Mindfulness Meditation: Reflections from a Personal Journey

G. ALAN MARLATT
University of Washington

Having high blood pressure opened the door to meditation in my life. At first, I considered hypertension to be my ally, since it was high enough to disqualify me from being inducted into the army during the Vietnam War. That was during the mid–1960s, when I was a graduate student at Indiana University. I received my notice from the local draft board to appear for a mandatory physical exam just after I was granted a Green Card from the then U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (now called the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security). As a new immigrant from Canada, I needed a Green Card in order to receive a salary for my work as a Research Assistant in the clinical psychology training program. New Green Card recipients were among the first to be drafted, and I soon found myself on a bus to Indianapolis to take the required physical exam. When it came to taking my blood pressure, the attending physician told me I failed the test (my diastolic blood pressure was over 100) and assigned me a "1-Y" category: not fit for military service. (The 1-Y classification was abolished December 10, 1971.) I returned to graduate school elated with my failure and the opportunity to complete my doctoral degree in peace.

Four years after receiving my Ph.D., and having served on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin during an intense "publish or perish" experience as a new Assistant Professor, I was awarded tenure and accepted a new position as Associate Professor at the University of Washington, where I have remained as a faculty member since I first arrived there in the fall of 1972.

It was shortly after arriving in Seattle that my blood pressure problem surfaced again, this time as a serious health risk. During one routine physical, the doctor took my blood pressure and exclaimed, "This is very high—I'm concerned that you may stroke out on me!" Explaining all the various risks to my cardiovascular system, he referred me to a specialist in hypertension treatment at the university medical center, Dr. George Aagard, for a more detailed diagnostic workup. When I arrived for my appointment, Dr. Aagard began by taking my blood pressure: it was high, as usual. He then told me that some patients show initial high readings because of what he called the "white coat" syndrome: the stress of taking a critical medical test right after entering the examination room sometimes inflates blood pressure. He told me to lie down and relax on the exam table while he turned down the lights and said he would

Current Psychology: Developmental • Learning • Personality • Social Fall 2006, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 155-172.

return in 15 minutes to take another series of readings. This was the first time I ever experienced anything like relaxation in a doctor's office. When Dr. Aagard returned, he found that my blood pressure had dropped to a lower level compared to the first reading. "You seem pretty reactive to stress—what do you do to relax?"

I replied that I did the usual things to relax, including reading, watching TV, seeing movies, and having relaxing social activities with friends and family. I admitted that I did little or no exercise and that I was undergoing a stressful work period, trying to get established in a new job. "Have you ever tried meditation as a way to relax?" Dr. Aagard asked. "No—I'm not really interested in those Eastern techniques," I told him. In my mind, I identified myself as a Western psychologist, trained in the scientific method and committed to the empirical way. Psychology is the scientific study of behavior, I was told over and over again during my graduate school days. Even an interest in cognition or studying how the "mind" works was considered a taboo topic among my behavioral colleagues in the academic world, in those days. Obviously, meditation was "non-behavior," so how could I, a young and dedicated behavior therapist, consider it a valid technique?

Dr. Aagard reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a reprint from a medical journal. "Take a look at this study," he said, handing it to me, "It clearly shows that meditation is an effective intervention for many people with hypertension, such as yourself. Check the data—the drop in diastolic pressure for those in the meditation group is significant beyond the $p < .05$ level, compared to the no-treatment control subjects," he said, pointing at a graph showing the results. He then gave me the phone number of the local center for Transcendental Meditation (TM) near the university campus. "Call them and check out their program," Dr. Aagard said just before we ended our session. "You look like you could benefit from TM."

And so it was, with considerable reluctance, that I called the local TM training center in the University District and signed up for the free introductory lectures. Those who wanted to be initiated into the formal training were asked to bring the tuition fee in cash, a basket of fresh fruit, and a clean white handkerchief for the initiation ceremony.

After attending the two introductory lectures, I decided to drop out. When I returned to my office in the psychology department, one of my graduate students asked me what had happened. I told her that I was turned off by the demeanor and behavior of the TM staff, all men dressed in black suits and ties, and that they were hardly my kind of company in laid-back Seattle. They spoke of how TM would release "bubbles of stress from my unconscious mind" and how that would lead to "spiritual enlightenment and eternal bliss," I concluded disparagingly. "So, did you actually try the TM technique to see how it would impact your blood pressure?" she asked. "No," I replied. "Why, I thought you were an empiricist," she countered. "Blood pressure can be measured objectively at any time," she persisted, "Either it works or it doesn't work. How are you going to know unless you try it for yourself?" She had a good point. I returned to take the initiation ceremony and receive my mantra from the TM instructors.

During the initiation ceremony, I met with an individual instructor who gave me my personal mantra, based on Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Hindu tradition of Transcendental Meditation. During my first guided meditation session, the teacher instructed me to

repeat my mantra silently to myself during the 20-minute session. I was seated in a regular chair, with my back straight, feet on the floor, hands together resting in my lap, and my eyes closed. Seated next to me, the teacher (a kindly man in his mid-twenties) gave me the basic instructions for how to do TM: "Repeat the manta on a natural basis to yourself, at first saying it in between breaths: take an in-breath, exhale slowly, then say the mantra to yourself. If it changes in terms of when you say it in your breath cycle, that's fine—let your mantra find its own timing interval. If and when you find yourself distracted by thoughts, feelings, or sensations, to the extent that you realize that you have stopped saying the mantra, gently bring your attention back to the mantra and your breath. Go ahead and try it for the next ten minutes," he concluded.

So I started the first ten minutes of meditation in my life. I focused my attention on my breath, repeating my mantra, "Sherim," in between breaths, silently to myself. Breathe in, breath out, say Sherim, repeat. Even though I said my mantra silently, it was as if I could hear the sound, Sher—Im (as in "eem"), in my mind's ear.

When I was given this mantra during the initiation, I was told that "Sherim" was a Sanskrit word with known "vibrations" for facilitating relaxation. I was not told the actual meaning of the word, because knowing the "meaning" can become a source of distraction during the meditation practice (triggering associative thoughts and cognitive speculation about the "true meaning" of the mantra). Just go ahead and let the inner sound of the mantra do its thing, I was told.

After the first few minutes of getting settled into the correct posture and feeling comfortable with the teacher by my side, I practiced meditation. I soon found myself in a state of relaxation that I had never before experienced. My body relaxed physically at the same time as my mind seemed to let go of its habitual thought patterns and cognitive interpretations of what was going on. In fact, when I did find my mind speculating about various theories of how meditation works, for example, I asked myself if this was the basic physiological relaxation response described by Herbert Benson in his book, *The Relaxation Response* (1975), it took me awhile to realize that my mind had gotten off track and that it was time to return to my mantra and my awareness on breathing. When I did so, I noticed that my relaxation deepened, as my thoughts dissipated.

After the full 20 minutes of my first TM experience, I was convinced that this was a technique worth practicing. I made a personal commitment to meditate daily for the next three months, and to keep track of my hypertension levels during that period using a portable blood-pressure monitoring kit. I was told by my instructor to sit in meditation for two 20-minute periods each day, once in the morning and once in the evening, and to find a quiet place to sit where I would be free of interruptions, phone calls, etc. The den in my Seattle house became my meditation room. I began daily sittings (with some exceptions), the first after my morning shower and coffee and the second after returning home from my university office at the end of the workday, or at equivalent times during weekend and vacation days. Although on many occasions, particularly in the morning, I felt like I "should" be working instead of sitting there doing nothing, I stuck with the schedule on most days. At other times, I found myself looking forward to the 20-minute meditation break and the feeling of deep relaxation

that it engendered. In my mind, my mantra, Sherim, reminded me of how I felt after meditating for a few minutes: Serene.

Meditation worked for me. Even though it seemed like "doing nothing" at first, the meditation periods were very active in my mind. When things were running smoothly, my mind focused on the repetition of my mantra, and I felt a deep sense of relaxation—my breath slowed down and my body settled into its own quiet presence. Sometimes I would find myself nodding off, a reminder that I was in need of a nap or additional rest, particularly in the post-work afternoon sitting. The biggest distraction, however, was not fatigue but an ongoing inner monologue in which my thoughts took over and carried my attention downstream, away from its focus on my mantra. Like a monkey, my mind jumped around from topic to topic, treetop to treetrunk, branching out in all directions, spinning its own story line. Sooner or later, my awareness of being in a state of distraction would kick in, and I would shift my focus back to the mantra and my breath. This "awareness" was a new skill and I felt my practice improve in terms of how long it took me to realize that my attention was off course before returning it to the sound of the mantra.

Although I did not know what to call this newly developing sense of awareness, I would now call it "mindfulness"—a detached perspective, an awareness of mental and physical processes as they occur in the here-and-now, in the moment-to-moment flow of ongoing experience. All of this was a unique and rewarding experience. I continued to practice meditation over the next 90 days. Most impressive was the change in my blood pressure during this period. At the beginning of the first month, my average weekly reading was 136/100 (systolic/diastolic), quite a bit above what was considered "normal" at the time (equal or less than 120/80). By the end of the third month, my average had dropped to 120/90—still high for the diastolic reading, but an impressive drop.

Dr. Aagard was impressed, although he recommended adding an anti-hypertensive medication to my daily meditation routine. My blood pressure 30 years later showed a weekly average of 128/82. For me, a combination of meditation and medication seems to have produced the best results.

As an empiricist, I was impressed with the data documenting a drop in my blood pressure. As a psychologist, I became more intrigued by what was happening in the process of meditation on a cognitive and behavioral level. As a beginning meditation student, I felt pulled by the promise of spiritual awakening and the lure of enlightenment.

Given that I found TM effective in terms of my own needs, both as a relaxation technique and as an antidote to my hypertension, I wondered if meditation could be a useful intervention for individuals with other problems, including their reliance on alcohol and other drugs as an attempt to reduce their stress and anxiety. The literature on this published in the mid–1970s often included a discussion of the "tension reduction hypothesis," which stated that engaging in addictive behavior is often reinforced by short-term relaxation effects (avoiding or escaping tension is technically defined as "negative reinforcement" that strengthens the individual's attachment to the target behavior). Addictive behavior is frequently motivated by a desire for "self-medication" or a search for immediate gratification and relief from stress and tension, accord-

ing Edward John Khantzian, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and other experts.

Like many of my colleagues, I was impressed with the theoretical writings of the Harvard Medical School physician, Herbert Benson, in *The Relaxation Response.* Benson stated that all forms of meditation are effective to the extent that they elicit a basic "relaxation response." This hypometabolic state of relaxation is facilitated by four basic components—a quiet environmental setting in which to practice, a "mental device" to focus thoughts (such as a sound, phrase, or mantra repeated silently), a passive attitude (instead of pursuing thoughts that arise in consciousness, the meditator simply returns to the repetition of the mental device), and a comfortable physical position with minimal muscular tension. According to Benson, a specific assigned mantra (as in the TM program) is unnecessary: simply repeating the word "one" is equally effective. Benson provided a clear summary of the many health benefits associated with regular meditation practice eliciting this relaxation response (Benson, 1975).

Again, according to Benson, all forms of meditation have the same effect in terms of eliciting the basic relaxation response. I began to wonder how unique TM was in its effects. How necessary was the use of a mantra, and on what basis was my mantra assigned to me for my own personal use?

Around this time, a psychologist by the name of Patricia Carrington developed a meditation program, *Clinically Standardized Meditation* (1978; Cf. http://www.eftupdate.com/ModernFormMeditation.html and http://www.eftupdate.com/AboutDrCarrington/AboutDrCbackground.htm) in which she provided psychotherapists with instruction in teaching meditation to their clients, including a list of potential mantras that therapists and clients could choose from for their own practice. My training in TM did not include reading assignments or other reference resources, other than what was provided in the two introductory lectures, the individual personal interview and private instruction session, and the option to attend at least three follow-up group sessions. In order to get more information about TM, how it evolved and potential explanations of how and why it is effective in reducing stress, I turned to the existing literature. Although books on TM were published in the 1980s (for example, Roth, 1987), all I could find at the time was the original text by the developer of TM, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's *Science of Being and Art of Living*, first published in 1963. In order to gain more information, I signed up to attend a weekend retreat sponsored by the TM community in the winter of 1973 in Monterey, California. [In the scientific literature, research studies assessing the impact of TM on brain waves began to be published soon thereafter, (Cf., for example, Orme-Johnson, 1977). Orme-Johnson served as the co-editor for a new collection of research articles on TM (Cf., Orme-Johnson, E.W., & Farrow, J.T., 1977).]

This was about the same time as I began to hear about a new development among some TM advocates: some advanced meditators were apparently capable of "levitation"—the experience of rising in space above the meditation cushion. Since I had never witnessed (much less experienced myself) anyone actively levitating, I had my doubts about the veracity of these claims. Still, I tried to keep an open mind as I headed south from Seattle to Monterey.

When I arrived, the TM registrants at the Asilomar Conference Center were buzzing with excitement and speculation, based on a statement supposedly issued the day before by the Maharishi from his headquarters in India. A comet was scheduled to cross the skies the same weekend as the retreat. Newspaper accounts predicted that the Comet Kohoutek would be as dazzling and bright as Halley's Comet. According to the TM devotees at the retreat, the Maharishi had declared that anyone who was touched by the tail of the comet as its passed through the night sky would become instantly enlightened. That night, most everyone at the retreat sat outside, under the stars, practicing TM and awaiting the comet's arrival. Kohoutek was hyped by the media as the "comet of the century," but it gave a poor display and was a letdown, leading some to nickname it "Comet Watergate." As for me, I packed my bags and caught the first available plane back to Seattle. Enough was enough. The "comet" of my involvement with TM fizzled.

A couple of months later, in early 1974, I was describing my disappointment with the TM movement and my experiences at the retreat to a friend in North Carolina. She asked me if I had ever tried Buddhist meditation, such as Zen or Tibetan Buddhism. Although I was familiar with some of the Zen teachings, having read Alan Watts in college, I told her that I had never tried any meditation practices other than TM. Before I left to return to Seattle, my friend handed me a copy of a book at the airport. "Read this on the plane home," she suggested. "It's a book about Buddhism that I think you will enjoy."

I can vividly recall first seeing the yellow paperback she handed me with the title *Meditation in Action*, by Chogyam Trungpa (1969). The author was born in Tibet in 1940 and was recognized as a major Tulku, or incarnate teacher in the Tibetan tradition.

After escaping Tibet during the communist upheavals in the late 1950s, Trungpa Rinpoche ("Rinpoche" is the Tibetan term for a spiritual teacher) attended Oxford University and later established a meditation center in Scotland, where he wrote *Meditation in Action*. Trungpa then moved to North America, and in the early 1970s established meditation centers in Nova Scotia and Vermont. In 1974, he founded the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. Still in existence, Naropa became the only accredited Buddhist-inspired university in the United States. He remained at Naropa until his death in 1987.

During the long flight home, I read through *Meditation in Action*, cover to cover. I remember feeling a growing sense of excitement and intrigue as I started getting into the material. Although English was his second language, Trungpa had a way with words and a gift for metaphor. He seemed to address my own ambivalence and doubt about meditation and pursuit of the "spiritual" path. When I read his book, I had the strong impression that Trungpa was directly addressing my own doubts and concerns—that he somehow could "read my mind" and address the very questions I was asking myself about meditation and the "spiritual" path. My feeling of connection with his ideas and his analysis of my own need to ask questions about what it all meant stayed with me.

And so it happened, 32 years ago at the time of this writing (2006), that I found

myself first become a student of Buddhism. Trungpa Rinpoche was my first teacher. Although I continued to practice TM during this period, I sought out instruction in Buddhist meditation practice. I realized I did not believe in Hinduism, the spiritual origin of TM.

Medicinal Meditation

In 1975, I conducted my first research study on the effects of meditation on alcohol consumption among heavy drinkers. Along with my colleagues, Robert Pagano and Richard Rose, Janice Marques (then one of my graduate students) and I decided to follow up on two recently published studies showing significant reductions in alcohol and drug use for participants who began a regular program of meditation (Benson & Wallace, 1972; Shafii et al., 1975). We employed a prospective research design with appropriate control groups in our study. We recruited male college students who were assessed as "high volume" social drinkers to volunteer for a study that would help them learn new ways to relax when feeling stressed. We selected heavy drinkers instead of alcoholics as our subjects because we wanted to determine if the relaxation training would lead to changes in drinking behavior for individuals who had expressed no particular desire to cut down or stop their drinking.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups—meditation training (using Benson's mantra: the word "one," as described in his 1975 book, *The Relaxation Response*), progressive muscle relaxation (using E. Jacobson's technique as described in his 1938 book, *Progressive Relaxation*), a "bibliotherapy" attention-placebo control group (participants in this condition were asked to sit quietly while reading material of their own choosing), and a no-treatment control condition. All students who volunteered for the study agreed to keep a daily record of their drinking for a period of 15 weeks. During an initial six-week training period, students in the meditation, progressive relaxation, and quiet reading groups were asked to practice twice daily for twenty minutes (morning and late afternoons). After the six-week training period, students were followed for a period of seven weeks, during which time they were free to continue or discontinue practice of their relaxation techniques while they continued to self-monitor alcohol consumption on a daily basis.

The results of our study showed a significant reduction in alcohol use for students in all three relaxation conditions, as compared to the no-treatment control subjects. Overall, participating in any of the three relaxation conditions was associated with an average 50% drop in daily drinking rates during the six-week training period. They also showed a significant shift toward a greater internal locus of control (using Julian Rotter's 1966 measure), compared to students in the no-treatment group, who showed little or no change in their drinking rates or locus of control over the same period. During the seven-week follow-up period, however, almost all of the students discontinued practice of the relaxation procedures, perhaps because they were not as motivated to continue as were other populations (for example, clients in treatment). We first presented the results of this study at the Banff International Conference on Behav-

ior Modification in March, 1976 with subsequent publication of the results (Marlatt and Marques, 1977; Marlatt et al., 1984).

The results of our study appeared to support Benson's hypothesis that meditation, as with Jacobson's muscle relaxation procedure or simply engaging in two daily periods of quiet sitting and reading, is capable of eliciting a common relaxation response. One of my students at the time, Tim Murphy, was an avid jogger who claimed that aerobic exercise was also an effective stress-management strategy, and that he often felt very relaxed after a good run. With Tim taking the lead, we decided to conduct a second study with male heavy drinkers who were randomly assigned to one of three conditions—aerobic exercise (running four times a week), meditation (using a mantra-based technique developed by Patricia Carrington in 1978), or a no-treatment control group. All participants kept daily records of their alcohol consumption during three time periods—pretreatment baseline (two weeks), treatment intervention (running or meditating for eight weeks) and a six-week follow-up period.

As in the first study, significant reductions in drinking behavior were reported for both the meditation and exercise groups, with the aerobic running group showing the best results overall (60% reduction in weekly alcohol consumption rates on average, during the intervention phase). No significant differences among conditions were found during the follow-up period: most participants showed an increase in drinking once they no longer were required to participate in regular meditation or exercise periods. We concluded that unless participants continued to practice their relaxation technique on a daily basis, the effects would wear off over time (Carrington, 1978; Murphy et al., 1986).

Taken together, the findings of both studies were consistent with the tension-reduction model of problem drinking and alcoholism. According to this hypothesis, excessive drinking was reinforced by the reduction of tension or stress, presumably caused by the anxiolytic effects of alcohol (Higgins, 1976; Marlatt, 1976). Other psychologists focused on meditation as a stress-management intervention. In 1971, Daniel Goleman described meditation as a type of "meta-therapy," similar to Joseph Wolpe's systematic-desensitization treatment for fears and phobias in which clients would imagine a hierarchy of feared stimuli while practicing muscle relaxation (so as to "extinguish" or desensitize the anxiety response). According to this view, the practice of meditation often is associated with a rise of anxiety-provoking thoughts and upset feelings. When such thoughts increase in frequency and intensity, the meditator is instructed to focus on the breath or mantra and to "let go" of the stressful reactions—much like what happens in systematic relaxation but in a more "global" manner. Psychologists, particularly those associated with behavior therapy, began to define meditation as a type of psychotherapy for a variety of problem behaviors, ranging from alcoholism to anxiety disorders (Goleman, 1971; Smith, 1975; Wolpe, 1958).

Mindfulness as Compass

The parallel pathways between Western psychology and Eastern contemplative traditions were explored by therapists and theorists identified with humanistic and

"transpersonal" psychology. First developed by pioneers such as Abraham Maslow (1962) and his writings on self-actualization, the field of transpersonal psychology was originally devoted to the study of consciousness and actualization experiences transcending normal individual personality development and the traditional boundaries of psychology. In July of 1976, I attended the Seventh Annual Conference of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (ATP) held at the same retreat center as the TM conference I attended in 1973. Although I felt uneasy at first, given my background in behavioral psychology and academic research, I soon found the presentations of considerable interest and I met many influential colleagues who shared my interest in meditation and Buddhist psychology. As a result, I entered a subscription for the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, and attended several more of their annual conferences. I also learned more about Buddhist teachers who were writing about this topic, and I was impressed with Tarthang Tulku's 1975 book, *Reflections of Mind: Western Psychology Meets Tibetan Buddhism.*

The first time I learned about mindfulness as a foundation of meditation practice occurred at a panel discussion held at the ATP annual conference in September 1978. The panelists then included Daniel Goleman, Deane Shapiro, and Jack Kornfield. During his presentation, Jack Kornfield drew a distinction between two types of meditation practice—concentrative meditation (including mantra-based meditation) and insight or "Vipassana" meditation. "Vipassana," a Sanskrit word meaning "seeing things the way they really are," is a practice enhancing mindfulness, or what Jack described as awareness of the moment-to-moment flow of experience from a non-judgmental point of view. He closed his talk by telling us that one of his primary meditation teachers told him that the way he teaches students mindfulness is to conceive of the student as walking along a road, with darkness ahead. The teacher's basic task is to tell the student, "Hey! Move to the left, or you'll go in the ditch. Or, move to the right—whatever it takes to get the person to move away from all the attachments on the path." I wrote in my notes: mindfulness is a navigational skill.

At the 1979 conference, also held at Asilomar, my wife Judith Gordon and I presented a workshop entitled "Addictive Behavior Problems: A Transpersonal Persepective." In the program description, we stated that the "workshop will provide an overview of our Relapse Prevention program—a self-control program based on a combination of transpersonal theory and cognitive-behavioral treatment procedures, including the use of meditation and related imagery to cope with urges, cravings, and attachments to consciousness-altering substances; moderation and the 'Middle Way' as alternatives to abstinence will also be discussed."

We also attended presentations by a number of noteworthy speakers in transpersonal psychology, including Willis Harmon (who spoke on transpersonal values and creative/intuitive decision making), Kathy Speeth and James Fadiman (on mindfulness and attention), and Ralph Metzner (on the typology of the four basic elements). Admittedly, some of the presentations were pretty far-out and on the fringe. It's no wonder, I remember thinking, that the Association for Transpersonal Psychology was denied admission as a separate professional division of the American Psychological Association, despite many attempts over the years.

It was at the 1979 conference that I had my first exposure to Vipassana meditation. Jack Kornfield presented a day-long workshop on Buddhist psychology and mindfulness meditation. For the first time, I concentrated on my breath as the focus of awareness during the meditation practice, rather than continuing to repeat my TM mantra. Kornfield also recommended that we meditate with our eyes open (rather than closed, as in TM), and that we gaze downwards, still "seeing" but not looking at anything in particular. That day, the experience of "mindfulness" opened my mind, for the first time. The following account is taken from my journal notes dated July 13, 1979:

> Friday the 13th, 9 a.m., Kornfield workshop, Asilomar.
> Bright sunny day. Enjoying the slow motion and awareness of doing one thing at a time. Each action becomes an act unto itself—increasing the pleasure and sense of grace. Jack's talks are clear and focused and to the point, no wasted words. As he said, awareness is like a switch: it's either on or off. Also find meditation with a cushion and pad to be balanced and steady (although some numbness).
>
> To deal with fragmentation and half-hearted life experiences: Mindfulness. Krishnamurti calls it choiceless awareness. Gurdjieff calls it self-remembering. Seeing what is happening, awareness of body, of feelings, of content of mind, and of the dharma ("natural law" or "reality") of mind. To develop mindfulness, we need (1) Humility; as Jack said, 'We don't know shit about nothing.' Don't know! (2) Stillness, bringing the mind into the moment to give oneself time-breaks, (3) Simplicity of mind (vs. mind's own tendency to over-complicate things).
>
> Lunch, preceded by a mindful glass of wine. Small is beautiful vs. more is better. Eating in mindful mouthfulls as a weight control procedure. Training alcoholics to become wine connoisseurs. The Middle Way.
>
> "Sit every day—it's the most important thing you can do in your life" —Jack Kornfield.

In the fall of the same year, 1979, I received a flyer in the mail that announced a ten-day meditation retreat scheduled for November, to be taught by Ruth Denison. The invitation to register came at the "right moment" for me and Judith, and we signed up immediately:

> THANKSGIVING MEDITATION COURSE lovingly given in the Vipassana Tradition by Ruth Denison, Nov. 14–24, Ocean Park, Long Beach, Washington
> The course will be conducted in noble silence.
> Group meditation instructions will be given as well as individual guidance.
> Please leave all business behind.
> The teaching is given freely.
> Cost for food and lodging for 10 days will be about $100

The retreat was held on the grounds of the United Methodist Youth Camp, a summer camp with meager facilities (for example, there was no heat in the cabins despite the cool November weather), located on the beach just north of Ocean Park on the Long Beach Peninsula on the Olympic Peninsula. About 20 people signed up, with men and women assigned to separate cabins. The daily schedule was posted in the meditation hall (a cozy room with the camp's only wood-burning stove):

5:00	Wakeup
5:30	Meditation
7:00	Breakfast
8:30	Meditation
12:00	Lunch (main meal)
1:00	Beach walk
2:15	Meditation
5:30	Tea
6:30	Meditation & Dharma Talk
9:00	Tea
9:30	Bed

Each meditation session consisted of alternate periods of meditation and walking/ movement meditation. Participants were asked to remain silent at all times, except when communicating with our teacher, Ruth Denison. Below are some excerpts from my journal notes written during the retreat:

> Saturday, November 17, 8:15 a.m.
> I am feeling fresh on this sunny November morning—interspersed with rain showers. Up before dawn to sit; then walking and body movement outside, under the stars and a crescent moon. Ruth is very alive and spontaneous—I wonder how old she is. (I received an invitation to celebrate her 83rd birthday, on September 25, 2004, so she was fifty-eight years old at the time of the retreat.)
>
> Yesterday was a difficult day in some ways—very difficult to keep my mind focused on my breath as it kept slipping away into dream-like imagery (can't remember the details due to lack of mindfulness) or into a sleep (sloth and torpor) state. Plus I was having continual problems with pain: in my legs and feet while on the cushion, and in my toes while sitting on the meditation bench. At times, it was unbearable, and I would try to shift positions to make it more comfortable. All this did was bring temporary relief, followed by a strong desire to move again. The pain does help sharpen my awareness when I use it as a meditative focus. Once or twice I would go the whole 30 minutes without moving—showing myself that I could do it. The pain always goes away very quickly at the end of the sitting, anyway. No permanent damage: it's all in my head. This is an important lesson for me, since I usually always "give in"

whenever I am faced with any discomfort in my life, always taking the easy way out. Self-discipline is part of self-control. Here, I am beginning to learn that I can do it . . . . I am beginning to realize how important all of this is for me, and how this is the first time I have submitted to this form of discipline ever. The 8:30 meditation bell is ringing. It tolls for me.

Monday, November 19, 8:00 a.m.
I feel clear as a bell and clear as a whistle in this frosty blue-sky Monday morning. What a contrast to my usual Monday morning! I have never felt in better shape: I sleep well, have incredibly clear dreams, I feel refreshed despite 5:00 a.m. wake-up and the chilling temperature . . . . Can you imagine? The whole pattern of my habits has changed totally in the past five days. We are half-way through the retreat at noon today. I sometimes find myself (my ego, that is) doing a count-down, but I am learning not to feed it.

Wednesday, November 21, 1:00 p.m.
I can now sit in one position for about seventy-five minutes, without too much discomfort. To do otherwise would reinforce my tendency to give in or give up when the going gets rough. Perhaps this is why the retreat is 10 days and not just one week long. I seem to have reached a ceiling effect in my consciousness: better ability to focus my attention while sitting, very relaxed (except when angry), and the occasional "flash"—the sudden realization that the pain "I" feel is in my legs, and not in my observing mind, which is clear and detached from the pain. And so we go into the final stretch.

My experiences with various meditation teachers I worked with over the years since I attended Ruth Denison's Vipassana retreat in 1979 were invaluable. In 1981, Judith and I attended a ten-day Vipassana retreat in North California, taught by the revered Buddhist master, S.N. Goenka, one of Ruth Denison's teachers and founder of a world-wide network of Vipassana retreat centers with its headquarters in India. Of all the retreats I have attended, the one taught by Goenka was particularly intense in the practice of basic mindfulness based on the Buddhist Hinayana tradition.

During the next few years, I had the opportunity to attend several additional meditation retreats also taught by leading teachers from both Western and Eastern traditions. Joseph Goldstein led an excellent meditation retreat that I attended in Breitenbush, Oregon, based on his book, *Insight Meditation* (1993). I met Jon Kabat-Zinn during a talk I gave at the University of Massachusetts and later provided an endorsement for his book describing his mindfulness-based stress reduction course for patients with chronic pain problems (*Full Catastrophe Living*, 1990).

In 1994, Judith and I signed up for a Tibetan Buddhism retreat taught by Lama Tashi Namgyal at the Hollyhock Farm Center on Cortes Island, British Columbia. Lama Tashi was sent to Canada by the Dalai Lama to serve as a teacher for Tibetan refugees. It was at this retreat that I first met Jhampa Shaneman, a Western Canadian who served as a Buddhist monk for many years in India, and who translated Lama

Tashi's talks for the English-speaking audience. We later traveled to various Buddhist centers in India as part of a group led by Jhampa, including Bodghaya (the place of the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree) and Dharmasala (the Dalai Lama's current residence in northern India).

At a retreat center near Santa Cruz, California, in 1995, Judith and I were fortunate to be among the students at a wonderful retreat taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, the esteemed Buddhist teacher from Vietnam who was later nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. A key focus in his retreat was mindfulness of the breath and how this practice can enhance awareness of body sensations and emotional states. In his gracious teachings, Thich Nhat Hanh taught us how to calm the body by mindful breathing linked to various parts of the body. For example, he asked to breathe in slowly while saying to oneself, "Breathing in, I'm aware of my eyes. Breathing out, I smile at my eyes." Another example: "Breathing in, I'm aware of my heart—place your hand over your heart. Breathing out, I smile at my heart." Similar to the teachings of Goenka, he emphasized mindfulness of bodily sensations using a mindful "body scan" of various physical sensations, including emotional states ranging from pleasant ("Breathing in and out: I feel happy") to negative ("Breathing in and out: I embrace my anger"). Even neutral feelings can be appreciated mindfully; as Thich Nhat Hanh put it, "Enjoy your non-toothache." In answer to one question, he replied: "What is the Buddha made of? Mindfulness. You only need to touch it every day for it to grow. This is the Age of Mindfulness, coming home."

Taking Refuge, Within and Without

Almost 20 years after taking my first meditation retreat with Ruth Denison, on August 22, 1998, I formally made a commitment to follow the Buddhist path by "Taking Refuge" at a meditation retreat taught by Pema Chodron. I was drawn to becoming one of Pema's students after reading her book, *When Things Fall Apart* (1997). Pema Chodron currently serves as the spiritual leader of Gampo Abbey, a western Buddhist monastery located in Nova Scotia, Canada. The retreat was held at the Shambhala Mountain Center in the Colorado Rockies, also the location of the Stupa honoring the life and teachings of the late Chogyam Trungpa, who passed away in 1987. Pema Chodron was one of his early students. During the first days of the retreat, Pema taught us about "Maitri" (also known as "Metta"), the practice of "loving-kindness" or "unconditioned friendliness" to oneself. The practice of Maitri enhances our capacity for compassion for others as well, as expressed in this saying: "May all beings be happy and experience the root of happiness." Here are some of the notes I took based on Pema's discussion of Maitri:

> Sunday, August 16, 1998.
> Am sitting outside tent G12, as the late afternoon sun drops slowly toward the mountain ridges; just a few minutes ago, the sun was blocked by dark clouds pierced by lightening. Pine trees glisten around the tent compound, and I have seen deer, rabbits, and squirrels on the grounds since I arrived here at 7:30 this

morning. Just completed an afternoon teaching session in the huge white meditation tent. Pema is teaching about "Maitri," or loving-kindness towards the self and others. First for myself: "May Alan experience happiness and the roots of happiness." Then for others: "May all beings be happy and experience the root of happiness." What is happiness? It is not about fixing the problems of myself or others—it is about keeping one's heart open and helping others to open their own hearts, dissolving the barriers between self and others. The practice can deepen with personal pain, as it puts one in touch with the pain of others.

As a practice, whatever situation you're in: Open your heart and mind to that moment. We're standing in the middle of a Sacred Circle. Whatever enters the circle is to be welcomed, at any time—not just while meditating, but always, when things are together or when things fall apart. . . . Maitri is to foster welcoming into the circle, whereas compassion is sending this welcoming outside the circle to others (instead of avoiding them because of painful reactions). Maitri (also known as Metta, loving kindness or unconditional love) is a welcoming of whatever arises, and not shutting down, and not providing an evaluative, judging commentary (this is good or bad, etc.).

August 19. I look out at the stars and realize suddenly, that Choygam Trungpa is my true teacher, and that I belong to this lineage of Tibetan Buddhism (Kagyu/ Nyingma) and to this path. My heart opens and I weep for the first time at the retreat. Here I am at his mountain retreat center, and about to Take Refuge with Pema Chodron. So, here I am, twenty-five years after his *Meditation In Action* book, when we first "met." To Take Refuge is a commitment to self-awareness and the path of meditation.

August 21. Taking Refuge is very important in this lineage. Most people on earth look to outside authority for knowing the meaning of life. But, in Buddhism, we are here to fend for ourselves. It's like we are each a boat in a crowded harbor covered with ships, and get our sails and head out for the open ocean and the end of the earth: our true home, leaving the comfort of the harbor and other ships. We sail with no maps for days, with storms and sunny weather. We are each enlightened to begin with. By Taking Refuge we admit we are basically alone, and that we cannot rely on any fixed ideas or beliefs . . . . We Take Refuge in the "Three Jewels": the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. We also take internal refuge in the self as a seeker of truth and reality.

Refuge in the Buddha: Buddha is a model of courage for seeking truth—to question with an open mind, to try different teachings but to realize that we must find out for ourselves. Teachings are helpful, but one must try out everything for oneself, to find out if it's "good medicine." Refuge in the Dharma, consisting of all the ancient and contemporary teachings, and the capacity to see all experiences as opportunities on the path to enlightenment. Dharma is every

breath you take, every thought you think—anything that comes into your sacred circle is material for the path to awakening. Refuge in the Sangha, the community of fellow practitioners and others, all of like mind on the path. There is also the inner Sangha, the companionship offered by Maitri and Compassion since these qualities are your fellow travelers on the path.

August 23. Those of us who volunteered to Take Refuge met with Pema Chodron for an interview prior to the ceremony. She spoke of three changes to expect—(1) A change of attitude: taking non-aggression to heart, and not to harm others or oneself; (2) A change of "mark": the more we practice, the more we show change reflecting the evolving process of opening up, such that our external mark changes as we become kinder and softer over time; and (3) A change of name: we will each be given a Buddhist name in the Tibetan language, one that reflects our essential life theme or challenge. She told us that her name was given to her when she first took refuge, and that Pema Chodron is translated as "Lotus Torch of Dharma." As a group, we then recited the Refuge Vows three times in a row: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha." After the third repetition, Pema snapped her thumb and that was the moment! After the ceremony, we were each given certificates with our own individual new Buddhist names. Mine is: Sopa Gyatso, or "Ocean of Patience." As Pema told me later, "You seemed a little impatient to me during our interview."

The Work on the Self

I wrote this final section in November 2004 while attending a meditation retreat at the Shambhala Mountain Center in northern Colorado, the same location where Pema Chodron gave me my new name, Sopa Gyatso, over six years ago. I took a course entitled, "Meditating with the Body," taught by Dr. Reginald Ray, a recognized teacher (Acharya) in Tibetan Buddhism and an early student of Choygam Trungpa (as was Pema Chodron).

Unlike the last two sunny, blue sky days there in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, it was snowing that morning as I wrote this in my warm and cozy room in the Shambhala Lodge, where there was electricity to run my laptop, but no e-mail connection, cell phones didn't work there, and we had no newspapers, TV, or "Breaking News." Most of the 50 or so participants, including myself, were relieved to get away from the depressing news of the recent American election held earlier that month, and we relished the opportunity to experience the peace of a personal retreat just prior to Thanksgiving. I wished my first grandchild, Jack Marlatt, Happy Birthday on his very first birthday that day! I will see my grandson and his family in our home Canadian province of British Columbia in the coming week and celebrate my 63rd birthday on Friday the 26th, the day after Thanksgiving Day in America. Despite American politics, there is much to be Thankful for in this life.

After reading some of his published works, including his seminal text on *Secret of*

the Vajra (2001), I first attended a retreat under Reginald Ray's leadership in August 2003, also held at the Shambahla Mountain Center. I felt an affiliation with Reggie since we are about the same age, each married with adult children, and had a shared experience with academic life in the Ivory Tower. After receiving his Ph.D. in religious studies from the University of Illinois, he joined the faculty at the University of Colorado prior to his affiliation with the Naropa Institute (founded by Choygam Trungpa) in Boulder, Colorado. As a result, the following brochure for that year's course held considerable interest and I signed up to attend:

> Meditating with the Body: A six month-long intensive to ground your meditation practice in your body, with Acharya Reginald A. Ray. This in-depth intensive features three residential retreats at the Shambhala Mountain Center at Red Feathers Lakes, Colorado: May, August, and November. In between the retreats, your practice will deepen with: * A bi-weekly private phone call with your personal meditation instructor * A bi-weekly teaching and guided meditation CD designed to further your understanding of the body as the gateway to enlightenment * A monthly on-line meeting with your meditation group to support your practice * Daily self-guided meditation and body-based practices.

As it turned out, the dates for that last retreat, November 17–21, overlapped exactly with the annual conference of the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy (AABT). While many of my students and colleagues were enjoying science, jazz, and drinks in the French Quarter at AABT in New Orleans that day (after all, it was Saturday), there I was, a former President of AABT practicing mindful meditation in the Rocky Mountains. The setting there was magnificent, spacious and wild, and it was the final resting place for Choygam Trungpa's remains placed in a grand, two-story white Stupa that stands above the land overlooking the retreat center. From there, I knew what it meant to miss New Orleans.

The focus of the six-month course was to provide students with an "understanding of the body as the gateway to enlightenment" (as stated in the brochure quoted above). Previous meditation retreats that I attended, including various Vipassana courses, taught practitioners to pay attention to the breath as it passes in and out of the nostrils as the focus of awareness during meditation. When thoughts or feelings arise as distractions, the meditator is asked to bring attention gently back to the breath, and to observe the rising and falling of thoughts as "just thinking" in an accepting and non-judgmental manner. Perhaps because awareness is focused on the breath and on any cognitive processes that may arise during the sitting, one's attention is mainly on what happens above the neck, or "in the head" of the meditator (awareness of breathing through the nose or experiencing mental activities linked to the brain).

In our first retreat that past May, Reggie taught us that meditating with the body involves three components: alignment, relaxation, and resilience. Alignment includes the focus points of posture in sitting meditation, legs crossed, shoulders relaxed, eyes open but "looking backward" and starting the meditation session with ten slow breaths, followed by another ten breaths. This part of the practice is similar to that of many

meditation instructions, including Vipassana. In the relaxation phase, however, students are given instructions in what Reggie calls, "three-fold breathing." In the first-fold breathing, the instructions are to first lie down on your back, legs bent with knees facing up (with legs tied together beneath the knees with a cotton strap) and feet on the ground, "pigeon toe" style. Hands are placed facing down on the lower stomach, just below the navel and above the pelvic area, or what Reggie calls the "lower belly." Instead of focusing on breathing through the nostrils, awareness is placed on a spot in the lower belly (midway between your navel and perineum) that you are instructed to breathe into. After doing this for several minutes, you move to the second-fold by placing your hands just below the ribcage, and focus awareness on the rising and falling of this area of your body as you breathe in and out. After doing this for some time, you move to the third-fold by placing your hands over the collar-bone area just below the neck. Sessions vary in length, but Reggie recommends a 30—to 40-minute period of three-fold breathing each day. Once this practice is acquired, the third component of meditation, known as resilience, is enhanced. In the resilience component, if you are faced with a stressful situation in life, you now have the ability (skillful means) to focus your awareness on your bodily sensations (what Reggie calls the "primordial state" of experience) and cope effectively with the situation without getting caught up in the ego story-line of what is happening in the moment of stress.

During the course, I developed a deeper awareness of my body and its various sensations, feelings, and emotional states. Reggie encouraged his students to develop a dialogue with one's body, to learn to listen and pay attention to what your body is telling you. Working with the body requires a clear understanding of your own developmental history (karma) and how it relates to ongoing bodily processes, so as to uncover and pay attention to the formerly "unconscious" messages that your body is sending you. In the last part of the course, he provided guided meditation instructions on how to deal with strong emotional states (hatred, desire, paranoia, pride) without being wiped out by them. The strong energy provided by these "neurotic" emotional states can provide the fuel for transformation of negative bodily states. To learn more, you will have to take the course yourself.

I had a one-on-one brief meeting with Reggie that morning, just before our afternoon break and my writing time. He looked deeply into my eyes and said: "Don't be afraid. Everything is going to work out. Just relax, both here at the retreat and when you get back home. It's going to be OK." Just like Pema, who recognized my "impatience" when she gave me the name, Ocean of Patience (Sopa Gyatso), Reggie seemed to resonate with my own inner level of tension. It's clear that I still have work to do.

NOTES

This article is adapted from Chapter Two of *Addiction and the Middle Way* by G. Alan Marlatt and Jon Carlson, New York, Guilford, forthcoming, and reprinted here by kind permission of the author and publisher.

Address for correspondence: G. Alan Marlatt, Addictive Behaviors Research Center, University of Washington, Department of Psychology, Box 351525, Seattle, WA 98195–1525. E-mail: marlatt@u.washington.edu.

REFERENCES

Benson, H. (1975). *The relaxation response*. New York: HarperTorch.

Benson H., & Wallace, R.K. (1972). Decreased drug abuse with Transcendental Meditation: A study of 1,861 subjects. In C.J.D. Zarafonetis, (Ed.) *Drug abuse-proceedings of the international conference* (pp. 369–376). Philadelphia, PA: Lea and Febiger.

Carrington, P. (1978). *Freedom in meditation*. NY: Crown.

Chodron, P. (1997). *When things fall apart: Heart advice for difficult times*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.

Goldstein, J. (1993). *Insight meditation: The practice of freedom*. Dublin, Eire: Gill and Macmillan.

Goleman, D. (1971). Meditation as meta-therapy: Hypotheses toward a proposed fifth state of consciousness. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 3*, pt. 1:1–25.

Higgins, R.L. (1976). Experimental investigations of tension-reduction models of alcoholism. In G. Goldstein & C. Neuringer (Eds.), *Empirical studies of alcoholism* (pp. 37–74). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Co.

Jacobson, E. (1938). *Progressive relaxation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Marlatt, G.A. (1976). Alcohol, stress, and cognitive control. In I.G. Sarason, & C.D. Spielberger (Eds.), *Stress and anxiety* (Vol. 3, pp. 271–296). Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere Publishing Corp.

Marlatt, G.A., & Marques, J.K. (1977). Meditation, self-control, and alcohol use. In R.B. Stuart (Ed.), *Behavioral self-management: Strategies, techniques, and outcomes* (pp. 117–153). New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.

Marlatt, G.A., Pagano, R.R., Rose, R.M., & Marques, J.K. (1984). Effects of meditation and relaxation training upon alcohol use in male social drinkers. In D.H. Shapiro & R.N. Walsh (Eds.), *Meditation: Classic and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 105–120). New York, NY: Aldine.

Maslow, A. (1962). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York: Van Nostrand.

Murphy, T. J., Pagano, R. R., & Marlatt, G. A. (1986). Lifestyle modification with heavy alcohol drinkers: Effects of aerobic exercise and meditation. *Addictive Behaviors, 11*, 175.

Orme-Johnson, D.W. (1977). EEG coherence during transcendental consciousness. *Electroencephalography and Clinical Neurophysiology*, 43, (4), E487.

Orme-Johnson, E.W., & Farrow, J.T. (Eds.). (1977). *Scientific research on the Transcendental Meditation program: Collected papers, volume 1*. New York: Maharishi European Research University Press.

Ray, R. A. (2001). *Secret of the Vajra world: The world of Tibet*. Boston and London: Shambhala.

Roth, R. (1987). *Transcendental meditation*. NY: Donald I. Fine.

Rotter, J. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcements, *Psychological Monographs*, 80, Whole No. 609.

Shafii, M., Lavely, R., & Jaffe, R. (1975). Meditation and the prevention of alcohol abuse. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 132, 942–945.

Smith, J.C. (1975). Meditation as psychotherapy: A review of the literature. *Psychological Bulletin*, 82, 558–564.

Trungpa, C. (1969). *Meditation in action*. Boulder, Co.: Shambhala Publications.

Tulku, T. (1975). *Reflections of mind: Western psychology meets Tibetan Buddhism*. Emeryville, CA: Dharma Press.

Wolpe, J. (1958). *Psychotherapy by reciprocal inhibition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yogi, M.M. (1963). *Science of being and the art of living: Transcendental Meditation*. Los Angeles: International SRM Publications.