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# 3

## The Well-Focused School Leader

“Try looking at your mind as a wayward puppy that you are trying to paper train. You don’t drop kick a puppy into the neighbor’s yard every time it piddles on the floor. You just keep bringing it back to the newspaper. So I keep trying gently to bring my mind back to what is really there to be seen, maybe to be seen and noted with a kind of reverence.”

—Anne Lamott, from *Bird by Bird*<sup>1</sup>

### A Sleepless Night for Jason

It’s another sleepless night for Jason, the chief financial officer of a prominent charter preparatory school in Chicago, Illinois. He’s up at 3 a.m., his mind darting like a fish in tall reeds. He walks over to his bedside table and rests his hand on his dad’s dog tags, Jason’s reminder of commitment and courage. As he showers and dresses quickly, his mind races as he anticipates a tense departmental meeting with senior instructional staff. He turns his head while shaving to glance at the TV news, and inadvertently nicks himself. Hurriedly, he wipes his face and gulps down a handful of vitamins.

It's now 4 a.m. and Jason is at his computer, scanning the latest news feed and checking email. He sips strong coffee, which he says helps "kick start" his day, but he barely tastes it. Still dark outside, Jason begins emailing his staff, checking on the status of projects, confirming appointments, and skimming a district accountability report. "I can get these little details out the way early in my day, and get more done at school," he says.

He's heard about the benefits of mindfulness meditation, yoga, and just sitting quietly, but says he has no time. He thinks about more physical exercise, and really enjoys swimming, and says to himself that he will start next week. He turns to the pile of unopened mail on his desk and begins sorting through it, discarding envelopes, stacking new piles. Suddenly, he remembers today's his sister's birthday. He turns back to his computer, searching the Web for a gift. He gets sidetracked by an advertisement for a trip to Costa Rica, a place he has longed to visit. With his attention momentarily captured by images of Costa Rican beaches, he forgets completely about the gift for his sister.

It's now 5:15 a.m., and Jason is hunched over the computer while the first light of the day rises over the small yard behind his home. The birds outside—cardinals, wrens, and sparrows—begin their morning ritual, vying for a dominant place at the bird feeder he installed a few weeks ago. He is unaware of the morning light, the birdsong, not to mention the pain in his low back, shoulders, and face from tensing his muscles and gripping his jaw. Later that day, he will wonder why he feels exhausted and tense. Sound familiar?

## Mindfulness and Attention Training

As we alluded to in Chapter 2, mindfulness strengthens attention, focus, and clarity. When you begin training in mindfulness, you recognize that your attention is flexible and that much like a beam of light, it can be focused anywhere from a narrow attention to a more open kind of awareness. Within the literature on mindfulness meditation, there are many ways of describing the flexibility of attention and focus. For the purposes of this chapter, we describe narrow-focused and open-focused attention, or what some researchers call "task-positive" and "task-negative" networks.<sup>2</sup>

Both networks are useful and important ("the crowning achievement of human brain"<sup>3</sup>; the task-positive network is the one we use when we are deeply focused on a single task, and the task-negative network is the one that's engaged when we are moving from one thought to another in

the usual mash-up of our wandering minds (lots of creative thinking can occur here). Daniel Goleman in his book *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* describes the range of attention from narrow to open as well. Narrow-focused attention is often described as one-pointed, just as you might shine a laser beam of light in a dark room. You may begin a period of mindfulness meditation practice by starting with narrowly focused attention: becoming aware of the breath at the tip of the nose, for example. Open-focused attention is the ability to expand your awareness in a flexible, wide, and generous manner, fully taking in whatever is in your peripheral vision, much like sitting on a beach and taking in the fullness of the landscape: the waves, the sand, objects far out on the horizon, other people, and more. An example of open attention would be moving awareness from feeling sensation at the tip of the nose to feeling sensations in the body as a whole. This type of “open awareness” or “panoramic awareness” reduces impulsivity and decreases mind wandering.<sup>4</sup>

Both open- and narrow-focused attention require a balance of effort and ease: not too tight and not too loose. In focusing on the breath at the tip of the nose—narrowly focused attention, for example—you are not striving to get somewhere, to change the breath, to strengthen the breath, or to control the breath; you are not exerting brute force or willpower. Nor are you lying back with disinterest. As you become adept at shifting from narrow- to open-focused attention, you recognize another type of attention: meta-attention, or the attention of attention. You recognize the movement of attention from the object of attention (the breath, for example) to something else and back again. This noticing of the shifting away of attention from the intended objects of attention (i.e., noticing that the mind has wandered from attention on the breath to what you are going to have to eat in an hour), and subsequently bringing the mind back to the focus of attention, is like a bench press for the mind. You are training the mind, strengthening your capacity to focus the mind.

The third part of our attention system—the attention filter—helps us aim our attention and make choices about what we notice and attend to—and we believe that this is an increasingly important set of cognitive muscles and awarenesses for the contemporary leader. As we’ve described throughout, we live in an unprecedented era of information availability. As recently described in a *New York Times* piece on the importance of resting the brain, “on a typical day, we take in the equivalent of about 174 newspapers’ worth of information, five times as much as we did in 1986. As the world’s 21,274 television stations produce some 85,000 hours of original programming every day (by 2003 figures), we watch an average of five hours of television

per day. For every hour of YouTube video you watch, there are 5,999 hours of new video just posted!”<sup>5</sup>

Your attention also filters all this incoming information—and learning how to notice what you are paying attention to, and to make choices about this, is part of the emerging skills of mindfulness. Without development, your evolutionary biology distinguishes the important from the unimportant, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, and as you engage in constantly switching between these two networks of the brain, you get fatigued, dizzy—there may be too much seesawing. This switching back and forth is competing for your finite attention capacity and makes you tired. Levitin and others<sup>6</sup> recommend for workday activity that instead of switching back and forth, you work in blocks, focusing on bundles of work projects, and then moving on to the next thing. For example, work on just emails, or just social media. Avoid interrupting composing an email by checking your Twitter feed.<sup>7</sup> One of the central outcomes of a developing mindfulness practice is the capacity to observe where (and how) one is attending, and to gradually, with practice, make decisions about whether these attention modes are serving us as leaders.

In our work with Jason and many other school leaders in mindfulness training—who made a commitment to beginning a mindfulness practice after really tracking how frantic their lives had become—we’re convinced of the importance of focus and attention training to leadership effectiveness. Rather than sitting in a meeting, texting under the table, or excusing himself to take a call, after some commitment to beginning a mindfulness practice, Jason began to train himself to be more present to what was happening in front of him. Instead of giving advice, fixing others, or spacing out, Jason worked at truly listening to his colleagues, friends, and family. In conversations with his staff, Jason practiced speaking mindfully, sticking to the point without getting sidelined or interrupting others in midsentence. He found his interactions at work became easier and sensed a greater clarity in his own thinking, as well as a greater cooperation with his staff. Jason was learning to direct and sustain his attention for small tasks, using narrow-focused attention (like completing an email without jumping to a Twitter feed) and to expand his attention for larger tasks, like strategic planning and visioning. His attention filter was becoming more sophisticated, and he was gradually becoming more able to be choiceful about attention, which brought him a sense of accomplishment and emotional calm. All this, and he eventually remembered his sister’s birthday gift too!

## Two Ways to Practice: Formal and Informal

### Formal Practice of Mindfulness

We find it helpful to distinguish between two ways of practicing mindfulness: formal and informal. More formal ways of practicing mindfulness often involve adoption of a regular schedule of silent meditation, like Sophia Isako Wong and Philip Altmann, who meditate formally every morning before beginning their day. This formal practice can be done not only while sitting, but also while standing or walking (see Mindfulness Practice Aid 3.2, “Mindful Walking,” page 97). We have even experienced formal mindfulness meditation while eating (see Mindfulness Practice Aid 5.1, “Eating Mindfully,” in Chapter 5, page 151). A more informal way to practice mindfulness is to bring mindful attention to the activities of everyday life; we consider this as important and effective as the formal practice. Both kinds of practices are life enhancing, and the two support one another like the wings of a bird. Both are meaningful to us as leaders because they scaffold and nurture self-awareness, concentration, insight,<sup>8</sup> and attention, which are central to effective leadership.

In some traditions, the word *insight* or *vipassana* may have a different and/or nuanced meaning. With greater self-awareness, you begin to know yourself in new and more conscious ways, which supports your self-confidence as a leader. For school leaders, we develop the capacity to understand the school environment as it is, seeing it clearly.

In formal meditation practice you intentionally set aside some time daily to pause, stop, be still, and unplug from the near-constant stream of incoming data and stimulus, which is your regular life. You take time to be with the experience of living: breathing, feeling the breath in your body, noticing the condition of your body as a whole. Jon Kabat-Zinn and other mindfulness teachers speak of this time as *being* rather than *doing*. Megan Cowan of Mindful Schools describes this practice as a laboratory for learning to watch your thoughts come across the sky of your mind. This is a moment, too, to be aware of the sensory experience of being: observing sounds all around you, observing thoughts and feelings as they come and go in the stream of awareness, observing your reactions without immediately jumping to change anything, observing bodily sensations—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. In our in-the-fast-lane lifestyle, most of us aren’t used to slowing down long enough to observe ourselves in this way. As mindfulness meditation practitioners and in our work with school leaders, we know just how hard it is to move from doing to being, and that is why formal meditation practice can be important in growing these noticing muscles.

### *Breathing, Posture, and Practice*

Mindful breathing is the foundation of mindfulness. We are always breathing, and our in- and out-breath is very often used as a way of anchoring attention to the “now.” The breath is so simple, so essential, and so automatic that we often forget that it’s there. Yet, of course, without the breath, there is no life. The breath is a good barometer of your emotions and the state of your body. The mind follows the breath, and when the breath and the mind unite, there is a sense of wholeness, centeredness, and integration. One way we experience this unity of mind and body is in our daily yoga practice. On the mat, standing, bending, lunging, or lying down, we’ve trained ourselves to bring conscious awareness to the breath as we move from posture to posture. This marrying of the breath with the movement really enlivens even super simple actions, like inhaling fully as the arms are raised up and exhaling completely as the arms are released down. You don’t have to be an expert at yoga to see the benefits of breathing with awareness. It’s important to take this body and breath awareness off the yoga mat and into our daily lives. A great place to start developing self-awareness is to begin with awareness of your breath. Too many leaders we work with tell us about feeling disconnected from their bodies, living largely in their heads. Some are hard pressed to locate where they feel the breath in the body. Mindfulness of the breath is largely about befriending the breath, becoming familiar with it, maybe for the first time.

#### ***Practice Pause—Breath Inquiry***

We invite you to pause and breathe and to try this breath inquiry practice, allowing your eyes to be closed or open as is comfortable for you. The purpose of this breath inquiry is to gather information about how you breathe, to check in with yourself, not to judge yourself or set an ambitious goal for yourself. As you breathe through the nose, feel the full length of the natural in-breath and feel the full length of the natural out-breath. You may notice whether the breath is shallow or full, constricted or expansive. Allow the breath to anchor your attention. Place your attention on your breath for a few cycles. Feel the breath come in and go out through the nose. This is not the same as thinking about the breath or analyzing the breath. Instead simply allow yourself to feel the breath and to be with the direct, sensory experience of breathing. After a few cycles, stretch gently and open your

eyes if they are closed, and notice how you feel. In what areas of the body do you most feel the breath? Can you describe the quality of your breathing—short, choppy, smooth? Now that you have some information about your physical state, do you have a sense about your psychological and emotional state? Do you notice a connection between how you are breathing and this state of mind?

Many of us, in the strain and rush of our lives, engage in unconscious inadequate breathing practices: breath holding, shallow breathing, and chronically holding in the abdomen to look trim and fit. As you breathe in, the abdomen expands like a balloon taking in air, and as you breathe out, the abdomen contracts. When you engage in diaphragmatic breathing, you bathe the heart, lungs, and other organs with oxygen-rich blood. While abdominal breathing is the way you naturally breathe, when you're under stress, this natural way of breathing can become compromised and shallow. During meditation, as with some complementary practices, like some forms of yoga or Qigong, you are not trying to manipulate the breath or control the breath. Instead, locate where you feel the breath, whether it is high in the chest or deep in the belly, and place your attention there. Stay present, to the best of your ability, to the wave-like quality of the breath. This takes practice and patience, and know too that wherever you are is just right.



### ***Practice Pause—Diaphragmatic Breathing: A Snapshot***

The diaphragm, a dome-shaped sheet of muscle and tendon that separates the chest from the abdomen, plays a vital role in respiration and breathing. Other muscles (and organs) are, of course, at work in the complex process of breathing and respiration, such as the intercostals between the ribs, the abdominal muscles in the front of the belly, and the sternum and upper trapezius, among many others.

Very simply, with healthy diaphragmatic breathing, as you inhale, the diaphragm lowers and the belly and chest expand to take in air; as you exhale, the diaphragm relaxes and compresses air in the chest, allowing for air to be released. This movement is multidirectional in healthy diaphragmatic breathing.

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*Please pause for a moment and try a few practice rounds of diaphragmatic breathing.* Please put the book down and sit in a comfortable, upright position with the spine straight but not rigid. Close your eyes if that is comfortable for you. If you are wearing a tight belt or waistband, please loosen it. Breathe in through the nose and feel the belly expand and the chest rise. To help enhance feeling these physical sensations, place your hands at the belly. Breathe out through the nose and feel the chest gently relax down and the belly move in toward the spine. Breathe in this way for a few cycles, and when you are finished, stretch gently and open your eyes if they are closed and notice how you feel.

To continue the formal meditation practice preparation, after you've practiced breathing, it is useful to begin by sitting in a comfortable posture with your spine straight but not rigid. Sitting in a chair is just fine. You may also like to try sitting on a meditation cushion (*zafu*) with your legs crossed and your knees lower than your hips, resting on the floor, which helps to support a stable posture. This helps with good diaphragmatic breathing, which supports alertness and increases your energy level. If it is comfortable, allow the eyes to be closed as this helps reduce distractions especially when you first start practicing meditation. (However, many meditation teachers we know rightly say that the so-called distractions are part of the meditation.) Bring your attention to your breathing, focusing on where you feel the breath in the body. Notice how you are breathing, without judging it. When you notice that your mind has wandered, whether to your inner critic about how you are practicing, about a meeting later in the day, or anything else, gently yet firmly bring your attention and focus back to the breath. Mind wandering is universal and an essential part of the meditation process. Don't try to get rid of thoughts. Don't try to repress feelings. Don't try to ignore painful thoughts or sensations. As we have described in Chapter 2, the struggle and tension to try to control your experience sets you up for more struggle. Instead, though at first it may seem counterintuitive, allow yourself to be with all this, and notice how all this changes moment to moment. A formal meditation practice that cultivates the awareness of thoughts and feelings is described in more detail at the end of this chapter (see Mindfulness Practice Aid 3.1, "Mindful Sitting With Awareness of Thoughts and Feelings," page 83).



We've heard well-known meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein, the cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society, liken meditating to eating a meal: You don't get nourished by looking at the menu or having the waiter describe the meal. You have to actually eat the food to be nourished. Similarly, with mindfulness, it is not enough to intellectually know about mindfulness: to have read a few books about mindfulness, watched a video, or listened to a podcast. You have to practice, which requires a certain degree of discipline that can be difficult to attain. Too often, when you have a little free time, you think of ways to fill the void: watching TV, shopping, eating, whatever. In fact, a recently published study in *Science* found that individuals will go to great lengths, including administering electric shocks to themselves, to avoid being left alone with their thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

Committing to a formal practice of mindfulness creates the space and time for nonjudgmental awareness in the present moment to emerge. When you do this, you are learning new leadership skills and building cognitive management muscles. These take courage and commitment.

Later in this chapter, we describe important mind states—or “attitudes” of mind—that can be hugely supportive in your practice of mindfulness. School leaders, like many others, are a high-achieving group. Sometimes we hold ourselves to punishingly high standards and then get down on ourselves if we don't live up to unrealistic goals. Mindfulness invites leaders to explore mind states that can sometimes be undervalued in the school context. These include the capacity for self-acceptance, self-love, and self-compassion. We'll discuss these states below, as well as others such as nonstriving, nonjudgment, and equanimity.

We invite you to begin the formal practice of meditation now by trying this practice of mindful sitting with awareness of thoughts and feelings.

## **Mindfulness Practice Aids**

### **Mindfulness Practice Aid 3.1: Mindful Sitting With Awareness of Thoughts and Feelings**

As a way to calm a hyperactive mind and body, we recommend the practice of observing, without immediately reacting to, thoughts (“I'm not good enough”) and feelings (anxiety, fear, worry) as they arise in the moment. While this sounds easy, it's not because of the mind's tendency to jump from thought to thought and feeling to feeling. For this

meditation, as with the other practices, we invite you to visit our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/TheMindfulSchoolLeader](http://www.facebook.com/TheMindfulSchoolLeader) for a free downloadable recording of this mindfulness practice, or record this yourself. It may also be useful to use a timer feature in a mindfulness app listed in Appendix C, online, page 17, to keep track of time and focus on the meditation.

- Sit in a comfortable, dignified posture, with the spine straight but not rigid, in a quiet place, and bring your attention and focus to your breathing.
- Allow your eyes to be open or closed—notice what feels most comfortable.
- Feel the breath come in and go out of your nose and mouth.
- Locate the breath in the body.
- Observe the full sensation of breathing from the beginning of breathing in to the very ending of breathing out, noticing the pause between the in- and out-breaths.
- When you notice that you are lost in thought, become aware of the nature and the quality of your thinking and your emotions. A thought (“I’m not good at this. He/she always . . .”) is not a concrete fact; and yet, at times, you may feel it is.
- Notice any emotions associated with the thought (frustration, boredom, anticipation, etc.).
- Notice how fleeting thoughts are, and see them come and go like leaves floating by on a gentle current of water.
- Let feelings be; don’t try to get rid of them. Instead, label the feelings—excitement, boredom, calm, irritability—and watch how they change, the ebb and flow like the waves of the ocean, and return attention to the breath.
- Do the same with thoughts. Notice how the thoughts come and go, a passing show.
- Do not reject the thought or emotion; do not resist the thought or emotion; do not attach to the thought or emotion. Instead, notice the thought or emotion, and return to awareness of the breath. Don’t lean forward into the next thing, the next moment, and don’t lean back into the past.
- Acknowledge and allow whatever thoughts and emotions may be present in this moment, and notice how they change.
- Practice in this way for two to five minutes, several times daily.
- When you have finished, stretch in any way that is comfortable, and open your eyes if they are closed and notice how you feel.

## Informal Practice of Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be cultivated informally by focusing your attention on your moment-to-moment sensations during everyday, routine activities like brushing your teeth, walking the dog, or taking a shower. With informal mindfulness, you practice being fully present for the activity and using all of our senses. Informal mindfulness is a way of weaving mindfulness in everything you do in your daily life: sitting, standing, walking, lying down, eating, speaking, and listening. In other words, mindfulness is portable and can be practiced at any time throughout the day. Ordinary, everyday tasks like ironing clothes or washing dishes, a lengthy conference call with colleagues, or writing a performance review, when done with mindful awareness, can take on a quality of robust “aliveness.” Everything we have just said about the formal practice of mindfulness can be said about the informal practice of mindfulness.

Many school leaders drive themselves at a pace that ultimately is burnout level and unsustainable. You may feel you have a few options, and may be wondering whether mindfulness requires that you move at an unnaturally slow pace. Mindfulness does not require that you move slowly, though slowing down may support really being present moment to moment. We recall an interview with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh on National Public Radio many years ago. Nhat Hanh was asked by interviewer Terry Gross about how he stayed mindful in the midst of the Vietnam War, with bombs dropping around him. Nhat Hanh replied that he could “run mindfully.” In other words, mindfulness is not about whether you move fast or slow. Instead, it is about the quality of your awareness in the moment. Can you find moments during your crazy busy school day to insert mindful pauses, to notice what is happening in the moment?

Daily practice of informal mindfulness helps you stop, pause, observe, and breathe. You are engaged in life fully to the best of your ability. You are not a bystander to your own life. We recall the very touching words spoken at the end of a weeklong retreat for school executives. A diminutive woman who was struggling with issues of self-esteem spoke up at the closing session: “I don’t want to be late for my own life.”

Living each moment of the day with this level of awakened concentration takes energy. As with the formal practice of meditation, your mind may wander as you engage in the informal practice of

mindfulness. The practice is the same as with formal meditation: acknowledge the thoughts or feelings and accept them as they are without trying to push them away, without condemning yourself. Acknowledge that you are no longer focused on the object of your awareness and then gently yet firmly return your attention to its focus. The object of your focus in informal practice could be any number of things: placing the key into the ignition switch of your car, weeding the garden, baking bread, composing the next email you send. In the informal practice of mindfulness, many practitioners use ordinary everyday objects, like a stop sign or stop light while driving or the phone ringing, as tools to bring back the wandering mind to what is happening here and now, and to remember to stop to pause and breathe.

Formal and informal mindfulness practices are commonly used to cultivate both concentration and insight. When you are mindful, you are attentive and concentrated in what you are doing and in your environment; you are present. Your body and mind align. Your words and action align, and there is a quality of congruence and integrity of values and actions. With this focus and integrity, you are in a better position to choose wisely, and exhibit insight.

### Think About It

Risa, a third-year principal at a rapidly growing charter school in Oakland, California, is a dedicated, deeply thoughtful school leader committed to improving the conditions of teaching and learning and to intensifying professionalism among her teachers. She works 12- to 14-hour days and has said, "This is what the job requires." While she has quickly gained the admiration of her staff and the school community, a constant refrain from central office staff and teachers concerns Risa's frequent habit of jumping from one thing to the next, leading to confusion, frustration, and anxiety among staff and an ever-growing mass of unfinished projects.

She schedules a meeting with us to talk about her leadership and leadership development, including the job's many structural and interpersonal challenges. But the meeting is cut short by another meeting that runs late. Risa says she must stuff ballot envelopes while she talks, so that students can vote on who is most professionally dressed in an upcoming advisory meeting. She stands up behind her desk so that she can stuff envelopes faster. She interrupts the stuffing to take a call from the executive director, then says she has to run to the front of the building to speak to a student who is out of dress code. Could we talk while walking through the hallway?

Can you relate? What kind of neurobiological conditioning is Risa's mind engaged in during her busy work life? What is she "teaching" her brain to do?

Many misconceptions about mindfulness abound. When things finally settled down and we talked with Risa, she asked: “Isn’t mindfulness about not thinking, about having a clear mind, no thoughts?” We recognized that was an important moment to clarify a frequent misunderstanding about the practice of mindfulness. It’s important to recognize that you can meditate and be in a contemplative state even when there are thoughts in the mind. The mind need not be completely still like a clear, still lake to experience a meditative state. Thoughts drift across the mind, much like clouds drifting in a blue sky. We may have an underlying current of mental activity even while we are settling down. The goal is not to get rid of thoughts altogether, but to learn to work *with* one’s mind instead of against it. Next time you become frustrated, try allowing your thoughts to float by, like driftwood on a gentle ocean current.

Jason, our chief financial officer at the beginning of this chapter, started his practice slowly, setting realistic goals for himself: three minutes of sitting meditation, using his mindfulness app to sound once each hour to practice stopping, pausing, and breathing for 30 seconds. As he became more comfortable with these practices, he gradually broadened his practice to include listening to mindfulness CDs on his morning drive into work, as well as viewing online videos and listening to podcasts. He committed to eating mindfully for one minute during lunch. Eventually, he learned about a local meditation group and began attending monthly meditation sessions. Months later, Jason has noticed a difference in his ability to think clearly. He also feels more resilient, even during the most intense budget crunch cycles!

Throughout this book, we will introduce and share with you a variety of informal mindfulness practices: eating, walking, speaking, listening, and lying down. But now let’s turn to helpful mind states or mindful attitudes that support your practice of mindfulness.

## Mindful Attitudes

### Contemplative Mind States

#### STRIVING VERSUS DILIGENCE

“When we meditate for a purpose—to be calm, to gain insight—we are striving, not meditating.”

—John Tarrant, Director and Senior Faculty,  
Pacific Zen Institute, from *A Beautiful Wish* (2013)<sup>10</sup>

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Striving, in the context of mindfulness practice, means forcing or strong-arming yourself to achieve a goal, even if the goal is salutary. Mindfulness is about accepting things as they are in this moment, even if the present moment is difficult, fearful, or anxiety producing. This kind of welcoming mind-set is called nonstriving. With it, there is a quality of acceptance and ease in the body and mind, even if there are specific goals you seek to accomplish, and even if the circumstances are stressful. It does not mean that you lack goals, purpose, and direction, or that things are the way you want them to be. For school leaders, this is a radical shift; it represents a new paradigm, given the heavy emphasis on getting someplace “else” better than now. Please note that we are not also saying that leaders can or should give up purposeful action, direction, commitment, and planning altogether, but suggesting that having a nonstriving attitude toward some things is helpful and calming, and the sign of increasing leader maturity.

Diligence implies persistence and steadfastness but, from the perspective of mindfulness practice, also represents an added dimension of practice. While mindfulness practice should be done with sincerity, to the best of your ability, there is also an important quality of acceptance and tolerance for yourself and others. Diligence is not perfectionism, which the writer Anne Lamott called “the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people.”<sup>11</sup>

Many mindfulness teachers, including Bob Stahl and Wendy Millstine in their book *Calming the Rush of Panic*, describe several attitudes of mindfulness that are essential to training in mindfulness. These mind states are important to be aware of because, as we discussed in Chapter 2, pages 48–49, your thoughts influence how you feel, and they change the very structure of your brain. We believe it is important for educational leaders to experiment with an assortment of meditative approaches in order to engage and strengthen contemplative mind states or attitudes. The capacity for greater openness, as an example of a contemplative mind state, when used in the appropriate context, supports trust building within groups. It does not mean passivity or indifference. Instead, it represents the capacity to maintain balance in the face of shifting and competing demands, accepting what cannot be changed for the moment, and calling on one’s inner resources to stay poised under pressure.

While developing these contemplative mind states is important, we think self-compassion and compassion toward others are at the heart of mindfulness, and there is extensive research on compassion and self-compassion. Kristin Neff, associate professor of human development and culture at the University of Texas at Austin, a noted

expert on self-compassion and one of the first people to operationally define and study it in the academic literature, and author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*,<sup>12</sup> says there isn't much difference between compassion and self-compassion. Neff distinguishes three features of compassion:

1. You notice that someone is suffering, and you feel moved by someone's suffering so that your heart responds to his or her pain;
2. You respond to another's pain with care, warmth, and understanding; and
3. You realize that another person's suffering is part of the shared human experience.

In self-compassion, you extend the same care and understanding to yourself. Neff says that self-criticism, the opposite of self-compassion, triggers the fight-flight-or-freeze response. Obstacles to self-compassion include the belief that self-compassion is self-indulgent, or that it might undermine your motivation to achieve professional goals. However, the ability to understand and connect with others, and to understand and care for yourself, is at the heart of outstanding leadership.

**Practice Pointer—Mind States:  
Developing Attitudes of Mindfulness**

- **Create an Intention.** Intentions have power. An intention helps you define your goals, plans, actions, and vision. Intention also nurtures your internal capacity and resources in service of your deepest calling.
- **Embrace a "Beginner's Mind."** Have a mental posture that is filled with curiosity and wonder.
- **Practice Nonjudgment.** Cultivate impartial observation regarding your experience, not judging or interpreting thoughts and feelings as good or bad, right or wrong, and not showing indifference, either. Instead, notice thoughts, feelings, or sensations in the moment.
- **Practice Allowing and Opening.** Validate things as they are: the good, the not so good. Soften around mental states that feel particularly rigid. Ask yourself: Am I sure?
- **Practice Nonstriving.** Don't try to get to something else, other than where you are now; don't grasp or exhibit aversion to change.

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- **Embrace Equanimity.** Practice feeling a sense of balance and centeredness, which promotes understanding and insight, supporting wisdom.
- **Practice Letting Be.** Allow emotions and feelings to “run their course”; don’t try to change your experience. Let painful emotions be; don’t try to get rid of them. Often the struggle to control or otherwise get rid of what is unpleasant backfires, causing you more anxiety and stress.
- **Practice Self-reliance.** Trust in your own direct experience. Your own life is your best teacher. This doesn’t mean going it alone. Cultivate and cherish meaningful relationships.
- **Practice Balance.** Show steadiness or evenness of mind in the face of change.
- **Practice Self-compassion.** Show kindness toward yourself.<sup>13</sup>

We invite you to select one or more of these mindful mind states and throughout your day and your week practice with it. For example, you may choose to practice allowing and opening. How would that look in your school and home life? How might allowing and opening help you to be a more effective leader?

## How Much Practice Time?

“If you have a daily regimen—exercise, meditation, prayer, sports, music, writing—you’ve learned to do the same thing day after day. You don’t abandon it when it gets boring. You don’t avoid the repetition. You learn to just do it, because you know that the repetition and boredom eventually serve your goal.”

—Margaret Wheatley, from *Perseverance* (2010)<sup>14</sup>

When you first start establishing a mindfulness practice, you may set ambitious goals and quickly become discouraged if you don’t meet them. One of our colleagues began a “formal” practice by lying under her desk twice a day with the door shut, listening to an audio meditation program that arrived from a teacher in New York City every day. The practice took 10 minutes. It is not so important how much time you set aside to practice, whether it is 5, 10, 15, or 20 minutes daily. What is important is to practice faithfully for whatever time you decide to set aside. As you begin to develop your practice, the length of time may organically lengthen as you begin to see and feel positive results. Even in moments when you find the practice

challenging, you may notice that sticking with the practice is helpful. With a formal practice of mindfulness—whether sitting, standing, walking, eating, lying down, speaking, or listening, and so on—it is useful to set aside a special time and place where you can give your wholehearted attention. This can be indoors or outdoors.

Especially when first beginning to explore mindfulness, it is important to establish the conditions for your meditation practice to remain constant: same time, same place, same quiet spot. This consistency supports the body and mind in adopting new habits and experiencing a rhythm of practice; the same time and same place allow you to respond to positive cues, such as having a special space dedicated for the purpose of relaxation, or enjoying a special chair. But, even if this is not possible, please begin anyway. Give up the need to have all the right conditions and begin wherever you are.

#### Practice Pointer

"It is important to know that meditation has little to do with clock time. Five minutes of formal practice can be profound or more so than forty-five minutes. The sincerity of your effort matters far more than elapsed time, since we are really talking about stepping out of minutes and hours and into moments."

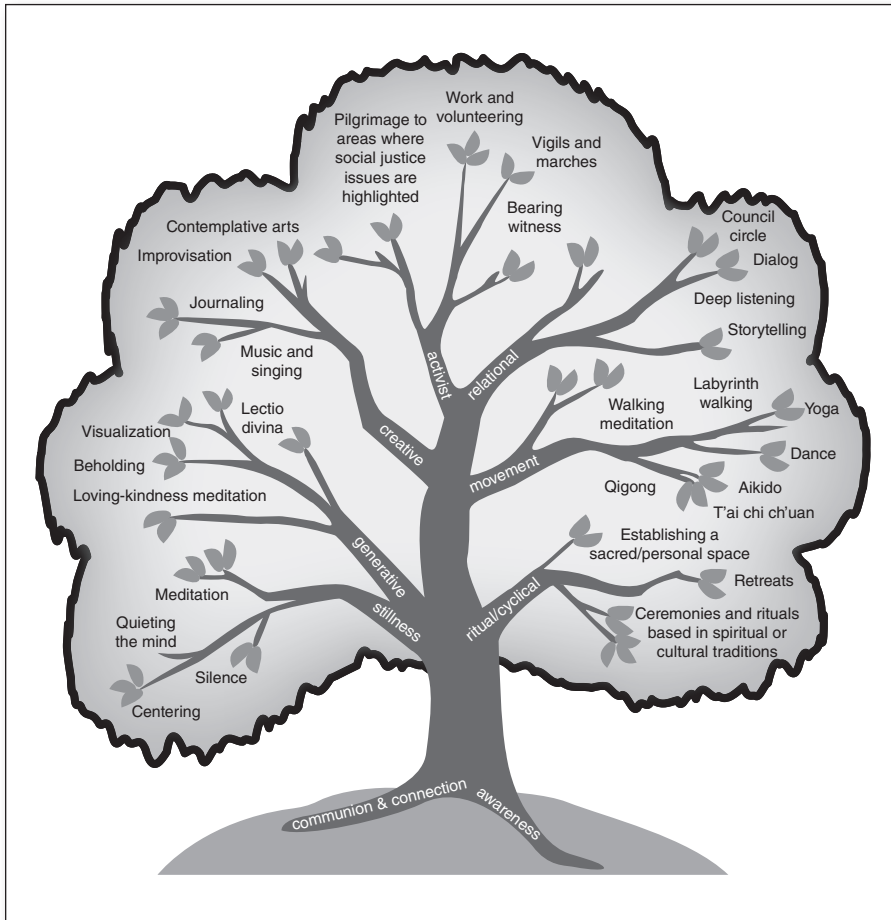
—Jon Kabat-Zinn, from *Wherever You Go There You Are* (1994)<sup>15</sup>

## Practices That Complement Mindfulness

While mindfulness is a foundational practice for school leaders, it's not the only practice we recommend to our clients. The Tree of Contemplative Practices in Figure 3.1 represents an array of contemplative practices compiled by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, whose mission is to transform and to support higher education through the use of contemplative practices. These practices are deeply supportive and complementary to mindfulness in that they support greater mind-body connection, focus, and reflection. They promote a contemplative mind state—mental, emotional, and spiritual qualities of openness, equanimity, acceptance, and gratitude. For the visual learner, practicing visualization from among these practices may be most useful. For the leader who learns best by reading, an approach to calming the mind and balancing the body may be the use of *lectio divina*, or meditative reading. Risa, our principal from Oakland, wanted to become more aware of her physical impulses and not just her mental and emotional impulses. To

address this, we recommended that she develop greater body awareness through yoga and Qigong. Over time, with greater awareness, Risa recognized her habit of self-criticism about her weight and her impulse to reach for comfort food when she was feeling badly about herself.

**Figure 3.1** The Tree of Contemplative Practices



**Source:** Concept and design by Duerr, M.; illustration by Bergman, C. (n.d.). "The Tree of Contemplative Practices." Northampton, MA: The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Reprinted with permission. Retrieved from <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>

## Distraction: The New Normal and the School Leader's Dilemma

Distraction, multitasking, "continuous partial attention," cognitive overload: The educational sector is addicted to multitasking, and

not just because our educational leaders are experiencing more conflicting accountability pressures than at any other time in American history. “Occupations shape people,” wrote Dan C. Lortie in his classic study of the teaching profession, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*,<sup>16</sup> and most educators today have almost no day-to-day socialization or support for sustained attention to their own learning and focus. This fracturing of focus is now coupled with intense performance demands based on the introduction of the Common Core, standards-based grading, and new teacher evaluation systems. It is a blunting brew. “I came into the superintendency wanting to bring reflection and focus to every aspect of my job,” a school leader recently told us. “I feel like I’ve lost that right now.”

Some of the most productive meetings in schools we have observed were held in a school district in New York City in the late 1990s. School leaders had drastically pared down agendas—only one or two topics were allowed per meeting, with unrelenting focus on teaching and learning: no announcements, no facilities talk, no discussions of budgets or schedules. These meetings were a revelation to us. Yet we’ve almost never seen them replicated, because they require so much focus and discipline.

“Attention is the most powerful tool of the human spirit,” observes Linda Stone, who coined the terms *continuous partial attention* and *email apnea* (see Chapter 1, pages 22, 58).<sup>17</sup> Teachers and administrators dislike and feel disrespected by the continuous partial attention they receive from students, yet this is very frequently the attitude they bring to their own learning and thinking about their work. “You need time . . . to find solutions to the dilemmas that face you,” writes Adrian W. Savage in his blog *Slow Leadership*.<sup>18</sup> His book with the same title advocates slowing down to regain work-family balance and because thoughtful decision making should not be rushed. Again, while slowing down may be useful, especially given our overbooked, overworked, and overextended lifestyle, the key is the quality of your attention and awareness. To make real change requires deep, devoted, unconstrained attention.

Distraction is the enemy of change, and multitasking is a roadblock to the satisfaction of focused, sustained attention. The late Clifford Nass, Stanford professor of communications and an expert on human-computer interactions, has said that half the time, we are sidetracked by distraction.<sup>19</sup> Our addiction to “doing” may make us feel engaged, active, and in control, when really we are spinning ever more out of control and moving farther from the real conditions that can change our work.

## Negativity Bias: Part of the School Leader's Dilemma

“Employees are not emotional islands. Rather, they continuously spread their own moods and receive and are influenced by others’ moods. When they work in groups, they literally can catch each others’ emotions like viruses, a phenomenon known as emotional contagion.”

—Wharton@Work, University of Pennsylvania<sup>20</sup>

Distraction and fractured attention isn’t the only part of the school leader’s dilemma. It has become common knowledge in the field of neuroleadership that our brains have a built-in negativity bias. We have a built-in bias toward the negative because our human ancestors once needed to focus on dangers and threats to stay safe and to pass on their genes. This meant being especially attentive to dangers and threats. Over hundreds of years, your brain has evolved to look for the bad and react to it intensely. This bias manifests itself in many ways in the present day. For example, say you have 10 great comments from colleagues about an important project you are working on and one negative comment about the project. Which do you remember at the end of the day, the 10 positive comments or the one negative comment? For most people, the negative comment stays with them. According to Rick Hanson, we overestimate threats and underestimate opportunities and resources. This Hanson says, sensitizes the brain to the negative, making it easier to have more negative experiences, a vicious cycle.<sup>21</sup> The effect of all this, according to Hanson, is that our brains are like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones.<sup>22</sup> What can you do about this? Hanson offers several suggestions in *Hardwiring Happiness*, which include making a conscious effort to pay attention to the many positive moments in your day: savoring a cup of tea or coffee, noticing the way the sunlight reflects off a windowpane, really noticing a smiling face. There are countless moments that pass us by unnoticed and unappreciated. Hanson’s mantra is “Take in the good.”<sup>23</sup> As school leaders, it is important to “take in the good” and to recognize and manage your mood to effectively lead others. This means recognizing when your mood has turned sour and how this might impact your school colleagues and your own effectiveness.

In his book *Primal Leadership*,<sup>24</sup> Daniel Goleman describes the “contagious” nature of a leader’s mood, which can spread to others whether the leader is aware of that mood or not. He also explores the degree to

which a leader's mood can influence the entire outlook of the workplace. Sigal Barsade, an associate professor of management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, has conducted several studies of "emotional contagion"<sup>25</sup> in professional settings and found that a leader's mood does in fact have a dramatic effect on the team. Sour moods have what he describes as a "ripple effect" that affects everyone on the team explicitly and more subtly; even the most subtle emotional cues can affect everyone nearby. Luckily, school leaders can take advantage of emotional contagion in the workplace. School leaders who cultivate a broad repertoire of emotional intelligence skills, and frequently express positive emotions, will have more success at enhancing the performance of the individuals around them. The entire school or organization can benefit from a leader's subtle cues.

### Think About It

#### Attitudes of Mindfulness to Address the Negativity Bias

How often is your negativity bias at work? How might it be affecting your leadership performance? How might the practice of mindfulness be useful in cultivating mindful mind states or mindful attitudes we described earlier in this chapter? Is there a particular mindful mind state that you might be willing to explore to address your negativity bias?

## The Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind

Mind wandering is a universal and inevitable occurrence during mindfulness meditation. Consider this: You're preparing for work, brushing your teeth. Your mind drifts from the sensation of holding the toothbrush and feeling the toothpaste to thoughts about an intensely difficult meeting planned for later that day. Unconsciously and reflexively, you begin to tense the muscles in your neck and upper back. Your thoughts speed up, cascading into one another, anticipating the worst. You finish quickly, feeling the pinch of time. It's no surprise that this diffused and unstable focus impairs an educational leader's performance throughout the day. What's surprising, once we become aware of it, is just how often our attention is drifting like a cork bobbing on a fast-running stream.

In *Focus* Goleman observes that while mind wandering occurs less often when people engage in pleasurable activity, they are still

inclined to think negatively. When you're focused on a particular activity rather than thinking about something else, you're happier.<sup>26</sup> According to Goleman, a greater predictor of happiness is not the activity itself—external events and circumstances—but what you're thinking and whether you're engaging in mind wandering.<sup>27</sup> Goleman cites several commonsense ways of addressing “attention fatigue,” such as spending time in nature, attending a retreat, and having quiet time, time when you unplug from your computers and devices.<sup>28</sup>

An important task for a leader is to bring the wandering mind back to the object of attention—often the breath is used, since it is always present—and to change one's relationship with the running mental commentary of judgments, criticisms, analysis, and planning. A leader should not try to suppress, grasp, or push away the thoughts and emotions. You are not striving to have a different experience. You accept things as they are: the pleasant, the unpleasant, and the neutral. This act in itself for many leaders is a huge step toward self-compassion and well-being.

To deliberately bring the wandering mind back is important for many reasons. The mind is a continuously engaged-in narration, like a TV set with the on switch continually engaged. When you notice that the mind has wandered, you are already back to the present moment, a critically important part of resetting one's focus. As you bring the mind back, you build focus and concentration. You notice where the mind is—in a distressing thought, for example, or noticing sensations in the body, stiffness in the lower back or pain in the upper neck, or whether your breathing has turned into panting, for instance. In this noticing, you'll find a lot of information about your stress level, the state of your well-being. Conversely, you may notice that in this moment, you are well, that you feel a sense of ease in your body and in your mind. You make the connection between what you think and how you feel—connecting the mind and the body. For leaders, this is a powerful form of integration and congruence: Your thoughts and body language align. This signals to others that you are trustworthy and authentic, comfortable in your own skin.

## The Myth of Multitasking

“Multitasking is a myth—what we actually do is task-switching. . . . Out of all the things our mind does, that switching function is the most depleting.”

—Amishi P. Jha, associate professor of psychology,  
University of Miami (2014)<sup>29</sup>



We have increasing scientific evidence that multitasking is a myth—our brains cannot actually handle multiple tasks simultaneously—and it is an untruth that multitaskers have an edge and are more productive. Multitasking is a poor way to manage your time. Multitaskers find it hard to ignore irrelevant information, so they have greater difficulty in remembering things according to the late Clifford Nass and his colleagues at Stanford. Multitaskers do things that they are not supposed to do, which interferes with what they should be doing.<sup>30</sup>

As most of us know, an essential leadership skill is the ability to focus and stay on task, to capture and direct attention for one's self and others. Daniel Goleman notes in *Focus* that continually splitting your attention diminishes concentration and focus.<sup>31</sup>

In Chapter 2 and throughout this book, we discuss the extraordinary demands facing school leaders today, which have contributed to the urgency to multitask. In her book *Real Happiness at Work*, Sharon Salzberg, cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society and a well-known meditation teacher and author, describes attention deficit trait (ADT), a workplace problem caused by constant input from high-tech devices in which workers find that they are not working to their potential, putting in more hours at work and yet being less productive.<sup>32</sup>

### Think About It

Consider your workday. How often do you engage in multitasking? How does this contribute to your work productivity? How might you reduce workplace distractions?

Share your suggestions on our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/TheMindfulSchoolLeader](http://www.facebook.com/TheMindfulSchoolLeader).

## Mindfulness Practice Aid 3.2: Mindful Walking

### *Meditating While Walking Around*

Even if you are like many school leaders and do not have time each day to practice formal mindfulness meditation, you probably do spend time walking around the school building. Here is a practice that you can do while walking to restore a sense of calm and focus.

### *How to Do Mindful Walking*

In mindful walking, you bring your awareness and focus to the entire process of walking. Notice body sensations, shifting weight, balance, and the micromovements of the body as you take a step, noting your breathing and focusing on each step and your environment. Walking mindfully can be practiced in many different occasions: when you are taking a leisurely stroll on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, or when you are walking from your car to the office or walking from one meeting to the next. Even if the purpose of your walking is to get somewhere for an important event, you can enjoy walking in this way. With each step, remind yourself that you are here now. With each step, you feel your breath. With each step, you recognize how you are feeling in the moment. With each step, you connect with the environment—really see the sky, the trees, a chair, or a desk. When you walk in this way, each step becomes a meditation.

Begin with this practice for two to three minutes, and expand the time if you like.

- Calm your body and mind by breathing deeply, in and out of the nose three or four times.
- Become aware of standing, and feel your feet on the ground.
- Even before you move, become aware of the impulse to move.
- As you take a step, become aware of moving your body.
- Feel the heels, balls of the feet, and toes, and observe the contact between the soles of your shoes and the floor.
- Become aware of sensations that you might not ordinarily notice—feel how your body moves, and feel your feet, arms, legs, torso, and facial muscles. Feel the clothes against your skin.
- Be aware of balance and weight shift of the body.
- Stay with the sensory experience of moving, allowing for full attention of each movement to the best of your ability.
- When you notice that your mind has wandered away from awareness of walking, gently and firmly bring your attention back to the sensations of walking and breathing.
- Notice the sounds around you, without getting attached to any one sound.
- Become aware of scents around you, without getting attached to any one scent.
- When you have completed walking, be aware of stopping and standing still.

- Feel your breath.
- When you are finished, stretch gently and notice how you feel.

### *Mindful Leader Practice Connection—Tips for School Leaders*

1. **Focus your attention on this step.** Notice when you are drawn into thinking about “what comes next.” This focus brings you out of your head and away from being continually projected into the future, striving, and goal setting. Know that life can be lived only in the present moment. (Again, we are not saying that leaders should not act purposefully and with direction.)
2. **Change your perspective.** If you tend to walk fast, try walking slowly. When you change your mind, you change your body chemistry. Notice the thoughts and feelings that arise. This practice cultivates self-acceptance.
3. **Take mini-mindfulness moments.** Remember to notice that you are breathing. Pay attention to your surroundings. Notice sights, sounds, and scents. This brings you back to the present moment.
4. **Pause in your walk to say something positive about another person, and then notice how you feel.** It is easy to be kind to people you know and like. Extending kindness to strangers cultivates an open heart and mind, which promotes positive emotions and well-being. Kindness can be as simple as a smile, a simple hello. Kindness is contagious and builds a positive school environment.
5. **Allow yourself to be bored.** As we’ve said previously, often, we are human “doings” rather than human “beings.” Instead of checking your smartphone, texting, or eating the next time you walk around the school building or to and from a meeting, do nothing else. Just walk. Breathe and enjoy this moment of being alive.
6. **Notice your thoughts and then let them be.** Most of our thinking is repetitive and, as we’ve mentioned, tends to be negative, which robs us of our capacity for peace. Instead of trying to get rid of thoughts, resist thoughts, or avoid thoughts, allow the thoughts to be as they are. Name the thought (“I am bored”), and watch it change. Naming the thought objectifies it, diminishing its charge.

7. **Focus your eyes softly.** Even if you have walked the same path a thousand times, look with a beginner's mind, like a child full of awe, curiosity, openness, and wonder. An element of creativity is curiosity and wonder. Openness promotes positive well-being in the mind and body.
8. **Feel and express gratitude.** The feeling and expression of gratitude is linked with positive states of mind and with overall well-being.

### MINDFUL WALKING ON CITY STREETS

While at a mindfulness retreat and course for educators led by Thich Nhat Hanh in Barcelona, Spain, we enjoyed walking mindfully with 600 educators through the city streets!



Mindful walking city streets of Barcelona, Spain, with Thich Nhat Hanh. Photo by Valerie Brown.

## Portraits of Practice

### 3.1 Sophia Isako Wong, (Self-Described) Disabled Writer, Musician, Spiritual Seeker, and Assistant Professor (2003–2009) and Tenured Associate Professor of Philosophy (2010–2013)

Long Island University–Brooklyn

“Mindfulness helped me to accept my disabilities, the severe and chronic pain, the depression. I began to see that I was too burned out to remain effective as a school leader.”

We met Sophia Isako Wong at a mindfulness retreat for people of color at Blue Cliff Monastery in Pine Bush, New York. We were touched by her openness and willingness to speak about her struggle with depression and how mindfulness has made an important contribution to bringing greater happiness in her life.

“Recently, I resigned my tenured teaching position at Long Island University’s Brooklyn campus in New York City. In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I founded and led a campus-wide network for peer mentoring and was a member of the college’s Teaching and Learning Initiative, which strategizes on ways to improve classroom teaching. Many of my students were women and people of color, and first in their families to attend college. As a woman of both Japanese and Chinese heritage, I really related to them, to their struggles and frustrations.

“I suffer from severe pain and chronic fatigue, and have a physical disability that limits my use of both hands and forearms. I can no longer type on a computer keyboard, write with a pen on paper, or lift more than a half-cup of tea. Before I started practicing mindfulness, I viewed myself as a person without disabilities. I saw my chronic pain and fatigue as something to overcome. My role was to help other people. Also, I lived with clinical depression, which I was aware of since my early 20s.

“I was raised to be very discreet about all of this, keeping this all hidden away. In my family background as an East Asian, there is such a strong emphasis on overworking, on being the ‘model minority,’ on making things look perfect. The message from my Japanese and Chinese heritages was ‘Do what is best for the entire community. Put yourself last; others first.’ I felt a lot of shame about the depression, believing that I could avoid the stigma of depression. I thought I could avoid being labeled with a mental illness if I didn’t think about it and did not talk about it.

“Mindfulness helped me to accept my disabilities, the severe and chronic pain, the depression. I began to see that I was too burned out to remain effective as a school leader. Mindfulness helped me discern where to put my energy—what to hold on to and what to let go of. I realized that my particular job—working in this



particular environment—was not the best place for me. I came to accept myself and my illness and then to disclose more of myself to others.

“I have seen many people in similar circumstances seemingly function perfectly and then one day disappear without explanation from the pressures of their work and their life. They resign quietly. Through mindfulness, I became more aware of my feelings, not just physically but mentally and emotionally. I did not want to just walk away, to disappear, to give up on my life.

“Today, my practice informs much of my day, from the time I wake up to the time I settle for bed at night. For example, every morning at home, I begin the day with a little ritual of sitting mindfully and quietly. I listen to a guided meditation, the same one I used to use in the classroom to begin class with my students. It’s interesting. My husband has no formal mindfulness training or practice. However, since I have been doing this little ritual, he now starts his day sitting quietly, drinking a cup of tea. Before, in the morning, he would check his email and read online magazines. I love watching him sipping his tea. When I have time, I prepare and eat a mindful breakfast, mainly in silence.

“I have built many opportunities to practice mindfulness and meditation in my life. For example, I am a member of a local mindfulness meditation community in Queens, New York, and attend weekly sitting meditation practice periods. Also, I go out of town for a three-day silent retreat every two to three months.

“All these practices are grounding in my body and mind. It was through being more aware and having a sense of self-compassion that I was able to be gentle with myself, to be curious about the stiffness and pain in my body, to feel the tension and then to slowly learn to pause and relax.

“When my pain levels skyrocketed, I started using Tibetan bowls in my classroom with students. When I found that the room was too noisy, frenetic, and unfocused, and to soothe myself, I stopped what I was doing. I stopped trying to force things, trying to make the students listen. Even though they were taking college courses, I found that many of them were underprepared to do college-level reading and writing, partly because of the university’s open enrollment policy. I also noticed some of my students behaving in ways that suggested they might have learning disabilities, ADHD [attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder], eating disorders, anxiety, OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder], and other conditions they chose not to disclose.



"To soothe myself and calm the atmosphere, I stopped whatever I was doing in the classroom and then started softly playing the Tibetan bowl. This was an audio and visual cue to the students to settle down, relax, and reset their focus. I found that this really helped me to settle down and helped them to refocus and calm down. In fact, I didn't use any mindfulness practice in the classroom that I had not used regularly at home.

"I taught Intro to Philosophy for first- and second-year students, also two courses I designed, Health Care Ethics and Justice in the Family. My classes were about two-thirds African American and two-thirds female, and many of them were the first generation in their families to attend college. Many of these students worked two to three jobs to make ends meet while going to school. Many of them were also looking after children, grandchildren, or family members with disabilities.

"I asked the students to put the desks in a circle before we listened to a three-minute guided meditation to bring calm and focus into the classroom. I even carried a small wind chime with me around my wrist as I walked through the campus as a way of offering mindfulness to the entire campus. I found the sound healing, and so did many others.

"Today, I feel grounded in my body and my mind. I am speaking out and speaking up for myself. I trust and care for myself. I am very grateful to my mindfulness practice for having created deeper healing and openness in my life."

*Sophia Isako Wong, PhD (Columbia), is a freelance writer, musician, and spiritual seeker. She taught Western European philosophy for 2 years at Columbia University and for 10 years at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University in New York. She maintains a list of mindfulness resources for educators at [www.sophiawong.info/mindfulness](http://www.sophiawong.info/mindfulness).*

### 3.2 Philip Altmann, Former Fourth-Grade Teacher-Leader

Recently retired from Ardtornish Primary School, Adelaide, South Australia

We spoke to Philip Altmann on Skype late one school night. Modestly and haltingly,





Philip described the birth of his meditation practice, his own “awakening,” and the ways in which his practice has influenced him as a teacher, school leader, and person.

Philip, recently retired, was a fourth-grade teacher and teacher-leader at Ardtornish Primary School in Adelaide, South Australia, and had taught for 37 years, mostly in the Australian public school system. He now teaches mindfulness classes at Lake Windemere School in South Australia.

Someone who knew early in his life that he wanted to be a teacher, Philip graduated from the Salisbury College of Advanced Education and took a bachelor of education. Later, he gained a graduate diploma of education in educational counseling from the University of South Australia. Along with studying pedagogy and classroom management, he became interested in “psychosynthesis,” a school of psychological thinking that focuses on the direct experience of self. While studying psychosynthesis, Philip began “breathing meditative exercises,” which he says helped him clear his mind, focus, and relax. He discovered this form of breathing and centering was pleasurable, and says “I found I really enjoyed it.”

#### QUOTES FROM “RATE MY TEACHERS [WORLDWIDE]”

##### FOURTH GRADERS WRITE ABOUT MR. ALTMANN

[We pulled these off the Web before talking with Philip Altmann.]

“He is a great teacher and teaches us mindfulness and is very helpful and helps me with my work”

“Mr. Altmann is the best.”

“Mr. Altmann is the best teacher I have every had, he is strict but fair, i lern a lot”

Then, in the mid 1990s, one of Philip’s friends became a Zen meditation teacher and began offering meditation retreats. Later, Philip discovered the work of Eckhart Tolle and the idea of living vividly in the present moment, from Tolle’s *The Power of Now*.<sup>33</sup>

Philip pursued his contemplative practice largely on his own, and for his own benefit for about a decade, until he took a course on mindfulness and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) through the Openground center in Sydney, Australia ([www.openground.com.au](http://www.openground.com.au)). During that MBSR course, it became clear to Philip that mindfulness practices would be very useful to his students and in his classroom. As

he said thoughtfully, “A door opened, and I took the plunge.” He later attended a Mindful Schools training course in Los Angeles because, as he put it, “I thought it would be helpful to get some formal training in mindful classroom practice techniques.

“I began teaching breathing techniques and meditation techniques to my 10-year-old students, and they were quite receptive to it. I’ve begun to add on some other pieces, things from Martin Seligman’s positive psychology work,<sup>34</sup> and I know students, parents, and my school colleagues have all begun to be influenced.

“Last week, we had our parent-teacher interview night, and I explained some of the curriculum, the research, and the things I am teaching in the classroom regarding mindfulness to my parents. A few said it was the best parent-teacher night they’d ever had, and one parent reported, ‘I don’t know what you’re doing, but yesterday my 10-year-old daughter was stressed out, and I found her sitting on the kitchen floor meditating.’”

Philip says he noticed that his students, the ones he’s taught over the last three years, are “the calmest group of kids we’ve ever had in the school. Teachers and staff really notice that.” He also observed that given Australia’s strict separation of church and state, similar to the United States, it was important to introduce mindfulness as a completely secular activity, “not religious in any way, which it truly isn’t. This is about a way of managing oneself and one’s thoughts.”

Philip continued to describe the effects on his students, and himself, from his evolving mindfulness practice. “What I teach my fourth graders is consciousness of their own bodies, through breathing. We do breathing exercises once or twice a day, depending on how restless they are, how focused they are. ‘Are their minds untidy?’ I ask myself,” and then Philip makes a determination based on this.

“Teaching is a job that requires you to constantly improve. My mindfulness practice has been a huge piece of my improvement and my evolution as a professional. Mindfulness is the water on which the boat floats; it keeps the water of my class calm. I’ve learned to notice my own breath, notice my mind, and this helps me be the teacher and the teacher-leader I wish to be.” Although intensely modest, Philip believes what he teaches has a “ripple effect through the school.” The kids say, “Thank you for teaching us mindfulness.” A student who moved schools, to another state, emailed him to say that learning mindfulness was the best thing they had ever done.

“This is a way for me to be a better person, perform my role in a more effective way. I have learned how to be a happier person, in an

informal way. I listen more, I don't talk as much, and people frequently ask me how I can be so calm."

When I ask Philip if he is interested in teaching mindfulness to larger groups of teachers and school leaders, he says, "I don't know. I'm about to finish my teaching career. I might rather go fishing. But I suspect I might be drawn to it, to training other teachers and leaders. There is a need for other practitioners to learn about how to teach mindfulness to their students to have calmer, more focused classrooms."

*Philip Altmann was formerly a primary classroom teacher in Adelaide, South Australia. He has a bachelor of education (BEd) and a Graduate Diploma of Educational Counselling. He practices and teaches mindfulness to students as well as leading workshops for staff in the personal application and teaching of mindfulness in the classroom. He has completed a mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR) course and trained with Mindful Schools in the United States.*

Please visit us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/TheMindfulSchoolLeader>.