

## Chapter 1

# How Your Mind Stresses You Out and What You Can Do about It

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Scuba-diving through your thoughts and feelings
  - ▶ Checking out the many ways your mind causes stress
  - ▶ Using meditation to ease your stress and suffering
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**F**or thousands of years, pundits and sages in both the East and West have been saying that problems originate in the mind, that your mind by itself “can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven” (as English poet John Milton put it). But how, you may be wondering, can this cute little truism help you when you don’t know what to do about it? “Sure, my mind’s the problem,” you may say, “but I can’t exactly have it surgically removed.”

You can begin by becoming familiar with how your mind works. As you may have noticed, it’s a rather complex assortment of thoughts, ideas, stories, impulses, preferences, and emotions. Without a diagram, it can be as difficult to negotiate as the jumble of wires and hoses under the hood of your car.

When you have a working knowledge of how your mind is structured, you can begin to notice how those thoughts and feelings distort your experience and keep you from achieving the happiness, relaxation, effectiveness, or healing you seek. Then you can discover how meditation can teach you to change all that by focusing and calming your mind, and ultimately by delving more deeply and unraveling the habitual stories and patterns that keep causing you suffering and stress. Who knows? You may not need a lobotomy after all!

## Taking a Tour of Your Inner Terrain

Natural metaphors actually lend themselves quite nicely to describing meditation. Practicing meditation can be compared to climbing a mountain, for example or journeying to the bottom of a lake. In either case, the lake or the mountain being referred to is *you* — you're journeying to the heights or depths of your own *being*.

### *Sifting through the layers of inner experience*

When you meditate, in addition to developing your concentration and calming your mind, you may find yourself delving deeper into your inner experience and uncovering layers you didn't even know existed. What do you suppose lies at the bottom? The great meditative traditions have different names for it: essence, pure being, true nature, spirit, soul, the pearl of great price, and the source of all wisdom and love. The Zen folks call it your original face before your parents were born. You may like to picture it as a spring that gushes forth the pure, refreshing, deeply satisfying water of *being* without reservation.

This wellspring of *being* is who you really are in your heart of hearts before you became conditioned to believe that you're somehow deficient or inadequate, as so many folks do. It's your wholeness and completeness before you

### Is it higher or deeper?

Spiritual teachers and personal growth advocates have a dizzying fondness for up and down metaphors. Some talk about digging down into your inner experience like a miner, or having profound insights, or feeling or knowing things deeply. Others talk about higher consciousness or transcending the mundane or having a mind like the sky.

To some degree, the difference lies in the personal preferences of the particular writer or teacher. But it can also refer to an attitude toward inner experience: If you believe

that the wellspring of *being* lies deep inside you, beneath the personal, then you talk about *down*. If you believe that it exists in the upper echelons of your being or comes down like grace or spirit from above, then you talk about *up*.

In the end, if you dive deep enough, you find yourself at the top of the mountain. And if you rise high enough, you find yourself at the bottom of the sea. In the end, it's the same place anyway. Ultimately, pure *being* has no location — it's everywhere in everyone all the time.

began to feel separate or lonely or fragmented. It's the deep intuition of being inextricably connected with something larger than yourself and with every other being and thing. And it's ultimately the source of all peace, happiness, joy, and other positive, life-affirming feelings (even though you may think they're caused by outside circumstances). Of course, people experience this source differently, which explains why there are so many words to describe it.



Connecting in some way with this source or spring of pure being is actually the point of meditation, whether you're aspiring to become enlightened or just trying to reduce stress, enhance your performance, or improve your life. And meditation definitely takes you to this source, as explained later in this chapter. But when you meditate, you also begin to encounter material that seems to come between you and the experience of being, just as you may encounter layers of sediment, algae, fish, and debris on your way to the bottom of a lake. These layers don't pose a problem unless the inner water is turbulent, in which case they can make it difficult to see clearly. (In this context, *turbulence* refers to a busy, agitated mind or a troubled, frightened, defended heart.)

In more or less the order in which you may encounter them in meditation, the following sections cover these layers.

### *Mind chatter*

When you turn your attention inward, the first thing you're likely to encounter is the ceaseless chattering of your mind. The Buddhists like to compare the mind to a noisy monkey that swings uncontrollably from thought-branch to thought-branch without ever settling down.

Most of the time, you may be so caught up in this chatter that you're not even aware it's happening. It may take the form of reliving the past or rehearsing for the future or trying to solve some problem in the present. Whatever the content, your mind is constantly talking to itself, often spinning a story with you as the hero or the victim. (Research indicates that a very small percentage of people experience no inner dialogue at all, but have only images or feelings instead.)

### *Intense or recurring emotions*

Just as an action film or a romantic comedy takes you on a rollercoaster ride of emotions, so the *dramas* your mind keeps spinning out evoke their own play of feelings. If you're trying to figure out how to make a killing in the stock market, for example, or how to ask out that attractive man or woman you just met at work, you may feel fear or anxiety, or possibly excitement or lust. If you're obsessing about the injustices or unkindnesses you suffered recently, you may experience sadness, grief, outrage, or resentment. Together with these emotions, of course, go a range of bodily sensations, including tension, arousal, contraction in the heart, or waves of energy in the belly or the back of the head.



Some of these feelings may be pleasurable; others are unpleasant or even painful. But emotions in themselves don't pose a problem. It's just that as long as you keep reacting to the dramas inside your head, you may be cutting yourself off from others and from deeper, more satisfying dimensions of your being. You may miss what's really going on around you as well. (For more on working with emotions in meditation, see Book VII, Chapter 5.)



Many people have trouble distinguishing between thoughts and feelings. For example, if someone asks you, "What are you feeling?" you may reply, "I feel like I shouldn't be so open with my partner anymore." Even though this insight begins with the right word, it's actually a judgment rather than a feeling.

Here are a few pointers for telling the difference:

- ✓ **Feelings occur as a set of recognizable sensations in your body.** When you're angry, for example, you may feel tension in your shoulders and jaw and experience a rush of energy in the back of your head. When you're sad, by contrast, you may feel a heaviness in your chest and heart and a congested feeling in your sinuses and throat. Through meditation, you can discover how to experience your feelings directly as sensations, separate from the thoughts and stories that perpetuate them. (For more on meditating with thoughts and feelings, see Book VII, Chapter 5.)
- ✓ **Thoughts are the images, memories, beliefs, judgments, and reflections that float through your mind and often give rise to your feelings.** If you follow the word *feel* with the word *like*, you're probably voicing a thought or a belief rather than a feeling. You can practice breaking strong feelings down into their component parts by asking these questions: What are the thoughts and images in my mind that keep me feeling the way I do? And what am I actually experiencing in my body right now, aside from my thoughts?

Thoughts not only generate feelings but they also often masquerade as feelings (so you won't actually feel the ones you have), attempt to talk you out of your feelings, judge your feelings, or suppress them entirely. The more you can disentangle your thoughts and feelings, the more clearly and consciously you can relate with (and express) your inner experience.

### *Grasping and pushing away*

At a somewhat subtler level of experience than thoughts and emotions lurks a perpetual play of like and dislike, attachment and aversion. The Buddhists teach that the key to happiness and contentment lies in wanting what you have and not wanting what you don't have. But often, we're somehow dissatisfied with what we have. We yearn for what we don't have and we struggle to get it. Or we may become deeply attached to what we have and then suffer

when time and circumstances change it or take it away. Because change is unavoidable, this tendency to either hold on tight to experience or push it away can cause constant suffering.

### *Negative beliefs and life scripts*

Imagine that your thoughts and emotions and even the dramas that keep running through your brain form the leaves and branches of some inner, subterranean bush or tree. (Think wild and uncontrollable here, like blackberries or bamboo.) What do you suppose constitutes the root from which the leaves and branches relentlessly spring?

Well, you may be surprised to discover that the root is a cluster of beliefs and stories, many of them negative, that have formed as the result of what people — especially people who are significant in your life, like loved ones and friends — have done to you and told you over the years. These beliefs and stories have intertwined over your lifetime into a kind of life script that defines who you think you are and how you view the people and circumstances around you.



The point is this: Your tendency to identify with your life script actually limits your range of possibilities and causes you suffering by acting as a *filter* through which you interpret your life in negative ways. To return to the bush metaphor, you can keep pruning back the branches, but you'll keep living out the same old story until you pull it up by the roots.

### *The sense of separation*

Even deeper than your stories — some would say the soil in which the stories grow — lies a feeling of being cut off or separate from life or being itself. Although the meditative traditions teach that separation is actually an illusion and that everyone is inextricably connected to one another, the sense of being separate runs deep. Often it dates back to early childhood experiences, such as when you were forced by circumstances to separate prematurely from your mother or some other nurturing figure. Sometimes it can be traced to the birth trauma itself, such as when you had to exchange your placental paradise for a colder, harsher reality. Or maybe, as some traditions contend, it comes packaged with the embryonic hardware.



Whatever its origins, this feeling of separation may give rise to a kind of primordial fear: If I'm separate, then I must end at my skin, and everything out there must be *other*. Because these others are often bigger than I am, and I have only the most limited control over their actions, my survival must be at stake, so I need to protect myself at all costs.

Life scripts, which are discussed in the preceding section, evolve as strategies for surviving in a world of apparent separation, in which others are perceived as potentially unfriendly, withholding, demanding, or rejecting.



## Becoming aware of your inner dialogue

Begin this meditation by paying attention to your thoughts. After several minutes, notice what the voices inside your head are telling you. (If you're not aware of any voices, you may want to observe feelings or images instead.) Does one voice predominate, or do several voices vie for your attention? Do they criticize or encourage you? Shame or praise you? Or do they focus primarily on the other people in your life? Do any of the voices argue with one another?

What kind of emotional tone do these voices have? Are they loving and gentle or angry and

impatient? Does one voice sound more like you than the others? Do any of them remind you of people in your life — past or present? How do these voices make you feel?

Allow ten minutes for this exercise initially. When you have the knack of it, you can stop from time to time during the day and pay attention to your inner dialogue. The important point is that you're not your thoughts — and you don't necessarily have to believe the messages they impart. (See the sidebar "You are not your thoughts or feelings" in this chapter.)

## *Discovering how turbulence clouds your mind and heart*

Needless to say, when you're experiencing inner turbulence, you may find it difficult to connect with *being* when you sit down to meditate. Sometimes, of course, you may have moments when your mind just settles by itself and you can see all the way down to the bottom of the lake. (To use another nature metaphor, think of those overcast days when the cloud cover suddenly parts and the sun shines through with all its warmth and radiance.) These moments may be marked by feelings of inner peace and tranquility, upsurges of love and joy, or intimations of your oneness with life. But most of the time, you may feel like you're doing a breaststroke through muddy water.



The turbulence and confusion you encounter when you meditate doesn't suddenly materialize on cue. It's there all along, clouding your mind and heart and acting as a filter that obscures your clear seeing. You may experience it as an inner claustrophobia or density. In other words, you're so full of your own emotions and opinions that you have no room for the ideas and feelings of others or even for any new or unfamiliar ideas and feelings that may well up inside you. Or you may get so caught up in your drama that you're not even aware that you're filtering your experience.

Consider these two examples:

- ✔ Person A, a computer programmer, received plenty of love and support as a child. Now, as an adult, he thinks of himself as inherently competent and worthy, even though he's no Steve Jobs. As a result, he enjoys his career, experiences only minimal anxiety when he makes work-related decisions, sees others as inherently supportive, and exudes a palpable self-confidence that draws others to him and invites them to trust him.
- ✔ Person B, an independent entrepreneur, has several advanced degrees and has taken countless work-related training courses but believes deep down that he's inherently unworthy. No matter how hard he works, he can't seem to get ahead. Besides, he doesn't really enjoy his work because he's constantly anxious that he may fail, and he imagines that others are conspiring to undermine or discredit him.

In each case, the way each person views himself and interprets what's going on around him determines whether he's happy or stressed out.



As these examples indicate, it's the inner turbulence and confusion through which you filter and distort your experiences — not the experiences themselves — that cause most of your suffering and stress. The good news is that meditation can teach you how to calm the troubled waters of your mind and heart, turn some of your inner claustrophobia into inner spaciousness, and find your way past your filters (or avoid them altogether) so you can experience life more directly — and reduce your stress in the process.



## You are not your thoughts or feelings

Find a quiet spot where you can sit for the next ten minutes. When you're comfortably settled, do the following:

1. **Take a few slow, deep breaths.**
2. **Turn your attention to your thoughts. (If you tend to be an emotional person, you can do the same exercise with your emotions.)**

Instead of getting caught up in your thoughts (or emotions) as you may usually do, watch them closely, the way an angler watches the tip of a rod or a tennis player watches a ball. If you find your

attention wandering, come back to the task at hand.

At first, your mind may seem like wall-to-wall thoughts or emotions, and you may have difficulty determining where one thought leaves off and the next one begins. You may also find that certain thoughts or emotions keep recurring like popular tunes (for example, repetitive worries or favorite images or fantasies). If you're especially attentive, you may begin to notice that each thought or emotion has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

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**3. At the end of the ten minutes, stop and reflect on your experience.**

Did you experience some distance from your thoughts or emotions? Or did you keep losing yourself in the thinking or feeling process?

The point of this exercise is not to see how well you can track your thinking or feeling; instead,

the point is to give you the experience of being the observer of your thoughts. Believe it or not, you're the thinker, *not* the thoughts themselves! As you begin to gain some perspective on your thoughts through the practice of meditation, you may find that your thoughts start losing the power they once had over you. You can have your thoughts, but they won't have you.

## *The Bad News: How Your Mind Stresses You Out*

Here's a story: A woman in her mid-30s decided to ask for a raise. Even though she'd worked with the company as a graphic designer for years and was long overdue for a pay increase, she was overcome with self-doubt. Every day as she drove to work, she agonized and obsessed as conflicting voices and feelings battled it out inside her.

In particular, she kept rehearsing her upcoming conversation with her boss and reviewing all the things she'd done to make her worthy of more money. She ran through all the projects she'd completed as well as the successful ads and brochures she'd designed. Sometimes she emerged from these imaginary conversations feeling triumphant; other times she emerged crestfallen and defeated. As she listened to all this mind chatter, her feelings fluctuated wildly, from excited and confident to afraid and uncertain.

At times, she heard a barely audible voice (sounding suspiciously like her father's) arguing that given her overall ineptitude, she didn't deserve a raise and that she was lucky to have a job at all. In response, she felt ashamed and hopeless. Next, an angry, vindictive voice stepped in, arguing that her boss was an ungrateful autocrat and that she should barge into his office and put him in his place. Then a confident, affirmative voice reminded her how much she contributed at work and what a fine person she was overall. Finally, a voice that sounded a lot like her mother's counseled her to stay calm and unruffled and be thankful for whatever crumbs life sent her way.

After nearly a week of intense inner struggle and stress, during which she had difficulty sleeping and could barely function at work, the designer finally made an appointment with her boss. Filled with conflicting emotions, she entered his office. She was immediately offered a raise even larger than the one she had planned to request! As it turned out, all the images, emotions, and ideas her mind and body had churned out over the days leading up to the meeting had no connection with what ultimately happened.

Does any of this sound familiar? Like the woman in the story — indeed, like just about everyone — you may spend much of your time engrossed in the captivating but ultimately illusory scenarios fabricated in the original “fantasy factory” (the one that predates Disney and Pixar), the *neocortex*.

One moment you may be worrying about the future — how am I going to make enough money, orchestrate a great vacation, impress my lover, amuse my kids? — and subsequently lost in a reverie filled with hope and fear. The next moment, you may be obsessed with the past — why didn’t I tell the truth, take that job, accept that proposal? — and you’re overcome with regret and self-recrimination.

And like the woman in the story, you may have noticed, much to your chagrin, that you have remarkably little control over the worrying, fantasizing, and obsessing your mind generates. Instead of having thoughts and feelings, it may often seem that the thoughts and feelings are having you!

The reason these thoughts and feelings seem uncontrollable is that they spring from a deeper story or life script that may be largely unconscious. For example, you may hold the subliminal notion that nothing you do is quite good enough, so you push yourself anxiously to make up for your shortcomings. Or, quite the contrary, you may believe that you deserve more than you’re getting, so you’re unhappy with what you have. Perhaps you believe that you’re inherently unattractive, so no matter how much you compensate, you feel embarrassed and uncomfortable around the opposite sex. Or maybe you see intimate relationships as inherently threatening, so you do all you can to avoid being vulnerable.

Your inner story or drama has a powerful momentum that carries you along, whether you’re aware of it or not. Sometimes it may seem like a tragedy, complete with villains and victims. At other times, it may seem more like a comedy, a romance, a fantasy, or a boring documentary. The point is, you’re the center around which this drama revolves, and you’re often so enthralled by the scenery that you can’t really see what’s going on outside in the real world around you.

As a result, you may be constantly acting and reacting excessively and inappropriately, based not on the actual circumstances but on the distorted pictures

inside your brain. (You've no doubt had moments when you suddenly woke up, as though from a dream, and realized that you had no idea what the person you were interacting with really meant or felt.) Besides, you risk missing entirely the beauty and immediacy of the present moment as it unfolds.



It's this inner drama, not the experiences themselves, that causes most of your suffering and stress. Not that life doesn't serve up shares of difficult times and painful situations for everyone, including the homeless in American cities and the starving children in Africa. But the mind often adds an extra layer of unnecessary suffering to the undeniable hardships of life by interpreting experience in negative or limited ways. (See the sidebar "Distinguishing suffering, pain, and stress" in this chapter.) The following sections highlight some of the major ways your mind stresses you out.

## *Preoccupation with past and future*

Like most minds, yours may flit from past to future and back again, and it may only occasionally come to rest in the present. When you're preoccupied with what may happen next month or next year, you churn up a range of stressful emotions based on hope, fear, and anticipation that have nothing to do with what's happening right now. And when you're reliving the past — which after all has no existence except as thoughts and images inside your brain — you may bounce from regret to resentment to sadness and grief.

### Hearts and minds

In this discussion about how the "mind" causes suffering and stress, the term "mind" is used generically to include emotions as well as thoughts because the two are inseparable. Certain Eastern languages, such as Chinese and Sanskrit, even use the same word to refer to both mind and heart, and many Eastern sages teach that the mind actually resides in the heart center.

When you have a thought about potentially charged situations — such as relationships, work, financial problems, or life transitions — you almost invariably have an emotional response (subliminal though it may be). In fact, the field of

mind-body medicine has corroborated the view that the mind and body can't really be separated. Thoughts give rise to chemical changes in the blood that affect metabolism and immunity, and alterations in blood chemistry, through drugs or environmental toxins or stressors, can change how you think and feel.

Similarly, the stories that run your life consist of complex layers of emotions, beliefs, and physical contraction that can't easily be teased apart. Through the practice of meditation, you can begin to peel back these layers, infuse them with awareness, and gain insight into the patterns that hold them together.

By contrast, when you meditate, you practice bringing your mind back again and again to the present moment, where, as the Persian poet Rumi says, “the only news is that there’s no news at all.” By returning to the simplicity of the here and now, you can take refuge from the stressful scenarios of your mind. (See the section “Returning to the present moment” later in this chapter.)

## *Resistance to the way things are*

Most people struggle unhappily to get what they believe they need in order to be happy while at the same time ignoring or actively disliking what they already have. Now, don’t misinterpret the message here; no one is suggesting that you just sit back passively and do nothing to improve your life. But the secret to improving your life is first to accept things just the way they are, which is precisely what the practice of meditation can teach. In particular, resistance to the way things are usually comes in one of two flavors: resistance to change and resistance to pain.

### *Resistance to change*

Like it or not, constant change is unavoidable. If you try to resist the current of change by holding on to some image of how things are supposed to be, you’re going to suffer because you can’t possibly get life to hold still and conform. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus used to say, “You can’t step into the same river twice.”



Through meditation, you can discover how to flow with the current of change by developing an open, flexible, accepting mind. In fact, meditation provides the perfect laboratory for studying change because you get to sit quietly and notice the thoughts and feelings and sensations coming and going. Or you can stiffen up and resist and make the process more painful. Did you ever notice how some people become more crotchety and depressed as they age, while others age gracefully and with a joyful twinkle in their eyes? The difference lies in their ability to adapt to the challenging changes life brings their way.

### *Resistance to pain*

Like change, pain is inevitable. So, too, is pleasure. In fact, you can’t have one without the other, though most people would love to have it some other way. When you tighten your belly and hold your breath against the onslaught of pain, be it emotional or physical, you actually intensify the pain. And when you affix a story to the pain — for example, “This shouldn’t be happening to me” or “I must have done something to deserve this” — you just attach an extra layer of suffering on top of the pain, which causes your body to tighten and resist even more and only serves to perpetuate the pain rather than relieve it.

Through meditation, you can learn to breathe deeply, soften your belly, cut through your story, and relax around your pain. Often, the pain naturally lets go and releases — and even when it doesn't, it generally becomes much easier to bear.

## *A judging and comparing mind*

The tendency of your mind to compare you to others (or to some impossible ideal) and to judge every little thing you do as imperfect or inadequate just keeps you anxious, frustrated, and upset. Generally, this tendency originates in your stories or life script, a deeply held cluster of often negative beliefs. (See the “Negative beliefs and life scripts” section earlier in this chapter.) After all, if you believe that you're lovable and inherently perfect just the way you are, your mind has nothing to compare you with.

When you practice meditation, you can develop the capacity to observe the judgments and comparisons of your mind without identifying with them or mistaking them for truth. (For more on this capacity, see the “Penetrating your experience with insight” section later in this chapter.)

## *Learned helplessness and pessimism*

As numerous psychological studies suggest, your ability to deal with stressful situations largely depends on whether you believe you have the resources necessary to cope. That's right. The *belief* that you have what it takes is perhaps your greatest resource. If your story keeps telling you that you're inadequate, it's just making stressful situations more stressful.

Meditation can teach you coping skills like focusing and calming your mind; returning to the present moment; and cultivating positive emotions and mind-states that help you avoid negative, distracting thoughts and empower you to deal with difficult circumstances and people. (See the section “The Good News: How Meditation Relieves Suffering and Stress” later in this chapter.) Ultimately, you can discover how to see beyond your story and make direct contact with the true source of optimism and joy, the wellspring of pure *being* inside you.

## *Overwhelming emotions*

Although you can't necessarily identify your story, you may be painfully aware of how powerful emotions like anger, fear, longing, grief, jealousy, and

desire cloud your mind, torment your heart, and cause you to act in ways you later regret.

Initially, meditation doesn't eliminate these emotions, but it does teach you how to focus and calm your mind and prevent the emotions from distracting you. If you want, you can then use meditation to observe these emotions as they arise without avoiding or suppressing them. Over time, you can develop penetrating insight into the nature of these emotions and their connection to the underlying stories that keep generating them. Ultimately, you can investigate these stories and even dismantle them entirely. (For more on meditating with challenging emotions, see Book VII, Chapter 5.)

## Distinguishing suffering, pain, and stress

Suffering, pain, and stress? Yikes! Who wants to burden their brains with such unappetizing topics? However, the clearer you are about suffering, pain, and stress, the more easily you can minimize their impact on your life. Consider the following helpful (and admittedly unofficial) distinctions:

- ✔ **Pain consists of direct, visceral experiences with a minimum of conceptual overlays.** Your best friend says something mean to you, and you feel a painful constriction in your heart. You hit your thumb with a hammer, and it aches and throbs. You get the flu, and your head feels like someone's squeezing it in a vice. Pain hurts, pure and simple.
- ✔ **Suffering is what happens when your mind makes hay with your pain.** For example, you decide that because she hurt your feelings, your best friend must secretly hate you, which means something must be terribly wrong with you. And the next thing you know, you're feeling depressed as well as hurt. Or you turn your headache into a sure warning sign of some serious illness, which just heaps a big dose of fear and hopelessness onto an already difficult

situation. Suffering, in other words, results from seeing situations through the distorting lens of the story your mind tells you.

- ✔ **The stress response is a physiological mechanism for adapting to challenging physical or psychological circumstances.** Certain physical stressors, such as extraordinary heat or cold, an extremely loud noise, or a violent attack, are stressful no matter how your mind interprets them. But the stressful effect of most stressors depends on the spin your mind adds to the situation. For example, driving to work in heavy traffic, sitting at your desk for eight hours handling paperwork and phone calls, and then driving home may be only mildly stressful on a purely physical level. But when you're afraid of arriving late, have a conflicted relationship with your boss, feel angry at several of your clients or coworkers, and are still mulling over the argument you had with your spouse or best friend yesterday, it's no wonder you crawl home at the end of the day completely exhausted. Just as your mind can transform pain into suffering, so it can parlay ordinary stressors into extraordinary stress.

## *Fixation of attention*

The tendency of the thinking mind to obsess or fixate on certain thoughts and emotions causes the body to contract in response. Have you ever noticed how tense and anxious you can get when you mentally rehearse the same scenario again and again, even when it's an ostensibly positive one? By contrast, an alert, open, fluid mind — which you can develop through the regular practice of mindfulness meditation (see Book VII, Chapter 4) — allows you to flow from experience to experience without getting fixated or stuck. Ultimately, you can practice *receptive awareness* (see Book VII, Chapter 3), the spacious, skylike quality of mind that welcomes whatever arises.

## *Clinging to a separate self*

The great meditative traditions teach that the root cause of suffering and stress, which gives rise to your stories, is the belief that you're inherently separate from others, from the rest of life, and from *being* itself. Because you feel separate and alone, you need to protect yourself and ensure your survival at all costs. But you have only limited power, and you're surrounded by forces beyond your control. As long as you keep struggling to defend your turf, you're going to keep suffering no matter how hard you try. Meditation offers you the opportunity to relax your guard, open your awareness, and ultimately catch a glimpse of who you really are, beyond your stories and the illusion of a separate, isolated self.

## *The Good News: How Meditation Relieves Suffering and Stress*

Now for the good news! In case you find all the talk earlier in this chapter depressing, be reassured: Your story or drama may masquerade as who you really are, but it's not. Your essential being remains pure and unharmed, no matter how elaborate and compelling your story becomes. Besides, as stubborn and intractable as they may seem, your mind and heart are actually malleable. Through the regular practice of meditation, you can reduce your suffering and stress by stilling and ultimately dissipating the turbulence and confusion inside you. As one ancient Zen master put it, "If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things, this moment is the best moment of your life."

To begin with, you can develop the skill of *focusing and concentrating* your mind, which calms it and prevents it from becoming agitated. As your

concentration deepens, thoughts and feelings that have been building up inside naturally bubble up and evaporate in a *spontaneous release*.

When you've developed strong concentration, you can expand your awareness to include thoughts, feelings, and the deeper patterns and stories that underlie them. Then, through the power of *penetrating insight*, you can explore the various layers of inner experience, get to know how they function, and ultimately use this understanding to dismantle the patterns that keep causing you stress.

## Extending the mind-body 'round the clock

The mind-body connection doesn't have to stop when you roll up your mat and put it away. You can take your lessons — and the wisdom you have gathered through them — along for the ride as you cruise through your day. You're likely to find other ways that work for you, too. Here are some suggestions:

- ✔ **Concentrate on breathing:** Train yourself to be aware of your breathing in all situations. You may be surprised at how often you catch yourself holding your breath. Really. If you're in a conversation, debate, discussion, or even an argument with someone, take a moment to breathe before you respond. Breathing alone can help slow your pulse and blood pressure.
- ✔ **Look inside yourself:** Think about how and why you feel and react the way you do in certain situations. Let yourself feel all during the day, in everything that you do, by looking inward in short meditative moments.
- ✔ **Observe the world around you:** Observe both yourself and others in daily interactions, without judgment. Don't think, "Oh, what I just said was so stupid," or "How could she ever have worn those odd shoes?" Instead, simply observe things

around you and how they affect you, then acknowledge that reaction or affect. You'll eventually find more calm and peace day-to-day.

- ✔ **Send healing energy to someone else:** Use the awakened mental powers you develop from mind-body exercise to "beam" positive energy to someone else. Imagining healing energy enveloping another person can make that person's day (and yours) better.
- ✔ **Take 5 (or 10, or 20 . . .):** Everybody can find at least five minutes in the day for him- or herself. Writing down your daily schedule to figure out where those extra minutes get lost may be helpful. You can even pencil in a time you intend to take a break, or set an alarm on your watch so you don't get so wrapped up that you forget.
- ✔ **Find 5:** Find a minute or two to do a quick balance pose, stretch, alignment drill, or standing meditation many times during the day. Look for times when you're just waiting for something. How about when you fill your car's gas tank? You can do a standing or breathing exercise in that moment. See how easy it is to find a couple of dangling minutes in your day?

### Book VII

Meditation,  
Mindfulness,  
and Letting  
Go of Stress

## *Developing focus and concentration*

So your mind chatters constantly, swirling you up and stressing you out, and you're wondering what you can do to quiet it down. Well, you can begin by practicing a meditation technique that emphasizes concentration, such as following or counting your breaths (see Book VII, Chapter 4) or reciting a mantra (see Book VII, Chapter 3). When you get the knack, you can keep shifting from your inner dialogue to the present moment, wherever you happen to be. And if you're so inclined, you can develop positive qualities that counteract some of the negative tendencies of your mind and heart.

### *Stabilizing your concentration*

If you've ever tried to quiet your mind by preventing it from thinking, you know how hopeless that can be. (See the sidebar "Stopping your mind" in this chapter.) But the more you invest your mental energy in a single focus during meditation, the more one-pointed your mind becomes, and the more the distractions recede to the background. Eventually, you can develop the ability to stabilize your concentration on a single focus for minutes at a time, gently returning when your mind wanders off.

With increased one-pointedness comes an experience of inner harmony and stillness, as the sediment in the turbulent lake of your mind gradually settles, leaving the water clean and clear. This experience is generally accompanied by feelings of calm and relaxation and occasionally by other pleasurable feelings like love, joy, happiness, and bliss (which incidentally originate at the bottom of the lake in pure *being*).

At deeper levels of concentration, you may experience total absorption in the object — a state known as *samadhi*. When this power of focused concentration is directed like a laser beam to everyday activities, you can enter what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow* — a state of supreme enjoyment in which time stops, self-consciousness drops away, and you become one with the activity itself.

### *Returning to the present moment*

When you've begun to develop your concentration, you can use it to keep shifting in everyday life away from your inner drama and back to the present moment. You may not eliminate the turbulence, but you can keep seeing beyond it. It's kind of like taking off your sunglasses and looking at things directly or like opening your eyes wide when you start falling asleep. The more you look past the drama, the more you see the freshness of *being* itself reflected in what you see. Returning to the present moment again and again forges a trail that allows you to do an end run around your drama and strengthens your direct connection with life.

### *Cultivating positive emotions and mind-states*

You can use the concentration you develop in meditation to cultivate positive alternatives to agitation, fear, anger, depression, and the other powerful emotions that arise when you're involved in your story. (In fact, the practice of cultivation itself can develop your powers of concentration.) These positive mind-states include lovingkindness, compassion, equanimity, and joy.

### *Allowing spontaneous release*

When you meditate regularly, you start to notice that thoughts and feelings that have accumulated inside you naturally dissipate like mist rising from the surface of a lake. You don't have to do anything special to make this happen. It simply occurs naturally as your concentration deepens and your mind settles down. You may sit to meditate feeling weighted down by worries or concerns and then get up half an hour later feeling somehow lighter, more spacious, and more worry-free. Who knows how this mysterious process happens? You may say that meditating is like lifting the lid on a boiling pot of soup: You create space for the water to evaporate and relieve the pressure that has been building up inside.



To encourage this process of spontaneous release, you can practice meditation techniques that involve *receptive awareness* — open, spacious awareness that welcomes whatever arises. (You need to develop your concentration first.) When your mind is no longer fixated on a particular object — be it a thought, a memory, or an emotion — and is expansive and unattached like the sky, you're no longer investing energy in your drama. Instead, you're inviting whatever's churning inside you to unfold and let go.

### *Penetrating your experience with insight*

The previous sections highlight concentration and awareness techniques that show you how to circumvent your drama, develop alternatives to your drama, and still your mind so that your drama doesn't disturb you. The problem with these techniques is that they leave your inner stories more or less intact, and when your concentration weakens or your lovingkindness wanes, the same old distracting thoughts and troubling emotions come back to stress you out!

Through the practice of penetrating insight, however, you can get to know your drama, gain an understanding of how it causes suffering, see beyond it, and eventually free yourself from it entirely.

### *Becoming aware of your inner experience*

When you sit quietly for 10 or 15 minutes and notice your thoughts and feelings, you're making a radical shift in your relationship to your inner experience. (For more on observing thoughts and feelings, see Book VII, Chapter 5.) Instead of being swept away by the current, you become, for the moment, an observer on the shore, watching the river of your experience flow by. Though the difference may seem inconsequential and you may not feel that you're making any headway, you've actually begun to loosen your story's stranglehold on your life. Gradually, you begin to notice spaces in your mind's chatter, and what once seemed so serious and solid slowly becomes lighter and infused with fresh air. You may find yourself laughing at your tendency to worry and obsess, or perhaps you pause and notice what you're feeling before you react.

As you practice welcoming your experience just as it is, including your judgments and self-criticisms, you may also discover that your attitude toward yourself begins to change in subtle ways. Instead of impatience or contempt, you may begin to notice a certain self-acceptance creeping in as you become more familiar with the repetitive patterns of your mind. Hey, you may even develop a measure of compassion for yourself as you see how self-critical or distracted or frightened you can become.

### *Becoming aware of your story and how it confuses you*

When you meditate regularly and observe your thoughts and feelings, you begin to notice recurring themes and story lines that keep playing in your mind. Perhaps you become aware of the tendency to obsess about all the times people misunderstood you or failed to give you the love you wanted. Maybe you see how you compare yourself to other people and judge yourself better or worse than them. Possibly you find yourself fantasizing about the ideal mate, even though you've been happily married for years. Or you may notice that you're constantly planning for the future while ignoring what's happening right here and now.



Whatever your particular patterns may be, you can observe how they keep arising to disturb you and pull you away from the reality at hand (which may be some simple task like following your breath or reciting your mantra). Gradually, you realize that your story is just that: a story your mind keeps spinning that separates you from others and causes you pain. As John Lennon put it, "Life is what's happening while you're busy making other plans." When you start seeing your story for what it is, you don't allow it to confuse you in the same way anymore.

### *Changing your story*

As you may notice after you meditate for a while, just being aware of your story can begin changing it in subtle (or even not-so-subtle!) ways. When you

develop a certain distance from your story — knowing at some level that it's just your story, not who you really *are* — you naturally become less reactive, people respond to you differently, and circumstances shift accordingly. Soon your life is just not the same old story anymore!



Of course, you may already be struggling to change your life by manipulating circumstances or reprogramming your mind with affirmations or positive thinking. But first you have to bring the power of penetrating insight to bear on your habitual patterns and stories; otherwise, healthier perspectives and patterns can't take root, and you just keep running in the same old grooves.

### *Seeing beyond your story to who you really are*

Even though you may become aware of your story, gain some distance from it, and begin to alter it in certain fundamental ways, you may still identify with it until you can catch a glimpse of who you really are beyond your story.

Such glimpses can take a number of different forms. Perhaps you have unexpected moments of peace or tranquility, when your thoughts settle down — or even stop entirely — and a sweet silence permeates your mind. Or you may experience a flood of unconditional love that momentarily opens your heart wide and gives you a brief glimpse of the oneness beyond all apparent separation. Or maybe you have a sudden intuition of your inherent interconnectedness with all beings or a sense of being in the presence of something far vaster than yourself. Whatever the insight that lifts you beyond your story, it can irrevocably alter who you take yourself to be. Never again can you fully believe that you're merely the limited personality your mind insists you are.

### *Freeing yourself from your story*

When you've caught a glimpse of who you really are, beyond your mind (and even your body), you can keep reconnecting with this deeper level of *being* in your meditations as well as in your everyday life. To resurrect the metaphor of the lake described earlier in the chapter, you can dive down to the bottom again and again because you know what it looks like and how to find it.

Even though your story may continue to play on the video screen of your brain, you can develop the capacity to disengage from it or even disidentify from it entirely. You even come to realize that the personality is a case of mistaken identity and that who you are is the vast expanse of *being* itself, in which your personal thoughts and feelings arise and pass away.

Such a profound realization may take years of meditation to achieve, yet it's always available to you no matter how long you've meditated — indeed, whether you've ever meditated at all! Many people report laughing uproariously when they finally see that their true natures were right there all along, as plain as the proverbial noses on their faces.



## Stopping your mind

Many people believe that the point of meditation is to stop the mind. To get a visceral sense of the futility of such efforts, you can attempt to stop your mind and see what happens. Try the following exercise:

- 1. Sit quietly and take a few slow, deep breaths.**
- 2. For the next five minutes, try to stop thinking.**

That's right. Do whatever you can to keep your mind from generating more thoughts. Try humming to yourself or concentrating on your big toe or recalling a beautiful day

in nature. Or just try being as still as you possibly can. Do whatever you think will work for you.

- 3. At the end of five minutes, reflect on your experience.**

How successful were you? Could you actually stop thinking for an extended period of time? Did you find that the struggle to stop thinking just generated more thoughts? In case you hadn't noticed, this exercise reveals how stubborn and tenacious your thinking mind can be.



Contrary to popular belief, people who learn to integrate this realization and live their understanding in a moment-to-moment way don't become more detached and disengaged from life. Rather, because their stories and their senses of separation have lifted like a fog, they actually perceive situations and people with more immediacy and compassion, and they can act more appropriately according to the circumstances.