PART I

The Key

If you want peace, peace is already there. If you want joy, love, harmony, understanding, wisdom, and happiness—these, too, are already present, right in the nature of things. You do not need to travel to Tibet or India. You do not need to find the perfect teacher or the perfect retreat. You do not have to do anything special whatsoever. All you need to do is open yourself gently to receive what already is, as the earth receives the rain, as a flower opens to the sun.

Perhaps the most painful and damaging illusion of all is the notion that peace and happiness are to be found in the future. When we finish that degree or find the right job or the right relationship, then, we believe, we will be happy. And these may in fact be good things. But peace and happiness can only be now. If we can touch peace and happiness in this moment, future moments will also contain peace and happiness. If we cannot touch peace and happiness now, when will we?

Practically speaking, however, we are prone to lose our way. Both spiritual and psychological practice are a kind of medicine to help us find the means to recontact peace when we no longer seem to know how.

In Part I, we describe the nature of the problems we face in the modern world, and how mindfulness or holding to the center can help. Today many of us see life as a problem to be solved rather than an experience to be lived, looking everywhere but within, everywhere but at our own experiencing. We suffer from fragmentation, disconnection,

negative emotions, and low self-esteem. We burden our primary relationships with impossible expectations, and live for the never-arriving future.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, centers us in our own lives, empowering us to find our own internal authority. Mindfulness is deeply connected also to the practice of no self, which we introduce in this section.

Part I provides you with the essential background and understanding of mindfulness. It eases you in to the more formal practices beginning in Part II.

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Week One

KNOW WHERE YOU ARE

If you are trying to know God, you must imagine that death is already gripping you by the hair. If you are trying to win power and fame, you must imagine that you will live forever.

—Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902)

Pushing the Stone Uphill

Judy flew home from the peaceful retreat center on the northern California coast. The day was cold and gray. Newark airport was busy as ever. Though she half expected it, the indifference and suspiciousness of the travelers and the airport workers shocked her. Reflexively, she smiled at one person as she had been doing all week on her retreat. He looked away quickly, as if to say, "What do you want? Leave me alone." Men touched their pockets to check for their wallets; women guarded their purses.

The airport atmosphere contrasted dramatically with the smiling, happy people at the retreat with the famous author. She felt well, whole, and calm just being there with him and all those friendly people.

As she stepped into the dark emptiness of her house, everything she'd left behind engulfed her: the loneliness, the half-completed plans and projects, all the unfulfilled good intentions. Even her cat's gaze induced guilt for leaving him. As cats sometimes do, he punished her for her absence by pointedly ignoring her. Six messages from work nagged at her, and her heart sank when she heard them. They were like a strong undertow pulling her down with great force. She reminded herself quickly that her next retreat was only two months away. For although this had been her fourth retreat this year, she always had the next one planned. Her friend Mark said it was *the* workshop, and though she did not recognize the name of the famous leader, she nodded knowingly when he mentioned it. Yes, of course she'd heard of her from the *Oprah* show.

Seekers like Judy deserve credit. They have taken a crucial step. They have paid attention to their sense that something is missing and are trying to do something about it. At least they are looking in places that actually contain help, instead of the more indulgent, destructive paths some follow. The difficulty is in connecting these insights to their lives.

Judy tried to bridge the gap between the mountaintop experience of her retreats and workshops with the valley experience of everyday life by staying one step ahead of herself—always having the next retreat or workshop planned before returning from the present one. Her real life was overwhelmingly complicated. It was easier to live with vague fantasies of self-improvement than to face the complexities. Someday she would get it all together. Someday she would have the right job, the right relationship, enough money, live in the right place, and have all the right thoughts and feelings. Someday she would know peace and wholeness. It all seemed to depend on finding the right workshop, getting the right prepackaged answers.

Judy had been a retreat and workshop junkie for years. Her strategy of always having the next workshop planned succeeded just enough at staving off anxiety that she never saw its futility. She kept pushing that stone up the hill and ignoring that it always rolled back down. The retreats and the workshops that she attended were wonderful, and she found wisdom and supportive people at them. The problem was not with the retreats. The problem lay with something deeper, with the way Judy kept the focus off of herself and her own life, the way she kept looking outside herself for the answers. Judy could not resist the urge

to tinker with herself. The more she did this, the more the peace she sought eluded her grasp.

Connect Where You Are

The essential thing people want to know from teachers and therapists comes down to this: How can I be happy? How can I find peace?

The essential answer is always the same: Begin where you are.

If the 1970s were the "Me Decade," and the 1980s were the decade of greed, today we look back on a century of growing self-preoccupation. Freud published his first major work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, right at the birth of the twentieth century. And from that point on, we have been increasingly fascinated with ourselves. Yet at the same time, our anxiety and uncertainty have only increased. For all this fascination and preoccupation, we are more estranged than ever from ourselves and our world.

The reasons we have failed to find peace through all this astonishing effort are doubtless complex. But part of the answer is that we are looking in the wrong place. Part of the answer is that all of our searching leads nowhere if it is rooted in a fundamental distrust of ourselves and our nature. Psychology can help and spirituality can help. But as long as our searching is rooted in self-distrust, we will always be trying on someone else's answer. Workshops and retreats and other tools can only be helpful if you use them to help you connect with *where you are*.

There are many different complications, roles, and roadblocks in our lives that contribute to pushing the stone uphill. There are also many attitudes and beliefs that contribute to our incessant motion that leads us nowhere and in fact keeps us stuck in the same place. But before trying to understand the way out, we need to take a look at how we got into this mess in the first place.

Look at Life's Curveballs

Sometimes life throws a major curveball at us. Times of major change, for good or ill, are obvious challenges to our capacity to remain centered. At such times, even the most spiritually advanced and psychologically whole among us will be thrown off.

Among the negative changes, there are the obvious traumatic events, such as the death of a spouse, parent, child, or other loved one; the unexpected and undesired divorce; the major health problem. These are difficult passages, requiring time, patience, and a lot of support from others. We are thrown out of rhythm and balance. And indeed it would be strange and unnatural if death or major loss did not affect us deeply. For a time, life is empty and pointless. But as time passes, we resume our lives and go on. As we move through our grief, we begin to heal and gradually we are able to return to center. Eventually we integrate the loss and function again, though we remain changed by the experience.

Less generally acknowledged is that positive changes, such as promotions, marriage, career changes, graduations, significant success, and the birth of children, are also difficult curveballs. While we may feel incredibly happy, the earth is shifting beneath our feet, and it can be difficult to stay centered and peaceful. And so even in the face of good fortune, we may lose our center.

Life's curveballs, while difficult, are nonetheless opportunities for learning and growth to take place. Life is a school and the universe is constantly sending us lessons. But we need a way to come back to the center so that we can look at the havoc that these events can wreak on our psychospiritual well-being, understand them, and continue on our path.

But perhaps even more important are the background tensions, the chronic conditions of modern life that make it difficult to stay centered during times of major change.

Open to Abundance

So why do we lose our way even when there are no major losses or changes? What knocks us off course and prevents us from holding onto that balanced, peaceful place: the center within?

In Buddhist cosmology there is a strange and peculiar realm called the land of hungry ghosts. The land of hungry ghosts overflows, as the Bible would put it, with milk and honey. It is a land of abundance. The beings that dwell there, however, are a little strange. They have huge, empty, distended bellies and tiny, pin-size openings for mouths. This is a picture, in other words, of a huge appetite, but an inability to satisfy it no matter how abundant the surrounding world. In fact, the hellish as-

pect of this realm is not that anything is lacking, but rather, that everything is there, right in front of you, readily and easily available. Only you cannot avail yourself of it because you can never get enough of it through your tiny mouth. *It is not lack, but the inability to open to the surrounding abundance that is the source of the torture.*

In some ways the developed nations of the West are just such a realm. We live in a land overflowing and abundant, but we are plagued by anxiety, depression, and dissatisfaction. Instead of enjoying the abundance, we focus on what is lacking. Like hungry ghosts, we never get enough. The abundance only convinces us that we are not getting our share, increasing our already swollen appetites. No matter how much we have, the focus remains on having more.

The point is not so much that desire is wrong per se. You are not a materialist for wanting abundance or a careerist for desiring success. The universe is generous and longs to bless you with your heart's desire. But these things can become problematic when we put them at the center. Desire can lead to an endless cycle. While we imagine a particular level of wealth will suffice, once achieved, this level is no longer quite enough. We then need still a little more. The attempt to find peace by such means is an attempt to quench our thirst with saltwater: the very nature of our efforts only makes it worse.

Escape from the Future

Another reason we lose our center is that we postpone life rather than live it. Planning is unavoidable to some degree, and planning is no more the enemy than desire is. But when planning for the future takes over the present to such an extent that the present becomes unreal, insubstantial, and ghostlike, we have lost our center. Planning mindfully means knowing we are just planning. We do not confuse it with the present reality. When done in the right spirit, there's a lightness about planning. You know reality is endlessly complex and endlessly evolving beyond our capacity to foresee. And since our plans therefore need continual refining and adjustment—if not total revision—there is no sense to get too caught up in them.

Can you enjoy future food? Can you drink tomorrow's water? Most of us try to do just that, yet you can only nurture yourself with the food and water that are here and now.

Judy avoids living today by focusing on the next retreat or workshop. The student postpones life till he gets his degree, the businessperson till she achieves some imagined height of financial success. Is that person out running around the track truly happy? Perhaps not. His head may be filled with visions of what he will be like six months from now, when he can run farther and faster, when his body-fat percentage is even lower. And in the meanwhile, all of us are missing it. We are missing our lives. The irony is, a life full of so-called purpose and planning and goals is ultimately without point. For while we are preoccupied with our plans, life is happening. Life is not waiting until we are done planning. And while we are defining our goals, we are missing the whole thing. For life consists only of this present moment—the very one we are so busy running away from.

PRACTICE

Where Are You?

Right now: *Where are you?* Come back from your worries and plans, to where you are now as you read. How are you breathing? How are you sitting? How does your body feel? What is the quality of your thinking, your self-talk? Don't criticize or try to change any of this. Just spend a few minutes being quietly aware, as much as possible without judgment.

This is it. This is your life.

THE EXPERIENCE (TOM)

As I write this, my fingers feel cold. I feel the precise resistance of the computer keys, feel the pressure of my wrists where they rest on the edge of the desk. My stomach anticipates lunch. I hear birds outside my window trying to sing spring a little closer while the cold, March New Mexican winds try just as hard to keep it winter. There's a slight tightness in my abdomen as I focus intently on writing. There is both a sense of curiosity about how this

chapter will turn out, and the effort to get the sentence and the paragraph to come out right.

Become Aware of Fragmentation

A special problem of present-day life that detracts from our well-being is the fragmentation we experience as we are pressed between conflicting roles and tasks. The many masks we wear and the roles we play can lead us away from the center.

Our work can be fragmenting, and it doesn't matter how complicated the job is. Sometimes other people's work looks enviably easier than our own. But when you're in that apparently simple job, it still has many aspects and demands. Being a homemaker, for example, is not the simple task others romantically imagine: "What is most important for me to do now? Should I do the grocery shopping or go to the cleaner's? Do the banking or vacuum the carpet? Have I done enough now to be able to take a break and do something I enjoy, like watching my favorite program, reading my book, listening to my favorite symphony, or just calling a friend and talking for a while? Or do I need to do more first? And, oh, I forgot to defrost something for dinner tonight." And just when you think you've got it figured out, the kids come home from school and demand your attention; the phone rings and that aggressive long distance carrier tries yet again to sell you its services (how did you ever get on its list, anyway?); the doorbell rings; you suddenly remember you need to pay the mortgage.

There is nothing easy or simple about running a home. Even within this one role, there are many competing demands. And of course it is more complicated than this for many of us. Most of us must deal not only with the complexity of one role, but with balancing the complexity of many roles.

Is it any wonder that we sometimes find ourselves yearning for some other, simpler time; some past or future Eden; some time when we know what is expected of us; some time when things are easier; some time when we can *just* earn a living, or *just* be a homemaker, or *just* be a

parent or a friend or a spouse; or some time when we do not have to do any of that at all and can just sit on the beach and sip margaritas? Beverly says, let's move to the islands and sell T-shirts. Yet she knows *this* is the time we have, the life we have.

~ PRACTICE ~

Acknowledge Your Many Roles

Get out pen and paper. Sit quietly for a few minutes, breathing gently. Start to think of the many roles and aspects of your life. List all the roles that you play.

Of course, you may think first of your role at work—the first thing we're asked at parties and social gatherings. But that one role has many subroles. For example, if you're an attorney, you may be part counselor, part litigator, part actor, part researcher, part businessperson, and so on. Also include the roles that you play as husband or wife, parent, son or daughter, and so forth. Make your list as long as possible, coming up with at least twenty-five roles or so, considering even aspects that are quite small such as salon customer or mail recipient.

When you have listed as many roles as you can, read your list over meditatively. Now ask yourself gently and repeatedly: *Who am I?* without trying to answer the question, just holding it in your awareness for a few minutes.

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THE EXPERIENCE (TOM)

As I wake up this morning, I am grateful that I didn't schedule appointments today. There's a feeling of freedom in this, and I'm glad to be able to start my day without having to be at a certain place at a certain time. But this feeling is short-lived. I start running through the list of things I need to do. I try to remind myself that my plan is to write, but just as I do, I remember that I also have to go to the bank. I should get some laundry done, too. Outside, the fruit trees demand pruning and fertilizing. I tell myself: First, I will read for a little while over coffee. But as I'm reading, the ideas in the book spark associations, and I think: I've got to re-
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member to add that insight to the talk I'm giving next week. And when will I get in that application to teach at the university? And don't forget to check the phone messages at work. I meditate for a while, and accepting these crosscurrents, returning again and again to the breath, I emerge from my meditation with a clear focus: to write. I turn on the computer and begin. Just then, my cell phone startles me. Will it be a crisis, or a wrong number? A million tasks, great and small, pull at me, each one a pretender to the throne in the moment it occupies my consciousness, each one claiming to be the most important thing.

And I could add more, just describing the demands experienced within the space of an hour or so on one particular morning, balancing responsibilities for domestic tasks, teaching and speaking, running a psychotherapy practice, and writing. The catalog of activities does not include some major pieces of my life that did not happen to figure prominently that morning, such as being a parent and being a spouse. And I'm not complaining. I'm pretty lucky. Many people are juggling more and enjoying it less.

Breathing in and out, in and out, feeling each breath all the way in, feeling each breath all the way out, not only breathing, but knowing that I am breathing, deeply aware, I let each demand come and go. No resistance. No struggle. This is my life. Just as it is. Its many pulls and demands. Breathing in and out, I know I am worrying about what to do. Gradually, without trying to do so, I grow calmer. I trust my sense of what is important to do now, what is important to do next. I am aware again of the coldness in my fingers, the wind, and the birds. I know that I am alive, as fully as I can be at this time.~

Recognize Disconnection

Though my father's father came from Europe, the next generation lacked all wanderlust. Most remained in the same city. When my father moved an hour south to the suburbs, it was as if we had moved to the moon. If we were to see his family, we were the ones who traveled. They could scarcely imagine leaving the city and going so far. Later some cousins moved all the way from New Jersey to Florida, venturing far beyond my father's journey. But for the most part, that generation

stayed put, as if honoring some cross-generational need for balance and stability after the emigration of their parents.

Disconnection and separation from our families of origin and friends, coupled with periodic change in geographic locations, all add up to a loss of center. There are many side effects to disconnection from family and friends. And sometimes these side effects distract us from our sense of balance and peace and cause us to lose our way.

For most of human history, people didn't venture beyond a radius of a few miles. Our bodies and nervous systems are no different from our ancestors who lived their quiet, local lives. Most human beings intimately knew the place where they were born, and knew the same set of family members and neighbors their whole lives. For us, it is unimaginably different. We scarcely know the place where we live. Our cars whisk us past them too quickly. We don't have a village, not even a neighborhood. And then every few years or so, we move and start again. Lifelong friends are rare. What we have are friends from different chapters in our lives. And the majority of these fade into the past as we move to new places and occupations. Whether we like living this way or not, our Stone Age bodies and brains are ill equipped for it. There is a constant background stress to lives so disconnected from the roots of place and community. Then when life throws us a major curveball, it is no wonder we lack the resources to cope with it.

But this is only the familiar piece. This is the piece we all talk about. There is much more. Disconnection runs deeper.

Recognize Disconnection in Time

In contrast with our own culture, consider the importance of ancestors in Confucianist Asia. Traditional Vietnamese homes, for example, usually contain an ancestral altar. Every important event in the family's history—every death, every birth, every marriage—involves ritual offerings and pronouncements before this altar, keeping the ancestors informed of all these events, and seeking their guidance and support. This is not a practice most Western people could imagine undertaking. Here, parents and adult children often have troubled relationships. Sometimes they have no relationship at all. Some ancient argument

severed the connection. And if we cannot connect back even one generation, how could we possibly entertain the notion of making a place for ancestors in our awareness?

Ancestor worship may not fit our Western context. But it does demonstrate another dimension of our disconnection. We are disconnected not only in space, but in time as well. We lack continuity with the past. Nor do we feel connected with our offspring and with the future. In the past, people were like oak trees, changing slowly, having the strength of deep roots—roots that sank not only into a particular place, but also into the stream of life flowing back into the past and forward into the future. Now we are like the tumbleweeds that roll incongruously across our southwestern interstates, rootless and blown by every wind.

It is impossible for most Western people to think like Confucians. But we do need to find our own ways of maintaining a sense of connection with the past and the future, with the people we came from, the traditions we were born into, and with future generations. Maintaining connection does not mean whole and uncritical acceptance of all people and traditions. Perhaps some of the actions of our parents and ancestors were misguided; perhaps some of the traditions no longer compel in our fast-paced, pluralistic society. We do not need to ignore shortcomings and errors. But if we are radically disconnected, we pay a tremendous price.

Sometimes We Need Separation: Jerry's Story

Jerry had not talked to his parents in ten years. He could no longer even say exactly what that last argument had been about. But he vowed at that time never to talk to them again. He kept his word and took pride in it.

Jerry had his reasons. His parents were alcoholics. Their disciplining would be considered abusive by today's standards. They terrorized him as a child. Coming home from school, he never knew whether his mother would be passed out on the couch or greet him with an angry tirade. Passed out was often preferable. At least then she would leave him alone. And likewise, when his father came home from work, Jerry never knew what mood he would be in. Jerry tried to be outside when

his father came home. He would listen at the door for a minute to test the water before going inside. Sometimes he didn't go inside at all, but stayed overnight at a friend's house.

In rejecting his parents, Jerry rejected their religion, too. It was so hypocritical of them, he felt, to spout their Christian platitudes and sit in church on Easter and Christmas with smiling faces, dressed in their best clothes. But Jerry went further. He didn't just reject Christianity. He rejected God. He rejected religion. He rejected spirituality. He rejected any sense of meaning and purpose in life. He saw it all as childish and hypocritical.

Jerry adapted the best he knew how. He tried to make a family out of his closest friends. This was not altogether satisfactory, however, for his friends had their own families. On major holidays and for birthdays, weddings, and funerals, Jerry's friends were with their blood families, and unavailable to him. Sometimes Jerry felt subordinate to his friends' families, and it bothered him. But he was doing the best he could.

Find Your Roots

The point is not that Jerry was wrong. His reaction was understandable. In some situations, it may be the best a person can manage. While none of us are born to perfect parents, some of us are born to parents who are so wounded it may be impossible to reconcile. So perhaps Jerry needed to take the stand he took. Perhaps he needed to avoid speaking to his parents and to see their faith skeptically. But even so, can he look more deeply? Can he, at least in memory, acknowledge that they were people, not monsters? Can he allow himself to remember those admittedly rare moments of positive connection? Though they gave him little and hurt him much, someone clothed him, fed him, changed his diapers—enough for him to have survived early childhood's dependency. And even if he rejects his parents' religion for himself, can he acknowledge the positive yearnings religion represents for others? Does he have to close himself off in bitterness and cynicism? Continuing in such a disconnected way creates grave risks to Jerry's well-being.

Over months of therapy and meditation practice, Jerry slowly began to heal. He learned to relate differently to his thoughts and feelings, experiencing them more fully and clearly while identifying with them less. He eased his grip on his anger and resentment, and eventually re-

contacted his parents. He did not want to become close to them and at least to this point cannot envision ever doing so. But neither does he have to completely ignore them.

Someone else might make a different choice than Jerry. Someone else might in fact feel that any contact is impossible. Still others may try to reestablish true familial closeness. But Jerry felt this was the healing choice for him. And he made that choice out of his freedom and mindfulness.

Not all of us are as disconnected from our roots as Jerry. But most of us probably have some disconnections to contend with: friends who were once close that we have lost touch with, a sibling we have nothing in common with, parts of our heritage that we have rejected. The world being what it is, this is to some extent unavoidable. But the fewer gaps of this nature we have, the stronger, the more resilient we can be.

It is hard to grow tall without deep roots.

~ PRACTICE ~

Reconnect with Your Roots

Spend some time considering the people who have been important to you. Be sure to think about all the different times and places of your life. Now write down the names of the significant people you have lost touch with. For each one on your list, consider the circumstances under which you lost contact. Was it just drifting apart as one of you moved away? Or was your disconnection the result of some conscious choice, based on disagreement? Or was it perhaps unclear how you drifted apart? Notice any patterns. Try to see beyond blaming either them or yourself.

Then for each person on the list, consider whether you might want to reestablish contact in some way. Form a plan to recontact anyone you might like to. There will be some people you may not be able to contact because you no longer know how to find them, and others who, for one reason or another, you judge it best not to be in contact with at all. That's okay. Such choices must be made in freedom and not forced. For those you do not want to contact or cannot contact, spend a few moments visualizing them. See them as happy, smiling, and fulfilled. If you have bad feelings about them, release them by reminding yourself that, whatever they did to hurt you, they were just trying to be happy

and avoid suffering in accord with their best understanding at that time. Don't just say the words, but do your best to let this be a deep intention.

THE EXPERIENCE (BEVERLY)

I just returned from a hike in the Sandia Mountains. As always, I feel refreshed. My hikes in the New Mexico landscape always help me to recenter when I find myself getting a bit off track.

But I had that feeling today: that Where am I? feeling that I sometimes experience since moving to New Mexico. It happens less often now, but still washes over me occasionally. It's a moment of feeling strangely disconnected from my New Mexico environment, which is so drastically different from where I grew up in the Boston area.

The moment passes and the landscape once again feels comforting and familiar. I stop for a few minutes and sit on a rock overlooking an expanse full of cactus and piñon trees. Breathing in and out, feeling the hard rock beneath me, I meditate on being at home right here.

Negative Emotions and Low Self-Esteem

When the Dalai Lama started coming to the West, he encountered the problem of low self-esteem for the first time. When first asked about it, he did not know what the term meant. And this was not just a problem of translation: The very concept was unknown to him. From a Buddhist point of view, there is never any reason to feel bad about oneself. No matter what mistakes you have made, you are a future Buddha. Nor is this just a philosophical attitude. Tibet had not been infected with the vicious microbe of low self-esteem.

Of course people everywhere experience negative emotions, and Tibetans are no exception. But negative emotions *with* low self-esteem and negative emotions *without* it are quite a different matter. If you feel positive about yourself overall, it is not terribly difficult to pass through negative moods, learn their lessons, and come out the other side, perhaps stronger and wiser. But if you do not feel good about yourself at

the root level, negative emotions grab you more deeply. They pierce you to the core and are more difficult to heal.

In the West, negative emotions present a special problem due to the background of low self-esteem. Our combined fragmentation, disconnection, and low self-esteem make us less resilient to negative emotions and mood states. They also present some special difficulties in learning to be more mindful and tapping into the healing and wisdom this brings. We will suggest ways to negotiate these difficulties in chapter 7, drawing upon both psychological and spiritual wisdom to help you in your work toward psychospiritual well-being.

PRACTICE

Be Aware of Self-Punishing Thoughts

Spend a day practicing awareness of your tendency to engage in self-critical, negative thinking. Label each instance you notice and number them consecutively: "Self-abuse number 1, self-abuse number 2, . . . self-abuse number 37," and so on. If you lose count, just start at one again. Do this in a lighthearted way. Laugh.

If you do this deeply, you will notice that many thoughts may contain an implicit self-critical element rather than a direct criticism of yourself. Count these also.

If you have a lot of these thoughts, you might like to continue this practice for several days. See if, by the process of awareness and without trying to correct the thoughts, they automatically begin to decrease. Awareness itself is healing.

Relationships: Great Expectations

Nothing affects us as deeply, makes us as happy, or causes us to lose our balance as much as romantic relationships. Love is said to make the world go round, but it often sends us spinning as well. Relationships, particularly romantic ones, often get in the way of our holding to center.

The modern view of romantic love seems so fixed and absolute and is

so much a part of the psychological landscape of our time, it is difficult to see it in its historical and cultural context. But romantic ideals of love are not universal, they are a phenomenon of the Western world. The creation of what we consider love in this sense can be attributed to one very powerful medieval woman, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor (1122–1204) was married successively to two different kings—Louis VII of France and Henry II of England. She used her attractiveness to spur Louis on to dangerous endeavors. As a patron of the arts, she encouraged the romantic poetry of the troubadours, which instilled an almost divinized view of woman as the unobtainable, ideal lady, thereby increasing female power and influence. It is hard for us to imagine a world without love, in this sense of the word, yet it is absolutely an invention of culture, scarcely existing before Eleanor's time.

In contrast with romantic idealism in the West, in traditional societies parents arrange their children's marriages. Our culturally conditioned reaction to this is generally one of horror. Imagine having to marry someone you had perhaps never even met. Where's the romance? Where's the love?

While romantic love can be wonderful, older ways contain their own wisdom, and people who do things differently than we do are not necessarily less intelligent or wise. Of course, marriages were arranged among royalty in former times to cement political alliances and strengthen family fortunes—reasons that from our perspective are horribly crass. But consider the consequences of our ideal of romantic love, of soul mates living happily ever after. For one thing, falling under the spell of this myth, we often fail to see the reality of the other person clearly. And for another, this ethos creates tremendous overexpectation. Somehow by just meeting that special someone, as the songs all say, all our dreams should come true. That's it. No more strain and struggle and striving. Instant happiness.

This sets up inflated hopes, and subsequently, painful disappointments. What we experience is inevitably at least somewhat different from the happily ever after of fancy. For one thing, all the other problems of life continue. We still worry about earning a living and what career to pursue, where to live and how. We still confront health problems and emotional problems. While it is often easier to face these things with someone we love than to face them alone, the problems themselves do not disappear. Moreover, the relationship creates problems of its own: How to get along with her when she's grouchy. How to

get along with her when you're feeling grouchy. Whether to have children and how to share these responsibilities if you do. Working out differing financial priorities. Whose family to spend holidays with. How to share housework. How to deal with it when one person wants more sex than the other. Whether to rent *The English Patient* or *Terminator II*. These are problems internal to the relationship, but factors outside the relationship also affect it.

Disconnection also affects our relationships. In the village of old, even in the neighborhoods of a few generations ago, people enjoyed considerably more closeness. For this reason, people did not expect their primary relationship to meet all their emotional needs. What you didn't get from your partner, you got in part from Uncle George or Aunt Sophie, from the friend next door or across the street. Even the neighborhood grocer might supply a piece of what you needed, just by noticing that you looked a little tired. For many people, all of this burden of caring is placed squarely on the shoulders of the primary relationship. And the heavier the burden, the more likely the eventual collapse. This lack of broader social support can strain even the best relationships.

Other external factors affect relationships. If your partner is not happy at work, guess what? You are going to be less happy also. If your partner has an argument with a friend, undergoes a change in health status or earning capacity, has a fight with his or her parents—all of these things and more will have a direct effect on you and on your relationship.

The hidden factor in many divorces is overexpectation, so that when these predictable crises hit the relationship, we feel something is terribly wrong. For it certainly does not resemble the fairy-tale fantasy, no matter how sound the relationship may be at its core. Because of these expectations, it is all the more important to take especially good care of our relationships. But in practice just the opposite is the case. Somehow the relationship is just supposed to be there for us, no matter how many years of neglect and indifference it has suffered. Often we lack the basic skills for relationship care. And if we have them, we may still feel something is wrong if we have to work at it. For this reason, to be mindful in the West involves special attention to relationship skills, which we address in chapter 8 with both spiritual and psychological practices.

Living in the future, becoming fragmented and disconnected, expecting all of life's problems to be solved by our partners—these are all

common sources of suffering. These problems point us all the more urgently in the direction of mindfulness. In the next chapter, you will learn more about mindfulness—what it is, and how it can help you meet these challenges and difficulties. We then move on to the specifics of mindfulness practice and relate it to the special problems of negative emotions, relationships, and other needs. You do not have to be superhuman. You do not have to be a saint to practice mindfulness. Every step taken in mindfulness helps reduce our very human, very common, but very painful suffering.

PRACTICE

Become the Beloved

With paper and pen in front of you, think of the person you feel closest to—perhaps your partner if you have one, perhaps a friend or relation if not. With eyes closed, imagine yourself becoming that person. Be him physically. Think his thoughts. Feel his feelings.

Now open your eyes. Let this person express his deepest feelings, his hopes and fears, his strengths and self-doubt, everything. Also record this person's feelings about you. Write this all down.

Do not worry whether this is accurate or not. In fact, do not assume that it is. It is not the particular things that are of importance, but making the effort to see it from the other's point of view. By doing so, you may begin to notice whether your guesses are correct, because you begin to observe more closely. Perhaps you even ask. It is all about paying attention.

See Yourself as a Flower

In *Psychotherapy East and West*, the author Alan Watts described a similarity between the activities of the Zen master and those of the psychotherapist. In Rinzai Zen, the master gives the student a koan, a kind of unsolvable riddle such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" He instructs the student to meditate continually on this intellectual jawbreaker until he attains insight. The student approaches the teacher many times attempting to answer with the required insight, which the teacher just as many times rejects, until something of a different quality

emerges in the student's answer. It is not any particular words that the teacher is looking for. He is looking for an answer that demonstrates spontaneity and trust of one's own being. But this understanding only emerges out of finally *giving up* the effort and relaxing into a knowingness. Zen masters are tricky fellows and have a knack for knowing the difference between a true, spontaneous emergence and a fake one.

Watts wrote that Western psychotherapy accomplishes something similar. The psychotherapy patient in essence approaches the expert therapist and says, "Fix me." Now every master therapist knows at some level that this is an absurd proposition. One human being cannot fix another human being any more than, in the Zen context, the teacher can make the student into a Buddha. So the therapist dispenses her own unsolvable riddles. If the therapist is a classical Freudian, the riddles will be about mother, toilet training, penis envy, and castration anxiety. If the therapist uses a modern cognitive approach, she will tell you to identify your irrational thoughts and counter them with more rational thinking. The patient keeps coming back, thinking he just does not get it, and the therapist keeps giving out more riddles, until eventually, the patient *gives up* and allows himself to just be as he is. The problem, you might say, is our perception that we are a problem that we have to fix. And once we stop thinking of ourselves as a problem, we discover that we are (and always have been) okay. In Buddhist terms we uncover our Buddha nature.

Of course, this is an oversimplification of both Zen and psychotherapy. It is like saying that bread is just water, yeast, and flour. So why bother with all that baking? Just eat the separate ingredients, then jump up and down for a while to mix them, and let them bake in the heat of your body. Isn't that the same thing? But this oversimplification has a point. Who told you that you were a problem to fix? *You are not a problem to fix any more than a flower is.* A flower is there to appreciate. You are much more like a flower than like a Rubik's Cube. Be wary of anything that teaches you that you are a problem to fix, that sets you at war with yourself, diminishes you, and reduces your capacity for peace.

Practice for Week One

1. Do the practices contained in the chapter:
   - "Where Are You?" (p. 8)
   - "Acknowledge Your Many Roles" (p. 10)

- "Reconnect with Your Roots" (p. 15)
- "Be Aware of Self-Punishing Thoughts" (p. 17)
- "Become the Beloved" (p. 20)

2. Try this special daily practice: "Take Up Your Robe, Sandals, and Begging Bowl" below.

PRACTICE

Take Up Your Robe, Sandals, and Begging Bowl

Wearing special clothes contains power. I knew a minister who wore a clerical collar every day. At one point he considered leaving the church, but in the end he decided to stay. What held him was a simple thought: He couldn't imagine not putting on his collar in the morning.

When a traditional Buddhist monk or nun wakes in the morning, there are no choices to be made about what to wear. Every morning, he puts on his robe. Every morning, she puts on her sandals. Every morning, he takes his bowl to beg food for the day.

Every time you put on your clothes in the morning this week, or change them during the day, or take them off at night, say to yourself, "This is my robe, these are my sandals." Whenever you take out your wallet to pay for something, say to yourself, "This is my begging bowl that the universe has filled." Use this as a way to remind yourself that, whatever role that you may be playing at the moment, your central calling is the same as that of anyone under religious orders: to be a person of peace, of calm, of mindfulness, of lovingkindness and compassion, of joy, and of equanimity. This is your true career.