

THE MINDFUL COACH



*Seven Roles
for
Helping
People Grow*

Douglas K. Silsbee

Praise for The Mindful Coach: Seven Roles for Helping Others Grow

“Silsbee’s approach is both practical and profound. This is a must-read for everyone concerned with people and learning.”

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PHILANTHROPIST; CO-FOUNDER, THE HOME DEPOT; OWNER & CEO, ATLANTA FALCONS

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“A useful book facilitating the growth and development of individuals and groups. His approach reaches deeply into human consciousness and experience where meaningful change and growth occurs.”

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“A welcome addition which teaches us that we can apply the deep spiritual knowledge of traditions like Buddhism to our modern business lives, in such a way that even our career becomes spiritually uplifting and a service to others.”

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“A clear and integrated model to assist people in understanding and applying the important skills in mindfulness and coaching. Executives from diverse backgrounds will find *The Mindful Coach* an insightful and practical guide.”

Hannah S. Wilder, Ph.D., M.C.C.

PRESIDENT, ADVANTARA EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT WORLDWIDE

“I loved this book! *The Mindful Coach* is personal, spiritual, systematic and insightful. This is mandatory reading for anyone who has the responsibility of helping others learn and develop. My trainers will all be receiving a copy. This is Thich Nhat Hanh meets Stephen Covey!”

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“*The Mindful Coach* captures the very essence of what coaching can be. Silsbee marries the art and science of human dialogue, of compassionate listening and advice giving without creating dependency. He guides the reader gently through the seven distinct roles of a true helping relationship. This is a process to be internalized and lived every day.”

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“*The Mindful Coach* is not just another coaching model. It is a frame of reference for anyone involved in developing people. This highly readable book should serve as a reference for anyone genuinely concerned about helping others. It has had a significant impact on the way I coach.”

James N. Bassett, M.Ed.

EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT, INSTITUTE OF NUCLEAR POWER OPERATIONS

“In his hands-on new book, *The Mindful Coach*, replete with artful and challenging exercises, Doug Silsbee models the mindfulness depth from which he springs in order to impart a valuable new coaching model based on professionalism, integrity, and dedication to service.”

Maggie Lichtenberg, P.C.C.

PROFESSIONAL COACH

“*The Mindful Coach* is warm, sensitive and intuitive, while at the same time clearly written by a scientific mind. The book provides a simple and cohesive model for the development process, coupled with practical strategies on how to become a more conscious practitioner.”

Alejandro Bolaños, Ph.D.

CONSULTANT, CENTRAL AMERICA

“*The Mindful Coach* is a book that anyone who is serious about coaching must read. It is comprehensive and compelling and will give you insights that will help you be the best coach you can be.”

James A. DeSena

AUTHOR, *The 10 Immutable Laws of Power Selling*

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Mindfulness

If the human brain were so simple that we could understand it, we would be so simple that we couldn't.

EMERSON PUGH

*When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep;
yes, and when I walk alone in a beautiful
orchard, if my thoughts drift to far-off matters
for some part of the time, for some other part I
lead them back again to the walk, the orchard,
to the sweetness of this solitude, to myself.*

MONTAIGNE

Mindfulness is the state of awareness in which we are conscious of our feelings, thoughts, and habits of mind, and able to let unhelpful ones go so that they no longer limit us. It is important to recognize, within ourselves, the presence or absence of this quality of being.

The cultivation of mindfulness is a lifelong process. As you read this book, please give yourself lots of permission to be a beginner and to experiment. Attachments to being “good at” mindfulness, or to being able to easily comprehend subtle new ideas, will only get in the way of this ongoing inquiry.

In this chapter we’ll look at a simple architecture of consciousness and come to understand some of the habits of mind that impede access

to self-awareness. We'll conduct a little experiment to get some first-hand experience with mindfulness. We'll explore a number of tools and approaches for cultivating our in-the-moment awareness of ourselves and others. Lastly, we'll conclude by tying the concept of mindfulness back into the coaching context that's the subject of this book.

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

Although some of the terms I will use—including “mindfulness,” “attachments,” and “aversions”—come from Western translations of the formulations of Buddhist teachers, this is not a book about Buddhism. Daniel Goleman's domains of “emotional intelligence” (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management)³ and other Western frameworks could also serve as platforms from which to develop the ideas presented here, but I have chosen Buddhist thought as a take-off point for several reasons.

First, for 2,500 years Buddhist teaching has described, in exquisite detail, a taxonomy of consciousness that explains how our minds work. This roadmap is practical, absolutely relevant today, and consistent with current scientific understanding. We can use it to understand more precisely what goes on inside us.

Second, being mindful often requires letting go of what we think we know and seeing the world and our relationship to it in a new way. It's been my experience that, for many Westerners, Buddhist language can be a catalyst for finding fresh perspectives and thus being more open to change.

Third, Buddhist teachings have been accepted and used extensively in many cultures around the world, while many other constructs that could provide a theoretical base for this work are purely Western. I believe that the ideas in this book are relevant and applicable in any culture. To place them in a transcultural framework can only make the

book more accessible to all potential readers regardless of their cultural background and assumptions.

Last, and most importantly, Buddhism has provided an integration of everything that I have learned in decades of focused personal growth and development work. No other framework I have run across provides the same lucidity in describing what I observe as I seek to live fully and intentionally, and to be as effective as I can be as a coach in helping others develop their own skills and capacities.

The Skandhas

Central to Buddhism's taxonomy of consciousness are the *skandhas*, or "Aggregates."⁴ Skandha is a word from Pali, an ancient South Asian language. While it doesn't translate precisely, it generally means a collection or a conglomeration of individual things. The skandhas together thus describe the whole of what we identify as being our selves. There are five of them.

The first *skandha* is form. Form encompasses our bodies, our sense organs, and all the physical aspects of who we are. We tend to assume that our bodies are solid and permanent, but they are simply a temporary configuration of atoms that will pass into a different form in the future. Even the very cells of our bodies are born and then die, being constantly replaced. There is nothing permanent about our bodies. My mother passed away suddenly while I was in the midst of writing this book; I had talked to her casually from the airport on the way to Asia, and a week later she was gone. Her ashes fit into a small box that was placed on the piano at the memorial service.

Second come feelings, emotions, and sensations. When form comes in contact with something, a sensation arises. The smells of my daughter fixing sautéed eggplant sandwiches downstairs for lunch, the sound of a Miles Davis CD playing as I write, the sensation of a mosquito on

my arm, a feeling of contentment as I look out the window. As we look into our feelings, we recognize that they have their origins in sensations, but they are also connected to other *skandhas*.

The third *skandha* encompasses perceptions and beliefs. Here, the feelings that arise when form encounters sensations are interpreted by the discriminating mind, thus producing judgments, names for things, and concepts about what it is that is being sensed. At first perceptions are just neutral. Then, because they are conditioned by our past experiences, they bias what we are seeing and can cause us to react in either helpful or unhelpful ways. Because my wife was irritated earlier, when I left my dirty shoes in the front hall, I feel anxious as she walks upstairs to my office even though it may well be that she's coming to tell me how much she's enjoying the sound of the rain on the roof. Again, there's nothing "real" about my anxiety; it's just a temporary configuration, a *skandha* arising that will dissipate on its own.

Fourth come mental formations. Our usual experience of mental formations is thoughts, images, and self-talk or mental chatter. Mental formations arise from the combination of the other *skandhas*.⁵ Our mental pictures of the future, combined with intention and will, determine our activities and ultimately the result of these activities, which may or may not be to our liking. The seeds, the potential for each of these mental formations, reside in our deep unconscious. When these seeds are watered—by sensory input, by an emotion, etc.—they sprout and arise into the higher levels of our consciousness where we become aware of them.

The fifth *skandha* is consciousness itself. This encompasses both an awareness of the other four aggregates and the deep unconscious within each of us in which the seeds, or potential, for all the other aggregates reside. In Buddhist belief, when a seed is watered—by us or by someone or something outside ourselves—it will spring into consciousness, and for this reason we must continually strive to be aware of which seeds are being watered. Becoming attuned to this process means that we are able to take notice as feelings, perceptions, and mental formations arise,

and this enables us to choose whether to put more energy into them or simply let them go as being unhelpful.

Sound complicated? It is and it isn't. Here's a simple example of an experience that might last half a minute but shows the interrelationship of the five *skandhas*. When we learn to look deeply we can see that all experience has these components.

As I'm coaching my client on the phone, I listen with my ears (form) after I ask a challenging question. The sensory input (sensation) is that of silence. In response to that silence on the line, a feeling of anxiety and tension arises within me (perception), immediately followed by an interpretation that I have pushed her too hard, and an impulse to jump in and rescue her by saying more (mental formations). But I'm also aware (consciousness) of my own tension and judgment, and so I make an intentional decision to sit quietly for a minute until the client can process the question.

This little drama transpires in seconds, yet when I slow down and pay attention I can begin to notice how the process works and consider its elements before I decide upon a course of action.

In this instance, when I pay attention I also notice that the feeling of tension subsides and is replaced by calm. When I hear my client respond to the question with a new insight, I feel energized and my mind decides that the question was productive; my picture of myself as an effective coach is validated. Another round of form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness!

All of the *skandhas* are linked and they are constantly shifting and moving through us. Such is the flow of life. None of it is permanent. All the *skandhas* are within us. They are temporary phenomena that arise and dissipate. Normally, when I'm busy, I don't notice these subtleties. When I am paying attention, they arise, are observed, and then easily pass. Nothing I can do can make them permanent.

It is a simple fact that our experience of life is entirely made up of these five *skandhas*, and that there is nothing permanent or solid about them. Though they form the basis of what we think we know, these

seemingly fixed patterns are always shifting and changing. To see this is to begin to become mindful. This is what it means to pay attention: we expand our experience to study and appreciate the intricate components of which it is constructed.

Attachment and Aversion

The second set of Buddhist teachings that are relevant to the work of a coach concerns the nature of suffering. While Westerners tend to think of suffering in terms of an acute crisis of pain or sorrow, in the Buddhist sense suffering is a condition of life that originates with the Eight Worldly Influences.⁶ These consist of four pairs of opposites that guide our actions and condition our behaviors and choices. One of each pair is something that we desire—these represent attachments. Balancing each attachment is something that we avoid—these represent aversions. Recognizing and letting go of these attachments and aversions is the key to ending suffering.

The four over-arching pairs that underlie the specific attachments and aversions we may develop as individuals are these.

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

These “worldly influences” are all around us, intensified by our social experiences. Advertisements condition us to crave cold beer,

telling us that we will experience pleasure, even attract a mate, by drinking it. Employers and schools, through pay and grades, seek to motivate us by encouraging attachment to rewards and praise. We are taught that it is good to be effective in getting what we want—a good job, stability, creature comforts, a loving spouse—and to fear the loss of these things.

None of this is bad. It just is. The relevance of the Buddhist perspective is the ensuing recognition that our experience of life is often controlled by these attachments and aversions. We are attached to the aspects of each of these pairs that we label as positive; we crave them and pursue them. We have aversion, or resistance, to those aspects that we label as negative; we avoid them. But as hard as we work to get what we want and to avoid what we don't want, we can never know what any experience is going to bring us.

Many of us dream about becoming rich. A casual friend of mine won two million dollars in the lottery. He quit his job, moved to a new, upscale neighborhood, stopped seeing old friends, and started a small business, but he didn't put much energy into the new enterprise. It seemed that the challenge and energy had gone out of life. He drank a lot, and he died of a heart attack a few short years later. Enormous financial gain did not bring him happiness.

Another friend had breast cancer. She went through months and months of painful treatments, and suffered greatly from anxiety about her future. Now, fully recovered, she has an appreciation of all of life's gifts that most of us feel only occasionally. She is clear about what she wants to do and how not to waste her life energy. She is much happier than before. As desperately as she might have wanted to avoid having the experience of cancer, for her it became a doorway into a more fulfilling life.

We put much of our life energy into pursuing our attachments and seeking to avoid our aversions, yet all that expense of energy doesn't guarantee us happiness. This is because, according to the teachings of the Buddha, those very attachments and aversions are at the root of our suffering. As Lama Surya Das writes in *Awakening the Buddha Within*,

It's easy to become so enmeshed in our worldly goals that we lose sight of the bigger picture. Without more foresight and perspective, we cannot help but prioritize foolishly. The ups and downs of office politics and interpersonal dynamics, for example, will overly affect the untrained mind. One minute you can feel like a winner, elated and on top of your game; the next you're in a slump, defeated, hopeless, and depressed. Buddhism reminds us that nothing lasts, not even our successes or defeats.⁷

Attachments and aversions, according to Buddhist teaching, are both the objects and the triggers of our mental formations. They are products of our minds. There is nothing real about them. For instance, the comment "You look good today!" from another person could be interpreted as praise or as an offensive come-on, depending on our perceptions and mental formations about the circumstances. There is nothing inherently bad or good about the comment itself, yet it has the potential to affect us significantly because of what we project onto it. We often get tangled up in these projections, and when we do, in our quest to fulfill illusory desires or to avoid illusory discomforts, we may miss what's truly important.

Our attachment and aversions—and the mental formations they give rise to—condition and limit us, providing tracks that we fall into. They become wired into our consciousness as habits.

Let's try a little thought experiment. First, imagine something that's particularly inviting to you: the smell of freshly ground coffee, a hug from a loved one, or a favorite memory from childhood. Look for a tiny upwelling of desire, a tinge of want that arises as you call this experience to mind. It will be fleeting and subtle, but if you pay close enough attention, you'll likely feel a slight pull of desire being triggered by your imagining. This is attachment.

Now try the reverse. Imagine instead a repulsive smell, or an argument with a loved one, or an incident in which you were wronged.

Notice the feelings that arise—that’s aversion. Again, it’s subtle, but as you learn to watch your mind at work, you’ll notice more and more how a brief thought (whether pleasant or unpleasant) will trigger fleeting emotions and impulses.

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

In my invented scenario about coaching over the phone, for instance, noticing that I have some tension around my client’s initial silence in response to a tough question is sufficient. I don’t have to change anything. It certainly wouldn’t be helpful right then to get into a tizzy about my tension, or to fight it, or to analyze where it comes from. None of that would help me be more present for my client in the moment. It’s sufficient to simply notice the tension and see it for what it is—nothing but a temporary feeling that will pass as soon as I let it go. Seeing the *skandhas* at work is the whole point.

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

The smell of baking bread from the kitchen triggers my desire to eat. A passing thought of an old sweetheart triggers a moment of remorse or longing. The sight of my wife fills me with joy, and I think about how good it feels to hug her. A conversation with a coaching client triggers my desire to be seen as helpful or intelligent.

These thoughts and feelings arise from the seeds in our unconscious, watered by sensory input and perceptions. Over time, they solidify into patterns of attachments and aversions that are particular to individuals or to social groups. As we become aware of these habits of mind, we can make a choice as to whether they are helpful or not. We can choose to continue to “water” them, or we can choose to let them go.

In coaching, our role is to help our clients recognize and act on the real choices that are available to them—to see the limitations in their own thinking and move beyond them to new possibilities. To be helpful to our clients in this process, we must first learn to see our own limitations. We must become familiar with our own attachments and aversions, our own drives and cravings and fears.

In my practice, I’ve encountered what I’d call certain attachments and aversions that are specific to the coaching profession. I offer the list below so that you can consider which of them arise in you as you work with your clients, as a first step toward determining whether they are helpful or not.

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

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

Self-Observation and the Cultivation of Mindfulness

Over the past decades, mindfulness has become a much abused concept in pop psychology, various branches of what's called the human potential movement (including the coaching industry), and the intersecting realms of commerce and merchandising. "Live consciously," "go with the flow," "get in touch with your feelings," "let go and let God," and "live in the present" have become trite and sometimes empty catchphrases. Advertisements promise serenity and peace in the luxury of your new car, access to your inner creativity in the form of a computer, and an oasis from the busyness of life in an expensive resort. It seems that our fast and commercialized world now promises to sell us what the wisdom traditions of many cultures have taught for millennia is freely and instantly available to all!

True mindfulness, however, requires attention and effort. In the Buddhist tradition, being mindful means "to be aware of our bodies, aware of our feelings and emotions, aware of our thoughts, and aware of events, as they occur, moment by moment."⁹ From a Western perspective, the definition of (being) "conscious" is remarkably similar: "having . . . knowledge of one's sensations, feelings, etc., or external things; aware of oneself as a thinking being; knowing what one is doing and why; . . . an awareness of what one is thinking, feeling, and doing."¹⁰

It sounds simple, but people spend a lifetime trying to learn to become mindful. We have all experienced moments of mindfulness, of course. Taking communion at church, the intimacy of looking into the eyes of a loved one, saying grace before dinner, being moved by the sight of a mountain, the joy of a child—being deeply conscious of what is happening at these moments is being mindful. In coaching, we might feel a surge of appreciation for our client, ask just the question the client needs, or jointly discover a new way of looking at the challenge he or she is facing. These moments happen, but usually the heightened awareness they evoke quickly slips away. Cultivating the ability to *stay* mindful is

spiritual practice of the highest order, and it represents mastery in the habits of our own minds and emotions.

Self-observation—noticing our thoughts, emotions, and impulses as they arise, and thinking about their origins—is the key practice in mindfulness.¹¹

Conditioning and Habits of Mind

As we grow up, become socialized, and learn to function in society, we learn certain patterns of thought and interpretation that seem to work for us. These patterns are as varied as the world's cultures, families, and individuals. Over time they become embedded in habits of mind: automatic ways of processing information, interpreting what we see and hear, and making decisions about how to respond to life's events. Like fingerprints, our individual patterns are unique, unlike anyone else's. In Western psychology we call the process that produces these patterns “conditioning.” Our conditioning determines how we experience our lives, or, as a Buddhist might put it, gives shape to the ways in which the five *skandhas* express themselves in us.

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

However, some habits of mind that have served us in the past may at some point become limiting, even detrimental. Because they're habits, though, our mental energies continue to follow these established pathways in our minds, like a stream following a worn groove over bare rock. Meanwhile, like seeds stranded on the bank above, new ideas,

new ways of thinking, and new possibilities for our lives fail to sprout for lack of water.

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

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

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

We all have habits of perception and response that impede our ability to be mindful, and in my experience many fall into certain discrete categories that I've laid out for discussion below. I know there are a lot of them, so please read these sections lightly. (Later, in Chapter 13, we'll offer some exercises to help you develop your powers of self-observation.)

The purpose here is not to overwhelm you with a litany of obstacles to mindfulness, but to develop a language for talking about them. The simple act of recognizing how any one of these types of habits of mind influences you, and accepting it without judgment or self-flagellation, is a real moment of awakening. Read, inquire into the nature of your own mind, and smile with recognition whenever you see yourself reflected here.

Self-Judgment

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

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

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

When we really pay close attention, we find that self-judgment is nothing more than the *skandhas* doing their little dance. In this case, self-judgment is simply another layer of my own conditioning, and it

doesn't help me listen to my client any more than an interesting view out the window did. It's just a different habit of mind, and equally unhelpful.

The trick, then, is simply to notice your own habits as they arise. As they do so, just smile at them. Awareness and acceptance takes the energy out of these mental formations, and they lose their grip on us, and with it their capacity to make us suffer. Any additional energy that we put into fighting them, trying to get rid of them, or analyzing them takes us away from the present just as surely as any other distraction would do.

As you read through our descriptions of other habits of mind, watch for the ones that you might yourself engage in from time to time. When you recognize something that you might do, just smile at that awareness and take a breath. Watch for your own self-judgment as you recognize yourself. Practice the discipline of observing with a neutral mind and letting go of any self-judgment that arises.

Social Identity

Our habits of mind are often rooted in social identities that we seek to preserve or strengthen. James Flaherty explains social identity in terms of two components that interact with and reinforce each other.¹² The first is the image that people have of us, which shapes how they interact with us. Clients come to us, whether we are a manager in an organization or a paid coach, with certain expectations that we can help them. Knowing this, we are more likely to respond in a way that fulfills those expectations. The other side of the coin is the image we have of ourselves, the "story" of who we are that we believe to be true. Since this story gives our lives meaning and our ego an identity, we become attached to the story and seek evidence to support and reinforce it.

For example, I sometimes seek to protect and reinforce a social identity as a knowledgeable person with good ideas and information

to share. This identity is reinforced by clients who pay me for those good ideas. My own conditioning leads me to avoid appearing stupid or lacking in knowledge. This isn't a bad thing, but it does present traps of which I need to be aware. It is easy for both my client and me to default to a narrow teacher/student relationship and thus limit our work together. If my energy is going into protecting or reinforcing a social identity, I am no longer fully available to my clients.

Any role can serve as a social identity. As Flaherty puts it, to the extent that our “relationship with others . . . has become hardened through a repetition of behavior and bound by the inflexibility of expectation,” we become trapped in that role.¹³ It quite literally becomes a worn groove in our consciousness: the role is a manifestation of the path of least resistance through the tangle of neurons in our brains. To change such a habit requires both mindfulness and discipline. While the client often colludes and reinforces habitual, unconscious behavior on the part of the coach, the responsibility falls on the coach to do her own work in recognizing the social identity she is attached to.

Projections

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

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

on out there in a way that affirms who we are and confirms the importance of our existence. This feels both gratifying and reassuring. But such projections are just a mental game we play, the *skandhas* at work in our minds. Nancy Spence, author of *Back to Basics: An Awareness Primer*, puts it this way:

At the heart of understanding projection is accepting the awareness that we are experiencing the perceptions we have about people, events and situations. What we are seeing out there is what we are doing inside. *Accepting this awareness means accepting responsibility for how we react to others.* Sometimes it is not easy to acknowledge that the difficulty we have with others is only a reflection of the difficulty we have with some aspect of ourselves. Sometimes it is not easy or pleasant to recognize we are always looking into a mirror.¹⁴

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

For example, I might be talking to a client about how overwhelmed she feels by her inability to focus on important planning issues in the face of a hundred emails a day in her inbox, each of which must at least be glanced at. I empathize with her because in the face of countless demands from consulting projects and other responsibilities, I find it difficult to find the time to write every day. But I also feel irritated and frustrated with her at times because of her seeming inability to prioritize in order to get things done. Not so coincidentally, those feelings are simply my projection onto my client of my own failure to make time for high priority tasks; they have nothing to do with my client and everything to do with me.

This kind of projection can be useful; if I can understand the frustration my client feels, this may help me to see possible ways for her to

manage the challenges she faces. But projection can also cause trouble. Both the sense of comforting intimacy and the feelings of irritation that we experience when we see ourselves in our clients impede our clear view of the client. They can easily trigger our own attachments and aversions, unconsciously steering our coaching to seek the former and avoid the latter.

Projection also makes it all too easy to assume that what works for us will work for them—which may or may not be true. Further inquiry might uncover major differences between my situation and that of the client, differences that would point to different solutions. If I'm caught in my projection, the likelihood is that I'll quickly assume that I understand and so fall into a coaching approach that is based more on my own history and needs than on those of the client.

It's important to remember that when we're projecting, we're not seeing things as they are. We have become attached to an interpretation, a mental formation, that somehow affirms something about ourselves. When we confuse ourselves with a client we cease seeing that person and her situation as fresh and unique and are therefore no longer present and mindful.

Philosophical Positions

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

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

experience or suggest specific alternatives if I believe that the answers to a client's questions must always come from her own experience.

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

Emotional Triggers

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

For example, a client with whom I worked, whose job was at risk because of some quite ineffective leadership traits, tended to view himself as a victim. He insisted that he had been “set up” by people around him, who had focused on a few minor negatives and ignored the overwhelming positives. His persistent unwillingness to take ownership of any part of the problems he was having in the workplace made me feel frustrated, even angry with him at times, and it also triggered anxiety and self-doubt about my abilities as a coach. In this case, my emotional reactions made it a significant challenge for me to remain compassionate with this client and to continue to engage with him.

Although our emotions may provide information that's useful in the coaching process—in this case, my own reactions to my client's behavior eventually led me to be quite candid about which of those behaviors might be putting him at risk of being fired—a coach must be able to recognize his or her own feelings and must work to keep them from influencing the work that is being done with the client in inappropriate ways.

Routines

We all tend to get numbed by routine. I fly frequently on business. It is an enjoyable drive from my home through the mountains to the

airport. One day, upon checking in at the counter, the agent politely informed me that I had the wrong ticket. I looked at it closely. Unfortunately, although the date, time, and destination matched, the flight—which I had booked myself—left from an entirely different airport, in the other direction from home and now three hours away. Clearly I hadn't been paying attention when I turned onto the main road. My wife still laughs at me about that one.

I take some small comfort in the fact that, as Ellen Langer reports in her book on mindfulness, “William James [told] a story of starting to get ready for a dinner party, undressing, washing, and then climbing into bed. Two routines that begin the same way got confused, and he mindlessly followed the more familiar one.”¹⁵

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

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

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

Distractions

Most of the professionals I know are exceedingly busy. Interruptions are constant, and the time available to focus on a single task seems to decrease daily. The fragmentation of time and experience that's become

a seemingly inescapable part of our lives makes it difficult to focus on important tasks, or to feel productive at the end of the day.

But while it appears that this is externally driven, and that we have no control over the distractions that plague us, closer scrutiny shows otherwise. Yes, there are external demands, but it's an internal reaction (those *skandhas* again!) that bids us to interrupt what we're doing to take that phone call, or get lost in our emails, or attend right now to whatever else is pulling at us in the moment. We can heed that voice or not; that's a choice. Neither choice is right or wrong, but each has consequences.

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

As coaches, it is up to us to train our minds to recognize distractions when they pull at us, and to bring our attention back to our clients and the work at hand.

Expert Mind

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

As an alternative, Shunryu Suzuki suggests that we cultivate "beginner's mind." This is the quality of attention that results when

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

In the beginner's mind there is no thought, "I have attained something." All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something.¹⁶

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

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

The mindfulness we lose when we are attached to our expertise can be regained when we let go of thinking we know it all. Beginner's mind serves us because we are more able to see what's in front of us with fresh eyes.

Observing Our Habits of Mind

Once we become conscious of our habits of mind, we can either embrace them as being helpful or let them go so that they no longer limit us. This is one of the keys to change, which is what we support our clients in achieving. But if we are to help them navigate this territory we must first explore it ourselves.

The following exercise is a variation on a traditional eating meditation, as described by Lama Surya Das.¹⁷ It's an excellent experiment for noticing your own habits of mind at play. (Please note: It's hard to read the directions and perform the experiment at the same time. You could read the whole thing through and then turn your attention to the raisins, or you might make a tape of it to listen to or ask a friend to read it out loud as you do the exercise.)

Exercise 2.1: The Raisin Meditation

Eating meditation is a marvelous way of putting ourselves in touch with nowness. This simple meditation with raisins can also be used with individual nuts or even tangerine sections. Later you can practice with all kinds of food, from a bowl of cereal to a plate of lasagna.

The first time I did this eating meditation, it tried my patience to the limit. I was accustomed to eating raisins by the mouthful, not one at a time. But I discovered that the chewing meditation can really slow us down and make us more aware of compulsive behavior. It helps you notice how your mind and body works. It helps us cultivate mindfulness and awareness in more varied situations.

Start by taking three raisins in your right hand. . . . Sit down, make yourself comfortable. Look at the raisins. Look at them as if you have never seen a raisin before. Turn them over. . . . We're going to direct our total attention to these three raisins.

Pick up one raisin with your left hand. Examine it closely. Feel its texture. Notice its colors and whether it's dry or moist. Notice any old associations you may have with raisins, such as like or dislike, or indifference. Smell it. Bring it to your lips. Notice any feelings of anticipation you may have about eating it.

Are you in a hurry? Do you wish perhaps that you could pop all three raisins into your mouth? Just notice whatever comes up in relation to this tiny little dried grape. Take the raisin in your mouth and chew it as slowly, as meticulously, as carefully, and as conscientiously as possible. Taste the actual taste of the raisin, but don't swallow it. Keep chewing. Notice how much you feel like swallowing. There is an impulse to swallow and get another one, but just keep chewing. Chew on that raisin until it becomes raisin juice. Chew and pay attention.

Exercise 2.1: The Raisin Meditation (cont'd)

If your mind wanders, if you hear a sound, bring your mind back to the raisin. Don't look around. Place your attention back on chewing the raisin. Point your mind, direct your attention, focus your awareness intently, intensely—like a light beam, like a laser beam. One-pointedly, focus on the raisin, on the place where your teeth make contact with the raisin; feel it directly. No need to understand why or how or what is the meaning of raisins, or meditation or of life for that matter. Just chew the raisin twenty or even one hundred times if possible, concentrating totally. Relax and enjoy the experience. Get the most out of it, as if this is the only food you're going to have all day. Chew it totally, appreciating and absorbing everything about it. Through total attention, extract the essence of every aspect of it—the taste, texture, and so on. Just keep chewing the raisin. Swallow it, and then just rest in the afterglow of this delicious experience.

Now slowly take the second raisin from your right hand with your left and bring it up toward your mouth. Look at it. Smell it. Feel it. Examine it. Resist the impulse to rush it into your mouth. Simply notice those impulses. Then put it in your mouth and start chewing it. . . . We see how long we can make it last. Simply pay attention to chewing the raisin while letting go of everything else. This stabilizes and unifies our mind. Just doing what we are doing, for a change. One hundred percent. Just sitting, and just eating. How delightful! How delicious.

Now you take the third raisin and do your own meditation on it. A new raisin, a new experience. How is it different from the other two? Does it look the same? Does it taste the same? Maybe it's sweeter. Maybe less startling. Where did your attention go? Bring it back. Concentrate.

This is a pragmatic example of meditation practice. We master meditative awareness by doing it again and again. It's always different, it's always fresh, it always develops and reveals new discoveries. We are exercising the muscles of awareness, directing our attention to precisely what we are doing.

When we chew our raisin, we are learning to thoroughly and meticulously chew over whatever task we happen to have at hand. In this way we learn to mingle mindfulness and concentrated awareness with daily life.

This exercise provides us the opportunity to notice what arises as we try to maintain mindfulness on one simple task. We may experience desire, or our aversion to raisins. If we pay close attention, we may

notice a subtle impetus to eat them fast, or the impetus to spit them out. We may experience our distractibility, or boredom, or sheer pleasure, or resistance to this silly exercise, or a desire to keep doing the one thing we're doing. We may realize that millions of years of evolution and months of sunshine on grape vines in California went into creating this single raisin and giving us this delicious experience! The range of possible responses to such a simple practice is astounding. I've done this meditation with groups in workshops, and find that people are consistently surprised by what they can see clearly arising in their minds as they "chew the raisin."

This, of course, is the point. When we focus on something so simple, everything else appears in stark relief. All that other stuff is there all the time anyway, it's just that we rarely see it so clearly. Learning to be conscious and appreciative of how our own minds work is essential to becoming effective and authentic as coaches. When we coach, our coaching becomes the raisin, the object of our total focus and awareness.

Basic Tools for Cultivating Mindfulness

There are a vast number of specific tools and approaches for cultivating your own mindfulness. Conversations with your friends and colleagues, a quick search on the Internet, or a tour through the self-help and spirituality sections of a good bookstore will turn up any number of resources on the topic. (Some of these are listed in the back of this book.) You must discern for yourself which writers, teachers, or programs are useful. Do some research and try things out, but pursue only what both seems authentic and speaks to you.

At the same time, remember that mindfulness is not an esoteric pursuit, and help in attaining it can be found in many contexts—in everyday activities as well as self-help books and religious or philosophical texts. Here are four simple things you can do that may help you become more aware of yourself and your habits of mind while learning

to be more focused and attentive to the moment. Cultivating mindfulness in any area of your life will be helpful in others.

Meditation. There are many forms of meditation, some secular and some connected with specific religious practices.¹⁸ At its most basic, meditation involves sitting still, focusing on your breathing or a symbolic object, noticing the thoughts, images, and feelings that arise, then letting them go to come back to the object of meditation. As Western scientists are documenting in their most recent studies, meditation has physiological as well as psychological benefits.¹⁹

Exercise 2.2 is a simple breathing meditation in the form of a poem from Thich Nhat Hanh.

Exercise 2.2: A Breathing Meditation

Recite this to yourself as you breathe in and out, synchronizing it with your breath and gradually slowing your breathing down. You can do this before a coaching session. It's a great thirty-second way to become more mindful and present.

Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in.
 Breathing out, I know
 as the in-breath grows deep
 the out-breath grows slow.
 Breathing in makes me calm.
 Breathing out brings ease.
 With the in-breath, I smile.
 With the out-breath, I release.
 Breathing in, there is only the present moment.
 Breathing out, it is a wonderful moment.²⁰

Reciting this poem verbatim isn't important. Paying attention to your breath as you speak the words, and synchronizing them, is. After a little practice it can be abbreviated to "In, Out / Deep, Slow / Calm, Ease / Smile, Peace / Present moment, Wonderful moment." You *can* try this at home!

Sports and physical activity. I've been told that I'm old enough to have to take physical exercise really seriously and young enough to still be in denial about it! Yoga, jogging, dancing, walking—all of these are great stress relievers, get the blood circulating, and help us get out of our heads and into our bodies. Sports like golf, tennis, and skiing require a balance between a focus on technique and a relaxed, concentrated mind. All sports have a mindfulness aspect that's been called the "inner game."²¹ (Basketball coach Phil Jackson of the NBA knew this when he taught his Chicago Bulls mindfulness techniques on their way to becoming a dynasty in the 1990s, winning seven championships.)

Physical activity provides a complete set of sensations to be aware of. Try to become conscious of your body, where it needs attention, where it feels good, what it's asking for. Practicing body awareness will also help you tune in to your own physical reactions as you're coaching, and to your client's body language as well; if you pay attention to them, these cues can alert you to your own emotional reactions, or to something that's going on with your client.

Nurturing creativity. All people are creative, but in our society we may not have been encouraged to explore this aspect of ourselves since kindergarten. The process of being expressive in some sort of physical activity—music, painting, pottery, metal fabrication, etc.—is simply a discovery of another realm of your inherent intelligence. Yes, it comes more easily to some than others, but it's available to all of us. If you already have such an outlet, pursue it and seek to become more aware of your own creative process as you do so. If you don't, find a way to tap into this realm: dance lessons, a poetry or singing class, wood-working, gardening.

Using your breath, your hands, or your body to create something in the physical world exercises parts of the brain that aren't usually activated by "knowledge work" or the routine tasks that so many of us do for a living.²² Also, you are nearly certain to get in touch with your own attachments to "being good at it": more conditioning to let go of on the path to mindfulness.

Spending time outdoors. Natural settings put everything into perspective. There is an order in nature that is beyond us. The natural world can be experienced as dangerous or unpredictable, or as bountiful and benign, depending on one's relationship to it. But its vastness and variety—even today, when the influence of human beings threatens to disrupt its rhythms—can be restorative for someone who spends lots of time in an artificial environment, being frazzled and pulled in multiple directions by purely human concerns.

I'm lucky enough to live on sixty-three acres in the mountains of North Carolina. After a walk to the river and back I'm a different person. Of course I can fuss and obsess in the woods just as easily as I can in my office, but out there it's more obvious that it's my mind that's producing that activity rather than the environment. At the same time, the physical activity and the beauty of what I see all around me serve to reduce mental chatter and bring me into the present. Most of us can find places to walk among trees or along moving water; those who can't might bring stones or plants or other reminders of the natural world into their environment.

Summary

Mindfulness is the state of being aware of our own perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and judgments. As we become more self-aware, we learn to identify and acknowledge our own habits of mind and so prevent ourselves from becoming trapped by them; as we see and accept them, they tend to dissipate, giving us a clearer view of what is around us.

This heightened consciousness provides the best platform from which to coach others. It is unbiased by our own agendas. It allows us to be aware of the nuances of what the client brings. It is open, spacious, and accepting. This is what we cultivate through our own mindfulness practices.