

Excerpt 1: From Chapter 1, "We Can Always Change Our Minds"

Here's the good news: with meditation we can build a capacity of opening to the vast complexities of our minds. That's the prime focus of the introductory practices in Practical Mindfulness. The bonus value is that in training the ability to attend to that little-m field, we create the opportunity to open to a deeper connection. We'll cap off this book's practices with exercises that offer that opportunity.

Then, the bad news: the challenge of cultivating attention has gotten a lot harder lately. The sheer volume of wavicles in our landscapes has recently grown at a pace never before engaged in human history. For four million years or so, there was not much new and different in where we went, what we learned, or who we knew. Novel interactions with other wavicles were few and far between. Our DNA has been "shaped," more or less, very slowly over that long stretch of time.

For the last two hundred years or so, humankind has developed the ability to push the limits on our use of time and space. As a result of the technology of travel, many of us can meet people and interact in cultures that would have been out of our reach just two hundred years ago. With reliable lighting, the productive period of our day-to-day life is no longer limited to the time between sunrise and sunset. And in the past thirty or so years, the amount of sheer data that runs past us has accelerated in a staggering way—estimated at thirty times or more from the days of no cable and only three networks on TV. The myriad mass of wavicles competing for our attention will only grow more in number, kind, and intensity as we go along.

We certainly can choose to reduce exposure to the outside world and become more selective. We may shake our fists from the porch at the wavicles, telling them to get off the lawn and turn down their awful music. That is a valid, if only partial fix for "wavicle overload." But my particular intention here is less about how to limit

what we're exposed to but what we do with that exposure.

If all experience is interaction, or bump, then understanding the bump is essential, and the cosmic market value of cultivating awareness goes through the roof. Awareness is the developmental tippy-top of reality as we know it so far. It is a capacity that can and should be nurtured and honed for maximum utility. The aimed-for result is a more supple, flexible mind's eye, one that not just watches the action of life but also watches the watcher, watches the watching. More aware of the interactive nature of experience, we stop white-knuckling the coming and going stuff of life as necessary for peace and comfort. Rather than holding so tightly to the stuff in our awareness for our security, we can work at resting in our capacity for awareness itself as our true home.

And, yes, we're practically home, right here. Mindfulness is a capacity that we all have. We uncover it, not acquire it. It's already there, waiting to be found, cultivated, refined. And comfort. Rather than holding so tightly to the stuff in our awareness for our security, we can work at resting in our capacity for awareness itself as our true home. And, yes, we're practically home, right here. Mindfulness is a capacity that we all have. We uncover it, not acquire it. It's already there, waiting to be found, cultivated, refined.

Excerpt 2: From Chapter 9, "Emotions Practices: Just Dropping In"

Over to Dirk with the Weather

A metaphor that I concocted initially in teaching elementary school kids actually is pretty effective for anybody, regardless of age. Emotionality is a changing aspect of the field much like the day's weather. While they can impact the whole body, historically we tend to associate emotions with, or even "locate" them in the torso—the anxious gut, the passionate heart. Practice with the kids involves imagining a window on one's own chest, looking in on the weather there, like one would check for angry thunderclouds, joyous sun, rainy sadness, or a chilly, anxious day. The practice slyly helps with the dual aspects of both being immersed in a state of

emotion yet also observing it, looking through that window.

With mastery of emotion as an object of observation, we can include it as part of the daily routine like the short form of the body scan or as the main event in the work. It can also be the “audible” that gets called when that emotion is yanking attention away from whatever else is the intended target and needs “dropping into.”

Emotions Practice No. 1: Look Through a Window, What Do You See?

The emotional “weather” of the moment, whatever that feeling state is, that’s the object of observation here. You can practice this way:

- Settle and prep with HWG... (the intention is to open to my emotional “weather”).
- Warm up with breath work, some reps of watching/ losing/regaining attention, and a brief body scan; “breathe into them,” if you like that tactic.
- With that feeling stable-ish, then pivot to observation of your emotional tone. You can simply attend to, “how am I feeling right now?” You can also work the more imaginal route, visualizing a window into your heart and looking inward. Notice how it feels physically.
- It is natural to label the state you find (calm, angry, joyful, anxious, etc.)—that’s ok. But resist running narratives about where from, why now, or other trails.
- Stick with this focus for short periods—a few minutes at a time, then relax back to the breath for a little while; then pivot back to watching the weather. Working slowly and carefully in “holding the emotion” in awareness is more important some heroic white-knuckling of an intense state.
- Be ready for attention to be gained and lost easily in this practice, especially at first. Whatever you got that day, do your best to attend to it. You can always move back “home” to the breath—that’s fruitful practice, too.
- Close the practice in your familiar way: a move back briefly to the breath;

then a letting go of any direction of awareness, just letting your mind be and resting back in the “watcher.” There, we, are.

Excerpt 3: From Chapter 12, "The Mind Hacker's Toolkit, For Those Special Moments"

Hack No. 3: Mindful Bracketing

While most of us benefit from setting a routine time for daily practice, whether mornings, or evenings, or sometimes both, life usually happens in between. We’ve been covering the unexpected occurrences that can rattle us, surprise us, and perhaps change us

in fruitful ways, if we are able to apply some attentional effort. The “breather” routine can become second nature over time and practice: when something novel happens, we can skillfully take a quick gander at the effect on the mindscape.

Other life events are less immediate, more predictable, and can be enhanced in awareness by a slight variation on this brief, mindful practice. It’s not, “Seven o’clock and time to sit.” Nor is it, “a pink slip? Right now? I need a (mindful) breather.” This practice is something in between: a routine but brief opener and closer to the daily actions and activities that many of us engage in but can sometimes lose the energy, intention, and appreciation for in the midst of a blur of contemporary life. Think of it as the mindful theme song⁵⁰ to your own show: play it to lead you to a defined stretch of action, and then play it back out.

What kinds of action? I’ve found recommending this bracketing routine helpful for individual workdays, whatever the jobs—but especially ones that involve direct tending to others. Teachers dig it as a brief interlude to set their mind and intention straight prior to the scramble of kids flooding the classroom, and then later on after the room empties. I’ve employed the same tactic in teaching bigger kids—a brief tune in before lecturing to training docs, then a quiet check-in moment after I’ve covered the last PowerPoint slide and answered their final questions. Performers—actors, musicians, dancers, creatives of all stripes—can bracket their performances in this way. Newbie self-help book authors find that bracketing my, um, their writing sessions helps to identify and settle tension, and then guide awareness in a productive direction. Or so I hear.

It is a vital, essential moment in my own clinical workday. Even if I only have a minute, I prep for my first patient of the day with a brief, planned opening in compassionate awareness. At the end of my workday, I try to bookend that brief meditation with a closing snapshot of, “done...how did that impact me?”

I can't with any certainty claim invention or discovery of this “hack” highlighting the entries and exits from personal efforts, though I haven't seen it specifically elaborated on much elsewhere. My own happening upon this routine came by accident, by desperation, really, in returning to clinical practice after radiation treatment and some complications thereof. With the intense distractions of somatic side effects of the treatment and a boatload of steroids aboard to treat those lovely effects, I found myself pretty damn immersed in suffering self. A Michelin Man morphing of body, a hair-trigger irritability of heart, and brittle distractibility of my ol' reliable thinky brain greeted me each morning as I opened up shop with the aspiration to attend to others and their suffering.

50 “Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?” Taken. As is “I'll be There for You” by The Rembrandts. Be your own one-hit wonder!

Our own suffering makes us contract our awareness around the aching self. But my particular job, not so unlike any other job that requires full attention to another individual, relies on opening out, not contracting in. Grunting through, or even tuning out, my own difficult stuff would also be quite the mixed message conveyed to my patients—folks I've routinely urged to bravely tune in to their own difficult stuff. It'd be a denial of the obvious, some ripe hypocrisy in action. Yet rather than switching chairs and leaking all over people counting on me to help them, I recognized the need for cultivating a middle ground: holding my own tension, even modeling the managing of it, in a way that allowed me to be effective in the interaction.

A mindful check-in of state, belonging, and intention (that's HWG) bloomed out of that brainstorming for a “play-in theme” sufficient to cultivate that necessary state of mind. Yeah, that damned thing again. Nothing fancy here; we'll just recycle the ol' H, W, and G, with a couple of emphases.

- The “Here” noting of self, state, and setting pulls us into the scene, whether it's prior to walking on stage, or “my date will be here in five,” or

anticipating an interview, or the rush of a family in weekday evening flux (homework, dinner, bedtime battles, etc.)

- The “We” step may seem unusual to include as a regular aspect of prepping for action, but I actually think it’s essential and workable in a couple of ways. One is in visualizing other peers in the task, all humbly managing our parallel experiences somewhere, somehow. For me, maybe it’s a shared bond of shrinks laboring at our work; perhaps we can get a group discount on tissues. Or “We” can cast a broader net to fellow wavicles at the service of others. That’s some union.
- Another flavor of “We” to consider embracing is the “We” of the other party or parties in the interaction(s) to come, whether that be with the patients in the waiting room, the audience silencing their cell phones, or the prospective caller to the support phone line one is preparing to manage (this last one helps me personally when I’m dialing an insurance company about a messed-up claim). Except in rare cases of overt prepping for battle, most of our interactions in the day-to-day involve at least the option of bonding, of creating a positive alliance, of empathy and compassion. Bringing to mind the opportunity for “We,” for a bond of belonging, doesn’t mean dropping one’s reasonable defenses nor a foolish “kick me” vulnerability. But humans are more hardwired by nature for threat, less so for “win-win.” This step helps counter that.
- The “Go” is straightforward—with the landscape attended to and a nod to our coming partner(s) in the dance, we go. Simple enough, but note how many times each of us sleep-walks into a task, relying on intuition and repetition to launch, and without a discrete intention in mind. As with sitting meditation, this “Go” step reinforces awareness of a deliberate effort to be made. It defends against the half-assed effort. Put the whole behind in there.

Excerpt 4: From Chapter 7, "Another Map: Your Mind, the Operating System(s)"

OS 1.0: Slither Up

Let's imagine a little about how we went from utterly non-aware creatures to barely yet alarmingly aware creatures.

Picture yourself for a moment as a lizard—not thinking about the beauty of the jungle around you or how to best prepare the fly you've just captured as part of a reptilian tasting menu.

No, you're just eating to survive, while your trigger-happy 1.0 stays lit up, vigilant for any other critter who's aiming to gobble you up while you're not paying life-or-death attention.

1.0 is the survival OS, anchored in the most basic, "I win/you lose" part of brain. The phrase "fight/flight" often is used to describe this OS; a fuller description includes "freeze," as in, "play dead." All three are basic threat responses to a "not-self," not rooted in coexistent interaction.

This is not the, "Does she like me?" part of the brain, or the "Do these pants make me look fat?" part, which assumes a more evolved quality of self-relating-to-another-self. (That's 2.0, coming up next.) It's the OS we got from our reptilian genetic friends, and sometimes may notice pops up in Uncle Louie at Thanksgiving dinner. While it sounds like a rather low bar in a broad cosmic sense, remember that even the most primal awareness represents a great evolutionary step beyond mere animate existence without any reflective awareness (fuzz atop the surface of sour cream in the back of the fridge/Uncle Louie after a six-pack).

1.0 is by nature a loudmouth of an OS, with physical, emotional, and mental/thought signals that are more local and intense. After all, in evolutionary history, 1.0 was once the only primordial signal system, operating for the goal of living to see another day and not caring much for style points.

Each of the "big three" states of suffering—"anxious," "angry," and "sad"—have a particular, more intense and primal feel when they originate from 1.0. A punch to the side of the head, a Dear John letter to the heart, or even a question on the quantum physics final that didn't seem to be covered in the professor's lecture (Heisenberg would suggest guessing "B," probably) can each generate a blinding 1.0 light on the dashboard of consciousness.

1.0 signals are sometimes so overwhelming and intolerable as to stun or freeze us from accessing higher centers of mind, and even co-opting the survival purpose.

Here's an example, involving anxiety. My lovely wife, toddler son, and I were moving into our first home, which had been outfitted for the prior, elder owner with bright red, cold-war cliché medical alarm system buttons throughout. We'd ignored the "Mr. President, you may make Vladivostok an ashtray" triggers as we went about toddler-proofing the place. Alas, my industrious little man did not, hiking himself up on a chest full of blankets and sending Mother Russia a clear message.

The ear-bleeding alarm stunned his two addled parents, our quick trip to OS 1.0 momentarily disorienting us from recalling where we'd left the disarm codes and phone numbers. A pounding at the front door was ignored, then eventually registered; I opened the door to find a burly fireman winding up his axe like Paul Bunyan to take a whack. (More 1.0!) Ultimately higher brain centers snapped online.

We can define "anger" as the dashboard light of grievance among wavicles, with a spectrum of variation from getting frustrated by heavy traffic or the voice of the annoying guy in the next cubicle over, to the primal rage that can be generated by being messed with in a major-league, traumatic way. That 1.0 kind of anger is different, more cataclysmic. Similarly, 1.0 sadness feels different than garden-variety blues. Many individuals with the most severe impairments in temperament find the root of their pain here—a gruesome sense of early aloneness and alienation, of being left to fend for themselves.

Early-and-often childhood exposure to anxious "watch out," to grievous "not fair," and to depressive, "left and all alone" experiences can groove in an ongoing defensive posture and to deep difficulty in teasing out 1.0 vs. 2.0 or higher responses to later challenges. A contemporary "peacetime" life nevertheless still feels like a chronic risk of "wartime."

1.0 can also become an all-too-familiar landing spot for other states of suffering to collapse to—those experiences themselves generating a fear that they are too hard to hold or adapt to. A catchphrase for this I use with patients is "collapse to 1.0"—states of suffering that trigger their own deeper survival fear. Mindfulness practices can be essential in helping patients tease out the core "ouch" from the reactive "OMG" and modify down that additional intensity. With practice, adaptation develops of having held that hot potato before and made it through.