirs of creativity, intelligence, imagination, clarity, determination, choice, and wisdom within us.

We tend to be particularly unaware that we are thinking virtually all the time. The incessant stream of thoughts flowing through our minds leaves us very little respite for inner quiet. And we leave precious little room for ourselves anyway just to be, without having to run around doing things all the time. Our actions are all too frequently driven rather than undertaken in awareness, driven by those perfectly ordinary thoughts and impulses that run through the mind like a coursing river, if not a waterfall. We get caught up in the torrent and it winds up submerging our lives as it carries us to places we may not wish to go and may not even realize we are headed for.

Meditation means learning how to get out of this current, sit by its bank and listen to it, learn from it, and then use its energies to guide us rather than to tyrannize us. This process doesn't magically happen by itself. It

takes energy. We call the effort to cultivate our ability to be in the present moment “practice” or “meditation practice.”

*Question:* How can I set right a tangle which is entirely below the level of my consciousness?

*Nisargadatta:* By being with yourself...by watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge, because it is there, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of awareness; it removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence.

NISARGADATTA MAHARAJ, *I Am That*

## Stopping

People think of meditation as some kind of special activity, but this is not exactly correct. Meditation is simplicity itself. As a joke, we sometimes say: “Don’t just do something, sit there.” But meditation is not just about sitting, either. It is about stopping and being present, that is all. Mostly we run around doing. Are you able to come to a stop in your life, even for one moment? Could it be *this* moment? What would happen if you did?

A good way to stop all the doing is to shift into the “being mode” for a moment. Think of yourself as an eternal witness, as timeless. Just watch this moment, without trying to change it at all. What is happening? What do you feel? What do you see? What do you hear?

The funny thing about stopping is that as soon as you do it, here you are. Things get simpler. In some ways, it’s as if you died and the world continued on. If you did die, all your responsibilities and obligations would immediately evaporate. Their residue would somehow get worked out without you. No one else can take over your unique agenda. It would die or peter out with you just as it has for everyone else who has ever died. So you don’t need to worry about it in any absolute way.

If this is true, maybe you don’t need to make one more phone call right now, even if you think you do. Maybe you don’t need to read something just now, or run one more errand. By taking a few moments to “die on purpose” to the rush of time while you are still living, you free yourself to have time for the present. By “dying” now in this way, you actually become more alive now. This is what stopping can do. There is nothing passive about it. And when you decide to go, it’s a different kind of going because you stopped. The stopping actually makes the going more vivid, richer, more textured. It helps keep all the things we worry about and feel inadequate about in perspective. It gives us guidance.

TRY: Stopping, sitting down, and becoming aware of your breathing

once in a while throughout the day. It can be for five minutes, or even five seconds. Let go into full acceptance of the present moment, including how you are feeling and what you perceive to be happening. For these moments, don't try to change anything at all, just breathe and let go. Breathe and let be. Die to having to have anything be different in this moment; in your mind and in your heart, give yourself permission to allow this moment to be exactly as it is, and allow yourself to be exactly as you are. Then, when you're ready, move in the direction your heart tells you to go, mindfully and with resolution.