



# The Liberative Potential of Mindfulness

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This is in all likelihood my final contribution under the byline Orthogonal Rotation in Consciousness. The serializing of *Coming to Our Senses* (Kabat-Zinn 2005) in *Mindfulness* has gone on uninterrupted since 2012. During this time, mindfulness has entered the mainstream in ways that could have hardly been predicted yet were very much presaged as well as furthered by the launch of this eponymous journal in 2010. During this time, the world has changed in ways that have been in general alignment with the vector trajectory pointed to in the original book. Below is the Foreword to the last volume in the *Coming to Our Senses* series, *Mindfulness for All* (Kabat-Zinn 2019), modified slightly for this publication. May we, as a species, find as many ways as possible to wake up and come to our senses for the sake of humanity and for the sake the world.

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Mindfulness for all!  
That is a wild thought.

But why not, when you come right down to it? Especially at this moment in time, stressed as we are individually and collectively in so many different ways, both inwardly and outwardly.

And in terms of the wisdom to transform the world, it is not hyperbole. That wisdom is a potential that is wholly distributive, lying within each one of us in small but, as I hope to make clear, hardly insignificant ways. That wisdom is cultivatable through mindfulness in ways both little and big. I have had the privilege of seeing it emerge and flourish in many different domains over the past 40 plus years. Now, that incipient

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wisdom is spreading throughout the world, becoming stronger and ever more an imperative.

## The Evolutionary Import of Meditative Awareness

If it is part of the evolutionary glide path of us humans to progressively know ourselves better, thereby inhabiting a bit more the name we gave our species<sup>1</sup>; if it is also part of the evolutionary glide path of us humans not to destroy ourselves or create nightmare dystopias beyond those we have already managed to perpetrate, we will need to take on a whole new level of responsibility for ourselves, for our own minds, for our societies, and for our planet. Otherwise, if past is any prologue, all of us may unwittingly be contributing either by omission or commission, in tiny ways that may not be so tiny in the end, to creating a highly unhealthy and majorly toxic world that none of us will be happy to inhabit. And that is perhaps the understatement of the millennium. The prevailing dis-ease of humanity is playing itself out increasingly before our very eyes. It is also increasingly harder for any of us to ignore, and we do so individually and collectively at our peril.

So mindfulness for all and the cultivation of greater enacted wisdom in how we conduct ourselves and take care of our world is hardly mere hype or wishful thinking. It may be an, if not the, essential ingredient for our short- and long-term survival, health, and ongoing development as a species. But to be up to the enormity of this challenge, the mindfulness I am referring to has to be authentic, nested within a universal dharma framework nurturing and cultivating wisdom and compassion (see Kabat-Zinn 2018 if the word dharma is unfamiliar to you). As I am using the term, mindfulness is a way of seeing and a way of being, one that has a long history on this planet. It also has considerable momentum at the moment as it moves increasingly into the mainstream of many different societies and cultures in a variety of ways. Axiomatically, the approach I am advocating has to be and is

<sup>1</sup> *Homo sapiens sapiens*: The species that is aware and knows that it is aware, from the Latin, *sapere*, to taste or to know.

grounded and safeguarded at every level in ethical, embodied, enacted, and ultimately selfless wisdom and action. We might think of mindfulness as one tributary of the human wisdom tradition. While its most highly articulated roots lie deep within Buddhism, its essence is universal and has been expressed in one way or another in all human cultures and traditions.

As I see it, the increasingly widespread adoption and practice of mindfulness meditation in our individual lives and in our work, and its intentional application moment by moment and day by day in how we respond to the world we inhabit, could potentially provide the very root of authentic well-being, peacefulness, and clarity within our vast diversity of peoples, cultures, and aspirations on the planet. Mindfulness has something to offer all of us as individuals, and as a global human community. I don't think that there is any question that its transformative potential needs to be realized—i.e., made real—in an infinite number of creative ways at this particular juncture in the unfolding of our species, nested within our far-more-fragile-than-we-thought-until-recently planetary abode.

As one of many recent indications that mindfulness is moving into the mainstream in broadly influential ways, the very last chapter of the historian Yuval Noah Harari's (2018) *21 Lessons for the twenty-first Century* is about mindfulness. In it, he discloses that since a ten-day retreat in the year 2000, he has been meditating every day, plus annually participating in an intensive silent meditation retreat of 1 or 2 months duration (with no books or social media during that time; see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuval\\_Noah\\_Harari](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yuval_Noah_Harari)). That alone tells us a lot. After offering us two remarkably popular, profound, provocative, and insightful volumes describing the history of the human condition (Harari 2015) and the challenges we are facing as a species in the very near future (Harari 2017), some of them quite terrifying, his most recent work, also a bestseller, distills from all that scholarly investigation twenty-one key lessons for the present. I found it quite revealing and gratifying that, with all the threads Harari so skillfully weaves together from history to reveal the enormous challenges our species is facing now, he explicitly adopts the rigorous practice of mindfulness in his own life and names it as an improbable but perhaps essential element for cultivation if, as a species, we are to thread the needle going forward in facing the new challenges brought on by both information technology and biotechnology, challenges he elaborates in considerable and sobering detail.

When *21 Lessons for the twenty-first Century* was reviewed on the front page of the Sunday New York Times Book Review on September 9, 2018, by Bill Gates, under the title, "Thinking Big,"<sup>2</sup> because Harari is nothing if not a deep

<sup>2</sup> Ironic, in that mindfulness is so much bigger than thinking and orthogonal to it. Awareness and thought are obviously not mutually exclusive at all, and if understood correctly, can complement and benefit each other enormously. In this context, "orthogonal" means that mindfulness, or awareness, is an independent domain or dimension, pertaining at the same time as thinking and able to provide a different vantage point from which to hold all thought.

and creative thinker and synthesizer as an historian, Gates asks rhetorically:

What does Harari think we should do about all this? [i.e., the large challenges Harari enumerates we are facing as a species at this moment in time] Sprinkled throughout is some practical advice, including a three-prong strategy for fighting terrorism and a few tips for dealing with fake news. But his big idea boils down to this: Meditate. Of course he isn't suggesting that the world's problems will vanish if enough of us start sitting in the lotus position and chanting om. But he does insist that life in the 21st Century demands mindfulness—getting to know ourselves better and seeing how we contribute to suffering in our own lives. This is easy to mock, but as someone who's taken a course on mindfulness and meditation, I found it compelling.

This is a rather remarkable statement, especially coming from Bill Gates. Apparently, he understands the power of mindfulness from the inside.

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The way I would put the basic message of this book is that before we give up being human in the face of what is very likely on the horizon, i.e. artificial intelligence, intelligent robots, and the prospect of digitally if not also biologically "enhanced" humans, and much more, as Harari describes in great detail, we might do well to explore in depth what being fully human, and thus, more embodied and more awake might really mean and feel like. That is both the plea and the challenge of the *Coming to Our Senses* series. But it is inviting a very personal engagement on your part, in the sense that each one of us has a responsibility, not only to oneself but to the world, to do our own inner and outer work through the regular cultivation of mindfulness—as a meditation practice and as a way of being—and thereby come to recognize and inhabit the full dimensionality of our being and its repertoire of potentials right here and right now, as best we can.

Since elements of the universal mindfulness meditation-based dharma perspective I am referring to run through wisdom streams within every human culture, mindfulness is intrinsically inclusive, capable of dissolving barriers to communication and finding common purpose rather than promoting divisiveness. There is no one right way to cultivate it and no catechism or belief system one has to adopt. What is more, this emerging wisdom perspective is continuing to evolve through us and through how we choose to lead our lives and face our very real challenges and opportunities. It reflects what has always been deepest and best in us as human beings, in our diversity and in our commonality.

## Befriending Your Own Mind and Body: A Universal Meditation Practice

Of course, the kind of wisdom we are speaking of has to be grounded in ongoing cultivation, and that means in a practice of some kind that nurtures, sustains, and deepens it. For mindfulness is not mindfulness if it is not lived. And that means embodied. Those of us who undertake it in this way do so as best we can—not as an ideal, but as an ongoing and continually unfolding way of being.

Why?

Because mindfulness is not merely a good idea, or a nice philosophy, belief system, or catechism. It is a rigorous universally applicable meditation practice—universal because awareness itself could be seen as the final common pathway of our humanity, across all cultures. When all is said and done, mindfulness is really a way of being—a way of being in relationship to experience. By its very nature, it requires ongoing cultivation and nurturance by us as individuals if we care about living our lives fully and freely, and ultimately, as supportive and nurturing communities and societies. In the same way that musicians need to tune, retune, and fine-tune their instruments on a regular basis before and sometimes even during performances, mindfulness practice can be thought of as a kind of tuning of the instrument of your attention and how you choose to be in relationship to experience—any experience, all experience. It doesn't matter how accomplished a musician you are. You still have to tune your instrument regularly. And the more accomplished you are, the more you need to practice. It is a virtuous circle.

Even the greatest musicians practice. In fact, they probably practice more than anyone else. Only with mindfulness, there is no separation between “rehearsal” and “performance.” Why? Because there is no performance, and no rehearsal either. There is only this moment. This is it. There is no “improving” on our awareness. What we are cultivating through the practice of mindfulness is greater access to and intimacy with our innate capacity for awareness, and an ability to take up residency, so to speak, in that domain of being as our “default mode,” out of which flows all our doing.

## Many Doors, One Room: Diversity and Inclusiveness are Paramount

The practice and larger expression of mindfulness in the world needs to be as diverse as the constituencies that might advocate for it, adopt it, embody it, and benefit from it—each in their own way, just as the music played and enjoyed by the human family is so profoundly diverse, a veritable universe of lived expression and connection.

At the same time, if you ask if I am concerned with the hype associated with mindfulness in the world these days, and with the tendency of some to advertise themselves as “mindfulness teachers” without much, if any, grounding in rigorous practice and study, you bet I am. Might the rubric “Mindfulness for All” be contributing to that hype? I certainly hope not. I have been engaged for decades in the endeavor to bring mindfulness into the mainstream of the world in ways that are true to its dharma roots and do not denature or diminish it, precisely because of my conviction about and personal experience (limited as that might be, being just one person) of its profound healing and transformative potential, its widespread applicability in the face of suffering, and its many-times-over documented contribution to health and wellbeing at every level that those words carry meaning. And the scientific study of mindfulness, while still in its infancy—although far less so than 20 years ago—is substantiating that there are many different clinical applications of mindfulness in medicine and psychology beyond MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) and MBCT (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy), such as MBCP (mindfulness-based childbirth and parenting) (Bardacke 2012), MBRP (mindfulness-based relapse prevention) (Bowen et al. 2021), MB-EAT (mindfulness-based eating awareness training) (Kristeller et al. 2014), and MORE (mindfulness-oriented recovery enhancement) (Garland 2013)). In addition, there are mindfulness programs making notable contributions in fields as varied as education at all levels, criminal justice, business, sports, community-building, even politics (see for example, Bristow et al. (2020); also, Mindful Nation UK – Report by the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG) October 2015: [www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk](http://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk)).

Do I mean by “mindfulness for all” that everybody is all of a sudden going to adopt or ultimately wind up with a rigorous and personally meaningful meditation practice? No. Of course not. Still, and highly improbably from the perspective of 1979, when MBSR first began in the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, more and more people around the world and increasingly among diverse and divergent communities are actually incorporating consistent and regular mindfulness meditation practice to one degree or another into their lives, from refugees in South Sudan to U.S. Forest Service firefighters, from children in well-researched public school and afterschool programs in inner city Baltimore to cops in major police departments, from people attending drop-in weekly public meditations throughout the city of Los Angeles offered by UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center to medical patients participating in mindfulness programs sponsored by the mindfulness initiative within the Shanghai Medical Society, from the work of

affiliate programs of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society around the world to a far broader world-wide network of MBSR teachers and teacher-trainers in university and hospital centers and stand-alone programs. Mindfulness is taking root on all continents with the possible exception of Antarctica: in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

But if you ask whether I mean by that phrase, mindfulness for all, that we could all, as unique human beings, young and old, whoever we are, whatever we do, whatever views we hold, however we have been shaped by the past and our various heritage streams, whatever groups we identify with or belong to—religious, spiritual, or philosophical, secular or sacred, right or left, pessimistic or optimistic, cynical or large of heart—benefit from greater awareness of, in Bill Gate’s words, “how we contribute to suffering in our own lives” and, of course, in the lives of others as well; and how we can all benefit from greater wakefulness, greater awareness of our interconnectedness with each other, of the web of life on this planet and within the universe we inhabit, and from recognizing and realizing the essential impersonal non-self nature of all phenomena (Anālayo 2015; Armstrong 2017; Kabat-Zinn 2015), including us, the answer is an emphatic “yes.” You bet I do. In fact, I think it could be the most important evolutionary opportunity for humanity at this moment in time, namely to know ourselves in our wholeness and our interconnectedness as a species, and to be able to act out of the wisdom of a larger wholeness rather than out of a more small-minded and often fear-based and misconstrued sense of self-interest and limited and limiting narratives about who we truly are as living breathing beings, here for such a short period on this planet—a full human lifespan, if we are lucky, the blink of an eye in cosmological, or geological, or evolutionary time.

### **If You Are Human and You Suffer, This Practice May Be for You**

And just to bring it to the personal level for a moment, why would you have even had the impulse to pick up this book if you were not in some way intuitively drawn to that very possibility in yourself and for yourself at some level? I am guessing that this is the case even if you weren’t and aren’t quite sure that you yourself could possibly begin or maintain and nurture your own personal meditation practice over days, weeks, months, years, and decades. The fact is, though, that you can. You can develop your own personal meditation practice in a way that works for you. And more and more of us on this planet are. All you need to do is begin, to put your toe in the water, which you already have if you have read even this far. If what I am saying here is true, the rest will take care of itself. . . life will wind up teaching you, nurturing you in ways

you may have not realized were possible, but will come to recognize and appreciate as you do wake up a bit more through the cultivation of moment-to-moment nonjudgmental awareness.

### **Life Is the Ultimate Meditation Teacher**

The practice of mindfulness ultimately comes down to how you choose to live your life moment by moment by moment while you still have the chance. And more specifically, it is in how you choose to live it in relationship to whatever you may be encountering in terms of what I sometimes call the full catastrophe of the human condition and, closer to home, the sometime full catastrophe of our own individual lives.

In terms of the hype, perhaps it might be valuable for us to back away from the word “mindfulness” for a moment. Mindfulness is just a word. We are pointing to something underneath the word itself, to its deepest significance, namely pure awareness—perhaps humanity’s most remarkable feature and evolutionary asset.

Once we are in the domain of pure awareness, we are also in the domain of *relationality*. Precisely because you are paying attention, it becomes a lot easier to see how everything is related to everything else in this wholly interconnected universe. Our challenge, being intrinsically capable of inhabiting our own awareness as our default mode, as well as capable of being aware of our own awareness, is this: How are we going to interface with reality itself inwardly and outwardly, in both the domain of being (wakefulness) and the domain of doing (taking action)? Once you tap into and learn to inhabit your own awareness, there is no going back to sleep. And who would want to?

Mindfulness is and always has been also a matter of “heartfulness.” The word for “mind” and the word for “heart” in Chinese and in many other Asian languages is the same word. In Chinese, the ideogram for mindfulness consists of the character for “presence” or “now” above the character for “heart.” So “mindfulness” is “heartfulness.” It always has been. And that means that it is intrinsically ethical. It is and has to be grounded in non-harming. Why? Because it is not possible to be equanimous, at peace in your own heart, if you are engaged in harming or killing others, or lying, or stealing, or in sexual misconduct, or speaking ill of others. All of these are the opposite of non-harming, and of basic human decency and kindness.

### **A Rose by Any Other Name...**

By the same token, we could also say that mindfulness is, to coin a phrase, in a profound way also “kindfulness.” If we called mindfulness “kindfulness,” would anybody object?

Would kindness seem difficult or beyond our reach, or overly hyped? I doubt it. An act of authentic kindness is usually spontaneous and generous. It comes out of a momentary perceiving of a need and responding in a friendly fashion out of an impulse to connect and perhaps to help. But preceding that impulse is a moment of nonconceptual recognition—a spontaneous recognition, before thinking arises—that something is being called out of us, if perhaps simply a smile directed at another in a critical moment, or something more, perhaps an unseen act of generosity directed at another. That recognition is an unbidden moment of discernment, coming out of awareness itself. That is mindfulness.

The initiating event could be anything that engenders a heart-felt and heartfelt response in that moment, whether it involves a loved one, perhaps a child of yours, or for that matter, a homeless person on the street or the person in the car next to you in traffic. It is not the act itself that is most important. It is the recognition. And that capacity for recognition is innate. It is intrinsically human. That moment of recognition is a moment of spontaneous mindfulness. It is a moment of nonseparation. It is not mediated by thought, although it can be amplified and rounded out by thought later on. It is direct apprehension unfolding in the present moment, followed spontaneously by a direct, hopefully appropriate action, if any action is called for or arises—which may not always be the case.

We are all capable of this kind of recognition in the present moment. We already engage in it when the circumstances spontaneously call it out of us. So why not in every moment? Why not recognize what is actually unfolding within you and around you moment by moment? That is mindfulness. It is that innate capacity for recognition of what is most salient, most important, most called for in this moment. You may discover that that capacity is profoundly trustworthy.

And we all already have it, or you might say, we all already are it. It is actually that very same capacity—simply seeing what is here to be seen, and then acting! That acting on the basis of what we apprehend, what we recognize, sometimes looks like doing nothing in that moment of awareness. But isn't, even if you don't do anything at all, including smile. Why? Because some shift has already come about within yourself. Why not acknowledge your innate capacity for recognition of things as they are, beyond how we label them and what we think about them, beyond their names and forms, drilling down to the essence of what is going on in the present moment, nonconceptually, before thinking sets in, or underneath whatever thoughts may be arising within us?

And why not then encourage that recognition to expand into other moments of our lives? Why not nurture that latent seed within ourselves? It is, after all, a form of intelligence. And it may in fact be our most endearing quality, and of all our human qualities, the capacity that might just be most critical to allowing us to evolve as a species at this

moment in our development. Of course, some enterprising people will then start selling “kindfulness” bracelets or seminars, or whatever. But why buy or commodify something you already have? Something that is already an intrinsic part of who you are? Why not just befriend it? Why not use it as a kind of compass and live in accordance with its guidance?

Or to switch metaphors, why not see the world through the lens of direct apprehension, of recognition, and live in accordance with your own embodied values? Why not connect with others who care in the way that you care, and find new and imaginative ways to be in wiser relationship to our moments and to our opportunities to be of service to others and to ourselves? To transform society and establish not merely non-harming as a guiding principle in all our relationships, as in the Hippocratic Oath in medicine when it is lived up to, but also taking steps to heal the wounds of our social fabric, the wounds of racism, inequality, injustice, and poverty as best we can, mindfully wrestling with and hopefully transcending in moments of clarity our tribal impulses toward “us-ing” and “them-ing,” favoring those we identify as similar to ourselves, while demonizing, dehumanizing, abusing, or ignoring those who are different, and thus, ultimately and unwittingly, ourselves as well.

## **Democracy 2.0—A Sorely Needed Upgrade via Mindfulness and Heartfulness**

This book is about the realization of mindfulness not only in our own personal lives, but in the larger world we inhabit together. Thomas Jefferson once said: “Liberty is to the collective body what health is to the individual body. Without health no pleasure can be tasted by man; without liberty, no happiness can be enjoyed by society.” He was right. At the same time, he was a slaveholder, denying liberty to other human beings in spite of his words in the Declaration of Independence that all (men) are created equal. So there is plenty of irony and contradiction here, and painful evidence of how slow the process of coming to a true democracy can be, and how challenging it is to break out of the box of one's own time and its multiple hard-to-see constraints that limit the evolution and realization of such an abstraction, however noble and worthy. Civilization's benefits always fall short of realization for some. The enslaved are always mindful of their enslavement. For them, it cannot be papered over with elevated rhetoric. They know the truth because they experience the oppression. Even ancient Athens, which gave us the concept of democracy, had slavery as an integral part of its social fabric. And when we speak of slavery, the polar opposite of being free, who could possibly imagine the suffering that it engendered and does to this day? The same could be said for the status of women, since the women of Athens were

themselves excluded from the democratic process. For that matter, until less than 100 years ago, a married woman in the United States did not have a legal existence apart from her husband.

This is one fundamental reason why democracy itself, and the liberation of all members of human society and the human family is usually a multigenerational evolutionary process, at present very much a work in progress with no guarantees of ultimate success, whatever that might be in a world where change is the only constant.

However, that cultural evolutionary process is speeding up, along with time itself and the transformations that our sciences and technologies have wrought so far and will increasingly bring in the future, in our lifetime and in that of our children and grandchildren. So part of what is called for are enacted laws, democratically arrived at, that protect the institutions of participation in the body politic, and the elemental sovereignty of all of its members, who constitute, if you will, the cells of the body politic for each country, and ultimately of the body politic of the planet.

Perhaps we could call this emergent possibility Democracy 2.0. It would be an “upgrade” that takes note of and prohibits all the various contradictions and machinations we have seen over the centuries that have sometimes, and even to this day (See, for example, Chomsky 2000; MacLean 2017) afforded outsized privilege to some members of society at the expense of others. This happens in a multiplicity of ways, from genocide and outright enslavement to endemic constraint through laws that favor the few—whether through inheritance, wealth, position, power, education, chicanery—over the many who have not had the benefit of such resources. The driver of this asymmetry is always ultimately greed, or hatred, or delusion, a protectionism of wealth and privilege, and a fundamental disregard for equal opportunity. Such elements curtail the right for all members of society (and the planet) to live life without undue and unfair constraints, be they legal, economic, social, or educational. Addressing this asymmetry will become even more important in society as many forms of human work/jobs are taken over by algorithms and robots.

Certainly there has been huge progress in standards of living, in health, and in personal wealth of ordinary citizens in first-world countries over the past 200 years, and more recently, in almost all countries on the planet (see Pinker 2018; Rosling 2018). Yet the narrative of human liberty and equal justice for all that we teach to children and immigrants when they become citizens of the United States through the pledge of allegiance has not yet come to grips with the contradictions of our national origins in genocide and slavery, and the ways our laws and their sometimes rude and violent enforcement do indeed privilege the few in hugely asymmetric ways. Such asymmetries of privilege and power are even more flagrant in many other societies. The development of democracies within the sweep of the past several thousand years, from

ancient Athens to now, has yet to face the roots of its own contradictions and the influence of powerful monied interests in subverting freedom and opportunity.

Now, I would say, it is about time for us as humans to catalyze an upgrade to a wisdom and compassion-based democracy, to assert that all beings have a fundamental right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—and to then inquire and investigate what true happiness might look like, and where it actually resides. Awareness of our own minds and desires has a huge role to play here, since ultimately, our minds and what we desire are at one and the same time the source of so much suffering and the only real possibility for liberation from that suffering, both for ourselves as individuals and for the world.

## The Power of Privilege and the Privilege of Power

As we all know, the Declaration of Independence, penned by Thomas Jefferson, speaks of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” But by the time the U.S. Constitution was enacted, the phrase “Pursuit of Happiness” was dropped in favor of “Property.” Not so surprising, since the Constitution was a legal document, and all the signers were property owners (and white and men), whereas the Declaration of Independence was a revolutionary declaration of grievance, with no legal standing. In fact, that document signaled a turning away from the legal structures and strictures of the British Empire and an outright rejection of its domination of its colonies. These ironies are poignant evidence that the arc of democracy and freedom on this planet is just that, an evolutionary experiment unfolding over time, and vulnerable to being undermined in many different ways. So any absolutism around freedom or who has the power to decide things is limited and potentially blinding. In the end, democracy needs something else, transcending the exercise of raw power. It needs wisdom. And wisdom only comes from the realization that the pursuit of self-interest defined too narrowly engenders that very blindness, especially given that the notion of “self” is highly questionable, suspect even in us as human beings and citizens, never mind in terms of corporations and governments. For true happiness or well-being, in other words, to tap into Aristotle’s *eudaemonia*, we need wakefulness, we need to learn to befriend our own essential nature as beings, as human beings. This is the domain of the non-dual, underneath thinking, beyond thinking, the realm of awareness itself.

## The Practice of Non-Doing

Non-doing, an essential element of the cultivation of mindfulness, almost sounds un-American, so much are we a culture of enterprising doers and go-getters. But the non-doing/being option

through which we can understand and ground all our doing, individual and collective, is becoming increasingly attractive to us as Americans. It is an invitation to be true to the promise of what an enlightened democratic society might be at this point in time, and to equally beware of the impulses of greed, hatred, and delusion—especially when undergirded and abetted by unjust laws—that could undermine it or subvert it altogether, an increasingly scary specter in this digital age. As the U.S. Air Force motto has it: Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. If the Air Force only knew how true that motto is. But the vigilance has to come out of a clear mind and a wise heart and be grounded in an ethical and moral soil. Otherwise that freedom can all-too-easily become part of the newspeak of George Orwell’s dystopic 1984. It can also give rise to what we saw unfold during the Trump presidency in perhaps increasingly more grotesque, overt, and disturbingly dangerous ways than in the past, but which indeed, has always been a tendency within human society that periodically comes into ascendancy, takes root, and takes over. And when it does, invariably a lot of people die. A lot of people, even children, are imprisoned unjustly. And love and compassion seemingly die with it.

Only that never happens entirely. That is another limited narrative we can tell ourselves and feel authenticated in in the short run, depending on our beliefs and allegiances. Human kindness and caring cannot die. Awareness and wisdom cannot die. They are in our DNA, often emerging under even the harshest and most nightmarish conditions. Each one of us is capable of great love as well as, unfortunately, great harm to others and to ourselves, both by commission and omission. Why *not* nurture the love? Why *not* nurture wisdom? Why *not* incline our minds and hearts in this direction? After all, it is where real freedom, wellbeing, and happiness lie.

## A Larger Vision of Self and Self-Interest

Let’s nurture life as best we can by expanding our definition of “self-interest” and looking deeply into what we even mean by self, and by “me” and “mine,” by “us” and “them” and what happens to “us” when we fall into the trap of reflexive emotional distancing and dehumanizing. We might inquire similarly about true well-being and happiness if we manage to write ourselves restraining orders in this regard at key moments, gentle reminders that we do not have to reflexively go this route of “us-ing” and “them-ing” on the personal level or at the level of the body politic.

## Shaping the Future by Showing Up in This Moment

And, while we are at it, let’s marvel at our potential role in what is yet to come, and contribute to it each in our own way

by taking care of this moment fully. When we do, the next moment is already profoundly different, because we chose to show up fully in this one. This is how we shape the future, how we bring about a wiser and kinder future—by taking care of and responding to the present we have now with our full presence and multiple intelligences, in other words, mindfully, in awareness.

This book invites you to trust your own creativity and heritage in that regard, whatever country or culture you belong to or view you identify with. Through the ongoing cultivation of mindfulness and heartfulness, we contribute, each in our own small but hardly insignificant way, to a multidimensional interconnected lattice-structure in which we can be nodes of embodied wisdom that can incrementally heal and transform our world. Embodied wisdom emerges in how we take care of and interact with our children and grandchildren in the moment rather than in the abstract. It manifests in the world we bequeath to them. It resides within the work we do, in our relationships, in our willingness to affirm what we most value and embody it in how we carry ourselves in our actions and in our choices. It appears when we are willing to sit down and listen wholeheartedly to others who may look very different from us and may see things very differently from how we see things, when we listen deeply to nature, including to our own true nature, and to the universe itself. In a word, embodied wisdom is alive and well when we are fully alive and well, when we manage from moment to moment and from day to day to recognize and then put out the welcome mat for what is—including the full catastrophe of the human condition—and then tend it wisely. When we do, the cultivation of mindfulness winds up somehow, mysteriously, connecting us to life itself in deep ways we might not have imagined possible and thus, winds up ultimately being of benefit to all.

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*Mindfulness for all: The wisdom to transform the world* (Kabat-Zinn 2019) is an optimistic attempt to make the case that it is imperative for us as human beings to bring the lens and cultivation of mindfulness to the larger world and to the planet as a whole. In doing so, we might have a much better framework for accurately diagnosing and then appropriately treating the ills of our society, both in terms of outright disease and the underlying and pervasive dis-ease it is suffering from. The outright disease element would include the incontrovertible evidence that the activity of our species has managed to give the planet a fever that has the potential to make life infinitely harder for almost everybody in the next few generations, and perhaps even unlivable, without some radical if not miraculous planet-wide social, technological, and governmental innovations of major proportions, coupled with reining in our seemingly endless intoxication with growth.

But the biggest learning, growing, healing, and transformation will not come out of technology or government. It can only come from our capacity as human beings—all of us—to wake up to our predicament and to our potential for realization: realization of our circumstances and of both the inner as well as the outer resources available to us as a species to minimize what is unhealthy and often greed-driven for something healthier and more compassionate. And out of that realization, to mobilize those resources, each and every one of us, in the service of healing rather than harming. We need to address head-on, with the full range of our multiple intelligences—somatic, intuitive, conceptual, emotional, social, global—what our precocious species has objectively wrought since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, only a dozen human generations ago—the shadow side as well as the beauty..

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How we treat the world in this moment depends in large measure, as it always has, on the lenses we use to apprehend it, and the attributions we make to comprehend it. We are seeing divisiveness played out as never before, and yet, as always before. The technology may be faster and more pervasive, since we have globally networked super-computers in our pockets and handbags, but the basic elements of our species' struggle remain the same.

I hope you will be able to see through the lenses I have attempted to provide through these *Orthogonal Rotation in Consciousness* offerings over the years, the world as it is now, and realize in your own way what it would take to live fully the life that is yours to live in the climate (all puns intended) we find ourselves in now—and what it would take to insure the same for everybody else. If we approach the dis-ease of the human condition from a medical perspective—drawing on what medicine and science have learned about the mind/body connection, neuroplasticity, epigenetics, telomeres and cellular aging, and indeed, about mindfulness, health, and well-being, public health, and the environment over the past forty plus years, we may just have a chance to diagnose our complex condition with much greater accuracy than in the past. And as a consequence, to find and have the motivation and stamina to implement an appropriate course of treatment for the magnitude of what ails us. In the process, we have the opportunity to uncover, discover, and recover our intrinsic wholeness and original beauty as human beings. That is not only satisfying—it gives rise to deep insight, and thus, to real power.

As essential “cells” of the body politic and of the flowering of life on this planet, each one of us counts, and our efforts to cultivate and embody mindfulness (and thus heartfulness and “kindfulness”) in our own lives and in our richly diverse relationships may be the critical element—and may in the end make the critical difference—in how things unfold in the coming moments, years, and generations.

There is cause for optimism. As my late father-in-law, the historian, teacher, and civil rights and peace activist, Howard Zinn put it:

We don't have to engage in grand heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory (Zinn 1994/2002; See also the Zinn Education Project (ZEP): [https:// www.zinnedproject.org/](https://www.zinnedproject.org/)).

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May your mindfulness practice continue to grow and flower and nourish your life and health and work and calling in this world from moment to moment and from day to day. May the beauty of the world hold you during the best of times and the worst of times and remind you of who you really really really really are and what is most important to keep alive and flourishing while you have the chance.

May you walk in beauty, as the Navajo people say, and may you realize that you already do—and that you always have. And may you tend what needs tending in the world along the way, with tenderness and with resolve.

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