

I. WHY MINDFULNESS?

1. THE POWER OF THE PRESENT

Vividness and Meaning

If you think back to childhood, it may seem like a time when the world had a lot more vividness. Simple moments like a puppy running up to you, a hummingbird poised in the air dipping into a flower, multicolored lights on a Christmas tree, blowing dandelion seeds off a stem—simple things like these can easily enchant a child. Those moments contain a feeling of wonder and immediacy that often seem lost to adults.

If you think about any kind of vividness in your life from any time, whether it was the moment you got married or the time your car hit a patch of ice and swerved out of control, the day you hit it big and received a lot of money or the moment your father died in his bed at the hospital—whatever it happened to be, for the child or the adult, whether it was joy or tragedy, in all those moments your mind was fully in the present, experiencing the brightness of being alive.

These moments stand in contrast to a mind continually burdened with depression, anxiety, resentment—hung up on itself and not all there. These

moments are different than being stuck in worries and daydreams. Something is happening so intensely in the environment that you forget about yourself. When you see a really absorbing, compelling movie, if you watch a tight, dramatic football game, if you're at a high energy party, or driving home through a terrible storm—any situation that might bring your attention completely into the present moment—suddenly you find yourself letting go of your usual concerns and focused on what's happening right now.

In the example of watching a great movie, the satisfaction you feel relates with how thoroughly it brought you into the present, as if you're living the experience along with the characters. You forget your other issues and enter the vivid now of the movie. In any experience where you're doing something you deeply love to do, like building something or working on an engine or playing a guitar, it's easy to forget the time because you're so fully engaged with what you're doing. There's a natural satisfaction and joy that comes from that.

In the opposite kind of example, of driving through a storm when the road is dangerous, being fully in the present moment undistracted by superficial thoughts might mean the difference between getting home safely or dying in an accident. In a similar way, in anything that you do, if you are fully present while you're doing it, you're much more likely to do a good job rather than a shoddy one. If

you're not paying attention, your mind is in another city or another time, it's easy to be careless and make mistakes, to not clean the pot thoroughly, to forget an ingredient, to leave out some important information, and so on.

All of these are ordinary life examples of the vividness and meaningfulness of the present moment. You may not think of them as *the present*—you might think of them as pleasant memories or happy times or dramatic things that happened. When they took place, though, you were all there, alive to what was happening as it happened. What concerns us here is how the present moment is a gateway to a much deeper understanding of life and mind. It's how we can come to accurately understand ourselves, to evolve who and what we are, and act effectively and meaningfully in our daily lives. We're learning in this book to be mindful of the present moment.

There's Only the Present

Our minds continually churn out thoughts about the past and future. They produce all kinds of thoughts. Memories can take many forms. We remember things that have happened to us personally. We remember things that were told or taught to us about what occurred in the past, like family events that may have happened before we were born, or national, historical events, like the Civil War and the Great Depression. Sometimes we don't remember things that happened

long ago or even yesterday morning, or we misremember them, thinking they happened in a different year, or we recall someone being at a particular event who wasn't there at all. Sometimes we dwell on the past, regretting what we did, imagining what we should have done. Or we remember it in a more ideal way than actually took place, where we felt great when such and such occurred and assume that everyone else did too.

We're always imagining the future. If you're in elementary school, you might imagine who you'll be when you grow up. If you're in prison, you spend time imagining what you'll do and where you'll go when you get out. You can spend a lot of time strategizing how things will work out. If you want to get something at the commissary but you don't have any money, you spend time thinking about how to get the money and how to be in line when it opens. If there's a big game on Sunday, you think about your team and its prospects in the contest. If your favorite food in the chow hall is at lunch on Tuesday, you look forward to it and make sure you'll be there to get some. You can spend a lot of time imagining things, practical or fanciful, that you'll get sometime in the future. Or you might view the future with dread, afraid that you won't get a job, your marriage will fall apart, or other disasters will befall you.

Such things take up most of the bandwidth in our minds. We can always look forward toward what

hasn't happened yet or back to what has. Very often, what we imagine about the future never comes to pass, and we have a tendency to distort what happened in the past, making it look better or worse than it was. Either way, the real truth of all these experiences is that they are thoughts occurring in the mind at the present moment. Our memories don't occur in the past, nor do our projections of the future occur in the future. They all only occur right now. They're not past or future events. They're present *thoughts* happening *now*.

What happened this morning is already gone. What will happen this evening hasn't occurred. The last minute is gone and the next hasn't arrived. All we have—and all we ever have had—is the present moment. We can convince ourselves that the past and future are fixed in place, solid entities that happened or will happen just as we imagine, but still the only place we ever are is the present moment.

What is the present moment? For one thing, it's a place of *change*, not a steady state. Moment by moment is passing away, being born and dying. If you look in the mirror, the face you see isn't the one you saw when you were five years old, and it isn't the one you'll see when you're seventy-five. If you just got out of bed and feel heavy and tired, you'll look one way, and if you just had your coffee and you've woken up, you'll see yourself another way.

So what you might perceive in the present mo-

ment will change, even in the course of a morning in prison. But while you and the world around you are shifting, at least subtly, your perception of it only happens *now*. How your thoughts might describe the world may be different than this direct, immediate perception. They might create many versions of the world you're in. They might offer many interpretations, some of which clash with each other. They may leave you regretting the past and pining for the future. The worlds they create are an interpretation or imagination; however, they're not an immediate perception of what is actually happening on the spot. They're *theories* about the reality you're in, that might be more accurate or less accurate, but they're not direct experience as it's happening. They're before or after the fact.

This is an important distinction, one we don't normally examine. The tool we use to examine the mind and present experience is *mindfulness*.

Finding Sanity Now

You may feel like the last thing in the world you want is the present. After all, if you're reading this, you're likely sitting in a prison, in a cramped cell or a noisy dorm. It's not the life you dreamed of having when you were growing up. Some inmates see their time in prison as meaningless. Even with long sentences they imagine their lives will only start again eight years from now when they get out. They don't see value in

their lives until they reach that far off release date. Until then, there's no real life to be had. Reality, they imagine, is somewhere else.

But mindfulness is the very opposite view. It's interested in the reality of now, whatever that may be. It doesn't put reality off to some special time in the future when everything will be perfect.

We can have a strong tendency to externalize happiness. We think that if we can get to an ideal place, with an ideal partner, and an ideal amount of money, *then* we'll be happy. We create scenarios that once achieved would remove our suffering.

But perhaps we haven't looked at suffering deeply enough, what causes it and what relieves it. If we can only find happiness when our circumstances are completely ideal and up to spec, then there's no possibility of happiness unless we have those circumstances. Even if somehow we manage to create the situation we've dreamed of, we still have the problem of things changing. Our thoughts, our body and entire world is in a state of perpetual change, so why wouldn't the ideal circumstances we've brought about also change?

What we haven't understood well is the mind that came up with this idea. If it came up with one version of happiness—say, living on the beach in Mexico deep sea fishing every day—it could imagine some other idea, like you're rich and successful running your own company. Which is the right one?

Whatever you might imagine, you're in a prison and you can't do either. What you *can* do is look at your mind.

Whatever brought you into this situation, you can be sure that your mind had some part in it—in the impulses that pushed you, the choices you made, the directions you took. Your mind shaped how you saw the world and what you saw about the world. It noticed some things and not others. It believed in this but not in that.

Therefore, the point of mindfulness practice is to really look at what's going on, investigating it to see how it works. You have a mind with its thoughts and emotions, a body and its senses, and a world you're occupying that supports and interacts with you every day. Mindfulness means taking a fresh look at all these things—a look that's unbiased but, at the same time, personal. It's unbiased because you're simply bringing your attention to the present moment, where you live and breathe, examining what goes on there without imposing a lot of theories between yourself and what's occurring. It's personal because it's your thoughts and feelings, your actual experience as it happens.

So it may seem like a theory rather than an actuality to say that mindfulness is the tool that can uncover your inner sanity. Nevertheless, this has been the experience of people practicing mindfulness over thousands of years. As crazy or as set in its ways

the mind may seem, it's something that can be genuinely explored, clarified, and deeply understood. It's a demanding, hands on process that requires personal effort and discipline, but it relates experientially with the *causes* of our confusion and suffering. If we penetrate the bewildering chaos of thoughts and emotional conflicts, we can reveal the *nature* of mind which is sane, wholesome, clear, and intelligent. But we can only find it in the present moment because it doesn't exist anywhere else.

Sanity means not being overwhelmed by every bad idea and disturbed emotional impulse that comes along. It means seeing clearly how the mind works: how it gets entangled, generating states of confusion and suffering, and how to go beyond this. It's able to discern what actions are helpful and those that lead to more and more problems. It's able to feel compassion and extend that to others. It has strength, courage, openness, and confidence. It knows the magic and vividness of now, and appreciates being alive, even in difficult circumstances. It doesn't need an ideal situation to be at peace with itself.

Finding this quality of sanity won't depend on getting out of prison or getting into special circumstances. It only depends on coming fully into the present moment and learning to be there. It's not about *creating something new* or *transplanting something external* into your system that's not already a part of who you are. It is found through getting to know

yourself in a much deeper way.

Connecting with our inherent sanity can uplift us from depression, steady us in adversity, and open us to perceptions and experiences we never knew were there. It's sometimes called *brilliant sanity* because it has the ability to illuminate our mental darkness and shine a light into challenging situations. We can start to uncover this quality right now. It's a matter of taking the journey.