

About Zen: Mindfulness

Craig Gilbert

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About the Author

Craig Gilbert currently lives in Fife, Scotland, where he runs mindfulness courses, groups, walks and mentoring sessions for individuals and organizations.

In addition to mindfulness, Craig is an author, poet and aspiring composer. He says that listening to music which carries him away on tides of inspiration is an essential part of his creative process. He's written a surprising number of poetry books, one of which is about the end of the world and his vision for what comes next, and he also has several fantasy trilogies in the works. He's always had a fascination with the otherworldly, and delights in poring over old, fantasy, or 'You are here' maps. If you have an interesting map, he wants you to send it to him.

Much of Craig's writing has accompanied and chronicled his own journey through life, becoming a poetic and fantastical record of various events and thoughts so far; and now evolving as the sowing of seeds for healing and positive change.

Craig can be found in tearooms, enjoying a mindful cup of tea and pondering the vastness of the universe.

www.craig-gilbert.com awaits your curiosity.

Other titles by Craig Gilbert

Poetry:

Soul Shadows

Alchemy of Love

I Am You

Spirit

A Gathering of Wings

Moonwind

Poems About Zen

Fantasy:

A Wizard's Tears – Vol 1 in the Elrohen Trilogy

The Black Tree – Vol 1 in the Dark Faerie Trilogy

(Volume 2 and 3 of each trilogy forthcoming)

Humour:

The Lemon & Other Short Stories

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May we all find our ways to live joyfully, prosper and promote peace and compassion throughout our lives.

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By Craig Gilbert

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1. Do you live in love, or fear?

What is it, to be Zen?

To me, Zen is more than a word, and it can mean everything and nothing at the same time. Its presence can be palpable; it resides in our awareness of the world around us, in our noticing of how life flows and does what it does in completely natural ways. Whenever you stop and tune in to this presence, you can feel it, like listening to the quiet after a storm, the chattering of birds in distant trees, or the stillness in between thoughts.

I use Zen to describe acceptance. If I'm Zen, then I'm ok with what's happening. If I'm not Zen, then I'm emotional or resisting what is. In essence then, Zen for me means to "develop complete acceptance of all situations, emotions and people". This can seem incredibly difficult to attain, if we allow our minds to get in the way.

In order to develop more acceptance and happiness in our lives, we can use our 'mindfulness'. Mindfulness can be described as the essence of *awareness* within us, that place from which we can feel deeply, see things with clarity, and gain the insights which help us to follow our life journey more joyfully. We all have the capacity to be mindful. We all have the potential to be still, and focus our awareness on the precise moment in which we find ourselves, beyond our perceptions and lenses of conditioning, which together make us who we are. By seeing with clarity, we more clearly see what is true, rather than

what is made up with our and others' imaginations, and what originates from our memories.

Beings of love

I believe that when we're born, for the most part we're without fear. I see all humans as beings born of love, tuned to the vibration of the universe, which *is* love. In a miraculous moment of birth, we are coalesced from the cosmos into a soulful being, into the arms of our loving parents. From there, we begin our journey of self-discovery, innocent to the ways of the world. Our spirit, our soul, is imprinted with all the essences of the stars, the planets, of sunlight, and life on Earth.

As beings of love, inherent basic goodness and the ability to love is our birthright. It's a jewel within us, part of our core self, and cannot be stripped from us. It's an unconditional gift of life; it's that part which shines when we're kind or compassionate to another, or to our self. We all hold the potential at any point in our lives, to be in touch with this innate love, and to permit ourselves to be filled with it. Innate love is the source of wisdom far beyond thought.

"But my parents weren't loving", "My life isn't filled with love", "Nobody loves me", you might protest. It's true, many people have a less than perfect start to life, with less than perfect parents, and a less than perfect journey through life, starved of love. There are hundreds of small and large ways in which love can be hidden, withheld, given conditionally, or given in ways which inflict deep and long lasting

wounds. After that perfect moment of birth, we begin a journey of growth, where our innate love, our innocence, and our inner beauty, are at constant risk of becoming tarnished.

As a child, we 'learn' very quickly about what is right or wrong. Our parents tell us. Others tell us. Our fun, limitless play and freedom are subsequently bounded by human rules, human fears, and we consciously or unconsciously take on those same rules and fears as unchanging truths. We may not question those rules our entire life.

For a vast part of the journey, our quality of life will depend entirely on our upbringing and conditioning. In modern society, there's a need to *do* all the time; as adults, we lessen our unique *being* through our thoughts and our incessant rushing. We're always thinking of what to do next, how to fix that, how to be happier. When ruminations are sufficiently persistent, these 'heavy' thoughts can even manifest as physical symptoms in our bodies. We can become anxious and ill through the stresses of living and surviving daily life. We often take on external fears as our own, as a result of being surrounded by the fearfulness of others. Over time, these fears can engulf and rule our days. When we find ourselves in this place, there's little room for an innate love state, our born with goodness, to function internally or outwardly.

How frightened are you?

The first step to identifying how frightened you are (we all have learned fear, to varying degrees), is to identify *fear* based emotions within you. Are you frequently anxious, angry, despairing, or sad? Are you lonely, depressed, or stressed? If this sounds like you, you're currently sitting at one end of the love versus fear scale. You could imagine this like a path. By moving into more of our love based emotions such as joy, kindness and compassion, we can walk the path in a different direction.

There *will* be glimpses of love piercing through; the odd happy day, moments of laughter and enjoyment of life. However these can be repressed with our thoughts, our moods, and by any circumstances which disturb ongoing contentment. Dwelling on any of these inevitably takes you further into fear, but more on that later.

The aim of this book is to guide you to noticing/realising where you are on this love scale, and how you might change where you are. Awareness of yourself and your emotional state is required to bring about the change of direction you desire.

By choosing to embrace this journey of Zen self-discovery, of gentle mindful awareness, the peace and happiness locked within you can be repeatedly brought to the surface, and then life can feel very different than it might do right now.

Your current state of being

All is change. This can be great news, or bad news, dependent on what we *think* about it. Change in itself isn't good or bad, that's just our judgment of it. The world is constantly changing, as are we. We grow older, our bodies change; our minds also change. We don't tend to enjoy change, or welcome it as the natural flow of life. We demand permanence! That is, we believe, what makes us feel safe.

Consider your life for a moment. What's happening right now that you're fighting against? Is it your physical or mental health? Is it the state of the world, or the job you despise? Do you reach for distractions to avoid the fears in your life? Do you like yourself and your life? These are all useful questions to ask yourself, to understand where you are.

Because everything changes, all of these things that aren't working for you will change, whether tomorrow, next month, or in ten years. Guaranteed, you will become a different person to who you are right now. By embracing that change, things that no longer work in your life can more readily be discarded, allowing for new possibilities to emerge.

'Now' is the only and best time to look at your state of being. Pause to observe yourself. How are you, really? What fears do you carry? They could be numerous and varied; fear of going to parties, of being alone, of eight-legged things, or of certain foods. Are you always early to appointments (fear of being late), do you constantly watch TV or listen to the radio when you're by yourself (fear of boredom/loneliness)?

We all have patterns; it's useful to start observing them in a curious way. Please do remind yourself that this is about self-discovery, not about judging yourself.

How anxious are you? How light/heavy do you feel? Heavy is walking through treacle; feeling tired all the time, or mentally exhausted, with little or no motivation. Light is having a skip in your step, having laughter and joy and bountiful amounts of energy.

How connected do you feel in your life, your work, your community? These answers will point you to where you're currently at on the love versus fear scale.

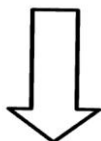
How do you feel about yourself? Do you like yourself, or do you beat yourself up? Do you live with regret, longing, or addiction? Do you look in the mirror and wish you were someone else?

I've put these questions into the diagram on the next page. It's useful to look at these 'Zen' questions and be honest with yourself about where you're at.

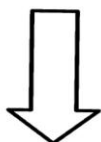
These questions/answers can guide you on your journey. It's a snapshot of you, right now. It's worth checking this list frequently, and seeing where there are changes.

ZEN QUESTIONS

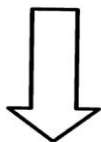
Health? (Mental/Physical)



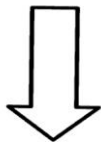
Feelings/Emotions?



Do you feel light/heavy?



Any habits/patterns?



Thoughts about self?

Fig 1. Zen Questions

Even if you're feeling deeply depressed, you will find you have better weeks than others, but you might not notice those better times if you aren't watching for them. Our moods and emotions shift constantly, the change is always there. It's of benefit to observe how you might be labelling yourself i.e. "I'm an anxious person" or "I'm depressed". This can only ever be partly true. You're not anxious or depressed 100% of the time. Start by noticing the gaps in your perceptions of permanence, and welcome in the impermanent nature of the universe!

Mindfulness and fear

Mindfulness is the practice of being in the present moment with our awareness, without judgment. At its heart is *paying attention* to what's occurring without fighting it. We can be mindful of anything, if we consciously choose to be, whether it's mindfully eating breakfast, mindfully walking in nature, or mindfully focusing on our natural breathing rhythms during meditation, or as we go about our daily tasks.

If we choose to mindfully eat our breakfast, we're there with our breakfast. We aren't thinking about anything else but our breakfast. Really tune in to the present moment, noticing the taste of your breakfast, the colour of the food, the textures, the smells, and so on. This simple focus can bring joy into your life straight away. How often do we not really taste our food because our mind is distracted, thinking of something else? If you have a habit of fearful, worried thoughts, then at breakfast you're probably thinking

about the day ahead. Notice your thoughts – do you look forward to the day or dread it? Are you pondering problems or issues that you might have to face? When we live more in fear, we'll be in our mind more, trying to fix the fears, but often entirely from our subconscious, which can mislead us and take us in directions that aren't so helpful. Without proper *awareness* of those thoughts, we're led on a merry dance into storylines, imagination, and judgments.

When we live in fear, in this subconscious state, our emotions become stronger. Annoyance can turn to anger very quickly if we don't catch sight of our annoyance. A slight nervous tension can lead to strong, deep anxiety if we're not aware. Our emotions are trying to alert us to something that's askew; that we're not balanced and need to resolve something within us. If we ignore our emotional alerts, we'll eventually be forced by our body to take notice.

Mindfulness gives us the space to *notice*. By recognising our emotions when they arise, in the present moment, we have a choice of how things can go next. Do we subconsciously wolf down breakfast because we don't want to be late, or do we take our time and enjoy our breakfast fully, mindfully? The more space we give ourselves, the more mindfulness we practice, the happier we will become, and those heavier emotions will not last as long. They become fleeting, just like clouds changing in the sky.

The mindfulness triangle

Mindfulness consists of three elements (see triangle below), with love at our centre, waiting to be unearthed. The three elements are the present moment, awareness, and acceptance (non-judgment).

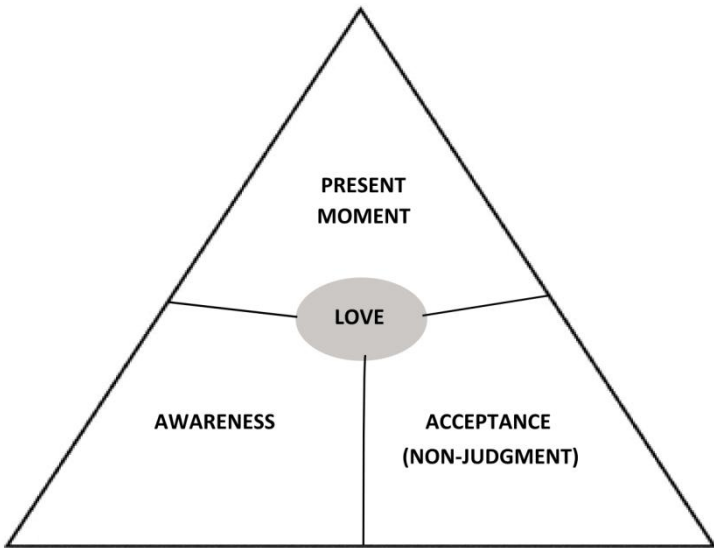


Fig 2. The mindfulness triangle

To be truly mindful, we need all three elements to be in play at once, otherwise mindfulness is lost. Non-acceptance means judging the situation – this leads us to think about what’s just happened, i.e. “I can’t believe he said that to me”, or “What a nightmare of a day that was”. Our mind has gone into the past; therefore we lose the present moment, what’s actually happening now. Our awareness is also gone, we’re just in our thoughts, but not *aware* of them. This can also

be described as being on autopilot, and is our subconscious taking over.

Mindful practices, like eating breakfast mindfully, or sitting meditations, release us from the subconscious autopilot and bring our mind back to our body. We arrive home, back in the present moment. From the here and now we can identify and recognise feelings, emotions, thoughts, body aches/pains and even gain insights (wisdom) on what the best course of action to take next is.

You can practise coming back to the present moment at any time, when you begin to feel a fear based emotion. For example, when you're stood in a supermarket queue, becoming impatient, wanting to be somewhere else, you can notice this with your mindfulness and come back to your breathing. Stand there in the supermarket queue and breathe, concentrating on the in-breath and the out-breath. This brings awareness of the breath, gives us back the present moment and we can stop judging the situation. We are just *feeling* our breath. If we start judging our breath, then we're in our thoughts again, mulling over what's wrong with our breath.

Mindfulness gives us the ability to stop what we're doing, for a moment, and tune-in with ourselves. It gives us the space to see, the space to breathe, the space to observe the reality of any situation. A supermarket queue is just that, people standing in a line waiting to be served. There's nothing else about it. It's not "a waste of my time", or "a cause for my frustration".

The preciousness of the present moment is all encompassing. When we sit in the present more and more, we start developing gratitude and calmness. We become part of the flow of the universe, not struggling against its tide. We let go of events like supermarket queues and we return once more to the realm of being, and this in turn will begin to open up our basic goodness once more.

Mindful eating practice

As discussed, mindfully eating can bring you back to the present moment and allow you to really experience your meal. It's a simple practice and can become quite a regular way to practise mindfulness (we all have to eat at some point). Try noticing the food as you eat. Notice the texture of it, the smell and the colour. Notice whether you're actually hungry, or whether you're eating for some other reason. Is food a distraction, a craving, perhaps? If it is, then it is. We don't beat ourselves up or make ourselves feel guilty for eating food – or else we're just in our heads again, not fully present but *thinking* about the 'issues' of eating.

Really taste the food. If it's something you really enjoy, allow yourself to indulge; beginning to have gratitude for our food is another wonderful practice in itself. Eat your food, and notice if your mind wanders. Are you thinking about the future, or the past? Have you lost the present moment? If your mind decides to start thinking, catch it, send it kindness and return to your food. Focus, with awareness, on your eating.

Mindful walking practice

Most of us at some point during a day have to walk somewhere, so why not try and do this mindfully? By a certain point in our physical development, we know very well how to walk; we no longer need to think about it for walking to happen. Upstairs, downstairs, outside, inside, our mind is 'freed up' to think about other things as we walk. You might notice when you start practising mindful walking that you're either rushing towards your destination, or pondering what you're going to do when you get there. With mindful walking, the journey becomes another opportunity to experience the present moment.

However you tend to walk, we step with the heel and the front of our foot one after another, in some sequence of synchronised action which brings about movement in the direction we desire. Place your attention on the movement of each foot. Let yourself feel the ground under your feet. Are you on a carpet, grass, or a muddy track? How do your footsteps sound? *Heel-toe...heel-toe...heel-toe.*

Look at your surroundings. A walk can be a rich experience, benefiting your sense of wellness if you allow it. Are you seeing the clouds in the sky? Are you feeling the wind on your face? Are you listening to the birds, or the sounds of the sea? Do you see trees, a landscape, a hill, or buildings? Do you know where you are? Pause every so often, taking time to really look; the entire walk can become part of your mindfulness practice.

See if you can feel your breath when you walk. With this step, I take an in-breath. With that step, I take an out-breath.

If this becomes a regular practice for you, you'll begin to notice a change to your walks. You'll walk slower. You'll be calmer, and more tuned in to your surroundings. Things you may have walked past thousands of times before suddenly have more clarity; they're sharper to your eye and might bring you moments of unexpected joy. You'll notice ever more subtle differences. You'll be more awake, more *aware*. This, then, is the point. Becoming more aware will lead to less thinking, giving space for love based emotions (such as happiness) to bloom.

Breathing in, breathing out

Your breath is all important (not least because it keeps you alive). Everywhere you go, your breath goes with you and so it can be a real anchor for your mindfulness training. Not sure? Breathe. Thinking too much? Breathe. Getting annoyed? Breathe. Feeling frustrated? Breathe.

Breathing forms the basis of meditation. With one in-breath and out-breath, we're meditating. We're paying attention to our breathing. If you were to meditate for longer than one in-breath and out-breath, if you were to continue for as long as you could, every day, you would see a difference in your whole being. You're interrupting the thinking, the non-stop incessant mind behaviour that drives us to all kinds of distraction. The volume of thoughts becomes less. The

endless streams of thought are separated, allowing pauses in-between. We become clearer and more settled in our heads, like the surface of a pond when it's placid and calm; not when it's choppy like an angry ocean. We begin to touch our inherent wisdom, our *right action*, which often isn't related to our strategic mind at all. It's more a *feeling* of what's right. Then our awareness takes over, and it keeps us safe. We're conscious.

With breathing, we can be happy right here, right now. Each breath is a miracle of life. Each breath continues our existence.

From this place of calm awareness, we can more easily observe and interrupt our over-practised ego, which likes to distract us from anything which takes us away from thinking about ourselves, such as feeling our breath or noticing the clouds. The 'well-meaning' ego is based purely on our fear based responses, and we'll talk about it more next.

2. Our protecting ego

At the start of this book, I mentioned Zen and that it was about developing acceptance of everything. When we're accepting, we're relaxed, calm and peaceful. When we're not, it's because we've entered our ego mind. Our ego is our resistance to what is; it's our mind letting us know that "this is wrong", or "this needs to be different" in order to make us feel safe. When we let go of thinking about ourselves as the central hub in relation to what's occurring in life, we become more selfless in our thoughts. This can lead us to greater acceptance, freedom and happiness.

Unfortunately, we tend to resist rather than accept things. We don't like it when the car breaks down. We don't like it when it's raining instead of sunny on our days off. We don't like it when we make mistakes. We, as humans, are constantly fighting this, fighting that, and most of the time these fights exist in our mind; in our thoughts about a situation.

Most of our thought resistance comes from our ego, our sense of self: "I'm fed up," "I wish this wasn't happening to me," "I hate it when that person does that," are all ego statements. Note the use of the "I" and "me" and "my" in these statements. That's a clue straight away that you've gone into your ego mind.

These clues can help you to understand the behaviours of others, and allow the possibility to respond differently than you would normally. Are they judging? Are they acting from fear based emotions? Are they resisting what is? If you notice any of this in

another person, take a breath and watch carefully for your ego rising up to 'defend' you.

Resisting what is

Any resistance will come from the voice in our head, our subconscious. This subconscious exists via our past conditioning and memories. Our ego usefully manifests to protect us when we feel frightened. It's part of our fight or flight survival response. The problems begin when we develop habits of ego, through our lack of awareness, and then use them over and over to 'get us out' of tricky situations.

If you came face to face with a lion, for example, your whole body would tense in fear of being eaten. Your ego would tell you to run, or to stay completely still, depending on how best to avoid being eaten. The voice in your head is your protector, and it's an interesting way to look at the voice. We tend to not like this inner voice very much, because it sometimes says scathing things about us, or others. In itself it is not an enemy, but part of your coping mechanism. In the situation with the lion, it will serve you well.

Most things in our daily lives are not as life-threatening as facing a predator that could eat us, yet we rely on our ego, over and over, to protect us, when we would be better to use our awareness. People who rely on their ego in this way are generally more frightened and easily triggered than those who have learned when to listen to their ego, and when not.

Our ego is our highly efficient autopilot. It speaks for us when we're in an argument and blurts out all

sorts of blame and judgment. Afterward we tend to feel guilty because of what we said in the 'heat of the moment'. When we speak from our subconscious ego, we're acting out our lives based on the past.

Dependent on how your life has been, you'll have a stronger or weaker ego. A stronger ego comes out at the slightest tension. We all know people who are quick to anger, or overly anxious. These will be ego-driven developed behaviours, because they've had to use the ego more in their life to escape their fears. The ego is reinforced every time it 'saves you' from a threat. But often the fear remains there, and because the ego can't fix the fear, it just plots and plans ways to keep you as safe as possible each time you experience fear.

Therefore, someone who has suffered greatly in life has this stronger ego, and this can be metaphorically equated to a suit of armour. This person is so defensive, so frightened, feels so vulnerable, that they have permanently got their suit of armour on, so that they can feel safe. Have you ever wondered why some people can stay calm in a situation whilst others panic? The situation itself is no different. Consider a spider in a room. Some people feel so much fear that they must leave. Their friend meanwhile, can easily remain in the room and might even become mesmerised by the spider's web-weaving talents. These responses are caused by conditioning, or by past events; you may not remember the traumatic event, or even how your parents responded to spiders when you were young,

so the fearfulness might be very bewildering to you because the level of 'armour' your ego has developed seems disproportionate to your accumulated memory of spider experiences.

This suit of protective armour is heavy. Noticing how your body is feeling, how your health is doing, are indicators of how much time you spend in your thoughts, in your ego, thinking up ways to escape from your suffering. We use our ego in many ways: habits, addictions, coping mechanisms, everything in our power that the thoughts can concoct to get us 'away from what's happening'. Is your body heavy a lot? Are you always tired? Drained of energy? Do you feel you carry a huge weight around with you, a terrible burden?

The ego armour tries to hide our suffering from others, although often it's etched in our expression or our posture. The ego compels us to run, escape, or fight our way through life, rather than sit and be with it in harmony.

Removing our ego armour

Selflessness is one of the keys to removing our ego armour. Practising mindfulness creates more selflessness in you. You're simply in the moment and paying attention, without judging the situation. Judging a situation *is* the ego self, in all its glory, coming out to reveal itself.

When we aren't frightened, it's a simple matter to practise mindfulness. We look at a sunset, and we engage with it. We are fully mindful of the sunset.

When we do this, we're not thinking about anything, we're just witnessing the marvel and wonder of a sunset. We don't judge the sunset, other than to perhaps breathe the word "beautiful" on our lips. This judgment of the sunset enhances the moment, as we fully immerse and embrace the beauty of seeing the sunlight disappearing below the horizon. This viewing of the sunset has no ego in it. There's no "I" in this situation. We're appreciating a moment of awe.

If we start judging the situation, though: "I'm a bit cold to be sitting here so late in the evening looking at the sunset," or "I should have the will power to do this more often," then we've added this "I" to the event. We've become *selfish*, our attention shifts from awe and reverence to our own discomfort. This thinking about our own discomfort leads to more discomfort, a stronger ego, and more armour to wear. It doesn't mean we don't reach for our jumper to help us if we *feel* cold, we just don't *think* the cold is bad.

Taking away the need to think about *self*, and just accepting what's happening in each moment, makes us more selfless. The more selfless we become, the more at ease we are with life, because the more accepting we become. When we accept, we judge less. When we accept, we let go of the past more readily and can reach the here and now; awe and reverence become more obvious in your life.

It's important to note that self-care isn't selfish. Taking time out because we *feel* tired or ill is essential for our well-being, as is being kind and compassionate to ourselves in all manner of situations – we aren't

able to help anyone as fully as we'd like if we're struggling with our own concerns. Self-compassion isn't our ego, it's our sense that we've noticed something is amiss and we're taking time to heal it. We can even honour our ego by resting for a short while when it causes us to be tired as a way of avoidance, by doing this with full awareness of where the tiredness has come from. We can breathe with the tiredness and regain our energy more quickly, maybe even in a matter of moments.

How heavy is your suit of armour?

It's worth studying your ego. It's worth noticing when it arises, and what it's saying. You'll become more tuned in to what frightens you when you do.

Some fears are stronger than others. We might have a fear of certain types of food, and we count that as a 'lesser' fear. We might also have a fear of loneliness, and we count that as a 'greater' fear. Each fear has a certain weight to it: the greater the fear, the heavier you feel.

With your practice of mindfulness, you can start looking at your 'lesser' fears first. The less frightened you can become, the more likely you are to unbuckle some of the armour you're in; the more relaxed you'll become, and your body will begin to feel lighter.

So perhaps we tune in to our fear of types of food, for example. I used to have a phobia about eating tomatoes. It seemed to be based on an early experience with the fruit; I remember feelings of nausea when I first tried one as a young child. Just the

thought of trying tomatoes made me nauseas, so of course I avoided them. Over time, the fearfulness spread beyond tomatoes, and I found myself to be fearful of pretty much any food which was even slightly unfamiliar or 'odd' to me. This led to becoming anxious about eating food cooked by others, which in turn inhibited my social life (and made socialising fearful). The humble tomato was ruling my life, or rather my ego's efforts to protect me from them was. So, after some hypnotherapy and much deliberation, I decided to face the fear head on and try a small, baby tomato. I noticed my anxiety immediately. I thought about how I might push into the fear. Perhaps I could cut a tiny piece of the tomato and try tasting it?

By practising mindfulness of your body, you can begin to notice when your anxiety arises. What does it feel like, with your awareness? Is your heart beating faster, or does your tummy have butterflies? Being with your anxiety longer than whatever you've managed previously, begins to lessen the fear. Taking away the judgment of the tomato in my thoughts, and coming to how I was feeling, helped me. I managed eventually to eat a small piece of tomato (after several attempts) and felt the old fear of the past begin to lessen in me. I began unbuckling my ego armour and just being with my reactions. Several years later, and I can now happily eat spicy, tomato-laden foods. A life-changing triumph!

Being positive is important. When we begin to push toward our fear, rather than run away, we're challenging our subconscious patterns. We're delving

into a new way of thinking, of behaving in the world. This can cause tension, and can cause our ego to adapt, and call us names, or beat us up, or say things like “What on earth are you doing? You really don’t even need to eat tomatoes, you know!”

Again, these are all thoughts based on nothing but past fear. By sitting with our fear in the moment, we can see what it is, what it’s doing in our bodies, and we can breathe and attempt to calm it.

It’s important to say here, that if you can’t face a fear, no matter how ‘lesser’ or ‘greater’, that’s also ok. We keep noticing our reactions and send ourselves kindness for even contemplating facing it.

You might find once you look at your ego armour there will be ‘lesser’ fears you’ll be able to let go of. There might be ones you’ll be able to confront and push through. Each time you do, your armour becomes lighter. You become lighter. There’s less for your mind to think about.

Curiosity: the practice of sitting in traffic

Looking at the world through curious eyes encourages us to stop feeling so threatened by the world and all the events that befall us. Instead of taking things personally and succumbing to our ego mind, we’re fully attentive to what’s happening in the present. Curiosity is the link between reality and our own ‘safety’. It’s generally safe to be in this world, but the ego may have you believing otherwise; curiosity is what takes the perceived sting out of things that the ego mind can present to you as threats.

For example, you may lose your inner peace when you find yourself stuck in traffic. You're in a tailback on the motorway, with no sign of when you'll move again. After a while, you might notice the ego thoughts, such as "This is a nightmare", or "Now I'm going to be late". Instead of wallowing in this mindset that focuses on *us* and self-woe, we can instead view the situation with curiosity.

In a curious mindset, you may think: "Oh, how interesting! Of all the roads I picked and the time I chose to drive, I'm now stuck in traffic. I wonder what this is teaching me? I wonder when we'll move again?"

So immediately, the situation of mind isn't entirely devoted to the self. You may go further: "Oh goodness, I wonder if someone has had an accident. Someone else could be struggling, here. I hope they'll be OK."

Then, the curiosity has led you into not thinking about self at all, but into compassion and concern for another human's well-being. This is a step towards selflessness.

You may decide, while sitting in traffic, that this is a perfect opportunity to tune into how you're feeling. You can focus on your breathing, and look with awareness at your body. Any aches? Signs of tension? Any emotions? Maybe you'll find an agitation – an anxiety of being late. So you sink into that: you concentrate on the feeling of anxiety. *Breathing in, I feel anxiety. Breathing out, I calm anxiety. It's all OK. At this wonderful moment, I'm using the space to breathe deeply, reconnect to my body with*

mindfulness, and be with my emotions. Thus becoming stuck in traffic becomes a space for healing.

Life will always throw something at you, be it traffic jams, or illness, or the death of someone close. Each moment, things will surface. If we can be curious in these moments, especially the tougher ones, we will build our relationship to who we are and how we respond to things. We recognise our feelings, and we breathe with them without judgment. We let things flow around us in acceptance. In this way, resilience and inner calmness pervades all we do. There's less room for doubt, or insecurity, or anxiety when we experience life this way.

What is self?

This is a good 'curious' question. When we begin to look deeply, we realise that we are bigger than our ego mind, our thoughts, which give us our sense of 'self'. There's something that is *aware* of our thoughts. We can feel our breath and we also don't need to think to make sure we do breathe. Often, thinking about the breath can lead us to not want to focus on our breath, for fear of breathing incorrectly or because of an unexplainable discomfort. There's something else, a greater intelligence, a greater wisdom, behind everything.

This consciousness, this awakened entity, is one of life's greatest mysteries. How is it that all beings and life has this sense of awareness? Even a tiny ladybird on your hand will sense your presence if you put a

finger close to it. This presence is everywhere, and we are a part of it.

When we contemplate such things, we gain an insight that there's a no-self: we're not separate from everything else, made up of just 'self'. We're also made up of non-self elements such as water, or this presence we see everywhere. When does water become "I" or "I" become water?

After a while, the walls of ego begin to fade, like the illusion it is. Our ego is not *us*; it's just the smaller voice within us that wants to keep us safe. Behind it, behind everything, is a consciousness that wants to understand itself; pure, untarnished love. It exists, and manifests in billions of forms. We are made up of the same elements that make up the universe.

Allowing the possibility of this truth, this insight, softens us to other people's pain. No longer a separate being, we can see how we're connected, a part of the great network tapestry we call life. Everything we do affects the whole. If we're kind, then that kindness resonates to the whole network. If we're unhappy, then that suffering resonates to the whole network. What we think, we become, and so do people around us. Have we suffered enough as a species yet?

Mindfulness is the tool that directly engages with each moment, which is all there is. With this awareness, we can begin to sense and trust in our connectedness, as beings of love, without fear. Then the world will also change with us. Where the world appears from our viewpoint not to be changing, we can choose to change our own responses to events

and circumstances, thus *we* are changing the world by our own behaviours.

Absorb into a task practice

In our daily lives, we all have to ‘do’ things, but why not try and ‘do’ these things with ‘being’? Whether it’s washing the dishes, cleaning the kitchen floor, potting plants, chopping vegetables, typing an e-mail, cleaning our teeth or driving our car; each task can be concentrated on, paying full attention to it. Each task can be used as a meditative practice.

Take washing the dishes as an example. We’re stood there, our mind and body connected, feeling the water in the sink. We’re feeling the touch of a dish and the suds of the washing up liquid on our cloth. We’re wiping the surface of the dish, concentrating on the cleaning process. Then we’re moving on to the next dish, and so on, and so on. This is washing the dishes to just wash the dishes. If we’re thinking about other things, like what to do after we’ve washed the dishes, we might rush the dishes – they might not be as clean as if we’d concentrated fully on them. If we’re thinking about our problems or issues, then we miss the simple elegance of simple tasks. We’re not with our dishes, nor the present moment, we’re floating away again into our thoughts. Keep bringing your mind back to the present, over and over. This practice can become a daily ritual with all of our routine jobs. This way, we’re not judging them. We’re not upset that it’s “our turn” to do the dishes, or that “nobody else does them”. These are just ego thoughts, and will lead to

annoyance. Mindfulness takes away the annoyance and leaves us with the experience. In the present, the experience is often one of calm, peaceful acceptance and relaxation. We're in the flow of everything. This is the flow to freedom, to peace within us.

Who makes the tea? A mindful guide

For many years, when I worked in an office, the lingering question: "who makes the tea?" caused interesting ripples. Some people didn't drink much, others drank a lot. Some people were so engrossed in their work, or rushing about in meetings/busyness, that their turn to make tea never arrived.

In some offices, we had a rota system of who would make the tea. In others, it was a free-for-all; just go when you need a cup and make one for yourself. In another office again, were people who just decided they wanted a cup of tea, and so would ask everyone else if they did also (the response often being affirmative).

At the time, none of these methods seemed satisfactory to me. I certainly drink a lot of tea, so my need for tea (so I thought) was greater than others. The rota system just produced some very grudging, grumpy cups of tea when the person who felt swamped with work didn't really want to make tea and did so with mutterings. The free-for-all option seemed the best for a while, but that caused feelings of guilt; when seeing others working flat out without refreshment, why should I be allowed to pause for refreshment? Others would often interrupt the 'rule'

of 'going solo' by eyeing up the tea, or by asking if tea could be made for them too. The other option, too, was not without its dilemmas. The responses to asking people about tea varied from 'no' with a stern look for even being talked to, to people demanding extra things, like more milk, or more sugar. And if there was no milk, the person making the tea had to go out and buy more.

Each possible route, then, all caused a bit of tension in each office. Some people, in some situations, NEVER made the tea, and were considered "selfish oafs". Others felt they were taken advantage of because of their need for tea. Do you see how a simple process of making cups of tea for a group of people can descend into all sorts of problems and thought patterns? Not to mention the emotions: guilt, shame, grief, anger. An unending stream of frustrations of not having tea, of having too much tea, or too little – and rifts extending between work 'colleagues'.

Life is like this whenever people have a difference of opinion. Dissension and strife: the essence of suffering. I look back and realise that all of these contests of will were run by the ego.

Ego – the bit of us that thinks only about ourselves; the thing that tries to separate us from everyone and everything. The thing that says 'I am right and you are wrong'.

So, now we come back to the power of mindfulness: the practice of non-judgment, noticing what's occurring in the here and now with our

awareness. I decided to adopt a mindful attitude concerning who makes the tea.

So, without judgment, I let go of the ego thoughts about “Why is it always me who makes the tea”, or “Why can’t they get up and just do it?!” or “I need a system here so everything is fair and just”. These were all mental formations based on what I believed to be good or bad (more judgments). Mindfulness isn’t like that. It’s not using the past experiences to label the present or affect the future. We don’t label at all. We just see what’s going on in the moment. So what is going on in the moment? I’m thirsty. I have a craving for tea. Nobody else seems to be worried, but I don’t know for sure. So I get up and make tea. However, this time, I make tea for everyone. I don’t ask. I go and brew a big pot of it, and take what I need, and then I leave the rest on a tray in the office kitchen.

People soon get to know that I do this, every time I go and make tea. I’m making the tea. I’m not annoyed that it’s always me that goes and makes the tea, because that’s just my judgmental ego speaking. I’ve let go of that; through constant hours of mindful practice (the practice is still on-going, that ego comes up quite often. But tea? I’ve cracked it.)

Nobody suffers when there’s no ego. In the present moment, just making the tea to make the tea, I get my needs met without all the worry about things being ‘unfair’ or ‘unjust’. Other people who didn’t voice that they wanted tea are given the choice to have some, or not. Either way is fine.

Interestingly, after a time, people who saw that I'm making the tea all the time rose up and began making the tea too. There comes a time in every human being where true connectedness comes through; we instinctively want to care for each other and to be cared for in ways that feel joyful and easeful. So, without my asking, or coercing, others start to make the tea. You might say this is a 'guilt-trip' for those people, and perhaps for some, it is. However, guilt is as much a lesson in mindfulness as anything else. Why do I feel guilty? Why does the ego make me feel guilty? The answer is because deep down, we're threatened. We feel that if we don't make the tea we'll be labelled as 'selfish'. So we act out this storyline in order to please others and to move the spotlight away from us.

If we can let go of this ego thought mentality, we can lose our guilt also. Someone makes the tea. That's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

3. The three elements of mindfulness

Mindfulness is the *practice* of observing what's occurring in the present moment, with conscious awareness and no judgment. It's our capacity to see what's going on in us and around us in any given moment: how our body feels, what emotions are arising and what our senses tune into. All three elements are bound together; without one, mindfulness is lost.

The present moment (first element of mindfulness)

The present moment is all around us, all the time. In fact, time becomes a non-entity, just a useful device we have to meet people (like meeting a friend for lunch at 1pm, for example). Used in this way, time is a beneficial measure of our existence. However, the past doesn't really exist in the present moment – it's only memory, a thought process, that brings the past 'back to life'. Similarly, the future doesn't yet exist; it's only in a thought process (we're imagining a potential future in our head). In the present moment, time has no meaning.

It's useful in mindfulness to note when our minds deviate from the all encompassing present moment; the times when we think about the past, or the future. If we notice this, we can pull our attention back to the here and now, refocus on what's actually happening. The trouble with the human mind is our habit of dwelling on things, or becoming anxious about the future. Our ego cannot endure the uncertainty of the

present moment, so it clings on to the 'past' or 'future' so it can survive. If our ego rules us, that is, if we live with more fear than love, we'll find ourselves constantly thinking of things that aren't happening 'now': they've already happened or they haven't happened yet. When we do this, our mind disconnects from our body (which can only exist in the present moment) and we float away on a mind journey, often manifesting emotions along the way.

Thinking too much about the past means that there's perhaps some unresolved issue – or else why the need to think about it? Perhaps you feel guilty, or regretful, or sad? These emotions can be based on past experiences. Or are we fretting about the future? Chances are we'll generate anxiety, and by doing so lower our joy, our experience of life.

By being in the present moment, body and mind connected, we're arriving at our natural state, a being, accepting, perfectly flowing with whatever that moment is bringing to us. Acceptance is about letting everything in and letting it be without fighting it. If we can do this, we're being mindful. We can sit with whatever occurs, observing it with our awareness, non-judgmentally. If we do this, the feeling, or emotion, or thought, will shift and pass through, without the distraction of negative thought. We allow it space to breathe, transform, create what it needs to create, and then flow back into the cosmos.

We're not forgetting what happened in the past or never planning for the future. We can do those things in the present moment too. The trick is noticing when

we dwell too much in past or future and lose our experience of our current life. It's extremely healing and restful to stay in the present moment. One of the simplest ways of tuning into the present moment is through quietening our mind.

The quiet (sitting meditation)

Sitting in a quiet space, noticing the quiet, one can begin to observe the present moment. We'll also quickly notice our thoughts and subconscious patterns, some of which make it very difficult to sit and meditate. Can you sit in the quiet? How long for? Can you manage a few minutes, and then see that mind; those thoughts, telling you that you're bored? Or thoughts telling you what a waste of time it is to just sit? Are you fidgety? Can you see your body becoming restless? The body responds to the mind. If your mind is busy, filled with thoughts, your body will not be able to stay still for too long.

Consciously choosing to meditate, to sit in the quiet, we begin to experience the edges within us. We see the frustration, the need to *do* something. Anything but sitting here! Your ego will attempt to come up with all manner of excuses and storylines for your need to get up and 'get on with your day'.

So, we practise. A few seconds; maybe a few minutes, if we can practise daily, we begin to grow our patience. We begin to quiet the mind. We notice the thoughts, acknowledge them as 'thinking' and then return to the quiet.

Exercise: Sit and just be for as long as you can manage. Notice the fidget, the boredom and the demands from your ego mind. Label all this as purely 'thinking' and come back to just sitting. You can breathe and focus on your breath if you wish – that is one way to meditate. Breathing in, you feel your in-breath. Breathing out, you feel your out-breath. Or just sense the quiet, and the spaces between any sounds. You'll notice nowhere is truly silent. You might hear your breathing or other sounds in the room, or outside of the room. Each sound gives you an opportunity to come back to just observing. See how long you can do this for.

Why bother sitting still? It's not going to solve my problems?

Notice the ego mind asking these questions. There's a 'my' in there, isn't there? Trust in the process of bringing yourself back to the quiet, back to the breath. Increasing one's patience to what is happening is a gift to your life. It's a place where we can dwell for as long as we can manage, allowing the mind to experience calm. Your thoughts become less frenetic, and your whole system gets some much needed rest.

By cultivating an attitude of mindfulness, repeatedly coming back to the present moment, you are re-wiring the neural pathways in your brain. The science of neuroplasticity is exploring how our brain can change and release old patterns of thinking, into new patterns. By noticing old, negative thinking habits, or judgments (the ego mind), and choosing to let go of

such thoughts, your brain begins to change. Ponder for a moment all those things that are holding you back from a fulfilled life, all those things from your past that haunt you or hound you in daily life. By re-wiring your brain to sit, patiently, calmly, you become the peace you are looking for. You discover inner joy, inner happiness, which is the only place it can come from.

You are using a different part of your brain: the awareness part. This is the second element of mindfulness. It is the conscious gateway to the present moment.

Awareness (second element of mindfulness)

We have many senses as human beings, but we don't fully tune in to them unless we become aware. Can you really feel your hands holding this book? Now I've given you that suggestion, turn your awareness to the book in your hands: its weight, its texture, how the connection between skin and paper feels. This is conscious awareness. You're truly experiencing the present moment – at this moment you're holding this book; furthermore, you're also reading words at the same time, and your brain is interpreting these marks called letters into understanding them.

Awareness is born with us. It's our liaison with everything we can see, smell, touch, taste and hear. It's our connection with all other life on Earth. Most of the time, when we're not being mindful and are thinking of this or that, leaving the present moment to go on an adventure in our heads (past or future), we lose our *conscious* awareness. Our mind is somewhere

else, and disassociated from our body. Have you ever driven your car, got to your destination and wondered how on earth you got there, as you'd been thinking about other things, not your awareness of the road? Only when we *choose* to come back to the present, through our awareness, will we re-connect.

This way, mindful walking, or mindful eating, or mindful listening etc. can be achieved. We can be walking just to walk. We can feel our feet on the earth. We can feel the warmth of the sun on our face while we walk. We could do all our tasks this way. We can mindfully brush our teeth, or eat our cereal, or wash the dishes. Mindfulness can be everywhere, so long as we use the amazing sense of awareness, the thing that doesn't need our ego thoughts in order to function.

Awareness can even detect our thoughts, notice them, and then we can consciously observe them. We can ask ourselves curious questions: is that thought true? Is it kind? Is it worth saying? Is it worth believing? This is the path to a freedom from the drama of thoughts, rather than being unaware of them and letting them create unconscious emotions within us.

When you engage with the present moment, thoughts lessen. You may notice an observational thought, i.e. "Rain is falling". You're seeing what is. In this way, thoughts are not about you. They're not of the self. They are selfless, looking at the world without judgment. This is a connection with what is, this is how awe and wonder begin to occur, when we realise life

isn't all about 'me'. We're simply part of the collective 'we', everyone, everything and the whole universe.

Non-judgment (third element of mindfulness)

This element is fundamentally important, because when we judge, our mind is no longer in the present moment. For example, if we're observing a person shouting at us, and we think "That's it, I've had it with this person!" then we're judging a catalogue of past behaviours, thinking into a possible future and taking personal offence. We might not really be aware we've had that thought; judgments tend to be subconscious. We don't really choose a judgment, it just blurts out from our ego. It's resistance; something happening now is not to your liking. Of course, you could judge positively: "What a beautiful person", which is still judging the person. However, this kind of judgment comes from a *love* based emotion (perhaps you're feeling kindness towards the person, so in this case, the judgment enhances your experience). Therefore it is something we won't become attached to, and it's certainly not of 'the self'. However, negative judgments are all about how things are affecting you (i.e. the self). Self is ego, and resistance to what is! If we keep judging and resisting what is, we soon lose our wonder, our full experience of the now, and tend to descend into the realm of the ego circle where we'll inflict more suffering upon ourselves (and others). If we can let go of the ego for a moment, suspend our judgments, we access an acceptance of life, and our natural joy will increase.

Judging is worse for you when it's about you: "I'm so stupid", "I'm a waste of space", "I wish I was more beautiful"...you aren't accepting yourself. If you can't accept yourself, then you'll be finding life very hard and fearful.

By practising non-judgment, we come back to acceptance of what is, and there's a shift from constant thinking to being in the present moment. If we can do this, then the more we can flow with the universe rather than fighting against it. We'll be happy rather than living in judgment and fear. Negative judgments are always fear based. They're always our over protective ego. By letting them go, you're beginning to turn towards your fears. This is insight, and the start of more love and open hearted kindness within you.

Acceptance doesn't necessarily mean agreeing with what's happening. We just acknowledge and accept it's happened. That way we're free to choose the right course of action from this acceptance, rather than endless thought patterns of "This isn't right", "This is ridiculous"; "This is disturbing my inner peace". If a dog barks in your meditation from outside, judging the dog barking will get you nowhere except into the past. Accepting that the dog barked and moving on to the next moment, there's liberation.

Observe yourself

A useful practice is to consciously decide to observe yourself. Maybe for five minutes at a time, you can declare to notice what you do, what you think

and how you feel. Observe your walking, sitting, pondering, body posture, rushing/slowing, worrying etc. Making a few notes afterward can be beneficial: we're not trying to fix anything by doing this; we're just becoming a watcher, like watching a TV show of us. This way, we can begin to see if we're hunched over, or feeling down, or reaching for our mobile phone over and over again. Observation is pivotal to understanding what we do; curiosity leads us to why we do it. By noticing we reach for our mobile phone, for example, we have a choice to stop that behaviour if we so wish, or carry on. Observing brings us to our awareness, out of our autopilot thinking. After a while of practising this, you may find you can do it for longer than five minutes. Indeed, this is what we do when we meditate formally: meditation is all about noticing and observing how we are in each moment. The key with the observing is that we don't judge, we just notice, let everything come up in each moment and then let it go as we bring focus back to our awareness of what is.

Some notes on meditation

A formal meditation practice is a fantastic way to improve your mindfulness. Perhaps you can fit in a time each day to give yourself five minutes of meditation? Even one minute is valuable!

One type of meditation is simply noticing your breath and letting everything else come up and pass by. So, if your mind wanders and you start to think, you notice, smile and return to your breath. Sitting down, standing up, lying down, all postures can be

meditative. Be comfortable, don't suffer through your meditation; if the floor or chair is too hard, pause your meditation and get a cushion.

Be aware and curious about your posture, try to sit with your spine straight, whether you're sitting on a cushion or in a chair. Some people enjoy sitting cross-legged, try that by all means, but give yourself permission to shift to another position or seat if your muscles get sore.

We don't *need* anything else to meditate, although a lit candle, soft ambient music, or guided meditation CD or app may help when you first start out. You'll know what suits you best, so do that.

It's important to note that we're not expecting anything from our meditations. If we go into a meditation hoping to come out more relaxed, for example, then we have an expectation (a thought of a possible future) and can often become disappointed when we find it not relaxing. Meditation can be relaxing, but not always. The point of meditation is to be with whatever occurs, however choppy, difficult or emotional, without any judgment of any of it.

We might notice we beat ourselves up. We might think we're not doing it right. Maybe we can only focus on our breath for a short while and discover the rest of our five minutes (or longer) was invested in mulling something over in our head. This is all ok in mindfulness; sometimes our minds are more active. Just notice.

Sometimes we feel uncomfortable feelings in our bodies. Maybe we're aching from staying in the same

position for too long, or maybe an emotion itself arises in the present. When this happens, it's important to keep breathing, to acknowledge and observe the ache or emotion. Know you are aching. Know you have an emotion. You can even label the emotion if you know what it is. Yet we continue to let thoughts drift by, and just experience the feeling as it feels. After a while you'll notice feelings shift within you; they don't stay the same. Aches will change consistency too. Of course, you can always adjust your position if it's uncomfortable; be kind to yourself.

Notice as well, if, after weeks of meditation, you don't feel any different. You might think it's not working. You might think "What's the point in doing this!" The point is to be in the present and let things come and go. The point is not to think about whether things 'work' or not. I guarantee that if you keep meditating, you will find other facets of your life improving. The longer we stay in the present moment, the more resilience we build in ourselves and the easier it is for us to heal our bodies and minds. We're growing our strength of mindfulness, our *noticing*.

4. The universe of magic

The universe has a sense of flow to it. All is change, all of the time. No two moments are ever the same; even when we're just sitting, the cells in our body are changing, our feelings change, the sensations in our body change. This impermanent nature is of great benefit – it allows suffering to ease. We have a headache for a while, and then it changes. When we're tapping into the universe of magic, we encounter its abundance, its changes; its *flow*.

Consider a tree. I love how the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh considers such things. He would tell us to look closely and see all the properties of the cosmos in the tree. For the tree even to exist, it needs the soil, the rain, the sun, and carbon dioxide to breathe. For rain, we need clouds. For soil to provide nutrients, we need earthworms, and the tree's own leaves to sink into the ground, and numerous minerals and elements that allow seeds to germinate and grow. In this way, the tree is not separate; it's connected to everything around it in order to survive.

We could also say the tree is full of creative energy, in that it changes through the seasons, knowing what to do to survive year after year. It's also selfless, in that it doesn't feel threatened by birds nesting in it, or even a branch falling due to stormy weather. The tree adapts, continuing its amazing life without any comment or judgment.

If we behaved like trees, we would flow with our life, not judging things, accepting what is

unconditionally, and be in tune with the creative abundant energy all around us.

What we think can influence us

We're blocked from this magic universe, when we leave the present moment and enter the realm of thoughts. When we think only of ourselves (or others), we lose sight of the world around us. We won't even see the tree we walk by if we're filling our head with problems. Fear blocks us from the magic, and we leave the flow. We get stuck in old, habitual thought patterns. "Woe is me", "What a nightmare of a day", "I'm unlovable", "I wish I'd done that better" etc are all examples of ego (self) thoughts that take us away from the wonders all around us. These thoughts highlight us as separate beings, removed from everything. The only thing is, these thoughts are just that, thoughts, and unless we attach to them, we can let them drift by. If we attach to them, we can get caught up in the drama of them. Thinking you're unlovable, for example, can damage your self-esteem, confidence and give rise to doubt within you. These unconscious thoughts are just your past returning – they are thoughts that may have served you once before, so your brain uses them again to try and protect you. Yet, what are we frightened of? How does calling yourself "unlovable" help in your current situation?

With mindfulness, we can notice we call ourselves "unlovable" and change to "I'm noticing my thought is calling me unlovable" which is more accurate. By beginning to notice our thoughts, smiling gently at

them, and letting them go, we don't give them any stability to coalesce in reality. We return to the present – what is actually happening; what is reality, and we regain the flow.

When we become anxious it's a natural tendency to imagine the worst. This only escalates our fear and our anxiety. Imagining the worst is exactly that: imagination. Mindfulness aids us by tuning in to see if we are making things up and choosing to let go of such storylines.

Accept where you are

Acceptance is about knowing that all will change, and if we're suffering now, it will pass, or at least shift into something new. "I wish I'd done that better" is non-acceptance. It's thinking of the past as a judgment, and this can only serve to make us judge and doubt our own ability. Doubt keeps us rooted in the past, into imagination and storylines. If we accept our past, even our mistakes, we're paving the way for a new future. Acceptance allows us to think less, use the past as a curious learning and to affirm we've learned the lesson and move on. Acceptance is a kind of letting go, a non-attachment: "Today I feel sad. Okay."

By using our awareness to tune into the present moment – "how am I feeling now?" gives us clarity on where we're currently at. So you've had an argument – how do you feel now? So you're feeling sadness? Okay. In this moment, you accept you're sad. You welcome it all in, accepting where you are. By staying with it,

rather than *thinking* about it, we can transform our emotions – they shift through us – they’re flowing again, like the universe.

How accepting are you of illnesses? Everyone gets a cold from time to time. Do you accept you have a cold? Or do you moan about it? Do you say “Oh, I can’t believe I’ve got another cold”, or “Why is it always me that gets a cold in the office? Why doesn’t Jim get it?” This is non-acceptance of your cold. Own it. Accept it. You have a cold! That is truth. Once you accept it, the suffering of the cold loses its hold over you. You can get on with just being with the cold. By all means take hot lemon and ginger drinks, and rest, and keep yourself warm, but if you’ve accepted it (and been kind to your body) the cold will pass through a lot quicker than if you’re groaning about it. If you fight it, it will most likely last longer, and you’ll miss the gift of the cold.

If we always have the intention to do our best, learning from our mistakes, then we can grow and develop new thought patterns. This in turn creates an ever-changing way of living. Instead of beating ourselves up, we forgive ourselves and carry on. We forgive others and send kindness to all. We stop thinking only about ourselves. We take the ‘I, me and my’ out of the majority of our thoughts. We no longer feel separate to others. We begin to understand we are part of the cosmic flow, just like a tree. Then our heart can begin to open to the wonder and beauty all around us, and we can fill ourselves with gratitude.

Visualising and sending love

How often do you consciously have thoughts of love and compassion? Sending some kindness, even if it's just a thought, offers kindness to the universe. It'll come back to you in some form. Your life will largely be a reflection of what you think, good or bad. If you want your life to change, the only place to start is with yourself. Can you give yourself loving-kindness? Being mindful is an act of kindness to yourself; you're giving yourself space to pause and not think, this in turn can aid your emotional response to things and provide calmness amidst times of suffering. Feel whatever is happening in the present moment, accept it, welcome it in, and send love. Your heart will be opened, and love based emotions will be nurtured.

Look for the lesson; all is a mirror

Everything is a gift. Even colds, anxiety, car breakdowns, relationship troubles, all of these things can go into a melting pot of learning. A friend gave me permission to share this story: following an allergic reaction to something, her face became swollen and puffy. It caused her to feel embarrassed about her face and about being seen in public, so she didn't immediately seek help. After a day or two, it wasn't going away, so she reluctantly consulted a doctor, and was sent to hospital for tests. It later transpired that she had extremely high blood pressure, and if not for the allergic reaction, she would never have known and might not be here today. Having the allergic reaction

led to the discovery of something far worse for her health. So, the allergic reaction, in that way, was a gift.

We don't know when things first come our way what the gift is. Even the most damaging, difficult thing that occurs in life guides us in a different direction. It might not have been what we'd planned for, or what we'd wanted, but the universe does it anyway. Some things seem impossible to forgive, or forget, but if we don't, we hold on to these events. They can become our identity and affect our health and happiness. Can we let go of the past and live in the present, accepting what comes to us, and what's befallen us? Often, the answer that comes back is 'maybe yes, maybe no'.

The times when we can't forgive, or forget, give the most learning. Even when we can't forgive another; or the universe, we can learn to forgive ourselves. We can always start over, right here, right now. It's always a choice that's available, if we're aware enough to make it.

If you can take everything that comes your way as a curious learning, you're beginning to accept and be in the flow. If you're anxious all of the time, try accepting your anxiety instead of fighting it. You're anxious. That is ok! What's it teaching you? What are you still clinging onto from the past? The anxiety is rarely about what's going on now, as it's normally a worry about a future that hasn't arrived yet. Observing your feelings about the past, and what still threatens you from it, choosing to let go of the past and living in each moment, whatever comes up for you, will begin

to free you from your anxiety of the future. Anxiety then, can also become a gift, a moment of resistance for you to work with, which alerts you to something being 'not quite Zen' in your life.

Emotions are there for a reason: to wake you up. Emotions often can prevent you from becoming ill, or stuck in the past. They can give amazing insights into where you're at, or how to proceed. Accept them all, with kindness and love. Know they are there, and you can comfort them immediately, before they get worse or heavier.

Look at everything as a mirror. If you're frequently angry, you'll notice and gravitate towards other angry people. A friend once said to me that she wished her mother would stop rushing about and take time to sit, whilst she herself was rushing about doing a myriad of chores as she spoke to me. Often, what we see or judge in someone else is actually a reflection of how we feel about our own life.

All this noticing gives us more understanding, and choices to change our patterns. Can we practise more joy, more kindness; more compassion for others? These things will then flow back to you. Such is the will of the universe of magic.

Feeling abundant?

Abundance doesn't just mean more money. Do you *feel* abundant? Does life give you joy and contentment? The more we live in the present, we gain more joy, more happiness, because we see the wonder and beauty available in each moment (even

the more difficult ones). In this way, your whole life can be filled with abundance, and the feeling of abundance can flow to you.

Simply by being with your breath, you can become aware of the abundance of oxygen, of air filling your body, giving you life every second of the day.

Smiling at a blackbird foraging in the undergrowth, you can be gaining joy from watching a bird doing its thing. You're not in ego, not worrying about anything. In those precious moments, you are with your body. There's just the present moment. The blackbird has brought you back to what's happening now.

I enjoy spending time walking by the sea. My favourite bird is an oystercatcher, because of the hooting sound they make as they fly. I use each hoot to bring me back to the present moment, and to remember that I'm awake and alive. They're a gift for me. They take me away from my thoughts about what isn't present, and back to the moment. Walking in the abundance of nature, seeing everything, feeling part of everything, saves me from living in my head and walking mindlessly.

What are your intentions and purpose?

Being in the present doesn't mean you can't plan anything. It doesn't mean you can't have goals or a sense of purpose in your life. We can plan in the present, and then take steps to achieve the plan. The trick is to do each step in the moment it becomes available to do. For example, we might have a plan to decorate a house, so we write a 'to do' list: paint this

room, rearrange furniture, put new flooring down. Then we might have additional steps of going shopping to buy new flooring and paint. We might mark in our diary that on Saturday we'll be heading to the store to do just that.

Our intentions may change. We might find Saturday becomes sunny and we decide not to go to the store, but to the beach to listen to oystercatchers instead. Wonderful! You're being more spontaneous, going with the flow.

If we stay fixed in our view, in our grand plan, our grand intention, we can get exasperated or disappointed in ourselves for not sticking to the plan. We call this procrastination, or at worst, laziness. Notice the judgments coming in when a plan is thwarted, or self-defeated by another idea that comes along. It's ok to change your plans, just as it's ok to change your mind. I highly recommend it!

Ultimately, we can more easily live into the purpose of our life, by living into each moment, and deciding based on our observations and feelings whether the current course is wise for us, or not. We can also notice when we're caught up in fear, or our own comfort zone, on what we can or can't do.

Joy and pain, two sides of the same coin

Do you seek happiness and try to avoid pain? Do you wish for a different life to the one you currently have? Wishing for something other than what's happening is future thinking.

We are where we are. Starting there, with acceptance, we can let go of a lot of future worry. Our plans and intentions will guide us to our future, but we take each step in the present.

It's important to be with the pain as well as the joy. Whatever the present moment bestows, that is how it is. A pain in our leg, a headache, a cold, an illness, that's where we currently are. It's hard to be accepting when we're in discomfort, adding thoughts and judgments to the mix can increase and extend the suffering. In this moment, the practise is to be with what is, and to be with your pain and suffering as best as you can. Facing pain in this way doesn't make it disappear, but we bring the possibility of learning and gaining wisdom from it. "Hello headache, what is it you're trying to tell me today?"

By giving our pain love and kindness, we help stay with it and may even heal it in some cases, if we choose to follow our body's wisdom.

Sometimes, it's good to pause before we rush off to 'fix' pain, like reaching subconsciously for pills each time we feel the beginning of a headache, for example. We can learn and transform from our pain, especially from our emotions. This doesn't mean we have to stay in the pain for a long time, but rather that we *observe* the pain, explore its true source and use that awareness to deal appropriately with it, in a self-loving way.

Our natural state is light, is joy. The longer we stay with our pain (including our unhappiness over something), with kindness and acceptance, we begin

to recover our natural lightness. Life becomes more joyful. Pain can often highlight that we've left our natural balance and gives us an opportunity to come back to ourselves with deep compassion. It can be a signal, a sign that we need to observe keenly what's going on for us. In this way, pain can equally be a gift as well as joy can.

5. The Opening Heart

So, your daily practice of mindfulness begins to open you up. You're mindfully eating, mindfully walking, mindfully meditating and mindfully observing your thoughts. You're letting go of the thoughts that don't serve you, the ones with judgments in, letting go of that resisting ego. You're accepting more of where you are, and what's happened. You're more trusting of the future; you don't feel the need to worry about it so much. All of this practice leads you to another insight: life isn't about you, it's about compassion.

We all start this mindful journey to better ourselves. We want to heal ourselves, fix ourselves. Yet the more we sit on the cushion and just breathe, the more our heart opens to all around us: *this conscious awareness of what is*.

This is when we start to smile more. We notice the needy 'child-like' thoughts of our ego, and send it love. By letting go of your thoughts you're giving yourself love! We begin to notice the absurdity of this self-thinking; this little voice that has protected us for so long is no longer needed all the time. In fact, what used to worry us doesn't seem to have the same effect any more.

Our brain, our mind has changed. This is what happens – our brain literally changes its pathways, reconnects us to awareness and the cosmic flow, and our heart – our feelings – is what becomes important.

Our noticing then expands outward, beyond us, to other people. We see how others tick, because we're

more 'present' for them. We can see others' body language, their mannerisms, their suffering. We can see when someone isn't being very mindful, and is criticising, blaming, judging or just not there. We smile to them, because we understand. Because we've seen it in ourselves, we understand that other people suffer because they're thinking about the past or the future. We understand that they aren't deliberately causing damage; it comes from their subconscious minds, their ego that just doesn't want to quit.

This is the birth of compassion. We see other people suffer, and we send compassion. This compassionate energy is what melts away all other emotions and reconnects us to our true nature of love.

The impatience of anger, the patience of compassion

Angry minds are ego minds, impatient and resisting what is. If someone lashes out at you, they are full of suffering. They're fuelling their anger with their thinking and beliefs based on past input. Remind yourself of the times you got angry. What was it actually about? Often associated with anger are feelings of worthlessness, of being misunderstood, of being made to be at fault when you've done nothing. It normally arises from a conversation where two people are judging the other for some perceived wrong-doing. We explore the many ways the ego can manifest in this way in the next chapter.

Anger demands a quick fix. It's impatient. It wants the other person to shut up. It wants the situation to change immediately. Voices raised in anger are

warnings to stop and desist straight away. So we can receive that signal for ourselves, and stop.

We can work with our anger in mindfulness. Start in simple situations where you feel impatient (like sitting in a waiting room) and breathe with that feeling. Sit longer on the meditation cushion, noticing your need to move, to keep going, to rush. Practise cultivating patience.

The more patient we become, the less angry we are. The longer we meditate, the calmer we get. Things that used to make us angry no longer do so. This is a practice, and takes time, but isn't that what patience is?

When we're calm and patient, it's possible to become compassionate. We can sit with a shouting person and not respond quickly. We can breathe, and direct loving-kindness at them. We know they suffer. We don't interrupt them, or tell them how wrong they are, or any such judgmental attitude. We sit, and we remain present for them, reflecting back what they're saying, making sure they're heard fully. In this way, we lose the 'threat' of another person's anger; we just hold them with it.

If this all sounds too difficult, well, let's get back to our practice. The beauty of mindfulness is that all is learning; all grist to the mill. If we don't get it right, if we do react out of our own anger, our own suffering, then we notice this and let it go. Next time could be different. Every time we notice we go into our ego mind to defend our position, or justify our 'being

right', we give ourselves compassion. Compassion is a practice, also.

Sending loving-kindness and compassion to others

Before we can truly send loving-kindness to another, we have to begin with ourselves. We have to notice our ego continually telling us that we're wrong, we're worthless, we're not enough, and then alter that mindset simply by letting go of what it's saying. You are not your ego. A daily practice of mindfulness will help you to begin to observe and understand what your ego is up to. At that point you can let the thoughts drift by without attaching to them mentally (or physically). Thoughts are just thoughts unless we attach to them and let them influence our subconscious patterns.

Self-compassion is giving kindness and gentleness to our own thoughts. You can accept you've had a thought, but watch it pass by like a car driving past you when you're stood at a pedestrian crossing. You can begin to understand that all these thoughts are based on your past; they are reminders of an 'old' you, actually your child within, wanting to be held, wanting to be safe, wanting to be protected.

As you would treat a child who is anxious, you deal with your anxiety in the same way, by sitting with it and talking to it, and hugging it and giving it as much kind attention as you can.

It can be extremely difficult when you're living in fear to be self-compassionate, so we let mindfulness help us to begin with, by letting go of any judgments

and coming back to the present moment over and over. This will provide steps away from fear and into being. Being is love; it's the comfortable part of us that can sit calmly and observe.

Once our love 'tank' has been topped up a bit, then we can look at our life and send kindness to it. No matter what you've done (or haven't done); you are here, a being of the Earth. The universe never judges, it just flows. We have to forgive our past, let go of it, and proceed step by step in the present, doing the practice of healing our ego, of healing our bodies, of enjoying the present moment of life. It is all there is!

Then, we can go further, in offering our peace and calmness out into the world, to all the people we meet, to all the situations where being peace helps.

We can do this in meditation. We can think of someone who is suffering, and we can send them loving-kindness. We can wish them to be free of their suffering, to have happiness and ease of life. We can extend out to anyone we choose. We can do this when we're sitting on a bus, or in a cafe. Anyone we see, or come into contact with, we can see their suffering if we look deeply. Can we send compassion to these people? Your kindness and compassion will ripple out and be felt, without you even having to say a word. It's the intention that's enough.

This is simple for people we actually love or like. It's not so simple for people we find difficult, or don't get on with, or judge for what they've done in the past. Yet, that is the point of the practice. We can't do this overnight, nor do we strive to. We don't beat

ourselves up for not being able to forgive or send love to someone. We notice when we can and when we can't. Each time we can't, we keep our practice going, we keep reaching out to others; we keep trying to understand them or empathise with their journey. We try and recognise our common humanity; that we're all beings trying to do our best. Many people live in fear and that fear causes them to do things that are harmful to them and to others. Compassion is the common ground. It's the emotion that understands another person is suffering and that person doesn't therefore need our scorn, or hatred, or anger. They need our compassion; they need to be understood, to be given love, to be accepted. To be able to transform others' anger, and our own, into compassion, is a courageous and kind act. With compassion, reconciliation is possible.

Keeping our heart open - gratitude and generosity

I keep a notebook by the side of my bed, and most nights I put one gratitude in it. This can be as simple as one word, but I'm expressing a gratitude for something that happened that day. It might be the weather, "I am grateful for the sunshine", or a person, "I am grateful for my friend who bought me a cup of tea", or anything. After a while the notebook fills with gratitude, and this becomes a lovely read – in particular whenever I notice any ego creeping in to my life telling me "My day was a nightmare".

Having thanks for life is a wonderful connection to the present moment. We're being grateful for what's

in our lives. Doing it in the moment is even more powerful. I'm cultivating gratitude for every breath, for every feeling, for every person I meet, for every blade of grass, for every bird singing me a song. Living life in this way alters your perspective from negative thinking to things that are actually going well. There's a lot that's going well. Even on the darkest of days, we can catch a glimpse of something majestic, something beautiful. It can be as small as witnessing a droplet of water on a leaf.

Cultivating selflessness, as already discussed, softens us and brings us more to the moment and less into our own thinking about our own issues (ego). I practise generosity to allow this selflessness to grow. Generosity doesn't mean giving all your money away, it can mean many things, but it effectively is practising the art of letting go. The practice of letting go can bring us right back to the moment. By giving someone a compliment, for example, or being kind to someone, you are 'letting go' of your ego. By giving yourself kindness and forgiveness, you are 'letting go' of your past demeanours. This is creating a generosity of spirit; a way of living with open heart intentions based on love and compassion rather than fear. Each day, can we ask of our choices whether they are coming from love or fear? If we decide to send a gift through the post to someone without expecting anything back, then we're in our love base and are being generous. If we're expecting a thank you back, or a reward in some way, then we're in our ego and are acting from our fear base.

Generosity is not striving to become better, or prove anything, or manipulate anyone into liking us more, it's a present moment act that arises in any moment where we see we can do something to help a situation.

Play – the joy of being with no goal

Children know how to be mindful. Every time they play, they're in the present moment. A child can use only a stick in the woods and gain great joy from it. As adults, we've lost or been persuaded away from our ability to play. We take things far too seriously. Can you reclaim your sense of play?

Whether you're mindfully doodling or colouring in, mindfully reading, mindfully playing a game, mindfully dancing; the point is there's no end product required. There is only the journey, and the journey is fun. It's important to cultivate some joy practices in our lives. They will keep us young, keep us present, and the more joy we have in our lives, the more it ripples out to others. Joy is the balm that caresses the spaces between our pain and suffering and keeps us going. It keeps our heart opening up too, because we notice when the joy isn't there, and we understand when people have no joy how much they suffer. Joy is a measure of how mindful you are. Lots of joy, there's lots of *being* in your life. No joy, there's lot of thinking about past or future concerns.

Be creative; do something different!

We're all creative beings. We don't need to be an artist, a writer or a musician to be creative. We can creatively cook, tidy our home, garden, brainstorm, invent; work with our hands. We can even get creative about our routines.

Doing something different is being more spontaneous. It's being more in the flow of what feels right. Rather than spend your days doing the same thing, over and over, why not take a day out to be creative? Maybe there's a project you'd like to start, or somewhere new to visit. By going to different places, even just taking a different route into work, you're altering your perspective and giving yourself more access to the present moment. Or (if you dare) just choose to be, and try doing nothing for a while.

Notice when you have no motivation to do something creative. What's stopping you? "I don't have time to take out for myself," "I have too many chores", "I can't do it, I'm not good enough", "When I start to write I just think it's rubbish so I give up" are some responses. Often our busy mind will stop us from being creative. We need a quiet, calm mind before we can have enough joy and enough love to try something new. Trying something new can be scary, even going a different route into work can be a challenge if we're living in our fear base.

In mindfulness, we can notice our reluctance, our procrastination; our 'worthlessness' thoughts and embrace them all. After a while, we might find we can begin to do creative things. Maybe we used to be

creative and lost it along the way through our lives. It's always with you though, and it can always be rekindled. By keeping our heart open and giving loving-kindness to ourselves, we find we can tune in to the creative connection that lies dormant within.

If creativity still eludes you, then that's ok too. We just embrace where we are with whatever's present. Everything is a voyage of self-discovery. This is no bad thing.

6. The Ego Circle Vs The Zen Circle

The ego mind can be very subtle, a trickster, a cunning fox that can throw you off your mindfulness. Even the most disciplined meditator can fail to see their ego mind when it's being masked by logic and patterned thinking. Fortunately, there are some clues the ego provides that we can tune in to.

Two ways of dealing with one situation

Mindfulness gives us the choice to deal with any situation from awareness, rather than from our ego mind. Even if we begin mindfully, we can lose our mindfulness once our ego surfaces. But by holding the intention to notice that you've gone back to your ego mind, you have the choice to return to mindfulness. This constant yo-yo between ego and mindfulness is the way of being more Zen. It's the learning that we constantly use; the times of resistance to the present moment are discerned and challenged over and over.

Imagine a trip to the dentist's, where you're awaiting an appointment. You're there in plenty of time, knowing you'll be seen soon. At this moment, you're relaxed, in a calm place, not in your ego. You're accepting of what's happening: you're therefore in a Zen mode. The time of your appointment comes and goes. In fact, fifteen more minutes pass by, and you've still not been seen. What happens then? Your relaxed, Zen state is lost. It's likely that you'll go into your head and start analysing. It's likely that you'll enter your ego mind, and may get caught in an ego circle (See Fig 3).

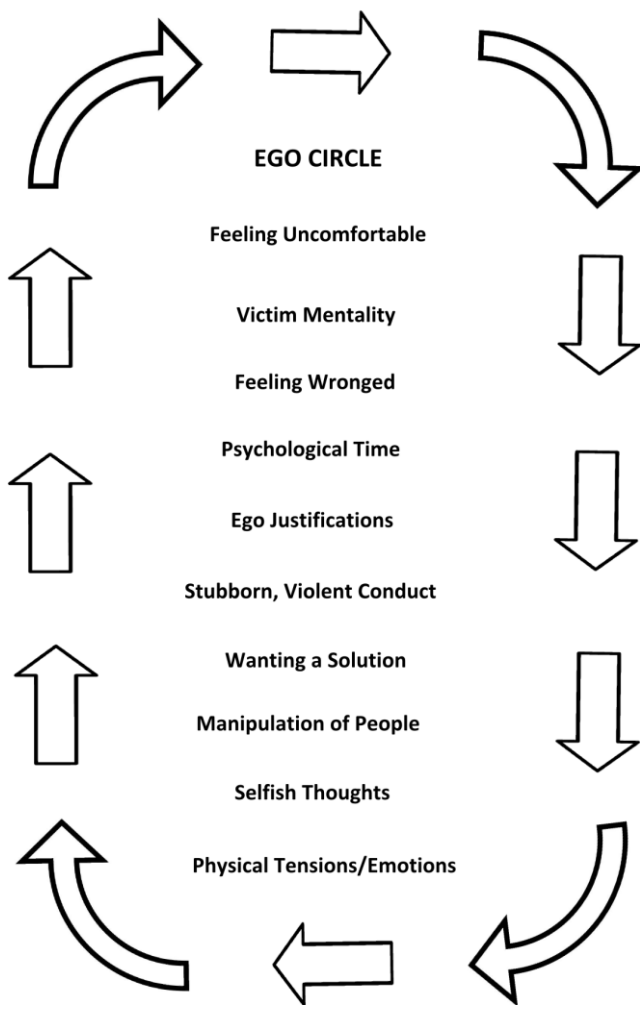


Fig 3. The Ego circle

The ego is your subconscious mind, the part of you that resists what is. The diagram above, the ego circle, shows some of the thought patterns and situations

you might find yourself in. These are all clues that you've entered your head and are judging the event. Your awareness of the present moment, your mindfulness, is temporarily lost while you enter the realm of thinking.

Each phrase in the ego circle is a clue; it's a chance to spot you've left mindfulness. If you have and you *notice* you have, you can reclaim the present moment by coming out of your thinking and entering your awareness. There's always a chance to become aware, even in the trickiest of situations. Let's go through some of these scenarios using the waiting room example:

Feeling uncomfortable

You might be sitting in the chair in the waiting room, fidgeting, becoming edgy in body and in mind. You might start tapping your foot impatiently. You might glance at your watch. You might sigh, and feel the beginnings of annoyance, or anxiety.

Victim mentality

You might begin to think you're a victim. "What's going on?" your mind might say. "Why haven't I been seen yet? This is outrageous service". In fact, your ego mind will concoct all sorts of moans and groans about the situation. When we feel like a victim, we're thinking of our *self* as a separate entity to everything. We're blaming, criticising and judging what is going on, and we suffer because of it.

Feeling wronged

Similar to victim mentality, we might start thinking about why everything is wrong. Your ego might say “I got here in plenty of time; I can’t believe this is now happening to me.” You might double-check your appointment card to confirm the time of your appointment. Either way, you’ll be suffering more and more, feeding the situation with a judgmental attitude.

Psychological time

You might now be thinking about the past or the future (psychological time) rather than being in the moment. Perhaps you have another appointment later on in the day, so now you’re worried you’ll miss it. Or you’re remembering a time when you were in the dentist before and they were equally slow in fulfilling your appointment.

Ego justifications

Ah, your sly old ego! It’ll justify the reason for its existence. It’ll say you have every right to be annoyed, or angry at the lack of respect, good service or efficiency. This is often called ‘righteous anger’. Even if we believe we’re right, it’s still only a label we’ve put to what’s happening. You’re still suffering, still getting worked up. You’re feeding your annoyance with your justifications. Would you rather be calm or annoyed?

Stubborn, violent conduct

You might start to swear, or sigh loudly. You want other people to know your discomfort. You might

begin to glare at the people being seen by the dentist before you. You might start to mutter, and you certainly won't be smiling. You'll be feeling frustrated, or worse. Such is the mindset of the ego.

Wanting a solution

You'll want a quick fix. You'll need to be seen right away, to be acknowledged, for people to see your suffering. You'll want whatever's happening to you to stop at once. You'll begin to feel impatient, which leads to annoyance and anger.

Manipulation of people

Your ego might try and work out ways of fixing the situation. You'll maybe go to the receptionist, and demand she sorts out the issue of you not being seen, based on the urgency of your pressing engagement later that day. You won't be seeing their suffering. You're the one who's in the right, and you're the one who needs to get things sorted for yourself.

Selfish thoughts

The ego is self, so you'll be ignoring anything or anyone else – you just want to get yourself to a safe place, a haven; a solace from the suffering you're in. Only, the more judgmentally you think about the situation in relation to you, the worse you suffer.

Physical tensions/emotions

Your body may become tense as you enter survival mode. Your breathing may be faster. Adrenaline might be surging through you, as you get more annoyed. You might experience strong emotions, fear based emotions such as anxiety or anger.

These are the ego circle traits. Notice any of these in the moment, and you might stop, and come back to your breathing, and your awareness. It's of great benefit to you to notice when you're in the ego (suffering) circle, and to come out and enter the Zen (non-suffering) circle. If you don't manage it, after you've finally been seen by the dentist, you'll leave the dentist still mulling over their "shoddy service", and everything afterward will be done in a non-mindful state. Only once you've calmed down sufficiently will you notice you got angry, or shouted at the receptionist – and then you might feel guilty and beat yourself up over your actions. Your body and mind will feel heavy, tired and drained.

The Zen circle

Look at the diagram below of the Zen circle (Fig 4), you'll see the different ways you can act in the same situation. This is the mindful way, the way of peace and of conscious awareness, not subconscious habitual patterns. Let's take a look at each trait:

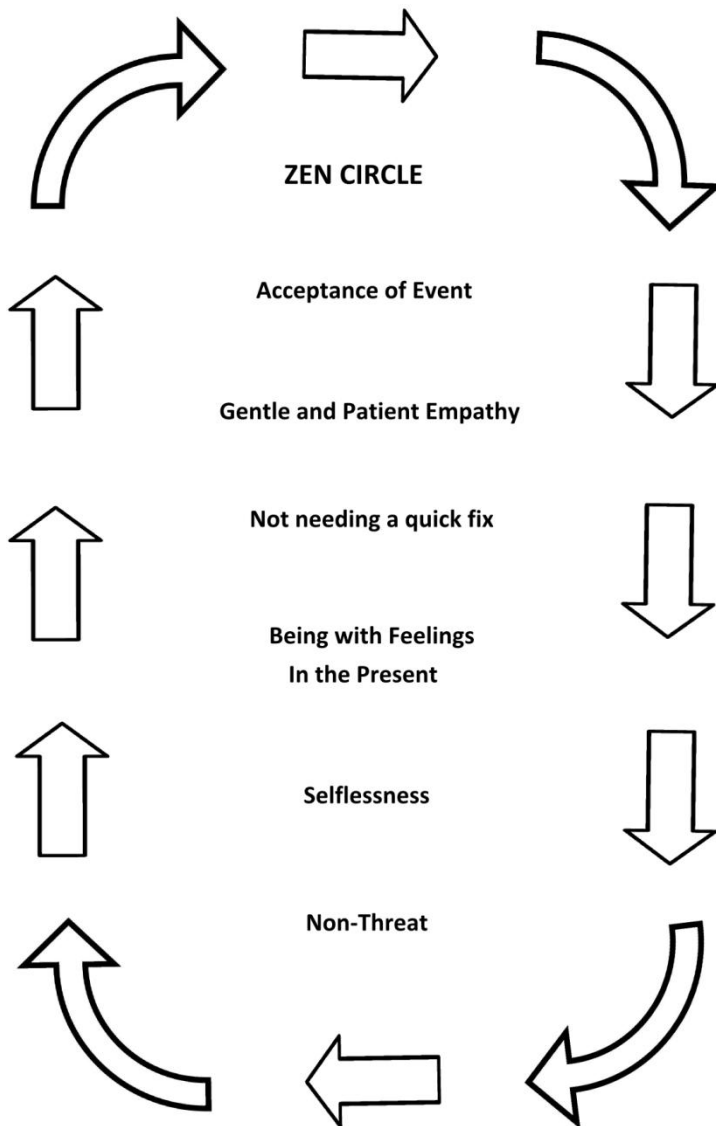


Fig 4. The Zen Circle

Acceptance of the event

No judgments, only acknowledgment and acceptance of the event. So you're still sitting in the waiting room; it's fifteen minutes past your appointment. You notice this and you practise mindful breathing. You feel the chair you're sitting on. You feel the ground under your feet. You listen to the sounds while you sit there. You know you'll be seen eventually; everything changes, you'll not be in this waiting room forever.

Gentle and patient empathy

You'll be gentle with yourself. Any beginnings of nerves or physical tension, you'll notice them and breathe with them. You'll be more patient, and you'll be able to empathise with the issues facing the dentist. It's not all about you.

Not needing a quick fix

With mindful breathing and patience, you'll be able to sit there for a considerable amount of time. You won't need a quick fix. It's not that you won't act if a further fifteen minutes pass by and you've still not been seen. You might then walk to the receptionist, and gently enquire. Maybe you've been forgotten, or the dentist is just too busy. It's all ok in the realm of mindfulness.

Being with feelings in the present

A strong mindful mind will notice when the ego surfaces, causing physical or emotional tension. You'll

be able to sit in the waiting room chair, and breathe with those tensions, sending kindness and calmness to your body and to you. You'll be able to let go of any thoughts of ego, and stay in the present moment.

Selflessness

You'll be more able to act with compassion. You'll see clearly that the dentists' issues are nothing to do with you personally. There are other factors at play. You'll be able to notice whether the receptionist is rushed off their feet or looking stressed. You may even compliment them or acknowledge this in some way when you go to ask what's happening. You'll be kind.

Non-threat

You won't see any of this situation as a threat. You won't be in a fear based emotion (or you'll see it quickly, if you drop into one). You'll be relaxed, at ease, and might even see the humour of it. You'll be curious about why the universe is deciding for you to wait here at the dentist. You'll understand that everything is flowing exactly as it needs to.

When you leave the dentist's, you'll remain light. You'll still have energy, you won't feel drained, or grouchy, or dwell on what happened. You'll be in the present, and head off to the next event in your day. You'll be in the flow.

Dropping judgments

The ego is the voice in your head giving you storylines. These are thoughts based on judgments. It's there every time you think about the past or the future. Can you drop the storylines you're weaving?

Exercise: sit somewhere in public, a cafe or a park. Look at people as they walk by, and observe whether you judge or create stories in your head. Maybe you're judging someone's appearance, or labelling them in some way. Through our mindfulness, we seek to practise equanimity, that is, non-discrimination towards everyone and everything. By treating everyone and everything the same, we drop the labels our mind creates. People are not 'ugly', or 'difficult', or 'a pain in the neck' – people do what they do because of their own minds, their own past, their own suffering. Can we see our suffering and offer compassion to others? Can we open our heart and let go of our ego?

7. Rumination

The pain of the world is all around us. It's a part of life, and isn't something we can avoid. Our bodies will get bruised, wounded and ill at some point. Our minds will experience thoughts and emotions like anger, sadness and betrayal at some point. These messages from our body and mind can be observed, transformed and used to giving us new learning, and new ways to cope with the discomfort we're experiencing.

Humans in modern culture have a learned condition to want to fix everything, to want to run from discomfort, to want to create new ways to alleviate or get rid of pain. We don't get on well with emotions such as sorrow or despair. We prefer happiness; we judge our despairing to somehow be wrong. Yet at times that's how we feel. By ignoring or running from these 'darker' frames of mind, we're running away from ourselves.

Resistance increases suffering

Although suffering is a part of life, it doesn't have to be increased artificially by our subconscious. As already discussed, our ego, our resistance to things, only increases our woe. We've already received one form of suffering (in an event or life situation), we don't need to extend this and make it larger with our thinking about the event. You can therefore reduce much discomfort in your life by thinking less, by accepting things more and by your continued present moment practices.

Mindfully noticing our thoughts

The first chance we have to reduce our suffering is to notice our thoughts, and notice when we deviate away from the present moment, into our heads. Mindfully, I am aware I'm thinking about my broken car, not my breakfast. I can then choose to let the thought of the broken car drift along, bringing my focus back to eating breakfast and fully experiencing the moment. If we do this, we are present, and gaining from the simplest wonders of life, as it unfolds before us. If you're dwelling on your broken car, your unpaid bills, or your work colleague, it's normally for a reason: perhaps you weren't satisfied with a conversation yesterday. You may remember your colleague being a bit short with you, or you getting annoyed with them. Whatever the actuality, you're in the past, and you're entering the thought process of rumination: that is, going over (and over, and over) things in your mind. Thoughts (and more thoughts) keep coming. "Why were they upset with me?" or "I was annoyed because they got upset for no reason" or "I'll just ignore them from now on, they obviously don't like me" or...the ego mind has infinite possibilities for what it might say to you. It's your faithful inner critic, the voice that isn't happy because something went wrong, and that something threatened your well-being.

This inner voice often tries to fix the situation for you, including judging the actions of your work colleague, and your response to it. You'll quickly spiral way beyond a lack of real 'acceptance' to what happened, and find yourself circling in many, many

thoughts, trying to understand it, fix it or get it out of your head.

The by-products of a habit of rumination can be stress, ill-health and disease. Your body will feel tired, heavy; it's draining to constantly be analysing everything. We'll begin to manifest stronger emotions such as anxiety or anger, and the longer we dwell on these endless thoughts, the more pronounced the emotions can become.

Counting your thoughts

Exercise: Try sitting for five minutes and counting each thought that comes up. Don't attach to the thoughts, just notice they've entered your mind and watch them leave your mind. By sitting with your thoughts rather than attaching to the drama/storyline of them, you become the observer, and they don't control you – you control them.

Mindfully noticing our body responses

If we've missed the specific thought(s) that have led us, to say, anxiety, our body will helpfully produce symptoms for each emotion. For anxiety, it may be butterflies in the stomach, trembling hands, or tension in the neck. You might have a headache, or nausea. These are all clues, wake up moments, if you're aware and being mindful. If you notice you're anxious, you have a chance to be with it, to let it be and return to the present moment. Everything changes, including our emotions. You won't be anxious forever. However, if you don't notice it, or notice it but ignore it – maybe,

you're adding to it with more rumination: "I can't believe they made me feel this way," or "I hate feeling anxious, I wish it would just go away" etc. you're not in the present moment, you're not focusing your full attention on your feelings.

The mindful way, is to do the following:

1. Recognise resistance (what's the feeling?)

If you're aware of your anxiety, you've recognised it. "Breathing in, I recognise my anxiety". Breathe in and out fully, focus on your breath, and notice you're anxious.

2. Welcome resistance (accept the feeling)

Often, the perceived way to combat a 'negative' emotion like anxiety is to ignore it or run from it. This isn't the way, as the anxiety is there for a reason: it's there to teach you, to guide you to a better understanding of your current state of being. All emotions need to be welcomed, they are your direct experience, and by accepting the feeling without judgment, we can have it in our lives without resistance. "Breathing in, I welcome my old friend anxiety. What have you got for me today? I'll take good care of you."

3. Calm resistance (breathe the feeling)

How does anxiety feel in your body? Do you have tension in your neck? Try to soften it. Breathe deeply. Come back to the present. "Breathing in, I breathe in my anxiety. I can sense it with awareness in my stomach, in my fingers, in my neck. Breathing out, I calm my anxiety."

4. Let go of resistance (embrace the feeling)

Give your anxiety a big, mental hug, like you're cuddling a confused child. It's ok to be anxious. "I'm here for you anxiety. I'm present."

You'll find the longer you can do points 3 and 4 above, the emotion will gradually diminish, and you'll return to a more balanced state. All changes. You've not fuelled the anxiety with more restless thoughts; you've fully concentrated on it in the present moment without any judgment.

Afterward, you can ask yourself questions. It's interesting to note when you get anxious, or angry. What was it that set it off? More understanding of ourselves, more patient, loving-kindness in ourselves, will reveal the fears beneath. Once we see fears, we can lean towards them. There's no need to resist anything and ruminate, if we're without fear.

Body Scan meditation practice

When we're not feeling any strong emotions, it's useful to practice body scan meditations. This can be achieved by sitting or lying down, whatever your preference. As in other meditations, we're trying to see the present moment and feel it without any judgment. You can take as little as five minutes to do this, or really take your time and do longer. I'd suggest around fifteen to twenty minutes as a good time to build up to.

Exercise: Find a comfortable position to sit or lie down. Close your eyes. Begin by noticing your in-breath, and noticing your out-breath. Your mind may wander away from your breath, as it has a tendency to do, and that's ok. Notice and bring your awareness back to your breath.

Next, bring your awareness to your left foot. Notice the contact between the foot and the floor, or the bed, or whatever it's connected to. Notice your toes, the heel of the foot; just notice how it feels. There may be aches or sensations, or nothing.

Then, move your awareness upward to your ankle, your lower left leg, knee, and upper left leg. Breathe as you notice your body parts; sense how these areas feel.

Then, move your awareness to your right foot, and repeat the process. Move up from your right foot to your lower right leg, knee, and upper right leg.

Move your awareness up to your hips, and the connection between you and the chair you're sitting on, or the feel of these areas connected to floor, bed or cushion. Be mindful of any thoughts taking you away from the feel of your body.

Proceed up from your hips, your bottom, up into your abdomen and belly. Move your awareness to your lower back and then upper back. Notice how all areas feel. Allow any tightness or tension to soften if you can.

Move to your heart, lungs and chest. Can you feel your heart beating? Can you notice the rise and fall of your lungs as they fill with your breath?

Continue upwards to your shoulders and neck. Notice your throat. Then move awareness to your face:

jaw, teeth, tongue, nose, eyes, ears and temples. Do you notice any tension? Breathe, and smile, and know you are smiling.

Finally return to your shoulders, and then starting with your left arm, move down to your left elbow, lower left arm and into your left hand. Where are there tensions? How does it feel? Switch to the right arm, and move down that also, finishing with your right hand.

Then feel your whole body, as you breathe. You can visualise your breath being a white light, entering your whole body from head to toe. Sink into your body and relax, soften and smile.

When you're ready, continue smiling and open your eyes.

8. The Consumption of suffering

Who we are is who we are

We're all different, based on the uniqueness of our lives. What's occurred in our lives defines who we are now, and our future will be whatever we decide to do from this moment onward.

We're all made up of everything that we consume in our lives: food, sensory input (what we see, touch, smell, hear, taste, awareness, to name a few), experiences and motivational stimuli. Another form of consumption, and at times the most dominant, is our thoughts.

Everything we experience in life will be a trigger for our reactions. We're hungry, so that's a trigger to find some food. We're sad, so that's a trigger for tears to run down our cheeks. Our bodies remember the responses to certain thoughts and emotions. We'll deal with the same situation similarly to how we've dealt with it before. If we get angry easily, it's because one of our remembered responses is anger. The more we do a certain thing, the more ingrained it becomes. We've all seen angry people. They can get angry for "no real reason" or for something so innocuous that many people won't even notice it happening, least of all getting angry. For those people, it's the *learned* subconscious response. The bus is late, therefore I am now angry. I'm stuck in traffic, therefore I am now angry. Angry people learn anger from other angry people. Angry people *become* angry because they're following old ego patterns they've always followed.

We all have the capacity for anger. Habitual anger can be overcome by practising a more mindful life, that is, to be aware of the anger (or other emotions) as it manifests. This will not fuel anger. This will calm anger in the present, and interrupt the anger cycle.

Practice makes perfect

We need to look at our learned thought responses and change our habits of consumption.

What are the emotions we keep fuelling? Emotions we subconsciously practise will grow larger in our life; we'll automatically do the thing we're well practised in, and if that's going into our ego and getting annoyed, that's what will happen. If that sounds like you, be kind to yourself and know that you've only been feeding that annoyance because that's what you learned worked.

Mindfulness will notice what emotion is coming up; it will be able to detect when we're getting annoyed. This is a step into being *with* the annoyance, which doesn't fuel its power, it cares for it with kindness. In this way, we begin to change our mindset, consciously, with our annoyance.

We can also practise our kindness, our gratitude, our positive thinking, our self-compassion. If you keep your practice up, these are the things that will grow bigger in your life.

So perhaps you begin to change your consumption. Maybe you watch a lot of news on the TV, and this causes despair and fear in you. Perhaps you decide to turn off the TV; not to not know what's

going on, but to choose to stop watching the incessant drama of the news. Your despair and fear in this instance, are then not being fed with the dramatic pictures and headlines.

You might decide, instead of rushing in the morning, that you'll wake up an hour earlier and practise mindfulness. By developing regular mindfulness disciplines, you'll find that mindfulness becomes easier. After a while, it becomes you and you become it. Having a regular routine for mindfulness practice will make it ever stronger and you'll be able to see your thoughts and subconscious reactions much, much quicker.

By being kind to yourself, you become kinder to others. By being kind to others (even a compliment, a smile, or an acknowledgment can be enough) you can build towards being kind to all. Your kindness to others helps them to open up to their own kindness. Can we begin to live with open hearts, offering our kindness, compassion and love to all? The traits you cultivate within you will ripple out, to the entire planet.

Righteousness in anger

As I write this book, it's impossible not to notice that the world has a lot of anger and violence within it.

In order for this to change, we must individually contain and heal our own anger and violence. If someone says something rude to us, our first response (subconscious, survival instinct) is predominantly to say something rude back. If it happens all the time, we might not even notice it, as we'll become used to

those patterns of behavior in ourselves and others. We don't need to notice, our mind jumps into action on our behalf. The ego mind thinks we've been wronged: "They shouldn't have said that to me" or "I can't believe that just happened, I'm just going to ignore that person from now on" and so on. This is how arguments begin, how anger can manifest within us, how easily grudges start. We've been wronged, or so we think, and we need to justify ourselves, defend our position; fight back!

This is not mindful, unsurprisingly. With our mindfulness, we observe what's going on in the world *without judgment* – a very difficult thing to do for our ego mind. However, with practice, the more we do this, the more we gain insight and understanding on what's really going on.

If someone says something rude to you, instead of getting annoyed with them, wanting to punch them, or plotting your revenge, seek to understand them. What made that person want to be rude to you? What insecurity/fear caused them to do such a thing? Curiosity is your friend in these cases; it stops us thinking about ourselves and our 'justifiable anger' to defend our position. Maybe the rude person was just tired, having had a difficult day themselves, and blurted something out without thinking. Maybe they *were* actually wanting to inflict a wound, that too is cause for pondering *why*. Each act like this is really a cry for help. It's saying "I'm not happy and I want you to know about it". It's someone, in their mindless state, leaking out their suffering...something that

they've perhaps had all their lives, something that's not resolved within them because either they don't see it, or they are stuck in conditioned habits. Those leaked emotions are rarely about the current situation.

Peaceful minds observe what's going on in the moment, accept it, and move on. They don't dwell on things, they don't complain about being 'right' or 'feeling wronged'. They do not fight. What exists simply exists; their minds are pools of compassion and kindness.

As I go about my day, I hold the intention to 'not harm or judge anyone or anything'. Using my awareness, I notice the times when I've not managed it, when I've got annoyed at something, or judged someone, and I return to my breath and to my practice. Each time, my mindfulness becomes stronger, so that I'm less annoyed, less judgmental. I'm intentionally heading towards a quieter, peaceful mind. That way, I do my best to never choose 'combat' as an option. I seek understanding, with curiosity, and compassion for myself and for others.

A day of mindfulness

Could you set aside a whole day for mindfulness practice? You'll be increasing the strength of your awareness and revealing the wonders of everyday life. You'll also be increasing your consumption of mindfulness.

It's intriguing to notice any reluctance to doing this. We'll make excuses: "I haven't got time, there's too much to do" or "I need to spend today with my

family” etc. The beautiful thing about mindfulness is that you can spend every moment in mindfulness! We don’t just ‘do’ mindfulness, and then fall back into our usual ways of consuming things. Ongoing practice can only come from using mindfulness throughout our everyday tasks.

As you wake up, breathe and try to smile. Today is a brand new day. Another twenty-four hours of being alive! Each breath is a miracle. Notice when you don’t want to smile – what are you hanging on to?

Be slower in starting your day. Lie in bed for a few moments longer, and breathe before you rush to get up. Feel the bed under you, the pillow under your head; the warmth of the duvet/blanket. Once up, you can attend to your daily tasks: having a shower, going to the toilet, brushing your teeth, eating your breakfast, but try and do them mindfully. Whatever the tasks are that need to be done during the day, take your time with them. Maintain your presence; let go of your thoughts about past or future. You are at the sink. You are at the toilet. You are walking down stairs. You are feeling the kitchen floor as you walk. You notice you are walking. You notice you are breathing.

Any resistance, or thinking that taking things slowly is a nuisance, is another opportunity for mindfulness practice! It’s only when we slow, that we can begin to see our discomfort in the ‘perceived ordinary’. In mindfulness, no task is annoying, or a nuisance, or ordinary. It is what it is.

After your necessary tasks, take time to just sit and be. Drink a cup of tea. Listen to the rain pouring on the

window, or watch the sunlight streaming through the curtains. Drink your tea with ceremony: know the whole universe is contained in every sip. Every act becomes more sacred.

A mindful walk during the day is wonderful. This can be indoors or outdoors. When out in nature, just being with the wildlife, or the landscape, or watching the cloud formations in the sky will rejuvenate your whole being. It's a freedom to have a day like this, with nothing to do but be in the moment you're in. Imagine staying outside until the stars come out, winking at you as the moon bathes you in its radiance? You are everything and enough in each moment.

You might also decide to formally practice mindfulness in your day too, such as taking an extended meditation, where you sit and enjoy the quietness of the day, or practice everything in silence, without speaking, changing your routine and letting go of the need to communicate verbally. You could consider the day as a mindfulness retreat: a space for you to breathe, slow and be gentle in all your actions. Take time to sit and do nothing; watch the world go by, watch the day go by, and smile into being. A day like that can be incredibly restful and healing.

9. Flow, gentle being

Any movement away from the present moment is not flow. Flowing is the unfolding of each moment. Our heads and minds think of many things that take us away from the present and into the past or the future.

Non-striving

Imagine you desire a change of job. You might be an administrator, wanting to become a manager. So you work hard; you write down plans, attend courses to increase your knowledge; you try and perform as perfectly as you can in the doing of those plans. You want your potential as a manager to be seen by your current manager, so that they promptly promote you. Then you'll be happy in your job.

This is known as striving. You want to be someone other than who you currently are. In striving, we force issues, we demand change; we don't rest until we achieve the change. This is a form of ego, of *self* trying to assert its control over your reality. In essence, there is a fear within that isn't comfortable with just being exactly where you are. It's thinking about the future over and over, i.e. "I'll be happy *when* this thing happens" or "I've got to improve this to achieve that", and trying to force the situation.

Any resistance to what's currently happening is non-acceptance, and that leads us into our minds to fix what is happening. It's ok to plan for the future and write 'to do lists'. The difference between non-striving and striving is to accept where you currently are.

Notice whether you're doing things out of a *fear* base or a *love* base. If you're feeling a lack, you'll implement plans out of fear, because you feel lacking in something. Until you get that something, you won't be satisfied; there'll be a discomfort in you. Even when you achieve your heart's desire, it's only a matter of time before you feel unfulfilled once again. Putting a plan in place to change direction, or move with trust for the future, with patience and acceptance for where you currently are, that's non-striving.

There is a certain irony in mindfulness that we come to the practice in order to improve our health and well-being, but when we're in the practice itself we're here just to observe what comes in the present moment without judgment or trying to change things. This very acceptance we cultivate is building our trust in being 'ok' in each moment, and that lessens our need to think too hard about the future. A more trusting person worries less.

Striving is thinking about the future too much, to delay your happiness until something is fixed or solved. If you're not happy right now, then tuning in to the feelings of what's going on in the present will help you to re-discover that happiness. No amount of material wealth, objects or striving will do that for you.

Non-craving

Craving is the desire to have something. Whether it's for chocolate cake, lots of money, becoming a celebrity, or solitude, we all experience cravings. We are certain we cannot be happy until the craving is

met, and to resist a craving can be an intensely uncomfortable experience, in which we pit our willpower against whatever is driving the craving. Often times, we lose the ‘battle’, which leads us to judge ourselves to be weak-willed. Cravings are a distraction from your emotional state in the present moment, they are trying to bring your attention to something that’s going unnoticed. It’s just another feeling, which fuels a thought process of “I want this”, “I need that”. Again, there’s this “I”, this separate being who is not at peace with the current moment.

In my late twenties, I struggled with depression. It was due, in part, to my feeling of loneliness. I was always looking to the future, wanting my life to change. I craved a partner, who would end my loneliness. I distracted myself from the experience of being alone, and spent a lot of time thinking about the past, reliving my ‘failures’. My mind told me that, due to the past experiences of relationship failures, that I would always be on my own, that I wasn’t meant to have happiness like other people. I compared myself with others and felt jealous of what others seemed to have. I used to strive desperately to meet new people, but people could feel my desperation, my anxiety, so of course things didn’t work out. I was lost in a sea of thinking, of judgment, of blame (mainly of myself), which only made the depression worse.

All that mental anguish; if I had known about mindfulness back then, things would have been different. I’d have released a lot of the thoughts, and be left with...what? Loneliness is just a concept,

although it tugs hard at us because we, as humans, are used to living in tribes, in community. The feeling of being alone can sometimes be overwhelmingly unpleasant and goes against our natural state.

With the soothing light of mindfulness, we can embrace our loneliness, or depression, with kindness and non-judgment. We can embrace our thoughts about wanting what isn't currently here, and give ourselves a hug. We can cry, and welcome that too. We can let everything have its moment, its time.

After a while of doing this, by accepting where we are, we soften. Our whole body begins to heal. Our tears stop. Our inner happiness begins to bloom, because we can cultivate a resilience of being ok on our own. We can lean into our suffering and come out the other side. We can be compassionate to ourselves and others. We can breathe, we can smile, we can listen to music, we can dance, we can sing. We can do all of these things if we choose to, we can cultivate our own joyfulness.

Mindfulness is useful for noticing the cravings, giving them love, and letting them pass by. We can decide not to distract ourselves with fleeting pleasures, watching TV, comfort eating or drinking. We can decide to sit with our pain, even if for just a short while. If we 'give in' and decide to follow the craving, we can accept that too, but we're doing it with more conscious awareness and with self-compassion. If we decide to eat the chocolate we were trying to resist, then we can do it mindfully and fully experience the eating of the chocolate. In doing so, we might notice

that a small piece was enough to ease the craving, and save the rest for another time. We might realise we're actually hungry, and prepare a tasty meal or a more sustaining snack. Neither is right or wrong, we can step into our choices with awareness and joyfulness. We no longer run away. We can take care of ourselves and remove thoughts of 'wrongness'. Healing begins to take place.

Become a beginner!

Feeling like we know everything there is and having knowledge is all very well, but often the world is going to come up and pull the rug out from under us. Even if we've experienced the same thing hundreds of times before, when a similar thing happens again it's never 'the same'.

I like to give an example of putting up a shelf. We might have put up a shelf hundreds of times. We might know how to do it. Yet, today, of all days, this shelf isn't quite doing what we expected. This is a different shelf. This is a different wall.

When things don't go as planned, or expected, we can quickly get frustrated, especially if we believe we should be able to solve the problem. This is where becoming a beginner is a lovely way to look at it.

For this shelf, I'm new. This is fresh. How do I put this shelf up? I'll try the usual methods, but for some reason it's not working. It's still wonky. Let me try drilling a hole here; let me try a different screw there. Ah, now it's coming. Do you see that being in the moment, noticing what's happening and then taking

steps to respond in the moment is very freeing? Our very notion of 'how easy' something should be is a projection to a future that isn't currently arising. It's ok for us to struggle, for things to not be calm, for life to throw things at us. The trick is to accept it all, and do our best.

Letting go of ego

To be completely without ego is to understand that we're not separate to anything. When we really look for a 'self' it's hard to spot. If you were to look through a microscope at your own body, you would discover cells, atoms and energy. Where is the ego in there? It's a good question to keep asking.

The voice in your head is something we take on as our personality, our identity, yet it's only a manifestation of past memories and conditioning. With the past no longer here, who is this 'old' self that keeps talking to us?

You look at pictures of yourself from the past, and that person no longer exists. You have completely changed every cell in your body. Our personality can change during the course of our own life. Even our brain isn't fixed into the same neural pathways all the time. Are you the same person you were twenty years ago? We're constantly changing, just like everything else. Nothing stays constant. Nothing is permanent. Everything transforms into something else after a period of time.

Noticing this fluidity can soften us and begin to lessen our ego mind that wants things to stay the

same. To know we're not going to be here forever, to know that every moment is precious because no two moments are ever the same encourages us to be more engaged with our life right now.

We notice when the ego arrives to stop something from happening, to make something happen, or to coerce us into judging what has happened, and we stop. We pause, we breathe, we give kindness to everything (including our ego), we let go of our thoughts and we come back to the clarity of awareness. The more we can let go of the ego in this way, the more we build trust in this fluid nature of the universe, the more present we become and we start to feel part of everything, not separate to it in our own mind.

10. The art of mindful communication

Our full presence is what we create when we practise mindfulness. We're truly there, in the moment, with our bodies. When we're present, without resistance, we can begin to hold the space for other people who need it.

Before we engage anyone in conversation, we need to come back to the moment. We need to cultivate our own presence. We need to let go of any ego thoughts that are sending us spiralling into the past or the future. How can we fully listen to someone when our mind is elsewhere?

Do not underestimate the power of your presence. Even just sitting with someone, without saying a word, with your full presence, you can reassure and calm another person. When sitting beside a huge oak tree, we can feel and be reassured by the presence of the tree. It doesn't have to do anything, but by it just being there it can give a lot of comfort. We might know people who give out this presence – the presence of a mighty oak tree, firm and unyielding to whatever is happening. With mindful communication, you can practise this.

We have to begin by using our discernment on whether someone wants to engage in conversation or not. It's no good starting a conversation when someone is distracted, or in their ego. An example would be if someone is hungry, they'll be thinking more about what they want to eat than listening to

you, though they might pretend to be, or think that they're listening.

It's useful to think of people as open, closed or in-between. If someone is open, they're ready and willing to talk to you. If someone is closed, they're definitely not (as in the case of an angry person). Somewhere in-between means things could go to open or closed depending on what happens next, what you say and where each person's thoughts go. With mindfulness, your discernment increases. You get to know straight away if something you said causes the other person to close down from the conversation. This is not cause for alarm, or for ego thinking. Without judgment, we change tactic: so that piece of speech didn't work, let's try another. Can we offer a silent presence, or words of understanding that might help the person open up again?

At times, it can be especially difficult to keep conversations going. You get stuck in conflict or misunderstanding. Sometimes it's best to leave conversing, have time out, and come back later.

Mindful listening

Mindful listening is the skill of paying attention to another without entering your ego mind. If someone is requiring to talk to you, that is a gift! Having gratitude for a conversation is wonderful. Someone is asking you something, or wanting to confide in you. This is already a compliment to you. So, whenever someone decides to talk to you, see if you can let go of your ego and tune in to listening.

As always, your ego gives clues you've entered this state of being and have lost your listening to your thinking about the conversation. Here's some clues right here. Each clue, if you notice it, is a guide for you to drop your ego and come back to the practice of just listening:

Always wanting to be right (justifying)

If someone is explaining something and you believe they're wrong, or if they're challenging you on a certain topic, you'll feel threatened immediately, and your ego comes into play. We'll start defending our position, and we'll be at war with our words. Things like "No, let me explain..." or "It's definitely on channel three, not channel two" is this kind of response.

Always wanting to talk about self

Someone might be telling you their story, and it triggers something that happened to you. So you decide to let them know about your story. "Oh yes, I know what you mean, when that happened to me I did this..."

Interrupting conversations

A classic ego trait is not waiting for the other person to finish their sentence. They may have sparked something in you, and you're desperate to get your points in, before you forget what you wanted to say. Maybe you're becoming impatient, or bored with the conversation. All of these feelings and annoyances come with thinking in your ego mind. Notice when you

interrupt people – it’s good practice to try again next time to not, if you can.

Non-presence

You might lose your awareness and drift into your thoughts. You might be distracting yourself by looking at the TV, picking up your phone, eating food, or mentally planning what to have for dinner. These are often subconscious habits and not deliberate ploys to stop listening; if you notice you’re losing your concentration, then you’ve noticed and you can come back to the listener.

Stubbornness

Digging one’s heels in; resolutely not budging from an opinion or judgment. Conversations end pretty quickly if someone refuses to see another side, or has a grudge about them being right.

Reluctance

Reluctance to even engage in a conversation is a trait of a wounded ego. Notice if someone asks to speak to you and your heart sinks. What preconceived notions do you have before you even start? Sometimes we’re reluctant because we feel we’re going to be told off, or found out, or something is a threat.

Feeling heavy/strong emotions

If you’re feeling something, you might struggle to stay fully present. Frustration, anger, annoyance,

impatience, grief, guilt etc is thinking about the conversation (or possibly about something altogether unrelated, which has been triggered consciously or subconsciously). Stop, breathe, and see if you can let go of your thoughts and re-tune in to the listening.

Offering advice when not required

Often when someone is talking to us, it's about an issue they're facing. Our ego is quick to placate or give a solution. Unless the person has specifically asked for an answer to their problem, the rule of thumb is to let it be. We're here to offer our presence and empathy, not become a saviour or show off our knowledge. There are times when it's perfectly acceptable to give a solution, but again it's up to your discernment and wisdom to know when it's the right time, and not use this 'problem solving' mind as a habit. Your mindfulness will be able to notice when someone wants empathy or actually requires a fix. Helping the person to find their own solution is better than offering advice, even when they directly ask for it.

Judgmental conversation

If you're gossiping, criticising something or someone, complaining about this or that, then you're in your ego. You're not accepting of something, and all we do if we continue complaining about something is to send our judgments out into the world, and this can affect the other people we talk to as well. Often people habitually have conversations like this, complaining about the weather, their family or their

job. These unconscious patterns are being reinforced in each of these conversations, no matter how harmless the gossip sounds.

Own need not being met

If we're hungry, or thirsty, or needing the toilet, we have physical needs that are not being met, and so we struggle to listen mindfully. If we have mental needs for rest, relaxation, or for being left alone, we'll be thinking of those things too.

So you can see, just with these ego traits, how difficult it is to remain present, with just your listening. The beauty of the practice of mindful listening is that we can notice when we enter our ego, and come back to our breath, retune in and come back to the speaker. If this becomes too difficult then no mindful communication is possible. How often are we thwarted by wanting meaningful conversations with people who go into their ego, blocking the communication before it truly starts? Reconciliation is not possible when the ego speaks through us.

Becoming a Zen communicator

The world needs better communication. We all need to work together in our own lives, in our own relationships, to hold the space for others. There are so many misperceptions, judgments and 'violence' in our every-day communications. By becoming a peaceful Zen communicator, by firstly attending to our own needs, and secondly putting aside our ego needs,

to really listen to someone, we can contribute to peace and understanding in the world. People with this skill would maintain better relationships and repair broken lines of communication, allowing reconciliation and harmony to occur more widely. Most relationships break down because of our lack to be mindful in our conversations: we're quick to beat ourselves up mentally, and to be verbally defensive or attacking with others. We're thinking mostly of our own problems, not the needs of the other person. By showing up and being present for another person and helping them come to a solution for their needs, our own needs can often get met anyway.

The Zen communicator approach is to be fully present, offer empathic responses – simply by reflecting back what the other has said – not judging anything and observing the facts.

For example, someone might be complaining about their job. “I really hate my job at the moment, it's so busy and my manager keeps giving me more work”. The mindful listener reflects this back: “You're not liking your job? They're giving you more than you can handle?”

You're using your own words, so not as to repeat it back like a parrot. All you're doing is reflecting back what the other person has said. It's not offering a solution, or telling them they're wrong, or that it's justified that they feel that way, or anything. You might have a completely different opinion about something, but there's no need to say it. The person talking to you has a feeling and opinion about

something, and that's what needs to be heard. Once this is understood, the person will begin to relax, and calm enough to gain their own insights.

The mantra for a Zen communicator is simply: "how do I give, to ease suffering"? By holding the space, by being patient, with warmth, compassion and loving-kindness, you help the other person in some way. They leave the conversation in a better place than when they came in.

Be very cautious about asking anything other than reflective questions. Help the person explore their needs with curiosity and gentleness, being fully attentive with your body language and presence, with little more than nodding and smiling as the other person speaks, and you'll ease a lot of suffering.

Sitting with a stone

Relationships have to be worked at with good communication. If we ignore our feelings, it can lead to discord and ultimately break-up between people we really love. So many of us don't like to show our vulnerability; those times when we haven't got things together. It's vital that we create a loving atmosphere in our own homes, or else how can we love out in the world?

The practice of sitting together with a stone helps. If you have a willing friend or partner, it's a wonderful practice to sit together and work at communicating more deeply. Find a comfortable place in your home. Create ceremony; have candles burning, sit on cushions on the floor, like you're planning a

meditation. Of course you don't need to do this, but this can offer a sacred place for you to speak to one another with as much focus on compassion as possible. To begin, one of you takes a stone (or another object of your choosing) and the other listens as the person with the stone speaks. While someone has the stone, the other person refrains from speaking and practises their mindful listening. When one person has finished talking, they pass the stone to the other, and they become the mindful listener. Everyone gets a chance to speak, to reflect on what's going on, without interruption. This is key to understanding where someone is at.

While someone is speaking, we offer our mindful presence. We notice if our head takes over and enters our ego mind if we begin to feel threatened by what the other is saying (it could be related to you, after all), but we do our best in breathing with our emotions and truly listening. This is the first stage in healing a rift or tensions; the ability and the desire (from all parties involved) to listen is truly a gift to each other.

Mindful speaking

When the time comes to speak, we'll have hopefully listened as deeply and with as much presence as we could muster. The time spent listening will have aided in cultivating patience, understanding and compassion. Knowing that someone suffers, we gain more wisdom in what to say to ease their suffering, and of any part we have played.

Often, through deep listening, we realise we have wrong perceptions of what's happened, or how the other person feels about it. Maybe the other person acted out through a completely different storyline in their own mind about the situation. By listening deeply we can work out the wrong perceptions, and with our speech, the time may come to express our own version of the truth (note that both 'truths' may be correct, from each individual perspective).

It's important to be truthful. We can phrase the truth with as much loving-kindness as we can manage. We're seeking to ease suffering, not create more.

Our speech should be filled with compassion and gentleness. We're not in our ego; we are there for the other person, not to defend ourselves from their words.

People only act out from their suffering. Any argument, or harsh word, comes from suffering. Anger or frustrations are suffering, and are born out of not understanding the other person's need and our place in those needs. An example would be our partner wants to see more of us, but this has been impossible due to extra work hours. When we reconnect, often one person is tired from work, and the other is frustrated because of the lack of quality conversation or time. This is where sitting with the stone can be invaluable. It offers time for reconnection, for mutual understanding. One person might be saying that "It's imperative I work to keep food on the table", the other saying "What's the point of that unless we can have quality time together?" Different viewpoints such as

these often come from the same need to have a loving, nourishing relationship. By sitting together, explaining in as loving speech as possible, reconciliation can occur. Instead of saying “I need to work” which isn’t particularly loving, saying “I can understand that we need more quality time together, just as I understand the need to keep us surviving with money. What can we work on together to create a happy balance?” is more gentle and opens up discussion for the other person’s needs.

It’s truly an art to practise mindful speech. We can use mindfulness and slow pauses so that we phrase things in a certain way. It’s doubly important not to speak when we’re filled with strong emotions, like anger. We’ll often say hurtful things in those situations.

Breathing space

Everyone needs a space to breathe. Create a breathing space in your home. It can be part of a room, or a whole room in itself. Make it a place of comfort, of ceremonial space. Whenever you have a strong emotion such as anger, you can visit your breathing space, and sit with your emotions. You can breathe deeply, noticing your in-breath and your out-breath. By doing this, it’s possible to calm your emotions. We stay with it for as long as is needed until the feeling subsides. We also look deeply at our emotion. Where has it come from? It might not be from the current situation or even the current people in your life. What might your unmet needs be? Is this something that

you can communicate, with loving speech, when you're next sitting with your partner? If a conversation or mindful communication time becomes too difficult, there's nothing wrong with calling a halt and taking some moments in your breathing space to regain your composure and presence. I highly recommend it!

The community of compassion

Knowing that everyone suffers gives us compassion. Knowing that suffering is universal, that it often affects what we do, what we say and how we act with people, can offer insight and wisdom into situations. With compassion comes understanding. We have all been there, in the same predicament, countless times, fighting and arguing over this and that.

What is truly important? That we stick to our ego thoughts about being safe for 'me', or that we decide to help and ease suffering in ourselves, in those we love, in everyone? By choosing to sit with people, to hold the space, to practise being a Zen communicator of peacefulness, we begin to change our relationships, our life; our world. If we heal other people's suffering, we also heal it in ourselves.

Closed people

People who don't want to communicate are living in their fear. They're closed off as a way of protecting themselves. It might only be for a certain time, or it might be a habit that keeps them safe. They might be suffering hugely, in strong depression or anxiety. It's

worth remembering that we need patience; it can be incredibly difficult to help ease their suffering to begin with. We need to refrain from jumping in and trying to help people fix their problems. We need to be there for them, with our presence, our spaciousness, and our compassion. After a time, even closed people will be able to relax in the presence of someone practising deep listening and loving-kindness. When they begin to open up, the healing and laying down of ego armour can begin.

Writing notes and letters

At times it can be too painful or too difficult to engage someone we love in face to face conversation, especially if they've closed off, or if we're stuck in our anger, hurt or frustration about a situation. In these instances, it can be healing to write a letter.

Even if you don't send the letter, you can write it for you. In fact, the bigger the issue at hand, the more that I suggest you don't send the letter; use the process to release emotions and resentments for yourself, until you reach the point where these things can be spoken, without consciously or unconsciously wishing to wound the other person. A transformation can occur in you. If you can let go of your own suffering (by being with it, owning it, embracing it) you can then be there for the other. You'll be healed and nourished by your own mindful, compassionate words.

By writing a note, you're showing that you want to understand, that you want to connect. You're open. This in itself can sometimes be enough to start the

conversation again. When we close down, stay in our own mind and nurse our perceived 'wounds', that's when mindful communication is rarely possible.

With the practice of mindful listening and mindful speaking, you'll notice so much more during conversations, and that knowledge will help guide you to a better understanding of people (and of your own habits!)

11. The courage of walking a new path

It takes courage and patience to adopt mindfulness. To begin with, we're seeking to come out of our old patterns, our old ways of thinking. We're trying to undo what we've learned from our entire lifetime so far. That can be a daunting proposition!

To realise that much of our suffering comes from our old conditioned thoughts, to truly look at and take appropriate responsibility for our state of being can bring up a lot of emotions from the past. Sometimes these emotions we buried for a reason: they were too painful to bear, so we hid them away, distracted ourselves in work, in projects, in addictions and in relationships.

It's a wonderful act of self-compassion to you, to be choosing to begin to walk this new path. It's not necessarily 'easy' or 'difficult'; but it is certainly challenging and you'll face many inner demons on your way. I look at my own demons now as old facets of myself, nothing to fear, just parts of me that I need to sit with and talk with. They're guardians of the past, they hold onto it; they want to keep it as part of my identity, so that I can learn from my past.

No wonder that we find it easier to stay the same, to focus on the pleasures of life, whilst keeping the difficult things hidden away. More than once, in my own mindfulness practice, I've wanted to run. At those times, I've wished I could go back to 'how it was' before I ever heard of the word mindfulness, and I've even yearned to wallow in my old comfort zones. The

compelling lure of those familiar patterns and subconscious habits offer the illusion of a protective bubble, where I can stay safe and avoid any suffering.

However, when I look deeply, I fully realise that I can no longer go back. I know that even if I tried, I would be unfulfilled and once again tortured with my old emotions and thoughts. I can't reclaim my old anger, loneliness and life even if I get the odd notion to do so. I realise that it wasn't a protective bubble after all; it was a prison, a place of feeling trapped in a world of uncertainty and insecurity.

Mindfulness embraces the uncertainty of the future and the insecurity of the past. It takes patience, understanding, compassion and love to accept and follow its teachings.

When I look back at my life and see where I now am, I bow humbly to the essence within that is my awareness. The fact that I can be the observer, the awareness of everything that comes to me, shows that I cannot be imprisoned by anything. I am something greater, connected to, and fuelled by the boundless energy of the universe. The more I embrace this viewpoint, the less fear keeps me held at bay. My comfort zone increases. I can now talk to groups in public. I can now hold meetings. I can now visit what I used to regard as strange, fearful places. In noticing as much as possible in my days, I can gain peacefulness and happiness from ordinary, wonderful and challenging days alike. This awareness has given me access to an enduring joyfulness which previously eluded me. I used to search for it, strive for it, through

fear based thinking: trying to force my life to be joyful and successful, rather than simply accepting where I was.

You may find that when you first begin to practise mindfulness that you think it's too hard. You'll find it difficult to find the time to practise, or you'll forget to do it altogether. You'll fall easily back into your old patterns of thinking and doing, causing you to lose belief in your ability to change at all.

What I'll say, for you to remember in those moments of despair, is that small amounts of practice, little and often, go a very long way. You don't need to rush this. You don't need to ensure that you keep to a schedule to meditate every day for the rest of your life. On the path to Zen mindfulness, we're gentle with ourselves. We take each day as it comes, and when we notice our ego, our discontent, or our despair, we smile at it and we greet it with the wisdom of our awareness, of our non-thinking mind: our heart.

If we let our heart guide us, if we let our mind take a back seat and use it only when we need to solve a problem in the moment, we can discover the truth of everything in our lives and smile in that knowing, even when it causes us to feel our suffering.

So, gentle being, smile and go forth. Be the best human you can be. Notice what you can, breathe with what you can. The world will be grateful.

Further Resources

If you enjoyed this book, you may also like to read further about mindfulness. There are many books on the subject, but I would recommend these books which really helped me along my path:

The Power of Now – Eckhart Tolle

The Art of Living – Thich Nhat Hanh

The Miracle of Mindfulness – Thich Nhat Hanh

Full Catastrophe Living – Jon Kabat-Zinn

Comfortable with Uncertainty – Pema Chodron

There are also apps you can download to your mobile phone/device to give you meditations. Try:

www.headspace.com

www.insighttimer.com

About Enough^K Publishing (Optimistic Vision, Metaphor, Delusion?)

Envisioning an alternative publishing model is our response to the overwhelming urge we feel to contribute positively to a different world. It represents a sacred acorn of an idea; a notion that each author might decide for themselves how many book sales is 'enough' for them, before they publish. Everyone's answer to the question of how much is enough will be different. It's a good question to be asking. We hope the idea will spread. We hope that people in all walks of life will ask themselves before they launch any new venture: "How much will be enough for me, and what would I do, if I exceed that need?" We feel a more sustainable, equitable world exists over the horizon. We can't see it yet, but we know it's there.

We see a ceaseless striving towards growth in the world, always towards more that somehow leads to less. We sense that we might (in our lifetimes) outgrow this planet of ours, or at least our ability for the majority of us to live harmoniously on it. We struggle with the logic of adding another book to the billions already available. "Stop buying books. No, hang on, just buy one more. Buy our book".

So, have we written and published this book with the intention of getting a copy into every household on the planet? No, we haven't. Then how many books *do* we want to sell?? 100, 1,000, 10,000, 100,000?

How many sales would make us feel it was worth it, this enterprise of making a living as creative people? Exactly how much do we *need* to earn to support ourselves? We've come up with an answer to that question, and whilst it might change over time, we've set our target at 100,000 sales per title. If we exceed our expectations, we'll set up a foundation to support the work of poets, writers and other starving creatives. 100,000 sales for each title would cover that. We dream there would someday be a creative element at every conference across the land. It would be nice to do something about that. A vision of abundance for all.

So, here is the E^k Publishing pledge; to only sell *enough thousands* of books to cover the author's needs. Every hold it in your hand book sold will be numbered by hand, and when the author's target is reached, the counter and the printer will stop.

Follow @craigwriter and @inthelighthouse on Twitter to find out how this vision/delusion progresses.

