

The Brief Guide to Mindfulness

*How to Create the Habit of Mindfulness &
Fall in Love with Life*

by Leo Babauta

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About

This guide was written by Leo Babauta as a companion to his book, Zen Habits.

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With love.

Introduction

Leo's mindfulness journey

I should start this guide by telling you that I'm not a meditation teacher, a Zen priest, an advanced meditation practitioner, or in any way certified or qualified to dispense meditation advice.

So why read this guide from me? This isn't a definitive guide to mindfulness — it's a place to start. It's for beginners who are interested in the benefits of mindfulness and want to explore it a bit. It's for people who want more mindfulness in their lives but don't know how to start forming the habit, or bring it into the rest of their lives outside meditation.

My experience is only as a beginner. I started sometime around 2005, when I was trying to quit smoking and start running. Meditation was something that interested me, so I read a bit about it and started a simple practice at home, not knowing what I was doing at all.

But it helped. It was instrumental in quitting smoking, and in sticking with the exercise habit. Running became one of my main mindfulness practices, but so did eating and decluttering and writing and playing with my kids.

I've had an on-again, off-again meditation practice ever since, and though I do have gaps in my practice, it's always something I can come back to. Even more importantly, it's something that informs my entire life, every day, whether I'm meditating regularly or not. Mindfulness is a part of everything I do, to some extent.

I've done some basic zazen (Zen sitting meditation) with San Francisco Zen Center and a couple other places, but nothing extensive. I've read countless books on Zen, Buddhism, and mindfulness, and talked to many meditation teachers. I've explored not only mindfulness but acceptance, letting go, non-self, the Four Noble Truths, compassion, and more.

It's also important to mention that I've taught mindfulness to thousands of people in my Sea Change program, even though I'm not qualified to do it, and in a couple of retreats at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California, with an actual Zen priest who knew what she was doing. The teaching really deepened my understanding of mindfulness, seeing where people struggled, reflecting on their questions and successes and insights. The teacher always learns more than the student, and this has been instrumental in my journey.

But ultimately, I'm still a beginner, still learning, and every month I learn more and realize there's so much more I have to learn. I don't have all the answers, but I do invite you on a journey with me.

Chapter 1

What is mindfulness?

"Mindfulness" is a bit of a buzzword these days, and it can mean a lot of things. In this guide, the word "mindfulness" will simply mean paying attention.

How is that different than any other time in our lives? Don't we pay attention most of the time? Well, it turns out that most of the time, we are only partly paying attention ... and that's something you discover with mindfulness practice (meditation). So as you're reading this guide, you might be paying attention to the words, but your mind also tends to wander and think about related ideas, things you have to do later, things you're worried about, a conversation that happened to you recently. It's something that happens all the time, and it's pretty hard to avoid.

As you walk down the street, or spend time with another person ... you often aren't fully paying attention. You don't notice the blossom on the ground in front of you, or how the light breeze feels on your arms, or how the person you're with seems to be struggling with something. Maybe you'll notice some of that, but your mind is also elsewhere.

So mindfulness is about putting our attention on what's going on in the present moment. There's a lot going on in the present moment, though, and you can't pay attention to all of it all the time. So there's a lot that we can do when we practice mindfulness, including:

- Noticing how different parts of our body feel (sensations)
- Noticing the light around us, how different things around us look

- Noticing sounds all around us
- Noticing smells, tastes
- Noticing our thoughts and emotions
- Paying full attention to what someone else is saying
- Noticing the details of something in front of us
- Trying to take all of this, or a large part of it, in at once

So mindfulness isn't just one thing -- it can be all of the above, and more.

Mindfulness practice, then is simply attention training. Our attention tends to jump around randomly, but being able to place our attention on something in particular, and hold it there, is useful. And seeing that our attention is wandering is also useful.

Meditation is simply mindfulness practice. It's not about clearing your mind of all thoughts, or achieving nirvana -- though some people do report experiencing these things, they're not what meditation is about. It's about learning to pay attention.

It's also about learning the practice of non-judgmental noticing. If we pay attention to someone in front of us, or a bug crawling on the ground, or our feelings as they arise ... there's often not just the noticing of these things, but a judgment of them. I don't like this person, the bug is gross, my feelings are bad. Or good. These are judgments on what we notice.

But we can also practice just noticing. Just observe, just see, without deciding whether something is good or bad, beautiful or gross, pleasing or annoying. Just watch. In this way, we can non-judgmentally notice sensations around us, our emotions, our thoughts, our body, and everything else.

We'll talk about why all of this might be useful, and how to do it, in the coming few chapters ... but first, let's clear up a few misconceptions about mindfulness.

What mindfulness isn't:

- A religion — though many mindfulness practices are rooted in Buddhism, there are mindfulness and compassion traditions from many other religions as well as secular tradition. And the fact remains that no matter where mindfulness comes from, you don't need to believe in any god or afterlife or mystical phenomena other than what we already know about the body and mind through science.
- All about "me" — while mindfulness practices encourage you to turn inward to your breath, body and thoughts ... that's simply so you can understand be more aware of your thoughts, not because that's the only important focus in the world. In fact, as you become more aware, you can learn to turn your awareness on the suffering and difficulties of others, so that you can have compassion for them.
- About doing nothing — while it's true that you can learn a lot by sitting and being still and turning inward, that's just a practice ground for mindfulness. You can take action and be mindful. You can be non-judgmental and still change things (indeed, things will always change whether you try to change them or not). You can help others through compassion, starting from a place of mindfulness, peace and non-judgment.
- About thinking nothing — while many people think meditation is about emptying the mind, that doesn't often happen and it isn't the "goal". You can have thoughts while you meditate, and I usually do. You don't have to try to push your thoughts out or feel bad that you have them. Just notice them.

- About nirvana or reaching an enlightened state — while some people reach states that they feel are enlightened, the truth is that this isn't the "goal" and isn't necessary. The most I've experienced is a dropping away of thinking about myself as I become fully immersed in the moment. But usually I just see what's going on, which is plenty. There are some who believe in nirvana, but you don't need to believe in that to benefit from mindfulness practice.

Chapter 2

Why bother

Mindfulness practice isn't always easy. It can take effort and focus, and it's not something you get good at overnight. So why bother to make all that effort?

There are a lot of incredible benefits from meditating and practicing mindfulness, but here are the ones I'd like to emphasize:

- It helps you fully experience life (appreciation)
- It's a powerful tool for changing your habits (awareness)
- It helps you feel better about yourself (self-acceptance)
- It helps you deal with frustration (letting go)
- It can help you be kinder (compassion)

There are mental and health benefits as well, but I'm not going to list the dozens of benefits of meditation that scientific research has been finding in the last decade.

Let's talk about those five benefits that I'd like to focus on.

Appreciation: Fully experience life

Imagine going to a movie theater, paying \$10, and then being on your phone while the movie is playing. You wouldn't really notice much of the movie, and that would be a complete waste of your \$10.

That's what most of us are like all the time with life itself — and not just with regards to distractions from technology. We miss out on the details of life when we're stuck in our heads, thinking about things that are coming up or replaying events that already happened instead of paying attention to what's right in front of us in the present moment.

Mindfulness practice is about learning how to pay attention to the moment in front of us. It's noticing when we're distracted, worried about something, spinning around in thoughts in our head ... and then once we notice, mindfulness is about turning our attention to the present.

Imagine spending time with your child or a good friend, and not really paying attention to them. You're not being a good parent or friend — but if you could turn your attention to them, and give them the gift of your attention, you'd be improving the relationship.

You'd also be able to better appreciate the person in front of you, by fully noticing them. You could fully appreciate food, or exercise, or any activity (including work) by paying attention and fully noticing.

Mindfulness is, in part, about really experiencing life, as much as we can. It's about savoring the life we've been given, and not wasting it.

Awareness as a tool for changing habits

I've learned, from changing my own habits and helping others change theirs, that meditation is the fundamental habit. There's no more useful habit you can build if you want to create a number of good habits (or quit bad ones).

Why? Because it helps you develop an awareness of your urges and rationalizations that often get in the way of creating new habits, or stopping ingrained habits.

I learned this when I wanted to quit smoking — often I'd just give in to the urge to smoke, without knowing why. The same was true of changing my old unhealthy eating habits, or starting the running habit, or waking up early. Rationalization and urges get in the way of all habit change, but we often don't even realize it's going on.

What I did with smoking was carry around a little piece of paper and pencil, and make tally marks each time I had the urge to smoke. This taught me an awareness of my normally unseen urges.

Once I had that awareness, I was able to watch the urge rise and fade away, without needing to act on it. I was able to listen to the rationalizations, without believing them, and recognize them for the lies they were. I was lying to myself all the time, but didn't realize it until I started paying attention.

Meditation helps you to become more aware of what your mind does, and that skill can be carried over to all other habit changes.

Self-acceptance: Learning to love yourself

Another thing that gets in the way of habit change for many people is self-dissatisfaction. We often don't like our bodies, or feel undisciplined, and guilty about our many failures. And this results in trying to comfort these bad feelings with eating, shopping, distractions, smoking, drinking, drugs.

We can try to change our habits, but unless we address this core problem of not liking ourselves, we'll probably struggle.

Mindfulness helps us to see this dissatisfaction, and to try to appreciate ourselves, find things to be grateful for about ourselves. It takes time to

change this feeling of dissatisfaction, but it's not possible without mindfulness.

Letting go: Dealing calmly with frustration

Frustration is a source of stress and unhappiness and relationship problems for pretty much everyone. No one is immune. But mindfulness can help.

If you have frustration coming up, instead of just acting on it mindlessly, you can watch it rising in you. Just notice it, see it happening, feel how it feels in your body. Then look for the expectations at the source of the frustration, and practice letting go of the expectation. If you can get good at doing this, frustrations will still come, but they go more easily. You'll hold onto the frustrations less.

Compassion: Becoming kinder

When we deal with other people, we often judge them for what they do — for smoking, or being unhealthy, or being vegan, or being poor, or being rich, or being superficial, or being a crunchy hippie, or being loud and obnoxious, or being shy and timid.

No matter what the other person is like, we can find a way to judge them.

But mindfulness helps us to see when we're doing that, and to see the ideal that we're using to judge the other person. It helps us to try to see them in a non-judgmental way. Further, it can help us try to understand the suffering or difficulties they're going through, instead of judging them for not handling it well.

Finding compassion isn't something that happens instantly, but mindfulness is the start of that journey.

Chapter 3

A small daily practice

While all of this might seem overwhelming, and you might be confused as to how to learn all of this, it can actually be fairly simple. We'll start with a small daily practice.

There are lots of ways to meditate, but I'm going to recommend that you start as simply as possible.

Here's what to do:

1. Pick a time (preferably in the morning, but whenever works best for you) when you'll meditate. It doesn't have to be an exact time, but actually a trigger that happens each morning, like opening your laptop or starting the coffee maker or taking a shower.
2. Commit to meditating every day for just 2 minutes immediately after the trigger. So if the trigger is showering, then you'll meditate right after you get out of the shower, with no delay.
3. Set up a visual reminder near where your trigger happens, so you don't forget. A big note or something like that.
4. Find a comfortable place to sit where you won't be interrupted for 2 minutes. Your couch, your bed, your desk, a cushion on the floor.
5. Just sit, and pay attention to your breath for as long as you can. You don't have to have an empty mind or push out your thoughts. Just put the fingertip of your attention on your breath.

6. When your mind inevitably wanders, just notice it. Don't be mad at yourself, because it happens to all of us. Just notice, then gently return to the breath.

That's it. Just sit for 2 minutes, pay attention to the breath, once a day after a certain trigger. Notice your thoughts, return to the breath.

More details

For this simple sitting meditation, how you sit doesn't matter very much. To form the habit, we're simplifying and trying to get to the essential practice. So we sit, and we practice mindfulness.

There are, of course, many other ways to meditate, but we're going to start with this. For those who have been practicing for awhile, there are some more advanced recommendations in the next chapter. For everyone else, focus on your breathing, as it goes in or out. For now, let's keep it as simple as possible.

You might be tempted to meditate for longer — 10 minutes, 20 minutes. Don't let yourself fall into that trap. This is not a test of how strong you are at staying in meditation — we are trying to form a longer-lasting habit. And to do that, we want to start with just 2 minutes. You'll find it much easier to start this way, and forming a habit with a small start like this is a method much more likely to succeed.

You can expand to 5 minutes if you can do the 2-minute meditation for 7 straight days, then 7 minutes if you can do it for 14 straight days, then 10 minutes if you can stick to it for 21 straight days, and 15 if you can do a full month. But don't increase your meditation time unless you didn't miss a day the previous week.

After a week of just focusing on the breath, try focusing first on your body, and then the breath. First notice your body — are you sitting up straight? Can you feel your “sit bones” (in your butt) beneath you? Are your ears, shoulders and hips aligned? Then check in with your breath.

As you breathe in, follow your breath in through your nostrils, then into your throat, then into your lungs and belly. Sit straight, keep your eyes open but looking at the ground and with a soft focus. If you want to close your eyes, that’s fine. As you breathe out, follow your breath out back into the world. If it helps, count ... one breath in, two breath out, three breath in, four breath out ... when you get to 10, start over. If you lose track, start over. If you find your mind wandering (and you will), just pay attention to your mind wandering, then bring it gently back to your breath. Repeat this process for the two minutes you meditate. You won’t be very good at it at first, most likely, but you’ll get better with practice.

And that’s it. It’s a very simple practice, as starting simply is always best.

Chapter 4

Remembering to practice

One of the most common obstacles for people as they get started with a small daily practice is remembering.

It's so easy to get caught up in the busyness of your day, in checking email and your favorite online distractions, that remembering to meditate can be difficult.

This is totally normal, and very solvable. Here are some ideas you can implement right now, so you don't forget again:

- Put a sticky note on your laptop and other places you normally go to in the morning, so you definitely don't forget.
- If you have a meditation cushion, put it somewhere awkward and obvious (kitchen table, in front of your toilet, on top of your laptop) that you won't fail to see.
- Set phone or computer reminders. Multiple ones that you won't ignore.
- Make your desktop picture or browser start page be something that says, "Meditate today".
- Ask a friend to call or text you every morning at 8am asking if you meditated.
- Have your spouse or kids or roommate remind you every day.

In truth, you only need reminders for a little while. After awhile, it becomes more automatic and you won't forget.

And when you do remember, or see your reminder, pause and think about how lovely this meditation will be. Don't see it as a chore to be checked off your list, think of it as a treat to be enjoyed every morning.

Finally, I'd like to say that if you find yourself feeling bad about missing meditation, pause and notice these feelings, and just let yourself watch them non-judgmentally for a minute. See them, feel them, and then let them go, as all feelings will pass.

Chapter 5

What to notice as you start

Once you start your small daily practice, there's a good chance that meditation won't exactly meet your expectations.

You might be frustrated, confused, not sure if you're doing it right.

Let's start by throwing out our expectations of what meditation should be. There is no right way to do it, and it will be different for every person, different each time you do it. Go into your meditation sessions with no idea how it will be, no expectations, open to whatever happens. No judgments.

A few things to notice as you get started:

1. **Your mind wanders.** This might be frustrating for some, as you really want to concentrate on your breath. Don't worry about it. Again, you might have a preconceived expectation of what meditation should be like, but in reality, what is happening is exactly what should be happening. It's how your mind works — it's just that we are not often aware of it. You can't force your mind to fit a specific mold. Just notice the wandering, and gently and compassionately return to your breath. When you wander again (often immediately), return again. Keep doing it, and you'll get better at staying there, but don't force it.
2. **Two minutes might feel very short.** Or it might feel longer than you expected. If it feels short, you might worry that you're not getting a lot of benefits out of just 2 minutes, and you'll be tempted to do more. Don't worry about the length of your meditation for now. If it

feels long, feel free to do a minute less. What matters most is not the length or benefits, but forming the habit.

3. **You might get distracted.** Maybe there are kids walking around, maybe there's music or some noise coming from somewhere, maybe you're worried that you're not wearing the right thing or sitting the right way. Just observe the distractions. It's a part of meditation. Now come back to your breath. It's OK to get distracted, but learn to have awareness of the distraction process, and learn to come back.
4. **You might forget.** If you were supposed to do it after brushing your teeth, but you forgot, that's OK. Put a note next to your toothbrush or on your bathroom mirror, or somewhere you'll see it at the right time. A reminder is a good thing in the beginning. Later you won't need it.
5. **You might be worried you're not doing it right.** Don't worry — you are. If you're doing it, you're doing it right. The main thing is to sit. The second thing is to breathe. The third thing is to pay attention to your attention, and to practice bringing it back to your breath. If you're doing the first thing, you're good. If you practice the second and third things, even if you don't do too well at them, you're great.

Habit formation is about repeating a small action over and over, right after a trigger, until it becomes ingrained. So focus right now on doing a small action, repeatedly, every day.

Once you have the habit ingrained, you'll notice yourself getting better. And the noticing is really what you'll get good at. What to notice as you meditate: that noticing is everything.

Chapter 6

Working with obstacles

Many times, we struggle when we meditate — the things to notice in the last chapter are good examples of that. The good news is that whatever you're struggling with is an amazing area of exploration. The obstacle becomes what you want to work with.

For example, you might be struggling with: thinking you're doing it wrong, being confused, being frustrated at your mind wandering, distractions, frustrations with other people interrupting your meditation practice, boredom, thinking there should be more to this.

Each of those areas is an obstacle, and in each of those cases, you have an area to work with.

How do you work with one of those obstacles? See them as resistance. Use that feeling of resistance as the object of your meditation. Instead of focusing on the breath, focus on the feeling of resistance. See where it is in your body. What does the sensation feel like? What is its source? What is the quality of this feeling?

Once you've really explored this feeling, see if you can turn from it to your breath, other parts of your body, and other things that are surrounding you. Notice that despite this resistance, you are OK. Things are not as bad as all that.

Try moving back and forth slowly between the resistance and other things you can notice in the present moment. In this way, you are developing a choice, between focusing on this feeling of resistance, and

being in other parts of the moment. Neither is better than the other, but you can choose what your reality is.

No matter what your resistance, you can work with it. And then another form of resistance will come up, and you can work with that.

Chapter 7

The observer vs. the impulse

One thing you learn from meditating that you don't always see otherwise is that you are not your urges.

We all have urges: to eat something fried or sweet, to go to distractions, to procrastinate instead of exercising or meditating, to smoke or drink, and so on. There's nothing wrong with these urges — they happen all the time.

What we normally do is just follow the urge, without realizing what we're doing. The impulse to do (or not do) something arises, and we are so immersed in our thoughts and impulses that we just follow them without making a conscious choice.

But as you meditate, you can actually see these urges — there's an urge to get up and stop meditating, for example. You can become an observer of your urges, instead of closely attached to them or immersed in them. You create a small amount of distance, where you're the watcher and not the doer.

That transforms your relationship to your thoughts and urges. You can watch the urge arise, and feel how it feels in your body. You can see it get stronger, and your instinct might be to act. But you can not act, and just watch.

In this instant of watching, in this small space, you can decide. You can just watch and not act, or you can act on the urge. This is now a conscious choice you can make. That's powerful.

It carries out to other parts of your life — suddenly, you can see your urges to distraction, to food and drink and smoking, to procrastination and quitting, to shying away from discomfort and fear, to judgment and criticism and negative thinking. And as you notice the urges, you can be the observer, and make more conscious decisions.

Chapter 8

Being non-judgmental

As you sit in meditation, practice being just an observer, not a judge.

Watch your breath come in and out, just seeing, just noticing. There's no good or bad about the breath — it's just happening. In the same way, observe how your body feels. Notice the sensations of the room around you.

Now apply this to your thoughts and feelings as they arise. Perhaps your thoughts pull you from your focus on your breath — that's OK. Just watch the thoughts. Just observe, without thinking that you shouldn't have those thoughts, or that they're bad. They're just happening, in the same way the breath just happens.

This is the practice of non-judgmental observation. It's about just noticing, not pushing things away, not judging them as good or bad, just watching. Be a detached observer, seeing a scene from afar, perhaps coming in closer for an examination but with no emotional involvement with what's happening, just a neutral observer.

Practice this for a few days, a week, two weeks. See if you can get good at this skill of non-judgmental observing.

What happens is that if you learn this skill, you can apply it to other parts of your day. As you get better at it, you might be able to see someone getting angry at you, or see your kid's mess in the living room, or notice yourself giving in to food cravings ... and not get upset. You just observe.

There's a lot of power to being non-judgmental, but I'll let you explore it on your own.

Chapter 9

Developing appreciation

When we sit still for a minute or two, we create a space for noticing.

Often we're in a rush to do this task and then the next one, constantly looking forward, planning and worrying and trying to get things under control. Or we're reviewing past conversations, things that happened recently. But we don't notice things as they're happening, most of the time.

Meditation allows us to notice things that are right here in front of us, as they're happening. That applies to physical phenomena — our breath, bodies, surroundings — but also to what's going on in our heads. There's a lot to notice!

When we really pay attention, we can see how much we've been missing. There's a richness and uniqueness to each moment, an arising and a passing at the same time. Each moment is fleeting, impermanent. We ourselves are constantly changing, ever shifting, always in flux, and we can see this if we stop to notice.

What happens when we practice this is that we start to appreciate each moment for the wonder that it is. We appreciate ourselves for the wonder that we are, and others as well. This is a sense of appreciating a gift that we've been given, rather than taking it for granted.

Moment by moment, we can see the richness and love contained in everything around us, ourselves included. In this way, life is never boring, always full of learning. We make the most of the gift of life.

Chapter 10

Learning acceptance

There's a distaste for the idea of "acceptance" in our Western minds, an idea that acceptance is passive and that we shouldn't just accept things as they are but do something about them. I struggled with this for years, and rejected the idea of acceptance for a long time.

But as I meditated, and started to watch things non-judgmentally, I learned acceptance. It was just a matter of saying, "This is how things are right now. And that's perfectly OK."

What I learned, though, is that acceptance isn't about never changing things — it's about taking appropriate action from a place of peace and understanding. Compare these two different approaches:

1. I don't like the way things are, and they frustrate and annoy me. From this place of frustration and dissatisfaction, I take action — I try to change things to make them better. But my frustration will influence my actions, so that if I'm dealing with someone else, for example, they'll sense my frustration and probably react in defensiveness.
2. I see things as they are, and accept them as the reality of the situation. I am at peace with this reality, but can see that there are actions I can take to ease someone else's pain, to help someone else. And so I take that action, responding to them appropriately, without frustration or anger.

In both cases, action was taken ... but the actions are heavily influenced by whether we're coming from a place of frustration and anger, or

acceptance and compassion. It's not about passivity, but about calm action.

How can we find acceptance? By being the observer we talked about, watching without immersing ourselves in our thoughts and impulses, noticing without judgment.

When we just watch, we see that things are arising and passing, impermanent and ever-changing. We can accept things as they are, knowing that they won't always be like that.

We might see all the phenomena of the current moment as clouds, coming and passing. This is the nature of acceptance: we are detached from the phenomena, and can just watch all of it and see that it is all fine, just the way it is.

How does this help us in life? If we apply this to the rest of our day, we can sit in a train or car and experience things just as they are, without wishing they were different. This can take frustration out of our daily commute.

We can observe others and accept them as they are, understanding that like us they are suffering from stress, uncertainty, fear, worry, frustration, doubt. And that's OK. Accepting others as they are helps us to be less frustrated with them. And the same process applies to accepting ourselves, just as we are.

Chapter 11

Letting go of frustration

When we're frustrated with someone else, or with a situation, or with ourselves ... it's because we don't want them to be the way they are. We don't accept things as they are. We wish they were different. We want things to match up to our ideals, and they don't, so we're frustrated, angry, stressed, fearful, upset.

This is very difficult, but we can learn to recognize when this is happening. Building awareness is crucial to dealing with it. So when you see yourself getting angry, frustrated, stressed, defensive, irritated ... just note that it's happening.

With practice, we can become neutral, non-judgmental observers of ourselves as it's happening. It's a strange phenomenon, watching yourself from a distance as you get upset. This detached observation helps you to see what's going on.

We can also see the ideals that we have that are causing the frustration. We can see that ideals are a way of saying, "I don't accept things as they are." Don't push away the ideals or be upset that you have them — just notice them.

Once you've gotten good at noticing the ideals, you can also turn from the ideal (what you wish things were) to the reality of the current moment. See the moment as it is, just observing non-judgmentally. Start to appreciate the fullness of this moment, as it is. Perhaps find acceptance with things, as they are.

This process can help ease frustration, though I'm not claiming you'll never get frustrated. What I've noticed about myself is that the frustration still comes, but I don't hold onto it as much. It can arise and then pass more easily, because I'm not as attached to the ideals, but more accepting of reality as it is.

Chapter 12

Finding compassion

What is compassion? My definition is that you see and understand the pain or dissatisfaction or frustration in others (let's agree to call these feelings "suffering, even if they're mild forms of suffering) ... and you wish for an end to this suffering.

So you see the suffering, and you also want it to end. You don't have to fully empathize with it. We don't always completely know what others are going through, and fully feeling what they're going through isn't always useful, because if they're depressed it's not helpful if we also become depressed. But we have some understanding of suffering is like in general and we don't want to feel it ourselves, nor do we want others to suffer.

This is great in theory, but how do we apply it in practice? And why is it important?

Let's talk briefly about why.

Why compassion is important

Compassion elevates our mindfulness practice from one where we're simply seeing our own experiences, thoughts and feelings ... to one where we're connecting to the experiences of others.

This allows us to go beyond the limits of ourselves, and have a greater impact on the world. It allows us to make a difference, rather than focusing only on our selfish desires. It allows us to have a real human connection with others in a way that's not possible if we put ourselves first.

This practice of compassion leads to improving our own happiness, and the happiness of others.

Let's take a brief example: imagine you're hanging out with someone and they're really frustrated, and they are continually complaining. There are a couple ways you could respond:

1. You could be irritated with their complaining, and become frustrated yourself. Your face would show it, and perhaps you'd say something to them about their attitude.
2. You could try to understand their frustration, and understanding it, want to help them not be frustrated.

Which response leads to a better situation? The first would lead to you both being unhappy, and you might even make them more frustrated with your response. Meanwhile, the second response would probably lead to you being less irritated, and perhaps even lead to them feeling better. In this way, the second (compassionate) response leads to you both being happier.

How to practice compassion

The practice of compassion begins, as Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron tells us, "right where you are." You don't need to be the Dalai Lama and be the most compassionate person in the world. Start by being compassionate with yourself, in whatever situation you're in right now.

We are all suffering or dissatisfied in some form — we're frustrated with others, bored or lonely, stressed or anxious, depressed or fearful, unsure of whether we're living life correctly, worried about missing out, uncertain about the future or what we should be doing right now,

unhappy with ourselves or our bodies. So start by practicing compassion with yourself, understanding your own suffering.

See that you're suffering in one of the above ways. See that it's the result of you comparing the actuality of reality that's in front of you with an ideal that you hold in your head. This ideal isn't real, but you are attached to it and want it to be true. Reality, then, falls short of this ideal, and you feel disappointed or frustrated or fearful because of it. The attachment to the ideal is causing your suffering.

You can practice compassion with yourself by seeing this suffering, and understanding the cause of it ... and wanting the suffering to end. That's not always easy — wish yourself happiness. Wish an end to your suffering. Wish for the release of this ideal that's causing the suffering.

Perhaps the ideal will go away, or perhaps not. Simply practice noticing the suffering and ideal, and wishing for the release of the ideal and suffering.

Practice this daily, in your meditation session, for at least a minute each day.

Once you get better at this, you can expand to seeing your suffering and wishing for it to end in other parts of your day.

And then practice it with others: see your loved ones who are frustrated or worried or afraid, and understand the cause of their suffering and wish for it to end. Do the same with strangers and everyone you meet. Practice it in little steps, and expect to not be good at it at first.

Understand that it's not always possible to do anything helpful, other than give them your attention. You can't force them to see the cause of their suffering as an ideal, nor can you force them to be mindful, to let go, to be appreciative of reality as it is. You can't always lend a helping

hand or give people money or food. What you can do is give them your mindful attention. And often, that's helpful enough.

Chapter 13

Changing habits with mindfulness

When I started changing my habits in 2005, after years of not being able to make any habits stick ... I lucked out. I was also reading about Zen Buddhism and mindfulness at the time, and so I was trying to practice mindfulness in my life. And it made all the difference in the world when it came to changing my habits.

A few examples:

- As I tried to quit smoking, I would mindfully watch my urges to smoke arise, get stronger, and then fade away. I learned that I didn't have to just follow my urges, that they were temporary.
- As I started running, I started watching my rationalizations for not running ... and learned that I didn't have to listen to them.
- I also learned to enjoy my running habit, even though it was uncomfortable for me, by mindfully appreciating the feeling of moving, the nature around me.
- I learned to appreciate healthy food by eating it mindfully and noticing how it made me feel.

Every habit became one that I could enjoy by mindfully seeing what I could appreciate about the habit. And by watching my urges and rationalizations, I was no longer beholden to them. These two things are huge: not enjoying a habit, and mindlessly following urges and

rationalizations, are two of the biggest reasons people don't stick to habits.

Let's look at each one in turn.

Watching urges & rationalizations

When we don't stick to a habit, it's often because we have the urge to procrastinate on it ... we want to check email or social media instead, or do something easier. Often this urge is followed by one or more rationalization: "It's OK just this one time" or "You deserve a treat/break" or "Why make yourself suffer?" or "I'll do it in a minute" or "This is too hard, let's quit!"

These urges and rationalizations are so powerful because we're not usually aware that they're happening. They operate in the back room of our minds, working their magic on us unseen. But when we turn our attention on these urges and thoughts, we can see them and realize that they don't need to control us.

Watch an urge arise in you ... it gets pretty strong, and you really want to act on it. An urge to go to a distraction while reading this guide, for example, or an urge to eat something unhealthy. You want to follow the urge, but you can just sit there and feel it getting stronger ... and eventually it fades away. Then it comes back, gets stronger, fades away.

By watching this process, and not acting on the urge, you remove the power of the urge.

You can do the same for rationalizations. Hear what your mind is saying to get you to follow the urge — these rationalizations can be very powerful, because we just believe them without thinking critically about what they're saying. For example, if your rationalization is "just this one

time won't hurt," that might feel true, but experience shows that "just this one time" is never just one time. So the rationalization is objectively false. It's a lie. By watching the rationalization and comparing it to reality, we can figure out whether they're true or not. Hint: they're pretty much never true.

Mindful appreciation of a habit

Most of us seem to have a tendency to rush through a habit, like we rush through many other tasks in our day. The habit becomes something you're trying to get through, a chore that you want to check off your list. If your habit is meditation or exercise or listening to a language tape ... you just want to get them over with and move on to the next thing.

That's a mistake, because who wants another chore? Who wants another burden added to their already full day? No one, that's who.

So instead, slow down and take time to enjoy the habit. Meditation can be an amazing break in your day, a time you give to yourself to really appreciate life. Exercise can be a transformative experience if you're paying attention, teaching you about overcoming discomfort and the joys of moving and exerting yourself.

The way to do this is to turn your attention from all the other things spinning around in your head, to the activity before you. If you're going to exercise, just pay attention to the exercise, your body, your surroundings, in the present moment. Notice the details. Appreciate the little things about the activity.

With this approach, you'll find lots of things to appreciate, and enjoy the activity more than you would if you just try to rush through it. And if you appreciate something, you're more likely to want to do it in the future.

Chapter 14

Expand what meditation is

Most of us think of meditation as sitting and concentrating on something, and in some ways, that's true.

But it can also be more than that: your entire life can be meditation practice.

For example, sitting and concentrating on the breath is one way to meditate, but what about walking and feeling your feet on the ground? What about talking with someone and trying to really concentrate on what they're saying (instead of thinking of what you're going to say)? What about washing dishes and really feeling the suds and warm water? What about writing and feeling the keyboard and seeing the words appear on the screen?

Every single moment of your life can be meditation. Sitting meditation is just practice for the rest of life, but what you do when you sit can be applied everywhere, all the time.

There doesn't have to be a time when you're not meditating.

After you've been meditating for awhile, see if you can expand your practice to all of your life. This is challenging at first, because you forget. A lot. But keep remembering, keep trying, and soon you'll find that you remember 20 percent of the time, then maybe 30, and then if you get good, maybe you'll get to 50 percent. You don't need to get to 100, but if you do, let me know. I'd like to know your secret!

Some things to start treating as meditation (create visual reminders):

- Washing dishes
- Showering
- Exercising
- Walking somewhere
- Eating
- Writing
- Sitting with someone
- Drinking coffee or tea
- Driving

That's just a start. Sitting practice is really mindfulness practice for the rest of the things you do in life. You can start to take what you do in sitting practice — mindfulness of body, breath, surroundings, thoughts — and practice those as you go through your day. It's hard to remember, so you might have little mindfulness reminders spread throughout your day.

Another useful technique is to have phrases you might pop into your head at different times, like “Be mindful of breath” or “Be mindful of body” or “May all beings be happy and free of suffering”. Whatever you're trying to be mindful of, have a phrase that reminds you of that.

Chapter 15

How to Deepen Your Mindfulness Practice

NOTE FROM LEO: *This chapter was written by my friend Toku McCree, a mindfulness expert, writer, and coach.*

In the beginning mindfulness is all about slowing down, breathing deep, and being in the now. But once you get beyond saying the catch phrases, doing the basic practices, and going through the motions, then what?

Then it's time to deepen your practice, which is as simple as it is demanding. Mindfulness is unlike anything else because in order to deepen your practice you're asked to let go everything you think mindfulness is supposed to be. Sounds fun right? Well it can be and it can also totally suck.

While deepening your practice can mean a lot of things, here are the three big things you'll have to let go of as continue your practice:

- Getting something
- Succeeding
- Yourself

Letting go of getting something

When you first practice mindfulness, you want to 'get something.' You want less stress, more calmness, or greater clarity. You think if you were mindful everything would get better and you'd be a happier kinder

person. And there's nothing wrong with that. Who wouldn't want those things? But that can only take you so far.

To go beyond, to deepen your practice, you must stop trying to make something happen.

Things will still happen. You'll still experience wisdom and peace, but you won't make it happen, at least not in the way you think.

To become an advanced practitioner is to become a true beginner who simply sits and tries to meet each moment, each thought, and each activity with a mind of curiosity and acceptance.

If you are an achiever and this sounds annoying, be mindful of that annoyance. If you're a cynic and this sounds impossible, be mindful of that feeling of hopelessness. If you think this sounds easy, be mindful of your confidence. Leave nothing out.

Letting go of success

Mindfulness is a state that lies at the exact center between desire or craving and aversion or frustration. It is a state of calm presence where you simply observe what's going on. And success can't be measured in this place. But that doesn't mean you won't try.

Here are some ways people try to measure their success at mindfulness and why it doesn't work:

Success as measured by your ability to focus. Being able to concentrate can help you achieve a mindful state, but there's more to mindfulness than concentration. Mindfulness contains both the struggle to focus and the ability to focus with ease. Focus is great when it happens,

but if you try too hard to concentrate, you'll slip into desire or aversion and totally sabotage yourself.

Success as measured by the number of thoughts you have (esp. during meditation). Mindfulness and thinking aren't opposites. They can exist at the same time. And trying to destroy your thoughts can prevent you from being in a mindful state. Thoughts are not your enemies. They aren't your friends. They aren't yours at all. Thoughts are just thoughts.

Success as measured by compassion. Being mindful might help you notice when you're being reactive or help you be more generous. But being mindful isn't about doing nice things. You should do nice things whether you're mindful or not. Plus if you get too attached to being a 'NICE' person, you'll lose track of the subtle space mindfulness thrives in.

Success as measured by greater clarity. Clarity can arise from mindfulness. But just as often confusion arises. If you try to make clarity happen, you'll miss it completely and obsessing over it only leads to trouble.

What's the point?

So what's the point? Why practice mindfulness if you can't get better at it? If you can't achieve anything?

Well that is the point. In every other area of your life striving or aversion rules. You strive to make more money, to be a better parent, to have a flatter stomach and a smoother butt. You try to avoid getting sick, paying taxes, and sitting in traffic. Your whole life is spent being pulled and pushed by your desires and aversions.

In mindfulness, you let all of this go. You let go of trying to get somewhere else, of trying to make something happen, and even of trying to get better at mindfulness.

Letting go of yourself

At first practicing mindfulness is a limited commitment. You just bring your crap to the table. You bring your bad habits, your guilty pleasures, and your most unskillful actions. But as you continue you have to move beyond what's on the surface to what's underneath.

And it's these deeper desires I struggle with all the time. I want to be successful, to be loved, and to find lasting happiness.

And all of these desires are normal and of course they affect me. They drive me to wake up early and work hard, but they also add an element of fear and doubt into my life.

For every time these desires drive me work hard or dream big there are just as many times they drive me avoid difficult conversations, withhold the truth, and to delay the big decisions that define my life.

If I truly want to deepen my practice of mindfulness, I have to bring these deep desires into awareness and let them unravel. I have to learn to sit with failure in one hand and success in the other without seeing one as good and the other as bad.

And this is really hard. Really really really hard! Because I want all those good things. I want the love, success, fame, and happiness. But when I look with a clear mind, I see how empty these things really are. I see how my life is so much more than a graph of good and bad events.

As you deepen your practice, you'll face these things too. You'll face these deeply held desires and beliefs. You'll face the fundamental things you think you can't live without.

If this sounds a bit scary, that's good, because in deep practice you begin to lose yourself. You begin to uproot all the things you think you are. And it is scary. But there is freedom beyond the fear.

Because when you begin to see that you're not just a coach, a business owner, a husband, or a mother. You see what you're really made of. And what you're really made of is pretty damn amazing.

But don't take my word for it, keep looking for yourself. Because the only way to follow this path, is listen to the guidance of your heart. It may sound kind of fluffy but it isn't. It's the most wonderful, dangerous, and badass adventure a living being can ever undertake.

Toku McCree is a mindfulness expert, writer, and coach. He lived for over 2 years at a Zen monastery and now spends his time helping people who are good at what they do be the best at what they do.

Chapter 16

Falling in love with life

Mindfulness isn't just a technique for changing habits or finding focus and becoming more productive. Those might be nice side benefits, but there's more to it.

It's a road to understanding yourself better. It helps you understand the nature of frustration and fear in yourself and others. It helps you to see your expectations of yourself and others, and let go of them so you aren't so frustrated. It helps you find compassion, and connect with people in a more meaningful way.

And it can help you appreciate the life that's in front of you, each moment. What a waste it is to ignore the gift of the world around us, and the gift of our experience while we're alive. It's truly a wonder, and we miss out on this wonder when we're not awake to life.

Mindfulness, then, can be a way to fall in love with life, over and over again. Each time you stop to notice what's going on, the beauty and joy of what's in front of you ... this is a way to appreciate the true wonder of the world.

FAQ: Answers to common questions as you continue

As you continue with your journey in mindfulness, you might encounter some problems or have questions ... here are some of the more common ones.

1. How "sustainable" is mindfulness? I have mindful moments in my day, but I've never had a day when I was mindful in everything I did. Is that even possible?

A: I've never had a completely mindful day myself. It's supposedly possible, but most people will never attain it, and I don't think you should set it as a "goal" or ideal. Just use it when you can, and be happy with that experience. With that approach, it's sustainable for life.

2. What do I do when I'm too busy, or have urgent things going on?

A: When you have a lot to get done, or the crap hits the fan, the meditation habit can drop off. I've experienced this myself. It's OK to drop the meditation habit when you need to, so don't feel bad about it. But what has helped me is:

1. To realize that this feeling of urgency is actually suffering. I'm feeling so much anxiety that I don't want to make time for self-care. But the best way to deal with this anxiety is actually to meditate.
2. To tell myself I only need to do 2 minutes. Even though I like to meditate for longer, if I can just sit for 2 minutes, that's a success. And I'll almost always have time for 2 minutes.

So when you feel rushed or busy, pause for a moment and watch your mind trying to run from the meditation. This is our mind being afraid that other things are more important, that we'll fail in our lives if we don't get moving on the other things. Watch it, but don't believe it. Our minds do a lot of things out of fear.

Instead, just sit for 2 minutes. Sit there and watch the anxiety and fear. See your suffering, feel it in your body. Accept the suffering, instead of trying to reject it.

3. What should I do if I keep forgetting to meditate?

A: This is an extremely common problem — many of us just plain forget to meditate. You tend to get better at this over time as it becomes more of an automatic habit, but you can definitely find solutions to remember until then.

Try creating both electronic and physical reminders. A big paper note posted somewhere obvious is a great physical solution, or a meditation cushion in your doorway where you won't miss it, write it on your whiteboard. Digital reminders include a calendar reminder, reminder emails, notifications on your phone, having a message about meditation on your browser home page or your computer wallpaper.

4. How do I deal with disruptions in my routine?

A: Another very big obstacle is disruptions to our regular routine — weekends when things are different and you sleep in, travel, visitors, or waking up late when the kids are already up.

There are a few ways to handle this, depending on the disruption:

1. When possible, plan ahead when you know there's going to be a change in routine. Decide ahead of time when you'll do your meditation. If you're traveling, make an extra commitment to set new reminders when you're on the road.
2. When something unexpected comes up, make a note to make an adjustment that day. For example, if you get a call in the morning and aren't able to meditate, write out a paper note to yourself and place it where you can see it — and then meditate at lunch, or right before bed.
3. If all hell breaks loose and you simply cannot find a few minutes to meditate, that's OK. Forgive yourself, but commit to getting back on track tomorrow (or as soon as the hell is over). If you can find a few minutes in the midst of the hell, that's even better. You can take a break anywhere and meditate walking or standing up if necessary, or in the bathroom or shower.

5. What if I'm too tired to meditate?

A: Sometimes you're just too tired in the morning to feel that you're meditating properly, or perhaps you're physically exhausted from work stress or being overcommitted in your life. Or perhaps you've pushed meditation to the end of the day, and you're too tired by then to focus.

The main suggestion I have is to let go of the idea that you need to be alert to meditate, or that you need to be not tired. You can meditate when you're tired or physically exhausted.

Your mind wants to run from doing something when it's tired. It no longer has its full battery of self-control, and is depleted.

You can still meditate when your mind wants to run. See your mind rationalizing why you shouldn't meditate. See it wanting to do something else. But don't let the mind run. Keep it there, and just tell it, "I can do anything for 2 minutes." And then just sit for 2 minutes.

If you're meditating and you can't focus because of tiredness, that's OK. Let yourself do it "imperfectly". There's no right way to do it anyway. See if you can stick to your breath or body while you're tired. Or instead, try focusing on the suffering you feel as you're tired. What's that like? How does it feel? Just observe, and accept the suffering. This is a really useful practice.

Other suggestions include going to bed earlier (set an alarm to remind you when it's bedtime, and turn off all devices/screens) and forgiving yourself if you fail because of tiredness, which is perfectly fine.

6. What about other people getting in the way? I might have company, or have other people who interrupt me while meditating.

A: These are legitimate obstacles, but they can be overcome.

Again, watch your mind wanting to run from the meditation here. Your mind will rationalize why you shouldn't meditate — because of the kids, or your spouse, or company, or interruptions. These are all just rationalizations from a mind that wants to avoid discomfort.

Instead, find any small space to meditate, even if it's in the shower or on the toilet or taking out the garbage, or waiting for the coffee to brew. You can find some space, just for a couple minutes.

Watch the mind want to run, and don't let it. See the suffering you're feeling because of others, and just observe, just accept the suffering.

Other suggestions:

- Invite your kids or spouse to join you.
- Go for a walk and meditate either while walking or find a place to sit for a few minutes.
- Meditate on your commute, even if you're driving — meditate at stoplights and while stuck in traffic, or when you arrive at the parking lot, or while on a train.

7. What if I have trouble concentrating? I am anxious about some struggles in my personal life and my mind wanders to those problems.

A: It's OK for your mind to wander. Just observe what it's trying to wander to. Give it a little space to do that, then gently return to the breath and body. Sometimes it's good to see your mind trying to wander, and see this as a form of suffering (distraction, attachment). Observe the suffering.

You don't need to perfectly concentrate, at all. Just keep doing it, keep watching your mind wandering. There's no wrong way to meditate, and if you're feeling like you're failing at it or doing it wrong, then a good thing to do is to examine your expectations and ideals around meditation. Meditate on those ideals, try letting them go and meditating without expectations.

8. My biggest obstacle is I still don't see any of the amazing benefits I read about. So the practice seems like a chore.

A: Yes, this can be difficult. I suggest continuing the practice, and giving it a chance. Sometimes you don't see the benefits for a month or two, or sometimes the benefits are there but you don't see them.

An interesting thing to explore is your suffering around your expectations and disappointment. You were hoping for some amazing benefits (expectations) and having seen them (disappointment), and so this is frustrating. You're suffering because of the expectations. In meditation, take a minute or two to watch this suffering, see how it feels, accept it.

It's also interesting to meditate on the feeling of doing something that feels like a chore. This results from not wanting to do something, not seeing it as worthwhile. But if you were doing something to help a friend, doing something that would make them happy, you might be grateful to do it. So approach this the same way: you're helping a friend (you), and you can find a way to be grateful that you're able to do this activity.

9. How can I deal with perfectionism?

A: These expectations of perfection are a great thing to meditate on, along with the suffering we cause ourselves from the perfectionism. Practice letting go during the meditation, and accepting the meditation for what it is, as it is.

10. I don't have anything good in the afternoon to anchor the meditation habit to.

A: For now, use an alarm, or a physical reminder. You might be mindful of your daily rhythms in the afternoon, and find a good pattern of time/energy to fit the meditation into.

11. I'm not very good at mindfulness!

A: I've learned that mindfulness isn't something you learn overnight. I think I believed that would happen — that I'd read about it and try it and instantly be good at it. But I've been practicing for years and I'm still learning.

What happens is that you try it, and it might seem difficult or confusing. Then you try again, and again, and you get better at it. The practice gradually seems easier. But then you find a new area to explore and it gets difficult and confusing again. Step by step, you improve, but there's always more to learn.

So it's important, then, to have patience with the process. If you get frustrated because meditation isn't as easy as you'd like, let the frustration be something you explore with mindfulness. If you are disappointed that it doesn't instantly make you calm or a master of changing your habits ... know that this is a part of the process. It takes time, and improvement comes gradually.