

## The Being of Coaching: Mindful Service

*Service is the rent we pay to be living. It is the very purpose of life  
and not something you do in your spare time.*

Marian Wright Edelman

*If one is estranged from oneself, then one is estranged from others too.  
If one is out of touch with oneself, then one cannot touch others.*

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

**S**ERVICE IS IMPLICIT IN OUR DEFINITION OF COACHING: whether you do it as a professional coach with an executive client, a manager with an employee, a teacher with a student, or a health care worker with a patient, coaching means placing yourself in service to another. In turn, placing oneself in service requires a broad quality called mindfulness.

This chapter begins with an exploration of service and its implications for our mindfulness. In developing the notion of mindfulness, we'll touch on the levels of experience that are available to us in every moment, the nature of the habits that cloud our mindfulness, and approaches for cultivating mindfulness in ourselves and, by extension, in our clients. As you will see more and more in later chapters, coaching can be considered in large part as a process of cultivating

greater mindfulness, and thereby resourcefulness and choice. By the end of the chapter, we will be ready to delve into the seven roles, or Voices, through which effective coaching is expressed.

## PLACING ONESELF IN SERVICE

Leadership is often done in the name of service; an entire field of “servant leadership” has sprung up to describe and deepen this leadership ethic. Unfortunately, some of what is done is not so helpful; leadership can often be self-service or arrogance disguised as help for others. True service means discerning and providing what is needed. This requires a high level of commitment and care. Ethical service is done consciously, with self-awareness, and for the benefit of the client.

The coach represents, and stands for, the client’s highest potential. As coaches, we can sometimes see the possibilities for a client’s success more clearly than he can. It is true service to believe in someone’s potential and encourage him to realize it, to help him set goals and develop strategies for achieving them. It is also true service to help a client acknowledge his limitations, help him work to overcome them, and accept him fully even when he can’t bring himself to take the plunge into change.

To place oneself in service is noble. It does not mean being subservient or putting oneself in a “lesser than” position in relation to the other. It is, rather, a dedication—a clear commitment to attend primarily to the client’s needs for the time being.

Service is what allows coaching to happen. It is enabled by an agreement that works for both parties about the parameters of their relationship, including logistical arrangements, mutual responsibilities, fees, third-party agendas, and other concerns. Above all, the coach must be able to respect and support the outcomes that the client seeks. The partnership between coach and client must be structured as a win-win so that both parties sense that their underlying needs are being met. This frees the coach up from her own separate concerns, making it easier to truly serve.

Being of service does not mean that we avoid giving tough feedback or dance around difficult issues. As coaches, we must sometimes participate in emotionally challenging conversations or tell our clients things that are hard for them to hear. Service depends on our

ability to participate honestly for the learning of the client and not for needs of our own that we ourselves may not even recognize. To serve, we first must understand what's going on within. Only then can we speak and coach directly, clearly, and compassionately.

If we feel irritated and impatient in a coaching conversation, for instance, we need to ask ourselves what part of that impatience comes from our own agenda and what part has to do with the client. Letting these emotions go unexamined may be easier for us, but it won't serve the client. It might be useful to the client for us to describe how his behavior affects us—for instance, to say that we notice our impatience rising and to suggest a connection between what we notice in ourselves and the client's behavior. If we do so, however, it must be by choice and in recognition that in this particular instance, it may be helpful for the client to recognize how his behavior may affect others.

So our own impatience can express itself in several ways. We can simply let it be acted out according to our own habits and agendas, but, if we are committed to service, we must find a way to use our impatience as a starting point for providing difficult needed feedback in a compassionate way. The difference depends largely on our own degree of self-awareness, enabled by mindfulness.

## MINDFULNESS AND SELF-AWARENESS

Placing ourselves in service is a powerful way to catalyze our own self-awareness. As soon as we place some of our needs and agendas off-limits, they'll show up full force. If you don't believe this, try going on a sugar-free diet for a week. Or giving up coffee. Or stopping just about anything that is habitual for you. All of a sudden, you *really* want that thing—whatever it is.

Mindfulness is the inner state in which we can observe ourselves in action. It enables the self-awareness, for example, that in this moment, I am irritated, or happy, or craving that cup of coffee, or I am just about to say something to my client that might be better not said. Awareness, in turn, allows us to consciously choose whether to say, or withhold, that thought.

The importance of mindfulness in serving cannot be overstated. The mindful coach knows, from her awareness of her own

feelings and thoughts, when she is serving the client and when not. She knows if her personal agendas and judgments are in the way, and what to do with them if they are. She is able to be mindfully present with the client and to listen and respond clearly, with acceptance, and without judgment.

Committing to service requires the corollary commitment to a self-development curriculum in mindfulness. Self-awareness— noticing and suspending one’s own habits and agendas—is a primary requirement for being an effective coach. But ultimately the coach himself benefits too. The client benefits from being served well, and the coach benefits from learning to be of service, from learning the discipline of true mindfulness.

A commitment to cultivating mindfulness will provide you with a lifetime of learning opportunities. It will also greatly deepen your experience of coaching and your ability to be present and effective as a coach.

As a concept, mindfulness is central in a mushrooming volume of professional and business literature.<sup>1</sup> The term comes from Western translations of the formulations of Buddhist teachers. Some of the other terms I will use (*attachments* and *aversions*) come from the same tradition. I have chosen to organize this book around these particular terms and distinctions in part because they are informed by my own personal work and lineage of teachers, and in part because they, more than any other language I’ve run across, point directly to the granular nature of experience that seems to be central in being mindful and aware. This language is pragmatic, relevant, contemporary, and consistent with current scientific understanding. We can use it to understand more precisely what goes on inside us. Still, I acknowledge that other vocabularies and conceptual frameworks could also serve as platforms from which to develop the ideas presented here. For example, Daniel Goleman’s domains of emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management) come to mind.<sup>2</sup>

The cultivation of mindfulness is a lifelong process. As you read this book, give yourself lots of permission to be a beginner and to experiment. Because you are probably a well-educated, successful, intelligent, quick learner, you may expect that you will be “good at” mindfulness. Watch out! This internal standard will spectacularly interfere with your learning in this particular realm because the very

orientation toward achievement and performance makes it particularly challenging to simply look squarely at what *is* and accept it fully.

I invite you to engage this material not as a reader seeking to efficiently assimilate a new body of knowledge into the way you do your work. Rather, approach it with genuine curiosity, seeking what you might discover about yourself and how the experiences contained within this book might challenge what you think you know. Instead of fitting this material into the existing frameworks of your understanding, be open to how it might expand those frameworks and enable entirely new ways of experiencing yourself and engaging in relationships.

Exercise 1.1 provides a beginning experience of mindfulness.

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#### EXERCISE 1.1.

#### *Mindful Eating*

This exercise is a variation on a traditional eating meditation.<sup>3</sup> It's an excellent experiment for directing your attention and noticing your own habits of mind at play. (It's hard to read the directions and perform the experiment at the same time. You could read the whole thing through and then turn your attention to the exercise, make a recording to listen to, or ask a friend to read it out loud as you do the exercise.)

Begin by selecting something that you enjoy eating, and procure three small bites. Fresh raspberries, small pieces of dark chocolate, or pieces of dried fruit work well. (You could, of course, later extend this practice to an entire meal.) I'll describe the practice with berries.

Cup your three berries in one hand. Settle yourself in a chair. Be comfortable. Let go of other activities and distractions, and let your body relax.

Now, take one berry and look at it as if you'd never seen a berry before. You could imagine that you just arrived here from Mars, and someone handed you this berry, and you are exquisitely curious about what it is. Sense its color, texture, patterns. Smell it. Bring it to your lips, but without touching them. Experience it fully, using all your senses, being exquisitely curious.

Notice any response in your body. What happens in your mouth in anticipation? Are you salivating? Is there any sense of craving in your chest? Any emotions? Memories of other times eating berries? Notice everything that arises in you in relation to this little berry.

Now, slowly place the berry in your mouth—not chewing, but letting the flavor slowly emerge. Sense the flavor spreading in your mouth and how the flavor is subtly different in

different parts of your mouth and tongue. Sense every nuance of flavor and texture. Feel the place where your teeth and your tongue meet the skin of the berry.

Very slowly and mindfully, chew the berry. If you notice your thoughts wandering or your attention elsewhere than on the experience of eating, bring it back to the sensation of the berry in your mouth. This is a practice in one-pointed attention, an opportunity to “mono-task” all too rare in our busy modern lives. Make the most of it.

Notice the urge to swallow, and sense the urge itself. Let the berry linger; chew slowly and bring your attention back to the berry over and over until there is nothing left in your mouth but berry juice. Then swallow, and sense the berry juice flowing down your throat. Let yourself experience the absence of berry in your mouth. What is it like to have the berry gone?

Now take the second berry, and bring the same fresh curiosity to this berry. You’ve never actually looked at this berry before! How is it similar to the first? How is it different? Look. Feel. Touch. Smell. Sense not just the berry, but every sensation in your body at the same time. Place the berry in your mouth, and notice your mouth’s response to it.

Consider momentarily that millions of years of evolution went into the perfection of this berry. A farmer grew this berry; someone picked and packed it; a truck transported it; someone placed it on the shelf in the store for you to buy—a miraculous chain of events, each of which was required to give you this precise experience. Notice the feeling of gratitude in you. Be present with the unique experience of eating *this* berry. It’s the only opportunity you’ll ever have for this particular experience, this particular moment.

Again, let the berry linger, become juice, and be swallowed, becoming part of you. Take your time. Enjoy. Be present and mindful.

Now take the third berry and experience it fully. Notice again and again that your mind goes off somewhere. Practice bringing it back. Over and over. That’s all there is to do. You are practicing focusing your attention—noticing everything that is available to notice, and bringing your attention back, over and over, to your own experience.

Exercise 1.1 provides the opportunity to notice what arises as we try to maintain mindfulness on one simple task. We may experience desire or dislike. If we pay close attention, we may notice a subtle impulse to eat the berries fast. We may experience new sensations, our distractibility, or boredom, or sheer pleasure, or impatience with this silly exercise, or a desire to keep reading. The range of possible responses to such a simple practice is astounding.

This of course is the point. When we focus on something so elemental, the nuances of our experience are illuminated. All that experience is there all the time anyway; it’s just that we rarely see

it so clearly. Learning to be conscious and appreciative of how our own minds work is essential to becoming effective and authentic as coaches. When we coach, our client and our coaching become the objects of our total focus and attention.

## MINDFULNESS AND THE THREE LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE

Contained within every moment of our lives are three levels or domains of experience. We can actually distinguish many more nuanced levels, but for our purposes, three will suffice: sensation, emotions, and thoughts. Generally, each of these three levels correlates with a particular part of our nervous systems.

Sensation is the first level, and the one that operates the most quickly in us. The smells of my daughter fixing sautéed eggplant sandwiches downstairs for lunch, the sound of the rain falling outside my window as I write, the sensation of a warm dog belly on my toes, the feeling of my weight pressing down in my chair, the pulsing of my heartbeat in my throat. When I am mindful, I am aware of all of these sensations.<sup>4</sup>

Emotion is the second level. At their root, emotions also have a component of sensation. When we look deeply, we can find the locus of emotion in our body. Yet emotions have a life, an energy, and a power all their own. Emotions can be very strong forces, taking over our awareness and driving behaviors that often are counterproductive. They can bias us and restrict our range of possible responses. Because my wife was irritated earlier when I left my dirty shoes in the front hall, I feel some anxiety as she walks into my office even though it may well be that she's coming to tell me how much she's enjoying the sound of the rain on the roof. I notice that I'm ready to react and defend myself against her irritation. Again, there's nothing "real" about my anxiety; it's an experience that will pass.

Thoughts are level three. The major components of most people's daily experience are thoughts, images, and self-talk or mental chatter. Our mental pictures of the future, plans, memories, and threads of conversations that constantly run through our brains take most of our available mental bandwidth. Because of how the brain is organized, this mental chatter or busyness often crowds out our awareness of our emotional and sensational selves. When we are mindful and

present, we are aware of all three levels operating within us. Being mindful allows us access to the full range of each of these levels of experience. However, modern life seems to expect high levels of mental activity and thinking. While this is normal, an unintended and unfortunate consequence is that we often cut ourselves off from and diminish our access to our emotions and sensations. Mindfulness, then, means opening ourselves back up to all the levels of experience that the precious, miraculous human body makes available to us.

It is important to see that these experiences of thoughts, emotions, and sensations are fleeting. There is no real substance to the experiences themselves. The taste of the raspberry, the experience of gratitude, the memory of a previous berry experience: all arise in our awareness, and then fade away.

This is inherent in the nature of consciousness. When we are mindful, we become aware that everything is fleeting and transient. Every moment of experience is simply a temporary configuration of our nervous systems that will pass. Seeing this, we can become less attached to the experiences, stories, and emotions that we previously thought were real and substantive. Less attached, we become freer to let the difficult experiences go, responding to what the next new moment requires of us. Becoming attuned to ourselves means that we are able to take notice as feelings, sensations, and thoughts arise. This enables us to choose whether to put more energy into them or simply let them go as being unhelpful.

Cultivating nonattachment is pragmatic. When we are aware of our full experience, we are freer in how we may respond to what happens. For example, if someone challenges us in a meeting, a coaching client has an emotional reaction that affects us, or if we notice that we are about to make a strong statement rather than ask an artful question, we can observe our reaction, know that it is fleeting, and let it go, coming back to the present moment and our best creativity and resourcefulness about how best to respond. This nonattachment, which will be discussed at length later, is central to mindful coaching.

Here's a description of an experience that lasted perhaps half a minute but shows more about the interrelationship of the three levels of awareness.

As I'm coaching my client on the phone, I am mindful as I listen after I ask a challenging question. I notice my heartbeat, the pressure of my feet on the floor (sensation). Also in the realm of sensation,



I notice silence on the line. In response to that silence, I notice anxiety (emotion) and tension (sensation) arising within me, immediately followed by an interpretation (thought) that I have pushed her too hard and an impulse (sensation) to jump in and rescue her by saying more. Being mindful, I'm also aware of my own tension and self-judgment, and so I make an intentional decision (thought) to sit quietly for a minute until the client can process the question.

This little drama transpires in seconds, yet when I slow down and pay attention I can begin to notice how the process works and consider its elements before I decide on a course of action. In this instance, when I pay attention, I also notice that the anxiety (emotion) and tension (sensation) subside and are replaced by calm (sensation). When I hear my client respond to the question with a new insight, I feel energized (sensation) and decide that the question was helpful (thought).

All the levels are linked, and they are constantly shifting and moving through us. Such is the flow of life—fleeting. As experience, none of it is permanent. All experiences are temporary phenomena that arise and dissipate. Normally when I'm busy, I don't notice all the subtleties. When I am paying attention, the subtleties arise, are observed, and then easily pass. Nothing I can do can make them permanent.

Though they form the basis of what we think we know, the seemingly fixed patterns of experience are always shifting and changing. To see this is to begin to become mindful. This is what it means to pay attention: expanding our experience to study and appreciate the intricate components of which it is constructed.

Exercise 1.2 provides an opportunity to begin to notice the subtle emotional and somatic experiences that are available during any experience, even when not eating fresh raspberries!

## ATTACHMENTS AND AVERSIONS

Along with levels of experience, a second set of experiential distinctions is critical to the work of a coach: attachments and aversions, the directional urges within us that drive our interpretations and, ultimately, behaviors. When we pay close attention to the granular nature of our own experience, attachments and aversions turn out to

## EXERCISE 1.2.

*Building Somatic and Emotional Awareness*

Under the surface content of any experience is a wealth of subtle emotional and somatic (felt, sensation-based) experience to which we can increase our sensitivity and awareness over time. Awareness of what is going on with us below the surface is key to building our mindfulness. Being able to bring this awareness into our conversational space is central to the proposition of mindful coaching.

Have a series of conversations. These could be coaching conversations or simply exchanges with a spouse or a friend. The conversations should be about something meaningful and engaging to both of you. Following each conversation, take about ten minutes in a quiet space to jot some notes about what you noticed within yourself, independent of the content of the conversation:

- What pleasant emotional states did you notice?
- How did you experience connection or intimacy with the other?
- How did you experience concern or resistance or defensiveness?
- Where within the boundaries of your own body did you sense the experience of some element of tension, anxiety, or discomfort?
- What sensations did you notice: increasing energy, the feeling of your arms or hands moving, the pressure of your body pressing into the seat or your feet on the floor, warmth, or coolness?

These questions are unusual, and you may find yourself struggling for responses. If you don't have answers to some of them, that's fine. The point is to be curious and to keep looking. Because this is an unfamiliar way to pay attention to our own experience, it will pay to repeat this exercise a number of times. The information is there; most of us are just not accustomed to looking for it. The more you direct your curiosity and attention into yourself, the more you will begin to notice the vast range of emotional nuance and sensation that is constantly present within you.

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be the very foundations of our unique personality. We can think of them as pairs of opposites that guide our actions and condition our behaviors and choices. One of each pair is something that we desire; we are attached to this. The other of the pair is something that we avoid; we have an aversion to that. Recognizing and letting go of our internal attachments and aversions is the key to being mindful and present and, ultimately, to serving our clients.

A specific attachment or aversion we may develop as individuals is likely to fall into one of four main dichotomies:

- We are drawn toward pleasure and attached to finding it/we avoid pain.
- We seek material gain, trying to get what we want/we try to avoid losing what we have.
- We want to be known and respected/we have an intense dislike for shame, embarrassment, and loss of face.
- We are attached to praise and to being appreciated and even adored/we wish to avoid blame and responsibility for negative things.<sup>5</sup>

These influences are all around us, intensified by our upbringing and our social experiences. Advertisements condition us to crave cold beer, telling us that we will experience pleasure, even attract a mate, by drinking it. Employers and schools, through pay and grades, seek to motivate us by encouraging attachment to rewards and praise. Our parents taught us not to cry, to work hard, to shape ourselves in a particular way in order to earn approval and love. We are taught that it is good to get what we want—a good job, stability, creature comforts, a loving spouse—and to fear the loss of these things.

None of this is bad. It just is. What matters tremendously is that our experience of life is controlled by our attachments and aversions. We are attached to the aspects of each of these pairs that we label as positive; we crave them and pursue them. We are averse to, resist, and avoid the aspects that we label as negative. But as hard as we work to get what we want and to avoid what we don't want, we can never know what any experience is going to bring us. For example, a casual acquaintance of mine won \$2 million in the lottery. Talk about fulfilling an attachment to wealth! He quit his job, moved to an upscale neighborhood, stopped seeing old friends, and started a small business, but he didn't put much energy into the new enterprise. It seemed that the challenge and energy had gone out of life. He drank a lot, and he died of a heart attack a few years later. Enormous financial gain did not bring him happiness.

Another friend had breast cancer. She went through months and months of painful treatments and suffered greatly from anxiety

about her future. Now, fully recovered, she has an appreciation of all of life's gifts that most of us feel only occasionally. She is clear about what she wants to do and how not to waste her life energy. She is much happier than before. As desperately as she might have wanted to avoid having the experience of cancer, it became a doorway into a more fulfilling life for her. Every day is now a gift.

Why doesn't successfully following what we're attached to, and avoiding what we have aversions to, guarantee us happiness? Because those very attachments and aversions are at the very root of our suffering. As Lama Surya Das writes in *Awakening the Buddha Within*,

*It's easy to become so enmeshed in our worldly goals that we lose sight of the bigger picture. Without more foresight and perspective, we cannot help but prioritize foolishly. The ups and downs of office politics and interpersonal dynamics, for example, will overly affect the untrained mind. One minute you can feel like a winner, elated and on top of your game; the next you're in a slump, defeated, hopeless, and depressed.<sup>6</sup>*

We interpret outside events through our inner attachments and aversions. For instance, we interpret someone's "You look good today!" as a compliment or as an offensive come-on, depending on our thoughts about the circumstances and our emotional history with that someone. While the comment was simply words directed from one person to another, the attachment or aversion we experience can drive a warm smile and a sense of connection, or a rush of irritation and a hurried rush into the next room.

Try a little thought experiment to get more in touch with how you experience attachments and aversions within yourself. First, imagine something that's particularly inviting to you: the smell of freshly ground coffee or dark chocolate or a childhood memory of your grandmother. Look for a tiny upwelling of desire, a tinge of want that arises as you call this experience to mind. It will be fleeting and subtle, but if you pay close enough attention, you'll likely feel a slight pull of desire being triggered by your imagining. This is attachment.

Now try the reverse. Imagine taking a clean plastic spoon, inserting it into your mouth, filling it with saliva, removing it from your mouth, looking at it, and then sticking it back in your mouth.<sup>7</sup>

Notice the revulsion that arises. That's aversion. For most people, it's pretty strong. We can tell ourselves that the spoon was clean, that the saliva came from our body and returned to the same place. So what's the big deal? But our body's instinctual reaction is a strong aversion. Again, it's subtle, but as you learn to watch your mind at work, you'll notice more and more how a brief thought (pleasant or unpleasant) will trigger fleeting but sometimes strong emotions and sensations.

People committed to a path of mindfulness are working toward noticing and accepting these subtle phenomena. We don't need to get rid of any of our attachments or aversions; it is simply helpful to become aware of them and how they influence our actions. (And it's also important to remember that becoming aware of our habits of mind can lead us quickly to self-judgment and a whole new attachment—to self-improvement.)

For instance, I described a scenario about coaching over the phone. In it I noticed some tension in myself around my client's initial silence in response to a tough question. The noticing is sufficient. I don't have to change anything. It certainly wouldn't be helpful right then to get into a tizzy about my tension, or to fight it, or to analyze where it comes from. None of that would help me be more present for my client in the moment. It was sufficient to simply notice the tension and see it for what it was—a temporary feeling that would pass as soon as I let it go. The whole point is just seeing one's mind at work:

*We might feel that somehow we should try to eradicate these feelings of pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, fame and disgrace. A more practical approach would be to get to know them, see how they hook us, see how they color our perception of reality, see how they aren't all that solid. Then [they] become the means for growing wiser as well as kinder and more content.<sup>8</sup>*

In my own experience and in training and mentoring hundreds of coaches over the years, I've encountered certain attachments and aversions that are relevant to the helping professions, coaching in particular. Consider for yourself which ones have been or are likely to be helpful as you work with clients:

- We want to be seen as competent by the client/we want to avoid being seen as ineffective or unhelpful.

- We value a personal connection with the client/we try to avoid tension or conflict in the relationship.
- We look for a sensation of aliveness and creativity/we are impatient with rote conversation.
- We like the security of coaching according to a specific template or model/we try to avoid being seen as uncertain.
- We want to earn additional fees or appreciation/we fear being fired or taken for granted.

To the degree that our actions and behaviors are shaped by our own attachments and aversions, we are responding to our own desires to attain pleasure and avoid suffering rather than to the client's needs. By cultivating mindfulness, we become better able to make wise choices about how we can best serve our clients.

## CONDITIONING AND HABITS THAT BLOCK MINDFULNESS

As we grow up, become socialized, and learn to function in society, we learn certain patterns of thought and interpretation that seem to work for us. The aggregate process of acquiring and internalizing these habits, of shaping ourselves to get what we want in our lives, we can call conditioning.

Over time our patterns become embedded as habits: automatic ways of processing information, interpreting what we see and hear, and making decisions about how to respond to life's events. Like fingerprints, our individual patterns of habits are unique. They are as varied as the world's cultures, families, and individuals; the aggregate of these patterns we call personality.

Habits, or conditioned patterns of behavior, are default responses to life's complexities. We learned them well, presumably because they worked for us earlier in life. And given who we are now and our current life circumstances, we may begin to discover that these habits limit our creativity, render us ineffective, or cause us to suffer. Our attachments and aversions hold these habits in place; we can think of them as the internal guidance that steers our behavior over and over into our habits or defaults.

Mindfulness does not require figuring out the origin of a habit. Rather, we learn to observe the habit as it arises, in all its nuances and subtleties, with its accompanying and precursory attachments and aversions. We can literally sense the attachments and aversions arising within us, as we sensed our attachment to chocolate and aversion to saliva. With this self-awareness (really, an expanded sense of our own truth in a given moment), we find ourselves with a choice about whether to act out the conditioned habit or choose a new response that may be more useful.

Habits have five elements: a trigger, three levels of conditioned responses that arise rapidly and sequentially<sup>9</sup> through the three levels of experience, and a resulting behavior.

*Trigger:* Something happens around us that we sense and that evokes a response.

*Somatic response:* Our body automatically responds to this sensory input. This is the biological organism responding, and it is observable as sensation (energy, tension, tightness, warmth, numbness, and so forth). Generally this is the first element of a constellation of linked responses.

*Emotional response:* Feelings arise based on our deep history; they are observable as emotions (anger, anxiety, joy, excitement).

*Mental response:* Mental formations provide meaning for our experience and rationale for our response. These are observable as language (stories, interpretation, justification). Because this is the highest order of response, it generally follows the first two, although the entire constellation can arise in less than a second.

*Resulting behavior:* Behavior flows out of the constellation of phenomena that arises. Observable as acts (movement, speech acts, and so on).

Some of our habits serve us well. They help us respond effectively to life's invitations and challenges. We even come to think of them as good traits of character. I grew up in a family of scientists. In part because of my early experiences, I have a boundless curiosity that impels me into learning and has led me to seek out opportunities for personal exploration and reflection that have made a fascinating journey and have helped me succeed in my professional life.

However, some habits of mind that have served us in the past may at some point become limiting, even detrimental. Because they are habits, our mental energies continue to follow these established pathways in our minds, like a stream following a worn groove over bare rock. Meanwhile, like seeds stranded on the bank above, new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new possibilities for our lives fail to sprout for lack of water. These worn grooves, while a metaphor, have a literal corollary in the default patterns of neurons that fire in our brains and form the elemental basis for our habits and personalities. Our habits are physiologically encoded in our bodies.

For example, in my very intellectual family of origin, we communicated about ideas but not about feelings. Much went unsaid, and strong expressions of emotion were discouraged. As an adult, I married a woman who is much freer with her feelings, whatever they might be and however rawly they might emerge. My conditioned response, instilled over years of living in an emotionally unexpressive family, had always been to either shut down or flee in the face of someone else's expression of intense emotion, especially anger.

In my marriage, this didn't work so well, and I have had to negotiate with my own habits. When my wife is angry about something, I still have to work hard to stay present and resist the urge to shut her out. She, in turn, works hard to address the source of her anger without overreacting. It requires mindfulness on both our parts to be aware of and then abandon unhelpful habits and cultivate new behaviors in their place. In all realms of life, becoming aware of the opportunity to choose new behaviors over old ones is the essential challenge of growth.

This is not what we label psychotherapy, as valuable as that endeavor might be for many people. We don't need to understand all the details of where our conditioned patterns came from, or revisit the early experiences that imprinted unhelpful habits in our minds. We can, in any moment, step beyond our patterned responses by simply becoming aware of them and seeing instead the multitude of alternatives that is available to us. It is a simple shift in perspective, an expanded view. This, in short, is what we seek to help clients do through coaching.

A helpful view is to be curious about your habits and to "make friends" with them. Your habits (presumably including some of the ones described in the previous section) are there because the organism that is you has learned well how to get along in the world. Your habits



have served their purpose. Now you are becoming curious about their subtleties and bringing awareness to the entire constellation of what arises with this habit. This is different from working at changing the behavior. Rather, you're expanding and deepening your awareness of something that is in fact quite complex and miraculous.

The secondary effect of this awareness is that down the road, you'll become able to sense the first arising of the pattern and choose whether to go the rest of the way with it or replace it with something new. The journey starts with your self-observation.

## COACHING HABITS

We all have habits of perception and response that impede our ability to be mindful as coaches, and in my experience many fall into the discrete categories that I discuss below. (Marshall Goldsmith also helpfully describes twenty-one habits of successful people, at least some of which will apply to each of us.<sup>10</sup>) Naming our habits allows us to first observe, and then interrupt, our habits. I offer these in the same spirit.

The purpose here is not to overwhelm you with a litany of obstacles to mindfulness but to develop a language for talking about habits. The simple act of recognizing how any one of these habits influences you, and accepting it without judgment or self-flagellation, is a moment of awakening.

Each of these habits will be accompanied by somatic, emotional, and cognitive experience. Familiarity with your particular favorite habits requires attending to the granular phenomena that together

### SOME COACHING HABITS OF MIND

- Self-judgment
- Social identity
- Projections
- Philosophical positions
- Emotional triggers
- Routines
- Distractions
- Expert mind

make them up. Read, inquire into the nature of your own experience, and smile with recognition whenever you see yourself reflected here.

### *Self-Judgment*

Let's begin by looking at what we sometimes do when we become aware that we're behaving in a less than perfect way. For example, I might notice that I'm feeling easily distracted as I listen to my client talk about an emotional experience that he's had. I notice my attention wandering; my gaze drifts out the window. By noticing my distraction, I have immediately become more self-aware; this brings me back to the present and provides an opportunity to listen more carefully.

Once I notice my distraction, however, I tend to scold myself. Little tapes go off in my mind: "A sensitive coach and mindfulness author isn't supposed to be distracted," "I'm being selfish," "I'm a lousy listener," and so on. This sort of self-judgment is, of course, rooted in my well-intentioned desire to measure up to some artificial standard of attentiveness I am attached to and measure myself against. The tendency toward self-judgment is just another habit of mind, another groove my thoughts follow. The truth is, I was distracted for a moment. That's all. No big deal.

If I launch into self-judgment, I allow my attention to shift once again. Instead of ignoring my client because of the view from the window, I'm ignoring him because I'm wrapped up in my own inadequacy as a listener. Either way, I'm not listening.

The trick, then, is simply to notice your self-judgment as it arises. Awareness and acceptance take the energy out of these habits. They lose their grip on us and, with it, their capacity to make us suffer. Any additional energy that we put into fighting them, trying to get rid of them, or analyzing them takes us away from the present just as surely as any other distraction would do.

### *Social Identity*

Our habits of mind are often rooted in social identities that we seek to preserve or strengthen. James Flaherty explains social identity in terms of two images that interact with and reinforce each other.<sup>11</sup> One is the image that people have of us, which shapes how they

interact with us. Clients come to us, whether we are a manager in an organization or a paid coach, with certain expectations that we can help them. Knowing this, we are more likely to respond in a way that fulfills those expectations. The other is the image we have of ourselves—the story we ourselves believe about who we are. Since this story gives our lives meaning and our ego an identity, we become attached to the story and seek evidence to support and reinforce it.

For example, I can be attached to maintaining a social identity as a knowledgeable person with good ideas and information to share. This identity is reinforced by clients who pay me for those good ideas. And I have an aversion to appearing stupid or lacking in knowledge. This isn't a bad thing, but it does present traps of which I need to be aware. If my energy is going into protecting or reinforcing a social identity, I am no longer fully available to my clients.

Any role can serve as a social identity. As Flaherty puts it, to the extent that our “relationship with others . . . has become hardened through a repetition of behavior and bound by the inflexibility of expectation,” we become trapped in that role.<sup>12</sup> It quite literally becomes a worn groove in our consciousness. To change such a habit requires mindfulness and discipline. While the client's own habits often reinforce habitual, unconscious behavior on the part of the coach, the responsibility falls on us to do our own work in recognizing the social identity we are attached to.

### *Projections*

Above my desk I have a picture drawn by my daughter many years ago, when she was about seven. It's one of those elementary school drawings where you trace the outline of your hand, then decorate it to turn it into a Thanksgiving turkey. Megan, however, took the assignment in a slightly different direction and drew a lovely chicken. It's done on black paper, and the sky is filled with little white stars and chicken footprints. The head of the chicken is looking up at the sky, and the title at the bottom says “Chickens like star gazing!!!!” I think this drawing is both hilarious and profound.

Just as we do, Megan's chicken sees herself in the universe. Where we might see a heroic Orion—a human being—with bow drawn, the chicken sees her own footprints in the stars. We look at the world through the filters of our experiences and then interpret

what is going on out there in a way that affirms our own identity. This feels both gratifying and reassuring. But such projections are just a mental game we play.

We project on our clients in the same way, finding ourselves reflected in them. Those aspects that we judge and resist in others are likely to reflect traits that we also have difficulty accepting in ourselves. This is both a source of compassion and a source of trouble. Nancy Spence puts it this way:

*At the heart of understanding projection is accepting the awareness that we are experiencing the perceptions we have about people, events and situations. What we are seeing out there is what we are doing inside. Accepting this awareness means accepting responsibility for how we react to others. Sometimes it is not easy to acknowledge that the difficulty we have with others is only a reflection of the difficulty we have with some aspect of ourselves. Sometimes it is not easy or pleasant to recognize we are always looking into a mirror.<sup>13</sup>*

I might be talking to a client about how overwhelmed she feels by her inability to focus on important planning issues in the face of three hundred e-mails a day in her inbox. I can empathize with her because in the face of countless demands, I find it difficult to find time to write. But I can also feel irritated and frustrated because of her apparent inability to prioritize in order to get things done. Not so coincidentally, those emotions are simply my projection onto my client of my own frustration with my challenges in prioritizing important work; the emotions have nothing to do with my client and everything to do with me.

For sure, if I can understand the frustration my client feels, this may help me to see possible ways for her to manage the challenges she faces. But projections are also trouble. Both the sense of comforting intimacy and the feelings of irritation that we experience when we see ourselves in our clients impede our clear view of the client. They can easily trigger our own attachments and aversions, unconsciously steering our coaching to seek the former and avoid the latter.

Projection also makes it all too easy to assume that what works for us will work for them—which may or may not be true. Further inquiry might uncover major differences between my situation and that of the client—differences that would point to different solutions. If I'm

caught in my projection, the likelihood is that I'll quickly assume that I understand and so fall into a coaching approach that is based more on my own history and needs than on those of the client.

When we're projecting, we're not seeing things as they are. We have become attached to an interpretation that reveals something about ourselves. When we confuse ourselves with a client, we cease seeing that person and her situation as fresh and unique and are no longer a mindful resource in service to her learning.

### *Philosophical Positions*

Belief systems and philosophical positions are part of our personality and identity, but they are also arbitrary and conditioned. And just like other aspects of who we are, they shape how we express ourselves and limit our understanding.

Let's say that I believe that the answers to all of life's questions reside within the individual. There are ways in which this belief may serve the coaching process. It might, for instance, lead me to ask probing questions that will in fact help the client discover her own resourcefulness. At the same time, that belief, if rigidly adhered to as a philosophical position, may also prevent me from playing one of a coach's key roles—that of a teacher. I'm far less likely to share my own experience or suggest specific alternatives if I believe that the answers to a client's questions must always be found within her own experience.

It behooves us all to become increasingly aware of the philosophical positions that we hold and to be mindful of their implications.

### *Emotional Triggers*

Certain stimuli trigger emotional responses. These are the levels of experience arising and infusing our awareness so that we are no longer mindful and available. As coaches, when we get wrapped up in strong feelings and reactions, we cease to be present with our clients.

I worked with a client whose job was at risk because of some ineffective behaviors. He insisted that he had been "set up" by people around him who had focused on a few minor negatives and ignored the overwhelming positives. His unwillingness to take ownership of any part of the problems he was having in the workplace triggered

frustration in me, as well as anxiety about my abilities as a coach. In this case, my emotional reactions made it a significant challenge for me to remain connected and respectful with this client.

Although our emotions may provide information that's useful in the coaching process—in this case, sharing my own reactions to my client's behavior in our conversations led him to see why his colleagues reacted to him as they did—a coach must be able to recognize his or her own feelings and work to keep them from influencing the work that is being done with the client in inappropriate ways.

### *Routines*

We all tend to get numbed by routine. I fly frequently on business. It is an enjoyable drive from my home through the mountains to the airport. One day when I checked in at the counter, the agent politely informed me that I had the wrong ticket. I looked at it closely. Unfortunately, although the date, time, and destination matched, the flight, which I had booked myself, left from an entirely different airport, in the other direction from home and now three hours away. Clearly I hadn't been paying attention when I turned onto the main road. (My wife still laughs at me about that one, a quarter of a century later.)

I take some small comfort in the fact that as Ellen Langer reports in her book on mindfulness, "William James [told] a story of starting to get ready for a dinner party, undressing, washing, and then climbing into bed. Two routines that begin the same way got confused, and he mindlessly followed the more familiar one."<sup>14</sup>

Routines help us get things done, but they may also put us to sleep. Because it's easiest to stay in our worn grooves, we follow a habit without paying sufficient attention to whether it is taking us where we want to go.

As coaches, we tend to follow the same line of questioning, falling into the same pattern of conversation with a client time after time. But when coaching becomes routine, we're at risk of not paying attention. We miss openings that the client gives us—nuances of tone or wording that may represent a breakthrough. Under the influence of an attachment to the illusion of being competent and comfortable, and an aversion to exerting the energy, or taking the risk, of trying something new, we fall asleep at the wheel.

To counter this tendency, ask yourself, How can I disrupt my routines? What can I do to help me see each coaching client and conversation in a fresh way?

### *Distractions*

Most of the professionals I know are exceedingly busy. Interruptions are constant, and the time available to focus on a single task seems to decrease daily. The fragmentation of time and experience that has become a seemingly inescapable part of our lives makes it difficult to focus on important tasks or to feel productive at the end of the day.

But while it appears that this is externally driven and we have no control over the distractions that plague us, closer scrutiny shows otherwise. Yes, there are external demands, but it's an internal urge that leads us to interrupt what we're doing to take that phone call, or get lost in our e-mails, or attend right now to whatever else is pulling at us in the moment. We can heed that voice or not; it's a choice. Neither choice is right nor wrong, but each has consequences.

Internal distractibility is characterized by rapid and often unconnected thoughts, tangents, and ideas, and it results in a lack of focus. Because our minds can process information a lot faster than conversation proceeds, we are at choice about how to use this extra mental capacity. A mindful choice is to focus our full attention on what we're doing rather than be distracted by unrelated matters.

### *Expert Mind*

Just as routine can put us in a metaphorical sleep, so can the overconfidence that comes from expertise. Once we have achieved a certain level of mastery, it's easy to believe that we know how to do something. The most perilous stage for a teenage driver isn't the very beginning, when everything seems new and the driver is careful and attentive. Rather, it comes when she thinks she has it down; she's got her license, the state has anointed her a driver, and she experiences long-awaited freedom. Then the risk is overconfidence; the driver doesn't know what she doesn't know.

As an alternative, Shunryu Suzuki suggests that we cultivate a beginner's mind: the quality of attention that results when we are

seeking to learn something new. It's the antithesis of the self-hypnotism that can result when we believe we have mastered something.

In the beginner's mind, there is no thought that "I have attained something." All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something.<sup>15</sup>

When we become attached to our own identity as knowledgeable—when we assume we have all the answers—we cease to pay attention. This puts us at risk for missing something important about a client or a situation.

In my own practice, I felt quite confident when a client named Ruth asked me to coach her in developing her delegation and management skills—after all, this was one of my areas of expertise. Since coaching by phone had always worked well for me, that's how I set up our relationship. It was only later, when she told me she had auditory processing difficulties, that I realized that this was one reason that we hadn't made any progress after several long-distance conversations. But by then she had made the decision to stop working with me, and I could hardly blame her for my own inattentiveness.

The mindfulness we lose when we are attached to our expertise can be regained when we let go of thinking we know anything. Beginner's mind serves us because we are more able to see what's in front of us with fresh eyes. Try Exercise 1.3 as a way of recognizing your own habits, attachments, and aversions in the context of a conversation.

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#### EXERCISE 1.3.

#### *The Bell Exercise*

Find someone willing to sit with you for a few minutes and talk about something of significance. An account of a challenging experience from which they learned something of value will work well.

Engage your partner in a conversation, and simultaneously observe yourself in action. Your role is only to ask questions. No statements are allowed. (A statement is defined as anything that ends in a period: "That must have been difficult," or "Something like that happened to me," or "Oh, no!")

The idea is to catch yourself experiencing an attachment. If you have a small bell, ring it every time you notice any urge to make a statement (or simply raise your hand as a signal).



Also, ring the bell any time you notice your attention anywhere other than on your partner. For example, you notice your habitual urge to reflect back what you're hearing. *Ring*. The phone rings and you notice yourself wondering who's calling. *Ring*. You notice yourself wondering if a particular thought was a question or a statement. *Ring*. You notice yourself worrying about whether the person will be offended if you ring the bell, and realize that you have an attachment to being liked. *Ring*. You get the idea.

Although you may notice that ringing the bell feels rude, it is actually a signal to the other person that you are mindful and that you just brought your attention back to her.

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The point of Exercise 1.3 is not that making statements is bad. Rather, we simply declared them off-limits as an exercise in becoming aware of the pervasive urges that drive us all the time.

By doing this, we begin to notice the incessant habits that we live in. We become mindful: part of our attention is in the doing, the conversation, the listening. And part of our attention is observing ourselves in the acting. This split attention is how we practice and build mindfulness.

Being mindful opens the possibility of not being driven by our habits and of living every moment in a way that is maximally creative and resourceful. This is the essence of self-generation. (A chapter from my second book, *Presence-Based Coaching*, can be downloaded at no cost from my Web site and adds significant depth to this exploration of self-generation.<sup>16</sup>)

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## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Coaching begins with a willingness to place ourselves in service. This is a commitment to bring ourselves fully to the coaching relationship and attend to the client's needs. Service requires placing the client at the center of the relationship and attending to how our own needs and agendas might undermine this.

Mindfulness means being aware of our own experience, moment by moment. It is in this mindful state that we become aware of our habits and how they might undermine our service to our clients if we lack rigor.

All human experience comprises three levels: cognitive, emotional, and sensation. When we bring our attention into the granular experience of each of these levels, we become more alive, more sensitive, and better able to identify our habits and unconscious tendencies as they arise.

Our habits are held in place by attachments and aversions. We can sense these within us and learn to intervene with our habits before they lead to behaviors that undermine our commitment to service. We can recognize certain habits that impede our mindfulness as coaches: self-judgment, social identity, projections, emotional triggers, routines, distractions, and expert mind. Learning to recognize these through self-awareness and self-monitoring is essential.