



**I'M  
MINDFUL,**

**Moving Beyond Mindfulness**

**NOW**

**to Meet the Modern World**

**WHAT?**

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## Introduction

The mindfulness revolution is in full swing. Countless people—from scientists, scholars, and mental health workers to the average practitioner—are touting its benefits. I am one of those people. For over forty-five years I have practiced mindfulness meditation and reaped its extraordinary rewards.<sup>1</sup> I begin and end every day with meditation, engage in annual retreats, and teach it around the world. Twenty years ago my passion for this ancient art led me into a traditional Tibetan Buddhist three-year retreat, which remains the most transformative event of my life.

This wasn't the normal three-year retreat designed for monastics but a creative five-year program developed for the modern Westerner that alternated one year in secluded retreat with one year back in the world. It was a brilliant way to mix meditation with life and stretch the meditative mind into post-retreat. But this was not an easy five years. The blistering discipline put the five years of my doctoral studies to shame. During the years of strict retreat, I practiced meditation fourteen hours a day and even slept sitting up in the traditional meditation box. This innovative container, what I came to call "ego's coffin," is an effective support for the practice of the nocturnal meditations (described in chapter 8). The retreat provided the systematic training, crafted over thousands of years by some of the world's greatest contemplatives, to enter a kind of lifetime retreat in the midst of daily life.

It was like going to a meditation university. I took extended "courses" in dozens of meditations that allowed me to discover dimensions of mind and heart I had no idea even existed. The off years were just as fruitful because they gave me the opportunity to stabilize and incorporate the practices and prepare for the upcoming year. The time off also showed me the limitations of retreat, the many "near enemies" of deep meditative practice, and how easy it is to slide into "spiritual bypassing." This term was coined by the psychologist John Welwood and refers to how readily we can use meditation and spirituality to bypass the challenges

of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> If we're not careful, meditation can easily turn into a subtle cop-out.

I left the retreat center, called Sopa Chöling (literally translated as “dharma place of patience” or “dharma place of forbearance”), with tears of gratitude for the magnitude of what I had been given.<sup>3</sup> As my good fortune became evident while still in retreat, I found myself saying, *There should be thousands of people in line to do this training!* Three-year retreat is traditionally done in silence, sequestered from the world, and controlled by dozens of monastic vows. Shaving my head and donning robes, I surrendered to the time-honored discipline. Retreatants are rightly advised to stay quiet about what happens in retreat and practice humility. Intensive meditation is a private affair, to be kept within the family. As they caution in the Taoist tradition, “He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know.”

While I deeply respect this traditional approach and have honored this unspoken contract for the past twenty years, I also believe it is possible to share some of this meditative technology with a world that is being conquered by materialism and consumerism. Otherwise, what's the point of meditative practice? To self-improve out of reality? To follow your bliss into heavenly states while the rest of the world goes to hell? If we can't take these remarkable meditative tools and apply them to a world in such desperate need, meditation becomes an insidious form of escape and a nasty case of spiritual bypassing. It becomes increasingly irrelevant in a world that is on fire.

Three-year retreat is secretive in nature but not in spirit. The spirit of engaging in this intensive training is to step out and help the world, step back to work on yourself before you step forward to benefit others. I'm acutely aware of the slippery slope of even talking this way, and that by professing my homage to traditional codes of silence and the need for humility I'm sneaking in self-aggrandizement and proclaiming authority. So while I honor the traditions and respect the code of silence, I must acknowledge that we live in untraditional times. If contemplatives don't step forward to share the inner technologies that can change the world, the traditions, like civilization itself, may go extinct.<sup>4</sup> This sharing is

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already happening. Some of the meditations offered in this book are tiptoeing into the public domain, but I know of no single volume that brings them all together while providing a constructive critique of the mindfulness revolution.

The tipping point for me came when I finally grasped the inconvenient truth that this planet, and everyone who inhabits it, is in serious trouble.<sup>5</sup> If we don't wake up individually, and then collectively, *Homo sapiens* will become one of the 95 percent of species that has historically gone extinct. It's often said that the biggest problem in this modern age is that we have unrivaled technologies with untold power but a level of awareness that is not correlative to that power. The technologies are then used to harm others and abuse the planet, which is tantamount to suicide. The counteracting meditative technologies offered in the pages ahead are designed to nurture that correlative awareness so we can use conventional technology with an intelligence equal to its power.

Our charter in this book is, therefore, threefold: to celebrate the power of mindfulness and point out its limitations; to introduce you to the meditations that build upon mindfulness and address the question, "Now what?"; and to do all of this in the service of helping others and the fragile planet we share.

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Over the past ten years I have written seven books, all of which circumambulate the central theme of meditation.<sup>6</sup> There's an introduction to meditation, a volume about the promise and peril of deep spiritual practice, a book about working with physical and emotional pain, three books on meditations you can do while you sleep and dream, and a book about meditations that prepare you for death. The purpose of the book you currently hold in your hands is not to give you an exhaustive look at all these practices but to provide a survey of what is possible in the world of meditation and introduce you to the wonders of your own mind.

Even though it's a survey, this book does not skim. The endnotes provide additional depth for the deep divers. If you're new to meditation,

I recommend you skip these references for now and return to them on a second reading. The heart of this book is about going further and deeper, so each reader will have to find their comfort levels with how far they want to go.

To honor the depth and nuance of mindfulness itself, we'll start by looking at the terminology commonly used and make sure we're all on the same page. What exactly is *mindfulness*, *awareness*, and *insight meditation*, for example? Different people use the same words, thinking they always refer to the same thing. But these are multivalent terms, and confusion is rampant. If you find yourself getting bogged down in this (or any) section, just skim it.

While you can learn a fair amount from a book, if you're new to meditation it helps to have a meditation instructor. Can you really learn how to play golf or the piano from a book? I will, therefore, list some of the communities that engage in these mentor-student practices as part of their curriculum. This part of the book will fall short, of course, and I apologize to the many capable organizations and individuals that are omitted.<sup>7</sup>

While I remain an open student of all the wisdom streams, I study and practice mostly in the Buddhist tradition. When people ask me what tradition I follow, I often say I'm a "curioust." I'm deeply curious about the human condition, the nature of the mind, and any method that allows me to explore it. Remember that the Buddha wasn't a Buddhist, just as Christ wasn't a Christian or Muhammad a Muslim. These were intensely curious individuals who looked deeply within themselves and came back to share what they discovered. No one has exclusive rights on the mind or a patent on truth.

I have taken refuge as a Buddhist because of the adage "Chase two rabbits, catch none." At a certain point it helps to commit. Buddhism speaks to me, but it may not speak to you. I could strip all the practices in this book down to their clinical essence, as some skillful researchers and spiritual teachers have done in their presentations of meditation or spirituality.<sup>8</sup> This might invite a broader audience, those who are allergic to any "ism" or those who are more spiritual than religious.<sup>9</sup> As viable



as that paring down may be, it borders on being disingenuous. My bias is to honor the traditions from which these practices arose and then culturally translate them into the modern world. Just as there are literal translators who strive to convert one language to another, cultural translators work to convert a body of teachings from one culture to another, or from one time period into another. This form of translation is an essential part of our journey.

I have personally engaged in each of the practices in this book for decades, so I will draw on that experience, conjoined with my study of the literature and the teachings I have received from meditation masters who have accomplished these practices. While my approach is mostly based on the Buddhist tradition, it is also integral in spirit and, therefore, casts a wide net.

I have neither the capacity nor the hubris to study and practice the meditations from countless other wisdom traditions, then somehow condense them into bite-size chunks for everybody. However, I do think an open-minded reader will be able to work with these meditations and, when necessary, adapt them to their own idiosyncrasies. In the end, any form of learning and transformation involves translation at multiple levels. You are the final translator. You are the one who has to bring these teachings into your mind and heart, into a vocabulary that speaks to you, and then into your life.