



Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

with Beth Meeker, LMHC

An Integrated 8-Week Weekend Program
Emphasis on Relationship with Ourselves and Others

Program Manual

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Welcome

Note: Much of the material contained in this manual was adapted from two MBSR programs that like the present one; closely adhere to the model developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. Specifically, the program manuals, texts and handouts from The University of Massachusetts Medical Center's Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society and The University of Virginia Medical Center, Department of Family Medicine were valuable resources in the development of this manual. Three books have also contributed significantly and are referenced in this manual.



Recommended Readings

Recommended Readings are to be done ideally before but can be done during the program (listed in order of importance):

- (1) *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn**
- (2) *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by Jon Kabat-Zinn**
- (3) *Heal Thy Self: Lessons on Mindfulness in Medicine* by Saki Santorelli**

Other aspects of this manual reflect personal preferences of the author, which are shaped by her personal meditation and yoga practice as well as her teaching experiences. Please consider this manual a "work in progress" and feel free to add your own "embodiment" of the practices reflected here to any MBSR programs you undertake.



About The Program

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is a well-defined and systematic patient centered educational approach which uses relatively intensive training in mindfulness meditation as the core of a program to teach people how to take better care of themselves and live healthier and more adaptive lives. The prototype program was developed at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. This model has been successfully utilized with appropriate modifications in a number of other medical centers, as well as in non-medical settings such as schools, prisons, athletic training programs, professional programs and the workplace. We emphasize that there are many different ways to structure and deliver mindfulness based stress reduction programs. The optimal form and its delivery will depend critically on local factors and on the level of experience and understanding of the people undertaking the teaching. Rather than “clone” or “franchise” one cookie-cutter approach, mindfulness ultimately requires the effective use of the present moment as the core indicator of the appropriateness of particular choices. However, there are key principles and aspects of MBSR, which are universally important to consider and to embody within any context of teaching. These include:

- ☞ Making the experience a challenge rather than a chore and thus turning the observing of one’s life mindfully into an adventure in living rather than one more thing one “has” to do for oneself to be healthy.
- ☞ An emphasis on the importance of individual effort and motivation and regular disciplined practice of the meditation in its various forms, whether one “feels” like practicing on a particular day or not.
- ☞ The immediate lifestyle change that is required to undertake formal mindfulness practice, since it requires a significant time commitment (homework is typically 45 minutes a day, six days a week minimally).
- ☞ The importance of making each moment count by consciously bringing it into awareness during practice, thus stepping out of clock time into the present moment.
- ☞ an educational rather than a therapeutic orientation, which makes use of relatively large “classes” of participants in a time-limited course structure to provide a community of learning and practice, and a “critical mass” to help in cultivating ongoing motivation, support, and feelings of acceptance and belonging. The social factors of emotional support and caring and not feeling isolated or alone in one’s efforts to cope and adapt and grow are in all likelihood extremely important factors in healing as well as for providing an optimal learning environment for ongoing growth and development in addition to the factors of individual effort and initiative and coping/problem solving.



A Few Words Before We Begin

It is recommended that you take the contents of the program at a pace of one homework or class per two weeks. Don't try to finish early or to put off a weeks assignment for a "more convenient time." Just make the commitment to "just DO IT."

Please resist the urge to read through the course material in advance. This may lead to forming expectations that may then lead to frustration when they are not met. The classes build upon each other and are intended to be worked through in the order presented. Stay with the program.

As you will see early on, this is a challenging program that requires a strong commitment if it is to be as helpful as possible.

You will be asked to set aside 45 to 60 minutes per day, 6 days out of 7 to practice the exercises presented here.

You may face the difficult challenge of "finding time" to work the program. This is an important aspect of the program and one that will bring you face-to-face with your attachments to doing things a certain way in your life. This program is about examining and changing the unskillful habits of one's life and replacing them with skillful ones. Stay with the process. Stay with the struggle. The way out of these unhelpful ways of being in the world is to sit with the discomfort that arises as you push yourself to change. Remember, you are worth the effort it takes to change into a more loving, peaceful and joyous being.

Good luck on your journey. May the taste of freedom be your guide and an unwavering source of encouragement.



Homework - Week 1

1. Practice mindfulness formally for 45 minutes every day for at least 6 days this week using the Body Scan CD for guidance.
2. Practice mindfulness of your breathing from time to time throughout the day.
3. Read "The Journey," "Busy-ness is Laziness" and "Mindfulness and Mastery" articles.

Reflections

- ☯ Nothing can be more useful to a man or woman than a determination to not to be hurried - *Anonymous*
- ☯ The flower, the sky your beloved can only be found in the present moment - *Thich Nhat Hanh*
- ☯ Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste, they hurry past it. - *Soren Kirkegaard*

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity and acceptance of present-moment reality. It wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present in many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives, but also fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation.

Dwelling in stillness and looking inward for some part of each day, we touch what is most real and reliable in ourselves and most easily overlooked and undeveloped. When we can be centered in ourselves, even for brief periods of time in the face of the pull of the outer world, not having to look elsewhere for something to fill us up or make us happy, we can be at home wherever we find ourselves, at peace with things as they are, moment by moment.

From: **"Wherever You Go, There You Are"** by **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, pgs 4 and 96.



One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice-
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations, though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
but little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do-
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver,

Dream Work, Grove Atlantic Inc.,

1986 & New and Selected Poems, Beacon Press, 1992.



by Dr. Reginald Ray ~ Dharmaocean.org

Life emerges out of the silence of our inner being. The life that we have in our mind, the life that is a reflection of our planning, the life that has been constructed out of bits and pieces in our environment—external conditioning, things we have observed in other people, things that influential people have told us—is actually not who we are. That pre-planned life is rigid. It's artificial. It's unresponsive. It doesn't reflect the life that we were born to live.

As a student of mine observed, obstacles—which are always with us—are not really obstacles when you work with them in the right way. And we have to work with them.

Many, many people tell me “I'm having a lot of problems doing this [meditation] practice because I am so busy. I'm really busy. I have a full life. It's busy and I run from morning 'til night.” People actually say that.

Now think about that for a minute. What kind of *life* is that? Is that a life worth living? Some people feel it is. America is probably the most extreme example of a speed-driven culture—and this is not my particular personal discovery, but something that has been said to me by many people from other traditional cultures. The first time this was said to me was when I was 19 and I went to Japan. Western people are running from themselves and they use the *busy-ness* of their lives as an excuse to *avoid having to actually live their own life*. We are terrified of who we actually are, terrified of the inner space that is the basis of the human experience.

We are actually incapable of being alone—of any work that requires genuine solitude, without entertainment, that requires making a connection with the silence of the inner being. The American family engineers a life in which there is never any time alone, where we never have to actually talk to each other. Even dinnertime is around the TV, at best—or we're just grabbing something at McDonalds.

But it's not the larger culture. It's actually *us*. It's *me* and it's *you*. We load our life up to the point where it's about to snap. And when you ask someone to sit down and be with themselves they go, “I can't. I don't have time for that.” Now you and I may realize that there actually is a problem. Most people don't think there is a problem.

We run our kids in the same way—and it's destroying them. The soccer practice and the music lesson and three hours of TV and homework—it goes on from the minute they get up until they go to sleep. They never have an opportunity to experience silence. Psychological development requires periods of solitude. Anthropological psychology—studying other cultures, as well as our own—shows that when children do not have completely unstructured time, when there are no parental expectations looming over them, they actually can't develop normally.

We see this at higher levels of education, too. Even the unusual and gifted students at [Naropa \[University\]](#). These people are disabled, in many cases, because they have lived a busy life, fulfilling all expectations that middle and upper-middle class parents lay on their children because of their fear. The underlying thing is fear of space.

We all have it. I have it in a major way. I am busy. I have all these things that I like to do. When one thing ends, the next thing starts. It's all important and I have to do it and I don't sleep enough. So we all have to take another look.

The problem with being busy is that it is based on *ignorance*—not realizing that by keeping your mind occupied constantly you are actually not giving yourself a chance. We even put an activity in our life, called meditation, where you practice not being busy. Think about it. It's actually genius. You have added *another* thing on top of everything else you do, but you are pulling the plug for a period of time every day—so it actually has a reverse effect of opening up and creating space. So you are just going to be more busy now! But this is good, especially in Western culture. People put meditation on their *To Do* lists. This is something I tell my students: "If you don't put meditation on the top of your To Do list, it will be at the bottom, and it won't happen." I find that if meditation is not the first priority of my day it won't happen. You know if I am foolish enough to say, "Well, I have to make this phone call, check my email..." then it's over. Finished. "I'll do it later." It never happens. Look at your life and ask, "Am I being honest with myself? Is it really true that I don't have time?"

When I was in graduate school I worked with a Jungian analyst, [June Singer](#). She used to say, "Work expands to fill all of the available space." The problem is not the amount of things you have in your life, it's the attitude. It's your fear of space. Busy-ness in the Tibetan tradition is considered the most extreme form of laziness. Because when you are busy you can turn your brain off. You're on the treadmill. The only intelligence comes in the morning when you make your To Do list and you get rid of all the possible space that could happen in your day. There is intelligence in that: I fill up all the space so I don't have to actually relate to myself!

Once you have made that list, it's over. There is no more fundamental intelligence operating. So the basic ignorance is not realizing what we are doing by being busy. What we are doing to ourselves, what we are doing to our families, what we are doing to our friends.

When my daughter Catherine, who is now 24, was a newborn baby my wife Lee and I went home to my mother's house. My father had already died. I grew up in Darien, Connecticut—the ultimate suburbia. Everyone works in New York and they are all busy. My best friend from high school came over with his wife, who was also a close friend of mine, and my godfather came over. This succession of people all came in...and Lee picked up on it right away, because she is from Alberta and out there, there is a lot of space! These people...we loved each other. We were so close. But it was always the same: after 10 minutes they said, "Well, we got to run!" Every single one did the same thing. And Lee said to me, "What are they so afraid of?" Not one of them was actually present. It made me realize why I left the East Coast and went to India. "How far away can I get?" But these patterns are deeply ingrained in us, and running away is not going to solve the problem. It's *in* us.

People on campus always say to me, "Gee, you must be really busy." I could be standing there looking at an autumn tree. I say "No, I'm not busy, I have all the time in the world." Now, I may

not really *feel* that way—but somehow we have to stop this mentality. It's sick. *Literally*. So I never say to my wife, "I'm busy." Ever. I used to do it, but it didn't evoke a good reaction. [Laughter]

"I'm too busy." I am sorry. I don't buy it. Its self-deception: "I am too busy to relate to myself." I don't care if you have four children and three jobs—we have *one* human life. And if you can't make the time, 15 minutes to relate to yourself, everyone else in your life is going to suffer. You have to realize that you are harming other people by making up excuses and not working on yourself. This is serious.

I *do* understand that things happen in life, and in the course of a week there are going to be times when you can't practice if you have a job, a family. But to say that over a period of three months I can't practice because I am too busy? That is the very problem that you came here to solve. I implore you. My wife has developed some techniques to help with this problem. I am going to give them to you, and then I'll ask her permission when I go home for lunch. [Laughter]

Being busy is tricky. We set up our life so we are busy. I do this to myself; this is one of my biggest obstacles. I get excited about things and agree to do things three months from now. But when the time comes I realize it is not a good idea because I can't do it properly, because I have so much else going on. But I have no choice. I have to go through with it. "God, you idiot, how could you do that!" But getting angry doesn't help, because there I am and I've got a 16-hour day I have to get through.

Unless you viciously carve out time to work on yourself it's not going to happen. You have to be brutal about it, actually. If your mind is always busy then you have no sense of the world you live in. Because there is no communication, there is no space within which to see what we are doing. We will end up destroying our lives, and you may not realize what you have given up until you are on your deathbed. By being busy you are basically giving away your human existence.

One of the things about being busy is that it is a un-examined behavior. It's habitual.

What's the Point?

So when something comes up and you think "I need to do this," the first question to ask is, "Why do I need to do this? What am I expecting to get out of this particular activity? What is the benefit going to be?"

A lot of times we actually don't even think what we are going to get out of it, or what it's going to accomplish. Amazing. Say I need to call so-and-so right away. Okay: "Why?" You'd be surprised. You think, "Well, it's obvious." It isn't. We have not thought through most of the things that we do *at all*. We haven't looked at what the desired consequence is.

What are the Odds?

I may think I am likely to get something, and sometimes I do. But what is the likelihood that

something is not going to happen? How sure am I that what I think I am going to get, will happen? What is the percentage of possibility?

Is Other Stuff Likely to Come Up?

This is the big one for me. Does this action have unforeseen karmic consequences? For example: I want to call up somebody and check on something. A lot of times they start telling me some terrible thing that has just happened. I'd allowed five minutes for this conversation, and 45 minutes later I am still on the phone. We do this all the time. We don't look at the consequences of a particular action.

It's like somebody who goes into a café, and there is this huge cheesecake right there. You could buy a slice, but you get a cappuccino and sit down with the entire cheesecake and start eating. Now, from a certain point of view this sounds like bliss. And maybe for a short period of time you are going to forget all the pain of the human condition. I mean, that is the great thing about cheesecake. [Laughter] It boosts your endorphins for 5 or 10 minutes. You feel great! But then, having eaten the entire cheesecake, you feel sick for the next three days.

Strangely enough, this is how we live our lives. We jump on things. Someone asks me, "Why don't you come to Switzerland, teach for a few days and then hang out in the wonderful Alps?" By the time I get off the phone I am ready to pack. Then I talk to my wife. [Laughter] And she asks me, "Have you considered what a 17-hour trip is going to do to your bad back? Have you thought about that?" And then I get back on the phone. [Laughter]

But, because of our ambitions of all kinds, we are ready to fill our life up to the point where, even if I'm in Switzerland, nothing is different. This is one of the great discoveries: wherever I go it's still lousy. [Laughter] It's just me and my mind and *I don't feel good and I have got this work to do and I don't have the energy*. It's the same story, no matter where I go or what I'm doing.

Except when I sit down and meditate. Then, I feel like I am creating an inner space so I can actually relate to the fact of what my life is, rather than just being in an out-of-control mode. So sit down and ask yourself, "What is important in my life, and what's less important?" Almost on a daily basis, we have to look closely at the things that remain on our To Do list to see whether they are actually realistic.

Ten years ago, after I'd taught a Dathün—a month long meditation—some of the students said to me, "We feel bonded to each other and to you. We'd really like to keep going" And I said, "Well, we could start a meditation group." And 10 years later I am trapped with a community of 200 people, called *Dhyana Sangha*. Now don't get me wrong, it's wonderful. But I got into it in a blind way. And there are many other things that I do not love in the same way that I get into blindly. We all do that all the time—and we wind up with a life that doesn't work and isn't helpful to others.

My ambition to accomplish things is going to be one of the last things to go. I can't help it; it's just the way that I am. I see a pile of leaves that need to be raked up and I start salivating. I love to *do* things. I love to be active. And you can say, "Well, that's great." But there's neurosis in

that. It's a way of shutting out space. This is another thing my wife has taught me: when there's no space *nothing really happens*.

I had a wonderful quotation by [Chögyam Trungpa](#) up on my wall during my [meditation] retreat. It goes something like, "If there isn't a complete sense of openness and space, then communication between two people can not happen. Period. It's that simple." The communication we have with each other is often based on *agendas*: negotiating with other people to get what we want. That's not *communication*.

My wife taught me that. Insistently. It's to the point where that *busy mind* is just not acceptable in our house anymore. It doesn't matter what's going on my life. If she comes into my study, I have to be completely there. And that's fabulous, because I'm never able to get invested in that neurosis. If I do, she'll let me have it.

Giving up this state of busy-ness doesn't mean that we aren't going to be active, creative people. We're giving up the mentality where you can't actually relate to what's in front of you because you have this mental speed going on. Let it go. I'm saying it to you. This is an issue that we are going to have to address if we want to be any good to anyone.

You'll notice when you work in this way over a period of years—and this is something that I have discovered accidentally—*the more you practice, the more you get done*. If you sit for 2 hours in the morning, which is a lot for people, you will find that your day is 30 hours long. When you establish sitting, somehow, in your life—when you sit in the morning—your day takes care of itself. Things happen as they need to. There is a sense of auspicious coincidence throughout the day.

And when you don't sit, things go to hell. [Laughter] Everything runs into everything. You say, "I don't have time to sit 'cause I have to do this email." You run to your computer, turn it on and spend the next 4 hours trying to get your computer to work. This is just how things work.

Magic is actually very down to earth. It's a part of our lives. It's going on all the time, we just don't see it. But when you actually take care of yourself, work with yourself and create openness in your life, life will respond by cooperating. And when you are unwilling to relate with yourself at the beginning of your day, your life is going to give you a hard time.

I got stuck on my first book, *Buddhist Saints In India*. If I wrote another book like that it would kill me. It was an unbelievable labor. I got stuck in the middle. So I started practicing more, I started doing long retreats. And the book started flowing. The more I practiced, the more the book happened. In a sense, when I meditated I was getting something good done.

I realized that the way you accomplish things in life—whether with family or going to work—is through practice. One hour of work with the practice behind you is worth two days when the practice isn't there. Things just don't work well—there's too much neurosis in it. When I don't feel busy, things I have to do fall into place. Going through my day with a sense of relaxation, I connect with people. I appreciate the outdoors when I walk to my car. *I see the sky*.

I encourage you to take a chance: put practice at the top of the list. Don't make that call if it

isn't something that actually needs to happen—so many of the things we do is to make people like us. “I have to make this call or so-and-so is going to be upset.” I have a pretty good idea that if you do that you will find that there is plenty of time to practice, no matter how busy you are. Busy people will look at your life and go, “I don't see how you can do it!”

Here's a teaching that Chögyam Trungpa gave that has changed the way a lot of people look at their work lives: *learn how to invite space into your worklife*. The space itself will actually accomplish most of what you need to do. In the form of helpful people turning up, auspicious coincidences... And in so doing, you are not only opening up your self, you are opening up the world. It becomes a dance. It's no longer your job to sit there for 10 hours doing your thing, it's to respond to the way the world wants things to happen. It's de-centralized.

In Buddhism, this is one of the *paramitas*: exertion. *Exertion* is tuning into the natural energy of the world. And when you tune in, you don't get tired. You become joyful. That you are part of a huge cosmic dance that is unfolding, moment by moment. And you have to change your ideas of what you thought should happen. It requires flexibility on our part!

Busy-ness. It's the most commonly mentioned obstacle that everyone faces, and I know for me it's #1. So I thought it would be worthwhile spending a little time with it. I invite you to take a fresh look at your life. Relate to the fear that comes up when we are not busy. Am I still worthy? It's that Calvinist thing, underlying our culture. But try letting go and lo and behold it's a better human life, and much more beneficial for other people.

I hope I didn't upset anybody by saying these things, but I can't beat around the bush with you. I need to just lay things out as they come up.

*The above is adapted from a talk [Dr. Reggie Ray](#) gave as part of his **Meditating with the Body** retreat.*



Mindfulness and Mastery in the Workplace:

21 Ways to Reduce Stress during the Workday

by SAKI F. SANTORELLI

THIS ARTICLE EMERGED out of a conversation initiated by Thich Nhat Hanh following the conclusion of a five-day mindfulness retreat in 1987. He had asked the participants to speak together about practical methods they used to integrate mindfulness into everyday life. Most people reported that this was a struggle and that the "how" of doing so was at best, elusive. Since this has been an explicit focus of our approach at the Stress Reduction Clinic, after talking about the clinic work and my own attempts to weave practice into the fabric of my everyday life, Amie Kotler, who also participated in the discussion and is the editor of Parallax Press, asked me to write this article.

Over the past seventeen years, the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center has introduced more than 8,000 people to mindfulness practice. The clinic is the heart of an over-arching community known as the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society and offers medical patients a substantive, educationally oriented approach we call *mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)*.

As an instructor, I have had the good fortune of working with several hundred patients/participants each year. In the context of preventive and behavioral medicine, mindfulness practice is a vehicle that assists people in learning to tap deep internal resources for renewal, increase psychosocial hardiness, and make contact with previously unconceived of possibilities and ways of being. Besides well-documented reductions in both medical and psychological symptoms, participants report an increased sense of self-esteem, shifts in their sense of self that afford them the ability to care for themselves while better understanding their fellow human beings, a palpable deepening of self-trust, and for some, a finer appreciation for the preciousness of everyday life.

In addition to this ongoing clinical work, I have the opportunity to teach in a wide variety of settings in both the public and private sectors. These programs are tailored to individual, corporate, or institutional needs with an underlying emphasis on the cultivation and application of mindfulness and mastery in the workplace. Out of one such program evolved: *21 Ways to Reduce Stress During the Workday*.

During a follow-up program for secretarial staff, I was moved by their struggle to practically integrate the stability and sense of connectedness that they sometimes felt during the sitting meditation practice into their daily lives while at work. In response to their struggle, "21 Ways" came into print. In developing these ways, I proceeded by simply asking myself: How do I attempt to handle ongoing stress while at work? -- actually from the time I awaken in the morning until I return home at the end of the formal workday. How do I attempt to stitch mindfulness into the cloth my daily life? What helps me to wake up when I have become intoxicated by the sheer momentum and urgency of living?

Mindfulness harnesses our capacity to be aware of what is going on in our bodies, minds, and hearts in the world -- and in the work place. As we learn to pay closer attention to what is occurring within and around us, one thing we begin to discover is that we are swimming in an unavoidable sea of constantly changing events. In the domain of stress reactivity, the technical term for this fluctuating reality is called a *stressor*. Stressors are ever present events that we are continually adapting to. Some tend to be met with ease and others draw us away from our sense of stability. The crucial difference in our responses to stressors usually has to do with fear and our perception of feeling threatened or overly taxed by an event, be it either internal or external in origin. Seen from a psychological viewpoint, stress is a relational *transaction* between a person and her environment. From this transactional point of view, our perception and appraisal of the events as either being over-taxing to our inner and outer resources (threatening) or capable of being handled makes a tremendous difference.

Because many of our perceptions and appraisals are operating below the current threshold of our awareness, often we don't even know that our resources are being overly taxed. Conversely, because we have all been conditioned by habit and history, events that are not, or may no longer be threatening are often reacted to as if they are threatening. Therefore, developing our ability to see and understand what is going on inside and around us is an essential skill if we are to be less subject to these unconsciously driven reactions.

Changing the way we see ourselves in relationship to events actually alters our experience of those events, their impact in our lives, as well as our capacity to maintain our well being in the midst of such events. Given this viewpoint, the cultivation of mindfulness -- our capacity to be aware and to understand ourselves and the world around us -- is crucial to our ability to handle stress effectively.

Primarily, what the secretaries were struggling with was the gap between the awareness and stability they were beginning to touch in the domain of formal practice, and the dissipation of awareness and consequent dissonance experienced in the workday environment and their usual "workday mind." What they wanted was a vehicle for integrating "formal practice" into everyday life.

Although this need for integration is the same for all of us, notions about how to work in such a manner remain largely conceptual unless we develop concrete ways of practicing that transform theory into a living reality. This is exactly what the "21 Ways" provided. The participants got enthusiastic about these suggestions because it provided them something solid to work with when attempting to "bridge the gap" and integrate mindfulness into their workplace.

Since then, I have shared these "ways" with many workshop participants and continue to receive letters and telephone calls from people who have either added to the list or posted them as convenient reminders in strategic locations such as office doorways, restroom mirrors, dashboards, and lunch rooms. I've been gladdened to hear from them and happy that by its very nature, the list is incomplete and therefore full of possibility.

Each of these "21 Ways" can be seen as preventive -- a strengthening of your stress immunity, or as recuperative -- a means of recovering your balance following a difficult experience. Most importantly, they are methods for knowing, and if possible, modifying our habitual reactions in the midst of adversity. As you begin working with this list you'll notice

that it includes pre-, during, and post-work suggestions.

Although arbitrary, these distinctions might be initially useful to you. Incorporating awareness practice into your life will necessitate a skillful effort that includes commitment, patience, and repetition. It may be helpful to think of yourself as entering a living laboratory where the elements of your life constitute the ingredients of a lively, educational process. Allowing yourself to be a beginner is refreshing. Give yourself the room to experiment without self-criticism. Allow your curiosity to carry you further into the *process*.

At the heart of workday practice is the intention to be aware of and connected to whatever is happening inside and around us (mindfulness) as well as the determination to initiate change when called for (mastery). A useful example of this process is revealed in the following story told to me some years ago by a physician friend. I call this story, *Little Green Dots*.

My friend told me that as his practice grew busier and more demanding, he began to develop minor, transient symptoms that included increased neck and shoulder tension, fatigue, and irritability. Initially, these symptoms were benign, disappearing after a good night's rest or a relaxing weekend. But as his medical practice continued to grow, the symptoms became persistent and, much to his chagrin, he noticed that he was becoming a "chronic clock-watcher." One day, while attending to his normal clinical duties, he had a revelation. He walked over to his secretary's supply cabinet and pulled out a package of "little green dots" used for color coding the files. He placed one on his watch and decided that since he couldn't stop looking at his watch, he'd use the dot as a visual reminder to center himself by taking one conscious breath and dropping his shoulders.

The next day he placed a dot on the wall clock because he realized, "If I'm not looking at the one on my wrist, I'm looking at the one on the wall." He continued this practice and by the end of the week he had placed a green dot on every exam room doorknob. A few weeks after initiating this workday practice, he said that much to his own surprise, he had stopped, taken a conscious breath, and relaxed his shoulders one hundred times in a single day. This simple, persistent decision to be mindful had been for him, transformative. He felt much better. Most importantly, his patients began telling him that he was "much more like himself." For him, that was the icing on the cake.

The story is simple and direct. Using what is constantly before us as a way of awakening to our innate capacity for stability and calmness is essential if we wish to thrive in the midst of our demanding lives.

Years ago, while working with a group of harried receptionists who described their reaction to the telephone ring as feeling much like Pavlov's dogs, I suggested that they use the first ring of the telephone as a reminder to take one breath, return to themselves, and then pick up the phone.

For many, this simple practice became a powerful agent of change. Some said that people they had spoken with for years on the telephone didn't recognize their voices. Clients told them that they were speaking in a more measured pace and their voices had settled into the lower ranges.

For the receptionists, the telephone no longer elicited the usual patterned reaction. They had learned to respond to this relentless, invasive, ubiquitous sound rather than to react. Through the action of awareness, the ring of the telephone had shifted from an object of unconscious threat and demand to a vehicle for cultivating greater awareness and skillful action.

Having experimented with the "green dots" on my own watch, I have found that like any other method, they can quickly sink into the realm of the unconscious. Pretty soon, like the second hand, numbers, or date indicator, the dots become just another part of the watch face, completely unseen, of no help -- actually perpetuating more unawareness.

No matter what is chosen as a reminder, our real work is to remember. This remembering is called mindfulness. The following "21 Ways" are simply a road map. Allow your curiosity and the sense of possibility to unfold as you explore the territory, discovering your own "ways."

21 Ways to Reduce Stress During the Workday

1. Take five to thirty minutes in the morning to be quiet and meditate, and/or lie down and be with yourself...gaze out the window, listen to the sounds of nature, or take a slow quiet walk.
2. While your car is warming up, try taking a minute to quietly pay attention to your breathing.
3. While driving, become aware of body tension, e.g. hands wrapped tightly around the steering wheel, shoulders raised, stomach tight, etc., consciously working at releasing, dissolving that tension...Does being tense help you to drive better? What does it feel like to relax and drive?
4. Decide not to play the radio and be with your own sound.
5. On the interstate, experiment with riding in the right lane, going five miles below the speed limit.
6. Pay attention to your breathing and to the sky, trees, or quality of your mind, when stopped at a red light or toll plaza.
7. Take a moment to orient yourself to your workday once you park your car at the workplace. Use the walk across the parking lot to step into your life. To know where you are and where you are going.
8. While sitting at your desk, keyboard, etc., pay attention to bodily sensations, again consciously attempting to relax and rid yourself of excess tension.
9. Use your breaks to truly relax rather than simply "pausing." For instance, instead of having coffee, a cigarette, or reading, try taking a short walk -- or sitting at your desk and renewing yourself.

10. For lunch, try changing your environment. This can be helpful.
11. Try closing your door (if you have one) and take some time to consciously relax.
12. Decide to stop for one to three minutes every hour during the workday. Become aware of your breathing and bodily sensations, allowing the mind to settle in as a time to regroup and recoup.
13. Use the everyday cues in your environment as reminders to "center" yourself, e.g. the telephone ringing, sitting at the computer terminal, etc.
14. Take some time at lunch or other moments in the day to speak with close associates. Try choosing topics that are not necessarily work related.
15. Choose to eat one or two lunches per week in silence. Use this as a time to eat slowly and be with yourself.
16. At the end of the workday, try retracing today's activities, acknowledging and congratulating yourself for what you've accomplished and then make a list *for tomorrow*. You've done enough for today!
17. Pay attention to the short walk to your car -- breathing the crisp or warm air. Feel the cold or warmth of your body. What might happen if you open up to and accept these environmental conditions and bodily sensations rather than resist them? Listen to the sounds outside your workplace. Can you walk without feeling rushed? What happens when you slow down?
18. At the end of the workday, while your car is warming up (or cooling own), sit quietly and consciously make the transition from work to home -- take a moment to simply *be* -- enjoy it for a moment. Like most of us, you're heading into your next full-time job -- home!
19. While driving, notice if you are rushing. What does this feel like? What could you do about it? Remember, you've got more control than you might imagine.
20. When you pull into the driveway or park on the street, take a minute to orient yourself to being with your family members or to entering your home.
21. Try changing out of work clothes when you get home. This simple act might help you to make a smoother transition into your next "role" -- much of the time you can probably "spare" five minutes to do this. Say hello to each of your family members or to the people you live with. Take a moment to look in their eyes. If possible, make the time to take five to ten minutes to be quiet and still. If you live alone, feel what it is like to enter the quietness of your home, the feeling of entering your own environment.

From: Engaged Buddhist Reader, Edited by Arnold Kotler, Copyright 1996 by Parallax Press



Homework - Week 2

1. Practice mindfulness formally for 45 minutes every day for at least 6 days this week using the Body Scan CD for guidance.
2. Practice mindful sitting meditation for 15-20 minutes a day.
3. Practice mindfulness of your breathing from time to time throughout the day.
4. Read "Mindful Eating" article.
5. Read Larry Rosenburg's article.
6. Cultivate an intention to increase your level of awareness during daily activities such as: eating, showering, brushing your teeth, washing dishes, taking out the garbage, reading to the kids. . .

Reflections

- ☞ What is the use of planning to be able to eat next week, unless I can really enjoy the meals when they come? If I am so busy planning how to eat next week that I cannot enjoy what I am eating now, I will be in the same predicament when next week's meals become now. - Alan Watts
- ☞ We develop this sense of interconnectedness by acknowledging all that is eaten in its original form: envisioning the wheat that comprises the bread, the milk of the cow, the pod of the pea. The ocean of fish. And the sun which feeds them all. We take in the sacred, the germ of life, like the Eucharist, in gratitude and respect. - Stephen Levine
- ☞ When was the last time you had a glass of water and really drank it? - Thomas Merton



An Interview with Geneen Roth on Mindful-Eating

(from **The Sun** January 2002 by Renee Lertzman)

There is perhaps no more recognizable trademark of compulsive eating than "grazing" at the refrigerator. Most of us do it only when we're by ourselves. In her latest book, *When You Eat at the Refrigerator, Pull Up, a Chair* (Hyperion), Geneen Roth describes eating straight from the refrigerator with humor and candor, and even suggests sharing the experience with someone: Imagine you invite a friend over for dinner. Tell her that the two of you are going to eat the way you eat when you are alone . . . Lead her to the refrigerator. Open the door. Stare. Begin picking from Tupperware containers. Use your fingers. Grate through yesterday's Chinese food. Last week's tapioca pudding. Make loud grunting noises of pleasure. Open the freezer. Try to chunk off a piece of frozen cake with your fingers. When that doesn't work, hack it off with a carving knife. Notice the fine spray of sugar settling on your floor.

I can appreciate her message, because I've been there, standing before the freezer in the home of my childhood, eating my mother's frozen Hanukkah cookies or leftover sweets from a Shabbat reception, hoping not to get caught. Like many women in our culture, I have experienced this painful struggle over food: the desire to conform to cultural standards of thinness, coupled with the unwavering conviction that once I've attained my ideal weight, I will be happy. It was Roth's book *Feeding the Hungry Heart* (Dutton) that led me to connect my desire for love and emotional nourishment with my endless quest to have enough to eat.

One of Roth's perhaps most well-known and controversial exercises helps people to experience what they have as "enough": in conjunction with her advice to "carry a chunk of chocolate everywhere," Roth teaches how to eat that chocolate slowly and with complete awareness. The exercise, she writes, "reminds us to wake up, pay attention, stop reaching for what we don't have, and focus on what we do have. It teaches us that we don't need a truck full of love to satisfy our hungry hearts. When we pay attention, enough is possible."

Roth knows what it's like to struggle with food, having gone on her first diet at the age of eleven, when she began skipping dinners to lose five pounds. "My mother always felt fat," she says, "and didn't want me to follow in her footsteps." They fought over food and body size, and Roth fantasized that, if she could be thin enough, she could please her mother and make everything all right.

When she was twenty-two, Roth traveled to India, where she lived alone for four months in an eight-by-ten-foot room with no running water. "It was a turning inward to something much bigger than myself, or the family I grew up in," she writes. "I started believing again in goodness, in kindness, and in something far vaster than I could see."

After her return from India, however, Roth went through a personal crisis: "I didn't know what I was doing. I had no idea what I was good at, or what I could do, and being of service in some

capacity felt crucial to me." Unable to control the direction of her life, she turned to something familiar that she could control: her eating. She became anorexic.

When she got down to eighty-two pounds, Roth realized what was happening and made another change: she went back to school to study medicine. Within two months, she had gained eighty pounds. "It was at that point," she says, "that I realized I was really, truly ruining my life.... The size of my body, how much I weighed, what I put in my mouth, what I didn't put in my mouth, what my life was going to be like when I lost weight—this was the center around which everything else revolved."

At this crucial juncture, Roth took a writing workshop with poet Ellen Bass and began to put her experiences down on paper. Her relationship to herself changed once more. She also read Susie Orbach's *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* and "realized for the first time that maybe I wasn't a crazy person, that perhaps what I was doing around food had some meaning, that there was some logic around it.... I also understood immediately that dieting would never work."

Roth went on to write several best-selling books on food, self-love, and the relationship between eating and intimacy, including *Breaking Free from Compulsive Eating*, *Appetites*, and *When Food Is Love* (all Penguin). She has garnered a huge following of readers who feel she speaks directly to the pain of overeating and underlying issues of deprivation. Though her subject matter is serious, she addresses it with humor, kindness, and even unabashed joy. She invites us to celebrate pleasure by eating exactly what we want, with awareness, and also to be willing to "lose the suffering contest." She has led "Breaking Free" workshops around-the country for two decades and recently added intensive retreats.

In person, Roth is warm, engaging, and charismatic. Her home in west Marin County, California, is full of color and light, with a view of the grassy, rolling hills around San Francisco Bay. She lives with her husband, Matt, her beloved and very fat cat, Blanche, and their new puppy, Celeste. As we talked in her sun-filled kitchen, Roth would occasionally cut off a hunk of Gruyere cheese and offer me a taste without missing a beat.

Lertzman: You've said that will- power, discipline, and commitment are "irrelevant when it comes to diet-ing." But isn't self-control what dieting is all about?

Roth: I used to believe that if I deprived and punished and fright-ened myself enough, then somehow I would change. But those strategies involving willpower and discipline—so celebrated in our culture—weren't leading me anywhere. In fact, I was killing myself. I began to sense that the way out was through love, openness, and trust, but I didn't feel any of those for myself at the time. Still, once the idea of love and trust occurred to me, I knew that I could never go on a diet again.

Lertzman: You are described as being a pioneer in the anti-dieting movement, but your work is more of a psychological—and perhaps even spiritual— approach to food and eating.

Roth: First of all, our culture deals with eating and dieting and food as just a women's issue—and a banal one, at that. New diets come out every month. Diet books are always on the bestseller list. But people generally don't think of dieting, weight loss, and food in a particularly deep way.

Sometimes dieting is seen as a feminist issue. That can be incredibly helpful, but it's not broad enough. Other authors approach the subject from a serious health perspective, but our relationship with food goes so much deeper than that. It's not just about what you put in your mouth.

Food is both concrete and metaphorical—it's something we deal with every day, but it can also be a doorway that leads into the hidden rooms of our lives. My relationship with food is a microcosm of my relationship to being alive, to my beliefs about trust, pleasure, deprivation, and nourishment. But looking at these deeper, underlying issues is considered subversive.

Lertzman: Especially if you're advising people to carry a piece of chocolate around in their pocket.

Roth: Yes, some people actually think I'm saying, "Eat whatever you want, whenever you want." That is not what I'm saying at all. I'm saying "Look; pay attention." Most people have hardly enjoyed a meal in their life. There's no joy or pleasure in food for them, because there's so much "I should, I shouldn't, I can't, I'm going to feel guilty about it afterward." I teach them how to slow down. I'm basically saying, "We have a choice: we can taste what is in our mouth and utterly enjoy ourselves, or we can remain unconscious of it and be in pain." People don't know there is a choice. It doesn't occur to them that they can actually enjoy eating.

Giving them a piece of chocolate is a way to introduce them to pleasure and awareness. At my workshops, there's an exercise in which we practice savoring a single chocolate kiss. Once, a man told me that he had been bingeing on chocolate kisses for twenty years and had never eaten just one. The one in his mouth was always the precursor to the ten that came after it, and the two bags after that. But when he actually allowed himself to have one, and was present while eating it, he didn't want another one. "It's when I feel I can't have one," he said, "that I want twenty."

In a normal dieting mentality, giving that man chocolate would be like handing an ax to an ax murderer. "I'm supposed to eat chocolate?" people say. "But I'm already forty pounds overweight." Yes, and you're forty pounds overweight in part because you're not allowing yourself to have what you're having anyway, and you're not paying attention while you're having it. I am asking people to stop, just for a moment, and think: Have I ever enjoyed chocolate, really? Do I know how to enjoy food? Does it bring me pleasure? I know I'm bingeing all the time, but am I paying attention to even one thing I'm eating? The answer is no.

So I am saying: "Show up, not just for meals, but for your life. Taste the food. Sit down. Focus on what you're doing." What's the point of eating chocolate if you're not going to have a fabulous time doing it? You're missing your whole life, because you never let yourself have it.

Lertzman: But if something brings us pleasure, don't we want to do it more? Don't most Americans already "treat" themselves with rich food?

Roth: That's a good question. I also work with people on the experience of what it's like to have enough. So many emotional eaters have a sense of never getting enough. They approach

life from an inner sense of poverty, and no amount of food, sex, clothes, or money will satisfy them. I ask them to question the notion of being forever deprived, to recognize that it is in their minds, though probably based on a real experience of having felt deprived in the past.

As a child, I couldn't get enough of my mother's love. But I was not in control of my mother. As an adult, I was in control of how much food I ate, so I ate more to make up for not having had enough of something vital in my past: in this case, love. I felt deprived and poverty-stricken when it came to love, and that became part of my motivation for eating compulsively. For the first twenty-five years of my life, I had a constant feeling that I could not get enough. Realizing that I could get enough food—and still lose weight— was a major turning point.

If you want to lose weight, you can do it by eating only when you're hungry and stopping when you've had enough. But this thought is frightening to most people, because it means taking responsibility and trusting yourself. It goes against the machinery of the culture— particularly the \$33 billion-a-year diet industry. Most people like to be told what to do, especially when it comes to food. That's part of the lure of diets they make people feel like children again, because they tell us that we cannot be trusted to handle food; that we are not capable of making up our own minds and having control over how we eat.

Lertzman: Why do you think people want to be told what to do?

Roth: It's easier. Many people say to me, "I'm tired of thinking about food. I don't want to spend one more second thinking about it. Just give me a set of rules, and I will follow them." But the problem is, people always break the rules. Something in them says, "I don't want to do this. I'm not going to do this. In fact, I am going to do the opposite of this."

Dieting perpetuates that cycle of making rules and breaking them, which leads into deeper issues of the heart, such as craving nourishment and gratification, and yet not really allowing yourself to have it. It perpetuates the belief that if I am good enough, I'll be safe.

Lertzman: You've said that food can lead us into our heart and soul. How?

Roth: You can take any avenue into your heart and soul. Just start with the physical. The physical is a reflection of the deepest part of yourself. You need to inquire into why you do what you do and slow down enough to pay attention and ask questions. For people who have a problem with overeating, food is a fabulous way in. That's what I'm doing: I am taking this thread, and if I follow it all the way, it will lead me to the bottom of my heart. It will lead me to everything.

Lertzman: When people come to your workshops, are they looking for a way into their "heart and soul," or are they just wanting to take off some weight?

Roth: Usually, by the time people come to me, they have tried many other ways to lose weight, and they are in a lot of pain. It's hard to know which is stronger the desire to lose weight or the desire to, end the pain. If people simply want to lose weight, I tell them that I'm probably not the best person for them to be working with: there are a lot easier and faster ways to lose weight. Other people might have serious health issues to which losing weight is critical. Again, my books and workshops are not for them.

Many people, however, want to lose weight simply because they believe it will make them happy and stop their pain. So it's not so much the weight they want to lose but the pain. They are the main audience for my work. At every workshop, I ask, "How many people have lost weight before?" Everybody raises their hand. "How many of you were ecstatically happy after you lost weight?" Two people raised their hands. "How many people believe that, when you lose weight again, you will be ecstatically happy?" Everybody raises their hand again.

In order to lose weight through the approach I teach, you have to be mindful of a few guidelines. These guidelines include not eating when you're distracted, such as in the car, or while doing something else; paying careful attention to the bodily sensations that you recognize as hunger; and stopping when you've had enough.

But the first step is truly slowing down and noticing what you're doing. Most emotional eaters not only eat to distract themselves; they distract themselves while they eat. They feel they are not really supposed to sit down at a table and eat off a plate with silverware, because they're already overweight. Every time they eat, there's a sense of guilt: I shouldn't be doing this; therefore, I have to do it standing up, or in the car, or behind somebody's back. I have to sneak food, hiding it not just from others, but from myself.

Because, at bottom, people feel they are not allowed to eat; they are not permitted to take up space. They are ashamed to actually sit down and give themselves what they want. Simply to eat with silverware, from a plate, changes the experience completely.

Lertzman: I imagine that allowing oneself to eat might sound terrifying to someone with a serious bingeing habit.

Roth: Yes, immediately people fear they will never stop eating. "What's to stop me from having an entire gallon of ice cream?" they ask. Well, what's to stop you is that, if you're present while you eat it, you're going to feel sick.

But people don't think about that. They hear "Don't diet" as endless binges—because all they know, after trying for so long to lose weight, is dieting or binges.

Lertzman: How does slowing down and becoming more mindful translate into not overeating?

Roth: It's much harder to overeat when you are paying attention to what you are doing. Most compulsive behaviors are an attempt to go numb. The opposite of that is to be mindful and conscious.

Zen Buddhist teacher and writer Ed Brown once told me a story about quitting smoking. When he asked Suzuki Roshi how to stop smoking, Roshi told him the way to stop was to honor his habit: every time he wanted a cigarette, he was to wrap it in a beautiful cloth, bow to the cigarette, and make a ceremony out of smoking it. The point was to focus his awareness on what he was doing when he smoked.

Ed said that, after a while, he stopped wanting cigarettes. Smoking became less enjoyable, because it was a total production. When he gave the act more time and attention, he noticed what it felt like to smoke and realized he didn't want to do it.

Emotional eaters eat to push down their feelings, to forget where they are. When you become aware of how full you are, it's hard to keep shoving food down your throat. It's not impossible, but it's hard, because most people binge in a daze or stupor. They eat to deaden themselves. To be aware is to revive yourself, to awaken to the experience and enjoy the tastes, the sensations.

But for people who believe they are inherently out of control, the thought of pleasure and abundance is threat-ening. At the beginning, I encourage them to be aware of foods that can trigger bingeing and going numb. They may try allowing themselves foods that they like but that are less apt to trigger binges.

Lertzman: What, ultimately, differentiates your work from more conventional weight-loss plans and diets?

Roth: The Atkins Diet and Jenny Craig basically tell you what to do, what is good and bad for you. I remind people of their inborn, relaxed intelligence and wisdom: a body-mind-heart wisdom.

Diet programs believe that if you let people relax their guard, they will devour everything in sight. In such a view, the urge to devour must be counterbalanced by a deprivational force. It's either one or the other all the time: devouring or deprivation; starving or stuffing.

But if you do neither, then the inner intelligence that has always been there is allowed to reveal itself, and it's what ends up guiding you. In most people, that intelligence is undeveloped because it's not given room to grow. Like anything, the more attention you pay to it, the more it will speak to you. But if you spend your life paying attention to other things, being directed and bullied and told what to do, then that natural intelligence will never reveal itself. You have to invite it, give it space.

Lertzman: In your most recent book, you recommend that readers "let go of friends who don't want the best" for them. This was striking to me; it's a subject not often mentioned in the context of food and eating.

Roth: Yes, I encourage people not to form friendships based on their wounds and suffering, where all they talk about is how unhappy they are, how much they were abused. The suffering about food, body, and weight is a major issue for many, many women, but we are not what we weigh; we cannot be limited to that. Because so many of us have defined ourselves that way, however, we tend to relate with others in those terms.

In a friendship based on wounds, it's difficult when one person starts breaking free of that cycle. When she realizes she cannot be limited or defined by her size, her tolerance for the other's obsessive complaining about weight is greatly lessened. The more she understands that there is a way out of the cycle, the less time she wants to spend on it. If the friendship has been based on those patterns - then she needs to be willing to let go of it. Otherwise, it's

painful for both parties. It's hard to end relationships; there is a lot of sorrow in it. But there's also sorrow in keeping yourself confined to a relationship that doesn't let you grow.

Lertzman: It seems that you are moving increasingly into a more spirit-ual, contemplative method of working. Why?

Roth: I have been engaged in spiritual practice since I was twenty-five. It's an acknowledgment that there's something else happening inside me, away from the flurry of daily activities. But I don't want to encourage people to do any particular religious practice. A close friend of mine is a devout Christian, and that's fabulous for her. I wouldn't dream of talking her into trying another spiritual path. She's already got something that allows her to feel close to herself and to God.

The people who come to my workshops are on many different paths, but there are also people who don't know how to begin looking inside. A daily practice of spending time with oneself is the simplest place to start.

Meditation can also be helpful. The value of meditation in the context of emotional eating is that it helps us learn not to take each thought so seriously. Learning how to be still and watch the mind also supports the sense that we are not just our bodies or how much we weigh. It encourages a broader perspective

We need to notice the "instructions"—the behavior patterns and beliefs—we have been following from our past. Often, the people who gave us these instructions are the sort we wouldn't ask street directions from today. Yet we blindly follow their rules as if they held the truth.

The retreats also focus on the body itself. We incorporate movement, being present in the body, and sensing one's arms and legs a hundred times a day.

Lertzman: Why the arms and legs?

Roth: It's a simple teaching tool that helps people begin to inhabit their bodies. We live so much of the time as if we were outside of our physical selves. Sensing the arms and legs is an easy way to return to our bodies, which are the locus of so much self-hatred, and see that there is nothing there to hate.

For many who suffer as a result of weight, this practice of inhabiting the body is the first time they experience their own physical presence in a posi-tive way. Mindfulness can cultivate gratitude for the body, which, after all, has schlepped us around in spite of all the abuse we've heaped on it.

Another thing meditation does is teach people that their thoughts are sometimes lunatic, imaginative, or fictitious. If you sit and watch your thoughts for twenty minutes, observing how one leads into the next, you realize that the thought I want to eat a gallon of ice cream doesn't have to be taken seriously. This is key, because we believe we are our thoughts.

Lertzman: What do you struggle with now? What are your edges, your limits?

Roth: I don't struggle with food anymore, which is itself quite miraculous, considering that for many years I believed I would always be tortured by food and eating, and that my life would change only if I could lose weight.

Now my struggles revolve around how I define myself. At times, I am convinced that I am my past, my conditioning, what happened to me as a child; that I am those thoughts, beliefs, self-images, and identities I still carry around from childhood. And then there are moments—glimpses, really of pure, clear being. The struggle arises when I find myself back in the confines of my beliefs and conditioning; it's very painful.

So my central work now is to allow myself to be my-self, in a relaxed way. As I discovered with food, a diet of suffering or pain is neither loving nor helpful. The way out is not through deprivation, judgment, and self-loathing, but through relaxation and trusting a kind of inner intelligence. ~



Meditation and the Practice of Awareness

The following, “Meditation and the Practice of Awareness” was taken from: LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF DEATH On the Art of Being Truly Alive by Larry Rosenberg with David Guy, SHAMBHALA, Boston & London, 2001.

The method of meditation I teach can be seen as a two-step process—samatha and vipassana, or calming and wisdom—with breath awareness as the cornerstone of the practice. The breathing is an ideal object to focus on. It isn't like a mantra; it has no cultural connotations or other associations. It isn't like a physical object, so that you have to be in a certain place or carry it with you. Breathing is simple and portable; we are all doing it all the time. We can notice it not just when we are sitting in meditation but at any time during the day. And it is always happening in the present. It is our doorway into the present moment.

In order to practice breath awareness as a formal method, the meditator chooses a quiet place and settles into a relaxed but erect sitting posture: cross-legged, with a cushion under the buttocks to help the spine stay straight; kneeling, usually with a cushion or a bench under the buttocks for support; or sitting in a chair, with the feet on the floor. In all of these postures there are three points of contact, so you are stable, like a three-legged stool, and you hold yourself straight, not in a rigid military way but in a relaxed manner, with just the amount of energy that it takes to stay erect.

Then you bring your attention to the process of breathing, in whatever locale it seems most vivid to you, the nostrils, the chest area, or the abdomen. You don't try to breathe in some particular way. You simply observe the breathing as it is, the in-breath, perhaps a short pause, the out-breath, perhaps a longer pause. You take notice of this simple process without which none of us would be alive. You don't do it; you let it happen. You surrender to the natural process that is already going on.

The act of following the breathing is quite profound; it can be, quite literally, the work of a lifetime. The more we watch it, the more we see that the breath is a whole world, a universe unto itself, and as we follow it over the course of months and years we go deeper and deeper.

Some breaths are long; some are short. Sometimes the breath-ing seems to take place in the chest; sometimes it is way down in the belly. Sometimes it feels brief and tight and constricted; other times it is effortless and very deep. It might be smooth, like silk, or rough and coarse, like burlap. All of these variations are possible, and countless others in between, even within the space of a single sitting. There is tremendous variety in the simple act of breathing. You realize eventually that no two breaths are alike.

The human mind, of course, is a lively instrument, and it has many things it would like to do other than follow the breathing. Most of us are quite restless and distracted; we don't realize just how distracted until we try to do a simple thing like following the breathing. Our minds, it seems, would rather do anything else. All kinds of things come up. That mental activity isn't really a problem; it's a discovery. You're seeing how wild your mind really is.

But at this stage of the practice, you don't want to look at that wildness in detail. When you see that the mind has wandered away, notice that, then come back - without any feeling of shame or judgment - to the simple act of breathing. At some sittings it may seem that that's all you're doing: noticing, you're away, then coming back. Other times - especially as your practice progresses - you may be able to stay with the breathing for longer and longer periods. It doesn't matter how you're doing; this isn't a competition and you don't want to struggle. Come to see, instead, that the awareness of unawareness is in itself valuable practice. Wandering away from the breathing isn't a mistake or the sign of a weak character. Simply follow the breathing, and when you notice you're away, come back.

The point of samatha practice is primarily to calm the mind. But of course, you can't help noticing what is coming up as you do that and sometimes you will notice that one thing is coming back again and again, maybe a pain in the body, maybe a state of mind, like anger or fear. It is as if this one thing keeps calling you away from the breathing.

Sometimes even in this early stage of the practice it is a good idea to expand the scope of your awareness to include what has become problematic. You can also temporarily drop the breath and give some attention to whatever keeps calling you away. You pay attention to it for awhile, the same way you've been focusing on the breathing, and that usually has the effect of calming it down and making it less persistent. Once it has lost some of its charge, you can go back to the breathing.

Beginners often ask how long they should sit. I really have no idea. In the introductory class I teach, which lasts ten weeks, I start people out at about fifteen minutes and try to work up to an hour, under the assumption that, between the weekly classes, they are sitting most days at home. On retreats most of our sit-tings are forty-five minutes, though some last for an hour. I encourage newcomers to sit a bit beyond what they regard as their limit, to challenge themselves without making sitting an ordeal. If there is no challenge they lose interest; if the challenge is too severe they may get discouraged and stop practice.

But however long you sit, the end of the sitting period shouldn't mark the end of mindfulness. The real point of practice is to bring the same kind of attention to everything; just as you give

your attention to the breathing as you sit, you should give your attention to taking a shower, eating breakfast, talking to your family. Following the breathing, because it is so simple, is in some ways the easiest thing we do. Our real goal is to be as mindful as possible in all the activities that make up our day.

People also ask how long they should follow this first step of practice before they go on to the second. That is another impossible question. What I usually say is that you should continue following the breathing until YOU get reasonably good at it, until you achieve some degree of calm and stability. That doesn't mean that other things don't come up but that you're able to notice them fairly quickly and come back to the breathing. Thoughts may still be there, but you're able to let them come and go without getting caught up in them.

In a ten-week introductory class, I might move on to the second step after seven or eight weeks. On a nine-day retreat, at which people are meditating all day, I move on after three or four days. I always let people know that they don't have to switch. If they want to continue with the breathing, that is perfectly all right.

Following the breathing is not kindergarten. It really is, as I've said, a profound practice, which gets more profound the more you do it. You shouldn't feel any compulsion to move on. Conscious breathing can help take you all the way to enlightenment.

The second step opens to a much larger field. Ultimately it opens to a kind of attention that is limitless, literally infinite. In this style of meditation, you might begin a sitting by focusing on the breathing, but once you have achieved some degree of calm you open the attention to whatever is happening, in your body and your mind and your surroundings. You might retain the breathing as a kind of anchor; that is probably a good idea for most people, though some will drop the breath altogether.

Now you are opening to the things you saw as distractions before, all the phenomena that were taking you away from the breathing. Before, they were in the background and the breathing in the foreground. Now, perhaps, they are the foreground and the breathing is the background. Or perhaps - as the practice grows more subtle - there is no foreground or background: there is just everything that is happening, all at once, a unified field.

There will be sounds, certainly; almost anywhere you are, even in a supposedly silent meditation hall, there are sounds, both inside and outside the room. There might be sensations in the body; a feeling of pain or tension, one of relaxation or relief. There might be smells, or a breeze passing through. There might be thoughts. You don't - as when you were following the breath - want to get caught up in a process of thinking, but you will certainly see thoughts pass through your mind. There might also be complex emotional states like fear or sadness, composed of both thoughts in the mind and feelings in the body.

Watching all of these phenomena come and go is more complicated than following the breathing; watching the breathing has prepared you for this more complex practice. Sometimes it may seem too complex, too many things are present, or you keep getting lost in thought. In that case it is probably a good idea to go back to the breathing, perhaps for a few breaths, until you've calmed down, or perhaps for the remainder of the sitting. That isn't an admission of defeat. It is just wisdom: seeing how things are for you and what the best way to practice is.

In another way, of course, what I'm describing isn't complicated or difficult at all. What you are really learning- and this begins with following the breath - is the art of doing less and less until finally you are doing nothing, just being as you are and letting your experience come to you. There are no distractions; you are mindful of your present experience just as it is. Nothing in particular is supposed to happen. You attend to what is there just because it is there. It is your life at that moment. We are used to doing things all the time, trying to change our environment, improve our situation, so it may seem difficult to do nothing. Actually, there is nothing easier. You just sit and let the world come to you.

In time you will see that these two steps-shamatha and vipassana - are not easy and difficult, or basic and advanced; they are just two ways to practice, one of which is appropriate for some times, one for others. You'll begin to see it as an art, moving from the breath to a wider focus or - sometimes - deciding to go back to the breath again. Samatha and vipassana work together like the right and the left hand in cooperation. A calm steady mind is more able to see insightfully. And insights calm the mind. There is not necessarily a right way to move back and forth, certainly not a perfect way. This isn't a realm where perfection is possible. You never come to the end of the practice of awareness. It will serve you well for the rest of your life.