THIS WORKS

How to Use Mindfulness to Calm the Hell Down and Just Be Happy

PADDY BROSNAN

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To Faye, thank you for your learning, teaching, belief and love. Your acceptance of my mad ideas never fails to amaze me and is the definition of true love.

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Of course, nothing in this book is particularly original and my greatest debt of gratitude is to my teachers. Some I have had the great privilege of meeting – the Venerable Panchen Otrul Rinpoche and the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh. The presence of these teachers in the world is a gift to all of us. Others, like Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche have contributed greatly to my progress along the path with their teachings. May you all stay until suffering ends.

You are not your thoughts and feelings, you are the awareness in which they exist.

Introduction

Making a Venerable Tibetan Lama Giggle

'There is, so I believe, in the essence of everything, something that we cannot call learning. There is, my friend, only a knowledge – that is everywhere, that is Atman,[1] *that is in me and you and in every creature, and I am beginning to believe that this knowledge has no worse enemy than the man of knowledge, than learning.'*

Siddhartha, Herman Hesse

Several years ago, when I was thinking about offering public workshops on mindfulness, I spent some time at Jampa Ling retreat in Cavan in Ireland. I wanted to be clear about my motivation for wanting to teach and that my intentions came from a place of integrity. Having practised mindfulness for a decade by that time, I'd become increasingly aware of the rise

in public popularity of the practice. Surely this could only be a good thing?

But I had noticed too that, with mindfulness, we were doing what we in the West always seem to do with the things we bring here from the ancient wisdom traditions – and that is, making it all so ridiculously complicated. All at once mindfulness had become the buzzword of the moment. Now you could get degrees in mindfulness; you could take and teach courses in MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) or mindfulness-based CBT (cognitive behaviour therapy), or even MIBS (mindfulness for irritable bowel syndrome); universities were setting up Mindfulness departments, as were hospitals in their Psychiatry outpatient units. To be able to talk about mindfulness with any authority, it seemed you now had to be a high-ranking academic or a world-renowned expert: a professor of psychiatry, a clinical psychologist or a distinguished neuroscientist.

Yet one of the things that has always attracted me to the practice is its sheer simplicity. The way mindfulness can help us tap into truths we know at an instinctive level (but often lose sight of), and the fact that it is accessible to everybody. Did I – a radio presenter turned investment advisor turned dog groomer – really have anything to contribute? Could I add something to the debate and, most importantly, could I bring something useful to other people?

On my final day in Cavan, I shared some of my concerns with the Venerable Panchen Ötrul Rinpoche, the distinguished Tibetan Buddhist lama and Spiritual Director of Jampa Ling.

His response to my questions was totally unexpected – and completely enlightening. As soon as I mentioned that universities were now offering Master degrees in mindfulness and that a lady I'd been talking to about offering courses had asked me for my professional qualifications, Rinpoche collapsed into a fit of giggles, which continued for quite some time. After a while, as I sat in front of him nonplussed, two of his attendants came in to see what was happening. Since he was close to 80 years old at the time, those around him were always vigilant for his welfare. I was glad to see them, as I was beginning to worry that my questions and his response, might perhaps have done him some kind of physical harm!

Once Rinpoche caught his breath, he finally managed to say, 'But how on earth would they examine you?' Then he dissolved into another fit of laughter. It was clearly one of the funniest – and most bizarre – things he had heard in a long time.

Rinpoche is an erudite and highly educated man, with a number of degrees to his name, including the highest degree in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy (*Geshe Lharampa*), which he was awarded in 1980. While he was living in India, he was

entrusted by the Dalai Lama with the task of redesigning the educational programmes for the three largest monasteries there – Drepung, Sera and Ganden. There was nothing in Rinpoche's laughter that expressed derision for education or human learning. But what he understood instinctively was that mindfulness is not something that can be related to at a purely intellectual, let alone an academic, level. It is an interior and highly personal process which can only be mastered through an individual practice; it is something simple but very profound which touches the essence of each person's experience of reality. And above all, mindfulness is a way of being whose practice and benefits are accessible to everyone, including me – a radio presenter turned investment advisor turned dog groomer; including you and anyone else reading this book.

I have the greatest of respect for Oxford University and its Department of Psychiatry, for the University of Massachusetts Medical School and the University of California; and for the wonderful work undertaken by these institutions in recent years. However, it is my personal conviction that, for the vast majority of us, bringing interpersonal neurobiology into the picture when we are trying to get to grips with mindfulness is about as useful as studying a set of chemical principles and interactions, in order to get a handle on the experience of falling in love.

You don't need degree-level understanding of human biochemistry to know that you're in love; you don't need to read an academic treatise on humour to know that you find something funny. And you certainly don't need to be a neuroscientist or have a deep understanding of the workings of the human brain to experience the profound benefits that practising mindfulness and developing awareness will bring to your life.

Rinpoche's laughter that day was in many ways the biggest affirmation he could have given me just then, and it's something I think back to at times when doubt sets in and I question the extent of my usefulness to my workshops attendees. While it is heartening to see that science is now catching up and adding its weight to some ancient truths, it is also encouraging to know that you don't have to be any kind of scientific expert to be able to enjoy the positive benefits of living your life with awareness.

I hope that this book will be as useful as possible to as many people as possible. I hope that you too will be able to enjoy the huge value that living mindfully can add to your life and come to see that sometimes the simplest things – and actually, the easiest – can also be the most precious.