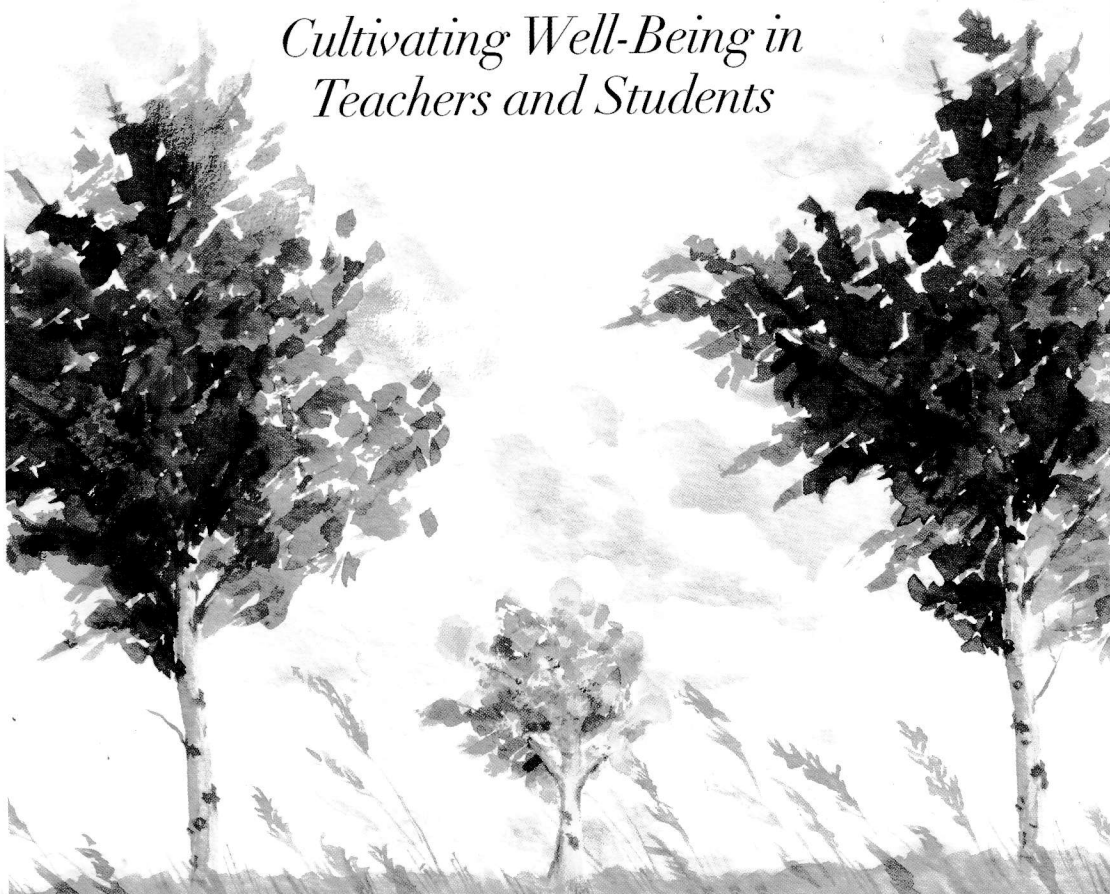


The Way of Mindful Education

*Cultivating Well-Being in
Teachers and Students*



Daniel Rechtschaffen

Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn

EM
WY
P.M.
J.E.
L.F.
L.
TON

Caring for the Caregiver



I lead a significant percentage of any training for teachers as silent mindfulness practice, sitting, walking, and generally withdrawing attention from the busy barrage of outside chatter in service of stillness and inquiry. Whether it is two hours of silence as part of a day long training, or a five-day silent retreat as part of a year-long program, I want teachers to get a direct experience of mindfulness. As you cultivate your own attention and compassion, you will invariably carry this presence into your work with kids. You can offer them the greatest gift of all: simply seeing them through the eyes of compassionate attention.

Susan, a schoolteacher who was a participant of the year-long Mindful Education Institute, walked up anxiously on day two of our silent retreat, asking if we could talk. She and I walked among the oak trees in the California summer sun. "I think that Nancy is really having a hard time," she said about another participant.

"I want to go up and ask if she is okay. It doesn't feel right to just sit there."

"What would it feel like," I asked, "if you let Nancy have her sadness and not make it your job to take that sadness away?" As I said this Susan's eyes began to well up and she started

to cry. "I would feel so sad. Nancy is struggling, my students at home are in such horrible situations, I feel so out of control."

As she cried, I helped orient her into feeling her own emotions instead of focusing so much on the distress of others. I had her imagine bringing all the care and support to her own heart. "In this moment, can you turn all this care toward your own sadness and fear?" Tears rolled down her face as she held her hands to her heart and her appearance seemed to soften.

Susan came to me at the end of the retreat with a deep calmness in her eyes and said that ever since that moment in the trees she had been imagining that she had been cradling her own heart like a baby. "Once we came out of silence, I talked to Nancy and she said she wasn't even sad. I guess I just had so much sadness I was projecting it onto her. It feels so good just to offer myself all the care that I have been giving to everyone else. It's like I'm putting that apple on my desk that I always hoped the kids would give me."

If we are attached to transforming our chaotic classrooms into rooms full of angelic children who line our desks with crisp apples every morning, we are in for a long and frustrating wait. It's great to have a vision of peace and harmony, but we all have to start where we are. We often leap forward, wanting to help our kids relax, forgetting to notice how anxious and in need of relaxation we are. A teacher would never try to lead a math lesson if she didn't know the multiplication tables.

I have had many teachers, therapists, and parents come to me with genuine enthusiasm about mindfulness, asking how they can use it to *save* their kids. When we see the suffering of the children in our world and get a little taste of the mindful-

ness antidote, our compassionate hearts leap in. "Maybe this can fix everything!" If this is the reason you have bought this book, I applaud you, and then I invite you to slow down and listen a little deeper into your own heart. Whenever someone tells me of their enthusiasm about mindfulness in education I begin by asking, "Do you have your own mindfulness practice?"

In his mindfulness-based stress reduction retreats, Jon Kabat-Zinn often asks, "Why are you here?" He then drops the floor out from under you and asks, "Why are you really here?" And one more time for good measure, "Why are you really, *really* here?" You may truthfully say, "I am here because so many kids have ADHD and mindfulness could help them cultivate their ability to pay attention" or "I want my children to have the inner resources to counteract the violent video games and other noxious media they are assaulted by." These are good honest answers, but as you ask why you are really, really, *really* reading this book, I invite you to look into your true motives.

How do you want to transform yourself to be a greater conduit to the learning of the youth that have been brought into your care? What is holding you back from embodying the type of person you hope your kids will become? Every time you ask yourself one of these questions, it is a gift to your students, a far greater gift than any information you might offer. Information is imperative in education, but transformation is where maturity, morality, and wisdom come from. When you are on a path of personal growth, you are modeling to your students the true meaning of mindfulness.

To teach mindfulness to kids, we have to do what Susan did. She started with herself. When we pull back all the projections

we have on the world and start with ourselves, we are already modeling mindful education.

As a marriage and family therapist, I often have conversations with parents who bring in their sons or daughters, saying “My child is acting out. Can you fix her?” I ask a bit about the parents’ relationship and other home life factors. Usually it will become apparent quickly that this child is the “identified patient” of the family, meaning that there is really a systemic issue. Something is going wrong in the larger family dynamic and the “problem” child is the one expressing it. If the parents are having difficulty in their marriage, I usually say, “The best way I can help your child is for the two of you to come in for couple’s therapy.” Parents are often amazed at how quickly their child’s “issues” are resolved once they face the underlying conflicts in their marriage. Once the parental structure is strong, the child can relax and stop sounding the alarm with his or her behaviors. Like families, emotional and behavioral disorders are often exacerbated in schools when we adults are not taking care of ourselves and our interpersonal staff dynamics.

The way of mindful education takes our attention from all the ways we want to change the world and turns our gaze inward. Instead of taking on the immense and impossible task of trying to get the world around us to calm down, we can notice and learn to manage the wild chatter in our own minds. Calming the mind, though not an easy job, is far more doable than getting the world around us to stop. Instead of trying to get the kids on the playground to be more peaceful, we can begin by realizing how anxious the chaos makes us. When we learn to experience our anxiety in our bodies, noticing the tightness and quickened breathing pattern, we can also learn

to use a mindfulness practice to relax and take care of ourselves. Then, even if the playground fights and chaos in the class continue (and they will), we can find that still point in the storm. Without needing anything to change, we can be the guiding light our students are drawn toward. Instead of waiting for the world to be peaceful, we can simply relax and let the world find peace around us.

Stream of Thoughts

Cultivating Heartfulness



Our intention with heartfulness is to cultivate a compassionate presence, the type of unconditional open-heartedness we feel toward a beautiful baby. Then we learn to extend this compassion toward ourselves and all other beings, even the annoying ones. It's easy to feel love and care toward a giggling, beaming baby, but quite a practice to keep our hearts open and compassionate toward a child having a tantrum.

The way that we extend our reach of compassion is by learning to be ever more compassionate to ourselves. Sometimes when we look into our own hearts it's like there's a happy baby in there, and at other times there is a child in full tantrum mode. With heartfulness practices we learn to support the happiness, kindness, gratitude, and other beneficial qualities we find inside while bringing a kind attention to difficult emotions such as anger, jealousy, fear, and sadness.

When little children are asked to send kind thoughts to themselves, they happily give themselves a big hug and wish for their own happiness, safety, health, and peacefulness. They don't say, "I don't know if I deserve all this kindness," or "Isn't there someone else more deserving than me?" They just smile and send themselves kind thoughts. When asked what else they might wish, they will often say things like "May it be my

birthday every day” or “May nobody ever be mean.” Most little children have not yet learned to protect their hearts.

Heartfulness begins with the radical practice of remembering how to open our hearts as easily as we did when we were in kindergarten. By the time we grow up we’ve built many layers of emotional armor. We’ve done so for very good reasons at the time; we were protecting ourselves from the harsh realities of the world. Unfortunately, when we armor our hearts, we limit our capacity to give and receive love, and we feel disconnected from ourselves.

When I teach teenagers heartfulness, I realize that many of them often think it’s cheesy or lame. Whenever I encounter this, I talk to the students about how sad I think it is that we think it’s cool to be mean to each other and put each other down. I ask them, “Why do you think being kind and vulnerable isn’t cool? Since all of us want to be liked and to have others like us, why is kindness cheesy? Doesn’t putting each other down to get people to like us seem like a poor strategy?”

This conversation always opens up an intriguing discussion. After we have gotten honest with each other about how we want to be accepted for who we really are, I ask, “Who wants to get cheesy with me now?” I find teenagers to be intrigued and excited by this conversation. This opens a path for students to understand the power of vulnerability. I find that when students have the bravery to share an authentic part of themselves, it relaxes the whole room. Everyone wants to be able to open up their armor and share what is true in their hearts. One student shares, and then the rest follow like an avalanche. Vulnerability is then seen as a courageous act to be respected instead of judged or picked on.

As teachers and child care providers, many of us know so well how to care for others, but we have often forgotten how to care for ourselves. We may tell children to be nice to each other, but when we look into our own minds we see how cruel we are to ourselves. We are perpetually judging ourselves, comparing ourselves to others, and putting ourselves down. To be truly compassionate to others, you need to care for the person who deserves your love and care the most: you. You don’t need to go far to find this compassion. You can simply take the genuine caring you have for kids and send it in toward yourself.

The following heartfulness practice draws on this genuine strength of yours: your compassion for your students. You can learn to turn the light of compassion in on yourself. As we begin to cultivate self-compassion, we may hit up against our own self-judgments, feelings of shame, and self-limiting beliefs. Instead of trying to get rid of our difficult emotions, we bring the light of our compassion to melt our inner armoring. We learn to hold the crying and tantruming child within ourselves. With an integrated emotional self we can bring our compassion, forgiveness, and kindness into the world. We embody compassion, loving the world as it is, without trying to change it.

Heartfulness Practice: Caring Phrases

Preparation

Find a comfortable seated position where your body can fully relax.

Exercise

Bring your attention to your chest and heart. See what feelings, emotions, and sensations you find there. Without trying to experience anything specific, locate your awareness in your heart.

When you feel relaxed and focused, picture a child you care about, one who evokes kind feelings. Imagine this child in your mind's eye and see what your heart feels like. You may notice happiness, compassion, tenderness, or any other sympathetic emotions.

Now offer the following wishes to this child either silently or out loud and keep your attention on the feeling in your heart.

- May you be happy
- May you be safe
- May you be healthy
- May you be peaceful

Offering the wishes at least a few more times, continue to be aware of your heart.

Now shift your heartfulness gaze toward yourself.

With the same kindness you sent to the child, send these heartfulness wishes to yourself, and as you do so, note how this affects your body.

- May I be happy
- May I be safe
- May I be healthy
- May I be peaceful

When you are ready, bring your attention back to the sensations in your heart for a few more breaths, this time without saying the phrases. Simply sit and notice. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Postexercise Reflections

We began this heartfulness practice by picturing a child for whom it was easy to feel care and love. We don't need to do much to open our hearts—we can simply picture an adorable child and our hearts respond sympathetically. Once we have opened our hearts, we can turn the spotlight of care inward and send ourselves the same kind acceptance. This can be like a healing balm to our hearts.

When we send ourselves kindness, it is like we are recharging our heart batteries. We can much more easily send our heartfulness out to others from this place of emotional fullness. We can picture all of our students before they come into class and send kind thoughts to each one. The graduate-level heartfulness is learning to send kind thoughts to colleagues, students, and family members who annoy us, or even those against whom we hold a serious grudge. As we open our circle of compassion, we can learn to forgive and understand the suffering of others.

Cultivating Emotional Intelligence



To teach, parent, or even develop a close relationship with another person, a certain level of emotional maturity is indispensable. Many of our actions (we could even say most) are created by unconscious motives. We have underlying drives within ourselves that we are not aware of. Whether or not we are conscious of them, they motivate many of our behaviors, especially our actions in relationship to others. Imagine your inner world as a classroom of students. There are all these inner parts: the inner class clown, the inner teachers' pet, the inner straight-A student, the inner rebel. If we don't recognize each of our inner parts and learn to meet their needs, then the inner class is always in conflict. First we must learn to create a mindful and accepting teacher in our own minds, someone who can track and care for our inner classroom. Only then can we embody the compassionate teacher we want to become.

All of our inner parts are natural expressions of who we authentically are. Babies are unapologetically blissful at one moment and enraged in the next. The emotional waves of childhood flow unimpeded until they bump into the parent's and teacher's fears and insecurities. Our primary caregivers and teachers trained us through their very being in how to

relate to our inner classroom. They learned from their teachers and parents in which parts were acceptable and which were not, and they passed these messages on to us. Then the child splits, realizing that to receive love, one's authentic expression needs to be muted or morphed. This is the birth of *suppression*, the process in which we hide our authentic selves from the world and strategize a persona to get our basic needs met. As an organism we decide it's safer to be loved for a false self than unloved for an authentic one. If we get sent to the principal for being too silly and energetic, our class clown part learns that it is not accepted, and we develop a self-critic, the stern inner principal, who tells us this jovial exuberant part is not allowed and needs to be censored.

One of the inevitable byproducts of suppression is an unconscious strategy called *projection*. To understand projections, simply think of the wonderful days when you walk into your classroom, having had a cheerful morning, and find all the students are smiling and any annoyances just roll off you. Other times, when you are feeling dragged down by the weight of the world, you walk into class and all the students seem to be intentionally getting on your nerves, your colleagues are being inconsiderate, and all the kids in the hall are "little monsters!" Our inner angst paints the world with a dark hue, not the rose-colored glasses of our happy days. If you have never explored the phenomenon of projection it may seem odd, but once you look you will realize that, as Anais Nin said, "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."

Particularly, we project onto the outside when we are uncomfortable with our experience on the inside. Many of us grew up in a family where our parents told us that they would love us when we were nice and not when we were angry. If you

express anger, the message went, you have to go to your room. In other words, if you express the angry part of yourself, love will be withdrawn. In these circumstances we learn, very intelligently, to suppress our anger to receive the love and affection we need as nourishment to grow into healthy human beings.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, is acknowledged as having said, "Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways." The inner parts of ourselves that we don't accept and keep sending to the inner principal's office have been labeled troublemakers, but the more we try to get rid of them, the more they act out. Our inner world insists on being experienced. If we are perpetually trying to escape from painful or unpleasant experiences, we'll often find ourselves seeing those painful experiences mirrored in the people and world around us. They sneak out and project onto the world so we can relate to them as if they belong to someone else. We project out what we find too painful to accept inside.

It is crucial for child care providers to be aware of these projections. Let's say you have an early morning argument with your significant other. You show up at school and even though you are feeling shaky and irritated, you decide to put on a happy face for your students and try to suppress your emotions. This may work for a little while, but there is a low-level irritation that you can feel every time a student drops something on the floor or takes a little too long to understand the material. It would be easy in this situation to project onto a student that they are intentionally trying to annoy you. The truth, however, is probably that the students are having their own difficult emotional experience that they don't know how to deal with.

This is where our mindfulness practice comes in. When the class won't settle down and we find ourselves slipping into negative projections, we can learn to feel the emotions in our bodies as sensations. Instead of circulating in our frustrating thoughts we can drop down into our bodies and figure out what scripted, learned responses the chaos in the classroom is bringing up for us.

Mindfulness offers us the skill of witnessing our frenzied thoughts without getting swept up in them. Whenever you notice your mind in a hamster wheel of difficult thoughts, you can bet that there is an emotion somewhere in your body that your brain is trying to get rid of by thinking its way out of it. If you are ruminating about the morning argument you had, you may be trying to come up with the perfect counter-argument so that you will be understood. The real reason we ruminate is that there is some distressing emotion like anger or sadness inside and we are trying to figure out a perfect strategy that can shift our experience.

The next time you find your mind in the spinning, do a scan of your body and see where the tension or emotion is. This physical experience is a direct palpable place that you can bring your kind attention and relaxing breath. Instead of trying to think your way out of it, see if you can feel your way into it. Instead of trying to come up with the perfect argument to get someone to understand you, in this moment you can develop understanding and care for your own distressed heart.

When you anchor your attention on feeling the sensations in your body instead of getting lost in angry or jealous thoughts, you are "pulling back your projections." Pulling back projections creates an inner responsibility where we *own* our emotions. We can learn to care for all of our inner parts, making

space for every character in the inner classroom. You may find a part inside that feels like a three-year-old throwing a tantrum. Instead of trying to shut this part up or blame someone else, you can learn to care for this part with genuine self-compassion.

When we pull back our projections and own our emotions, we see the world as it is rather than as we've imagined it to be. When we do this we cultivate what's called *discernment*. The classroom is driving you crazy, so you take a moment to notice what is happening inside. You realize you had an argument with your spouse that morning and have been feeling on edge all day. Notice where the tension is in your body, breathe into the uncomfortable feeling, and let your body relax on the exhale. Aware of your own feelings, you gain the discernment necessary to look up at your students and see them as they are, rather than coloring them and their actions with your frustration. Discernment allows us to see which parts of our experience are projection and which are true experiences. As we begin to more fully inhabit ourselves, we shed the need to project so much and are therefore able to act more consciously in our relationships.

One clear sign that you are progressing on this path is if you notice less drama arising in your life. Of course mindfulness cannot stop tragedies from occurring, but as these phenomena arise, we may notice ourselves responding without as much personal affront. If a tree were to fall in your path, you wouldn't imagine that the tree fell because it didn't like you. You know how to depersonalize that event; similarly, you may see the same disruptive behaviors of students, and somehow they're not sticking to you, not being personalized. You're able to handle the day with humor and grace.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: one of the amazing

Stream of Thoughts

benefits of starting to practice mindfulness is that your world will seem to transform around you. In my year-long teacher training we begin with a week of silent retreat and then months of inner work and personal practice. After months of this inner work, without any discussion of how to deliver these practices to children, I ask participants how their classrooms have changed. Emails inevitably pour in describing transformations of students and classrooms without a single intervention having been offered to the students. The changes came as a by-product of the teachers' work on themselves.

Children are incredibly attuned to teachers and rely on us to help them self-regulate. Any sports coach knows how their encouragement can help a frustrated player. Our children look to the sidelines to see how they are doing in our eyes. When a child feels truly seen, when they feel that their teacher is really interested in them as a human being, they can realize their own worth. Not only does this make them better students, it helps them gain lasting self-esteem and self-compassion.

It is our own attention, inspiration, and happiness that lays the foundation for our children to cultivate their own healthy way of being in the world. As our hearts expand, we invite students to open up, relax, and let their creative authenticity blossom.

Pulling Back Projection Practice: The Projection Journal

Preparation

In this practice we will learn how to witness our judgments, pull back our projections, and work with our emotions. To do

this you will need a *projection journal*. Carry this journal around with you and whenever you notice yourself judging someone, being jealous, or having any intense hamster wheel thoughts about someone else, write down the words that are going through your head. For example, when you witness yourself thinking, "that student is so annoying," write down the words, "That student is so annoying."

You will need about five minutes to go through the journaling process. If you don't have time for the whole exercise when the projection thought goes through your head, simply write the thought down in shorthand and finish the process later.

Exercise

When you notice a judgment moving through your mind jot it down in your projection journal.

Notice which emotions are connected to the thought you've written down. Anger, sadness, fear, or any others. Write down a list of whichever emotions you find.

Which physical sensations reside within these emotions? Do you notice tightness, shakiness, heat, cold, or any other specific sensations? For example, sadness may be made of tightness in the throat and heaviness of heart.

Even if the emotions and sensations are really uncomfortable, you can spend a few moments simply feeling them without trying to push them away. Imagine the sensations and emotions are a crying child you hold in your arms. For a few moments with every

Stream of Thoughts

inhale kindly hold your emotions and then with every exhale you can let your whole body relax. Try this relaxing breath for a minute.

When you have finished, scan through your body again and write down a list of what emotions and sensations you notice now.