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The Mindful Moment

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Several years ago, I suddenly fell ill. For almost three weeks, I was anemic and incredibly weak, and needed help with the simplest of tasks. I remember feeling frustrated at how little I was accomplishing and how many things I was falling behind on. I imagine you have experienced similar frustrations juggling work, family, and life in general. We can't always control the conditions surrounding us, but we can cultivate practices to cope and respond with a sense of choice, integrity, and wisdom.

One Mindful Moment to a Lifetime of Freedom

One of the reasons mindfulness can be so helpful is that we are often unaware of how our thoughts, feelings, and unconscious assumptions can limit our perceptions of what is happening. We often have habitual thoughts and running stories in our minds that we think are objectively “the truth.” These thoughts can keep us from seeing the bigger picture. This is why pausing to take a breath can help during difficult exchanges. In this book, we think about mindfulness as the ability to be present in the current moment, with awareness of our thoughts, emotions, and sensations in the body and what is happening in our environment. Another aspect of mindfulness is cultivating curiosity and openness with what is present in you and around you.

During my health challenge, mindfulness helped me notice my frustration and shame, so I decided to extend myself the compassion I often show others. I tuned into my body’s request for iron-rich foods and plant medicines, worked with my doctor and acupuncturist to restore my body to health, and, as much as I wanted to be in control, I communicated with family and coworkers about the rest and support I needed. I was able to recuperate quickly, slowing down and accepting support from others, despite my habitual thoughts. My husband shared afterward that it felt good to take care of me, and I was touched by his honesty.

Many cultures have practices that cultivate stillness and mindfulness. Whether it is contemplative prayer in Christian traditions, the Amidah in Judaism, or the sweat lodge ceremonies of some Native American cultures, people around the world have long sought to develop mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual awareness. Buddhism is perhaps most well-known for its teachings on meditation and mindfulness.

Secular practices of mindfulness have also entered mainstream culture. Jon Kabat-Zinn created Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs at the University of Massachusetts Medical School over 35 years ago. Since then, many studies have documented health benefits of mindfulness and meditation. Now MBSR and other mindfulness programs are routinely offered in hospitals, schools, prisons, business leadership programs, and corporations.

Myths About Mindfulness

Many people are using the word *mindfulness* these days, often interchangeably with the word *meditation*, which can lead to confusion. There are also some common myths about mindfulness. Here are just a few:

- **Myth 1 *Mindfulness is the same thing as meditation.*** Formal meditation techniques can help develop concentration, clarity, emotional intelligence, and awareness of habitual thoughts, so we can direct them toward peaceful and wise states. While Buddhist meditation is one well-developed practice of mindfulness, through mindfulness we can bring awareness to the present moment in small ways no matter where we are or what we are doing. In other words, we don’t need to meditate in order to practice mindfulness.
- **Myth 2 *If I am not happy and peaceful, I am doing it wrong.*** Sometimes mindfulness can bring more peace and joy, and other times it can bring up pain or grief we are avoiding. Like learning to walk as a child, mindfulness is a practice we stumble with at first and strengthen over time. We become more accepting of the thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations we may be feeling at any moment, no matter how pleasant or unpleasant they may be.

- **Myth 3 Mindfulness means having no thoughts at all.** Many people think mindfulness is about having a quiet mind or being at war with our thoughts. We are not trying to ignore or block our thoughts. Instead, we notice them as we would notice a cloud passing in the sky. At times there may be patchy clouds that stay with us. Other times we can let them drift on their way and we can return to the present moment.
- **Myth 4 Mindfulness requires setting aside a lot of time.** You may think you have to set aside a large chunk of time or get a fancy meditation cushion to get started. While these are useful, they are not necessary for practicing mindfulness in small ways in your everyday life. We can be mindful in the grocery checkout line, as we drive to work, or as we eat a meal.

Basic Skills for Mindfulness

Bringing mindfulness into your life can start with simple practices. There are some basic skills and mindsets that can help you get started.

- **Noticing the present moment.** Much of our mental energies are focused on the past, the future, or how we wish things were. Putting this aside on occasion can help us break out of unhelpful thoughts and unconscious kneejerk reactions. Then we may be able to listen more deeply to another person, offer gratitude for the blessings in our lives, or work with the situation in front of us right now.
- **Staying grounded and in your body.** Have you ever tensed up during a conversation before you fully understood what was making you uncomfortable? Noticing physical reactions can direct our attention to what emotions and thoughts may be arising for us, and how we may be spiraling off into a story about what is happening. Keeping thoughts from spinning out of control can help us pause before reacting so we can respond mindfully.

- **Recognizing thoughts and emotions for what they are.** Our thoughts and emotions are valuable pieces of information, but they are not necessarily reflective of reality. Treating our thoughts as right and accurate—as the absolute truth—can lead us astray. Give room to acknowledge and honor the thoughts and emotions you are experiencing now, while acknowledging they are different from anyone else's.
- **Encouraging curiosity and a nonjudgmental attitude.** Many people have developed a strong inner critic that tries to control their thoughts and reactions. Although the inner critic comes from a place of wanting to protect and help, its voice is not always helpful. It can even cause unintentional harm. In mindfulness, we strive to bring an attitude of curiosity and nonjudgment about our thoughts and emotions. By creating this room, we can release the inner critic and open up to new possibilities.

When I first started to learn about mindfulness, I became aware of the critical and reactive voice in my head. I had a realization that this voice was keeping me from being happy and successful, and was negatively impacting my relationships.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, speaks about the negative and positive seeds we all have inside of us, and which ones we are choosing to water each day. There is also a famous parable about a man teaching his grandson the lesson of the two wolves that battle inside us. One is filled with anger, greed, arrogance, shame, and ego. The other is filled with peace, generosity, faith, humility, and empathy. When the grandson asks which wolf will win, the old man replies, "The one you feed."

I hope that the practices in this book will help you water the seeds and feed the wolf you most want to cultivate in your life. You don't need to set aside a long time to start practicing mindfulness. You can start with the next five minutes.

How to Use This Book

This book covers 10 areas in life where mindfulness may be useful. These are topics many people struggle with and look to navigate through using mindfulness. Each chapter contributor was invited because of their experience and skill in teaching mindfulness to beginners who are working on these issues.

This book is designed to let you jump from topic to topic. Each chapter opens with a brief overview about a particular issue and how mindfulness can help. It includes some general tips for applying mindfulness in your daily life and then ends with a few practice exercises. Each exercise takes just a few minutes and can be done in a variety of settings.

For each practice exercise, you'll find a brief introduction and clear, step-by-step instructions for trying it out. At the end are tips to help you overcome any common obstacles that may arise and suggestions for varying the practice in different settings and situations.

You may find that some exercises are applicable for additional areas of your life, and not just the chapter they are listed in. For example, the One-Minute Breath Meditation on page 30 can cultivate focus and attention, but it can also help you cope with stress or anger as well as foster more patience and joy. If you want to find a specific practice by name, you can refer to the Index of Mindfulness Practices on page 158.

There are many opportunities to be more present. For instance, if we are stuck in traffic, we can focus on patience. Other times, we can take a moment to stop and breathe mindfully to bring clarity to a situation. In the upcoming chapters, you will find many useful ways to practice mindfulness in your daily life. I am grateful for the teachers who agreed to write a chapter for this book. They are some of the best in the country, and between them, they have many years of training and experience in teaching mindfulness. May these practices open the door to more freedom and peace in your life. Enjoy!

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*The seduction of
always doing
can keep us from
exercising the
discipline that
being requires.*

—Jon Kabat-Zinn,
Author and founder of
Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

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Mindfulness of the Body

One easy way to practice mindfulness is by noticing physical sensations experienced by your body. The body is always in the present moment, and we can tune into what we are sensing and feeling physically as a way to become more aware and mindful. You can do this anytime, anywhere, even while doing an activity like driving, walking, or eating. Just remember to keep a relaxed, nonjudgmental attitude about what physical sensations you notice.

STEP ONE

Take a moment to set your focus or intention for this practice. In this case, decide that you will try to stay in your body and to focus on physical sensations instead of thoughts or emotions.

STEP TWO

Take a deep breath and let the muscles in your body relax.

STEP THREE

Notice physical sensations that your body is experiencing as you go through this activity, like the air in your nostrils as you breathe or the sensation of your feet on the floor.

STEP FOUR

If thoughts pop into your mind, notice them without judgment, and then return your attention to your body's physical sensations.

STEP FIVE

Stay in your body for a few minutes, until you are ready to stop.

The Mindfulness of the Body practice is helpful for those times when you want to relax your body physically, such as at the office when your shoulders are feeling tight or at night when you're trying to fall asleep. I enjoy doing this when I need a break after sitting at my computer for several hours.

Your brain's job is to think, so you will probably have difficulty "staying in your body" the entire time. Even as you focus on your physical sensations, thoughts will come into your mind. This is normal. Just remember to return your attention to the present moment, over and over again. You may also notice places in your body that feel tense or painful. Try to "breathe into them" and see if the sensations change during the exercise.

You can practice checking in with your body for a moment or two throughout the day. You can see what you notice anywhere in your body or focus your attention on a particular area like your shoulders or your feet. There are smartphone apps that can help you remember to do this, or you can set a reminder bell or post notes around your home to remind you to take mindfulness breaks.

Sense and Savor Walk

The Sense and Savor Walk is an opportunity to slow down and enjoy a short five-minute walk to notice the beauty around you. Too often we rush through our day instead of stopping to smell the roses. Here, we challenge ourselves to step away from the frenetic pace of life and notice as many pleasurable things as possible. By using our senses, we practice being relaxed and engaged, rather than being lost in our thoughts.

STEP ONE

Find a place to walk outside. Take three deep breaths, and then begin walking slowly. Wander where you feel called and take your time.

STEP TWO

Notice as many beautiful and pleasurable things as you can. Perhaps it is the breeze on your cheek or the rustling of a tree. Enjoy noticing every detail.

STEP THREE

Engage all your senses. What are you drawn to touch or smell? What sounds capture your attention? If you feel drawn to a particular item, give it your full attention. Stay with it until you are ready to discover something new.

STEP FOUR

When you are ready, close the practice with three deep breaths. Notice how you feel and offer gratitude for the experience.

This activity is helpful when you are feeling anxious or need a brief break. You can go to a park or a forest, or take your lunch break outside your office building. You can also walk near your home or anyplace that feels safe. I love the smell of a neighbor's fragrant yellow roses as I walk down the street close to my home.

You may notice resistance to staying with something because a faster pace feels more familiar to you, or you want to take in as many things as possible. Consider that you are seeking quality of connection and not quantity. I often greet trees, feel the texture of their bark, and stop to pick up pebbles on the ground. Take the time to look deeper at what is in front of you, and engage your senses.

You can shorten this exercise by observing the outdoors from a window in your home or office. You can still focus your curiosity and attention even if you cannot engage all of your senses. For example, I recently spent some time watching a squirrel and a bird in a tree outside our living room window and noticed the changing colors of light as the sun set for the evening.

Affirmations on Belonging

This practice reminds us that we are part of a greater human family, and we all experience the suffering and joys that are part of the shared human experience. It also helps us recognize our inherent worth and the worth of others. The affirmations are adapted from a blessing by my teacher Jerry Tello.

STEP ONE

Find a quiet place where you will be comfortable talking aloud.

STEP TWO

Speak these words aloud slowly: "I am loved. I am a blessing. I am sacred just the way I am. I have dignity. I have wisdom and gifts for the whole." Repeat three times.

STEP THREE

Now visualize someone you love and say these words aloud: "You are loved. You are a blessing. You are sacred just the way you are. You have dignity. You have wisdom and gifts for the whole." Repeat three times.

STEP FOUR

Think of the many people experiencing suffering in the world and say these words aloud: "You are loved. You are a blessing. You are sacred just the way you are. You have dignity. You have wisdom and gifts for the whole." Repeat three times.

STEP FIVE

Close with a commitment to show kindness, later that day or the next, to someone you love and to a stranger you don't know.

If you find it difficult to say these words at first, start with the affirmation just for yourself, and allow the words to sink in over the course of several days. Do this even if you feel uncomfortable—it's okay to fake it until you make it.

If you are short on time, you can say each affirmation once instead of three times. You can also write the affirmations down and place them somewhere you can see them every day, like in your car or on your mirror. Then you can read them silently or aloud each day.