

PREFACE

MY STORY AS AN UNLIKELY MEDITATION TEACHER

One title you could put on my business card is “meditation teacher.” It still feels odd for me to say that out loud because I recall how I originally pursued meditation for a rather youthful, wayward reason: I was trying to impress a girl.

My girlfriend in college was into meditation. I was an economics major and knew next to nothing about meditation. I figured if I meditated, she would think I was cool. So, I started meditating.

She broke up with me two weeks later.

Despite my somewhat superficial undertaking and the unfortunate breakup, I continued to meditate. I didn’t really know what I was doing. I would lie down on my dorm room bed, put my hands on my belly, and think “INHALE . . . EXHALE . . . INHALE . . . EXHALE.” I thought it was weird, but I did it for fifteen minutes a day, three times a week. Within a month, some cool things started to happen.

The first related to sleep. At that point, I was a restless sleeper. It started in adolescence when my mind would race throughout the night. I tried sleep meds, but they made me groggy. Within a few weeks of hand-on-belly “INHALE . . . EXHALE,” I went from waking up every half hour

to only about two or three times a night. I even started having nights when I didn't wake up at all, which, outside of waking up hungover, hadn't happened before.

Another positive shift related to focus. I was going to class, but I wasn't actually *in* class, meaning my body was in one place, but my mind was in another. I really wanted to be focused, but my mind just wandered all over the place. After about a month of meditating, though, I felt like I had this new superpower that some people call "paying attention." With it, I actually started to enjoy learning, my grades improved, I became a better listener, and my mind wasn't so chaotic.

A smile would sometimes creep up on my face. There was a lightness in my step. I felt more peaceful.

Now, I don't want to oversell it. It's not like the clouds parted and all my problems went away, but having struggled with anxiety and depression through adolescence, feeling "good" out of seemingly nowhere was a major development in my life.

Then, something happened that took this from an interesting hobby with perks to becoming an integral part of my life.

My junior year, thirty of us from the economics department visited the New York Stock Exchange to meet with some bigwig hedge fund manager. Everyone said this was *the* guy to meet. We took the eight-hour trip from Allegheny College to Manhattan, where we sat in a conference room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. Eventually, this guy walked in wearing what must have been a \$10,000 suit. He pulled up his slides and gave a two-hour PowerPoint presentation. By the end of it, I felt like my soul had been sucked out of my body. I was bored, uninspired, and completely turned off. I remember my visceral repulsion and thinking, "I don't know what I want to do with my life, but I know for sure I do not want to end up like this guy."

To be fair to him, I have no idea what was causing his misery. He may have had a colonoscopy before he came in the room, so I can't confirm that he was perpetually unhappy. Regardless of what was actually going on, I owe him a thank-you, because that experience made me ask myself, "If that's not what I want, then what is it that I *do* want?"

After spending months with this question, one answer kept coming to the surface: *I want to be happy.*

I still cringe at how trite that sounds. It reeks of every social media post that says “life is all about happiness” or “happiness is a choice,” which turn me off as much as that Wall Street hotshot. But I can’t deny that happiness was my new focus. I became engrossed with one big question: What does it mean to cultivate a happiness that is not solely contingent upon external variables like money, my job title, or things going “well”?

I’m sure you can imagine a young man coming home from college, talking to his father, saying, “Hey, Dad! I know I was going to go into business, but now I want to understand what it means to cultivate a happiness that is not solely contingent upon external variables!”

You might imagine a response like, “Good for you, son. Now, go get a job.”

Fortunately, that’s not how it went down. Instead, one of the great gifts of my life is that my father, a family practice physician on Long Island, had already started studying ways to help patients change their behaviors, improve their health, and become happier. He had been getting frustrated with the direction that health care was going, feeling like he couldn’t serve his patients in the way he sought to from the outset. So, he turned to studying evidence-based modalities for fostering health and well-being in the science of mindfulness meditation—a practice to develop moment-to-moment awareness—and positive psychology, the scientific study of well-being.

When I told him that I was interested in happiness, instead of shutting me down, he encouraged me. And so did my mom, who is a social worker and also has a deep interest in helping people live better lives. They basically said, “People will always want to be happier. There’s new science to help people be happier, so if you pursue this study and cultivate the right skills you might be able to create a career in this.” My dad gave me a book on mindfulness meditation called *Full Catastrophe Living*, by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn—an MIT-trained molecular biologist credited with bringing mindfulness into Western medicine—and *Authentic Happiness*, by Dr. Martin Seligman—a world-renowned psychologist who in 1998

called on the field of psychology to not only focus on what goes wrong in life, but to also focus on what goes right in life. Both books helped me understand the simple idea that happiness is something we can develop with the right tools and training.

At the time, mindfulness caught my attention the most. I think there was something compelling about the prospect of actually being present for my life, as well as having a very clear practice to cultivate that capacity: meditation. I went on my first mindfulness meditation retreat three months later, and by the end of it, I was crying my eyes out in front of 150 people. My brother, who was also on the retreat, still makes fun of me for that moment—snot dripping down my face and onto the microphone, as I whimpered through tears, “There are just . . . so . . . many . . . beautiful . . . people . . . here.” We laugh about it now, but there was something profoundly meaningful in it.

The tears weren’t because I had touched into some really deep suffering; they were because I felt like I was reconnecting to myself and the world around me. I had this new appreciation for my life—colors seemed brighter, food tasted better, I felt more calm, and I started to experience deeper connections with people. I was more present and happy. I hadn’t realized just how much of my life I was missing.

I remember thinking, “If the promise of mindfulness and positive psychology is happiness, and what I’m looking for is happiness, I can’t go wrong following this path further. Even if it means living a modest life, different from what I had thought I wanted, this path will take me to a place of fulfillment. Why not first devote all my focus to understanding what makes an *actually happy life* rather than take a gamble on a different path that may or may not bring me happiness?”

It made so much sense to my twenty-year-old mind. And again, I was lucky that I had the support of my family to pursue this. I know that it’s a privilege to even get to ask the question, let alone pursue it.

So, I started taking psychology, meditation, and yoga classes at Allegheny College. I went on mindfulness teacher training retreats through the Center for Mindfulness at UMass. I traveled back and forth to Duke

Integrative Medicine to become a health coach. I consumed as many books as I could on the topic of well-being. Through all of it, mindfulness meditation continued to stand out to me as the most compelling, and I found my attention getting more and more focused in that direction.

When I graduated college, it was time to make some decisions about next steps. My life had improved drastically during the last year, but I was still nervous about what the best next step forward would be. I had watched some of my peers and elders pursue conventional success. Friends who were a few years older than me had gotten “dream jobs,” and thought they were set for life, only to find within two years that they felt trapped in a place they no longer wanted to be. I witnessed people getting into relationships and marriages, thinking this person would bring them happiness, and then several years later, complaining that the same person was making them miserable. Then there were the people who wanted to make a lot of money, thinking that this was going to make them happy, but once they had it they were still struggling with whatever had plagued them before.

I knew that I, too, could fall into this trap, trying to put all the right puzzle pieces together and thinking, “This is the picture of happiness I always imagined,” only to find out later that I was wrong. I still believed that if I could first cultivate a happiness that was less dependent on external variables, that would be the foundation to build the rest of my life on. I could still strive for all the other things—the house, the car, the relationship, the kids—but I wouldn’t *need* these things to be happy. And if my life someday got flipped on its head, it wouldn’t throw me into the pits of despair, because my happiness resided someplace deeper. This was my logic at the time, at least.

So . . . I decided to separate myself from the things that were currently bringing me happiness—friends, family, status, plans for the future—and see if I could develop a happiness within. I deferred over \$50,000 in student loans and traveled to Burma. There, I lived in silence as a monk for six months in a Buddhist monastery, meditating fourteen-plus hours a day, studying under a teacher named Sayadaw U Pandita—widely

considered one of the greatest (and most intense) living meditation teachers of the time. There was no reading, no listening to music, no speaking, no contact with the outside world. Every day, we woke up at 3:00 a.m. and went to bed at around 9:30 p.m., eating breakfast and lunch before 11:00 a.m. and then fasting till 5:30 a.m. the next day (no dinner). It was often over 100 degrees with no air-conditioning; there were mosquitoes, ants, and spiders everywhere; and the mattresses were so thin you could squeeze them between your fingers and feel the bone on the other side.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done, which might sound like an embellishment when you consider that I was safe, all of my meals were cooked for me, there were no e-mails to respond to, no kids to take care of, and from the outside, it looks like we're just sitting, walking slowly, and doing a whole lot of nothing for days on end. But it was the most intense "nothing" you can imagine.

When all of the distractions and pleasures of your life are stripped away—the smartphone, the music, the news, the friends, the career, the sex (yes, I was celibate; not even masturbation was allowed)—you're left with just yourself. You and yourself, all the time, 24/7. The meditation adds another level of intensity to this by bringing deep awareness to your inner world—your thoughts, emotions, and pains . . . all of it.

Looking in the mirror in this way is hard, but wow, is it incredible what can happen once you do. It's when you can meet yourself fully, turning toward not only your joy and goodness, but also your deeper hurts, and possibly shame, that you can do the work of appreciating, understanding, forgiving, and making peace with yourself. Otherwise, you risk running from yourself. The same problems, distorted thinking, and negative patterns that you've always had persist beneath the surface, never getting resolved, continuing to diminish your happiness and that of those around you. When we bring more awareness to *all* of our experience, not only aspects of ourselves that we are grateful for but aspects we've been hiding from finally get the chance to surface. Even though it can be painful to see and feel some of these parts of ourselves, meeting them with

gentle awareness, as we do in meditation, allows these experiences to start to transform, integrate, or pass entirely.

This process, of being attuned and present to the totality of ourselves, combined with a mind that is compassionate and calm, leads to a very deep sense of peace, as well as an ability to move fluidly with the constantly changing landscape of our lives and the world.

When I returned from Burma, though, I was hit with a stark realization. It was one thing to have peace and contentment in a secluded forest monastery where I could meditate all day with little distraction. It was another thing entirely to maintain this equanimity amid relationships, family dynamics, money struggles, smartphones, the news, and over-scheduled time. The “real world” posed challenges that I did not have to contend with in the monastery. Even though I was significantly better equipped to work with those challenges than before, it was a new landscape for me to navigate.

I decided *this* is where I wanted to do the work—the work of being deeply present in the world we live in, learning how to be human among other humans, and finding real happiness amid the chaos. I wanted to do it here, in the real world, where it’s most difficult and most needed. It is what I’ve committed my life to, and it’s what I hope to help others do as well.

It’s a privilege to be on this journey with you.



INTRODUCTION

FROM “PRESENT” TO “PRESENCE”

I’m sitting in a classroom at the University of Pennsylvania where, for the last four years, I’ve served as an assistant instructor for a graduate program in applied positive psychology. Despite the superficial ideas it may conjure up, positive psychology is not about positive thinking and perpetual smiles; it’s a science devoted to understanding flourishing in individuals, communities, and organizations; that is, it investigates the question of what it means to live well.

On this day, Angela Duckworth, world-renowned researcher and author of *Grit*, is presenting. For those of us in the world of positive psych, this is like going to a Beyoncé concert. Angela Duckworth is a legend. For the lecture, I’m sitting next to my friend Julia, a fellow assistant instructor. Julia and I have one of those unique brother-sister kind of friendships that involves mostly making fun of each other and pretending that we don’t like each other.

(when I put it that way, it sounds more like a dysfunctional marriage than a bond between siblings)

Whatever it is, it works for us, and there's mutual care and love beneath our banter. The thing I most appreciate about our friendship is that we call each other out on our BS.

Julia and I are sitting in the back row of a room of about fifty people, all eager to hear Angela speak. Julia is obsessed with Angela. Like, *obsessed* obsessed. I love Angela, too—seriously, she's incredible—but I've seen her present upward of twenty times at this point, and I have quite a bit of my own work to do at the moment. So, about ten minutes into her talk, I pull out my phone under the table to check some e-mails. As discreet as I try to be, Julia sees my eyes look down and without missing a beat, she quips, "Oh, look at you, Mr. Mindful. You're writing a book about presence, and here you are glued to your phone. Nice!"

(eye roll)

Damn you, Julia.

I've been called out. I give her a snarl, begrudgingly put my phone back in my pocket, and return to the lecture. All the while Julia sits there with her characteristic poise, her upright posture, hands clasped together on the table, and a proud smirk on her face.

Again, damn you, Julia.

Usually, interactions like these get brushed off and do nothing more than add fuel to our playful banter. But this was different. For the next half hour, something stirs inside me that I can't quite put my finger on. It's a frustration from her comment that continues to gnaw at me. It's not because she called me out; I'm used to that. It's not that I feel embarrassed for not walking my walk; I have too many foibles to pretend to be the Buddha. It's something else. As I'm watching this tension build inside me, it finally hits me.

She's missing the point of what I teach. She's missing the point of this book.

Julia's comment reduced my work to an overly simplified, one-dimensional, even commercial idea of presence: "Be in the moment." Which is *part* of what I teach. But the kind of presence I'm interested in is, well . . . bigger.

Before I explain what I mean by that, let's take a look at our current landscape. If you haven't noticed, we are chest deep in the age of "be present." This idea is featured in magazines, plastered on bumper stickers, and I've even seen watches that, instead of telling you the time, just say "be present." Although I still can't understand why you would spend money on a watch that doesn't tell time, I am glad the world is opening up to this idea.

And yet, as it grows, the phrase "be present" has become little more than a platitude imbued with the message:

You should be present for the sake of being present.

Have you noticed this? The idea of "being present" is slowly becoming unquestionably accepted as "good." In the same way that "drink your milk for strong bones" used to be considered obviously good. Or "listen to your elders" was unchallenged wisdom.

My concern is that if we view being present as an endpoint worth pursuing in and of itself—that is, *the* thing that will bring us happiness—we're going to get stuck. Being present makes sense when things are good, but it stops making sense when they're not.

Of course, we want to be present for this lava cake as it oozes into our vanilla ice cream. Of course, we want to be present for our children as they take their first steps, smiling ear to ear. Of course, we want to be present while we're falling in love or watching a fleeting sunset. Those are moments we *want* to be in. But what about moments that are full of pain, stress, trauma, confusion, or grief? What about moments when our partner is yelling at us? What about moments of feeling completely lost in life with no idea of our next step? We usually want *out* of those moments, and being present for them often seems to make the pain *more* intense.

And yet, when the "be present" truism goes unchallenged, and we gleefully place it on our walls next to the "live, laugh, love" decor, these nuances don't get addressed. My fear is that without a deeper understanding of where "being present" is taking us, and the kind of happiness it's cultivating, there will be little motivation to incorporate it into our lives when it doesn't fit our quick-fix goals for happiness, ultimately writing it off as another half-baked personal development fad of the season.

I believe we need a bigger “why” to pull us into the present moment. Something we are working toward, and for which we’re willing to endure some discomfort. And something that will enrich our lives, our relationships, and our communities—an actual way of being that we’re inspired to deepen.

I’m calling this way of being and relating Presence. And I think we’re primed and ready for it.

A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARD PRESENCE

Despite it seeming that more and more people are living with their head in their phones, caught up in chasing the next shiny thing and getting more “likes” on Instagram, I see a parallel storyline: a world that is waking up and wanting something more. And not “more” like a new toy, but “more” like something truer and deeper.

We’re disillusioned by the perfectly staged Instagram pictures and the guise of “having it all together.” We’re tired of being fed messages of “Once you get this or achieve that, you’ll be fulfilled.”

We want honesty. We want love. We want intimacy. We want to connect in the raw, messy, reality of life, not through the look-how-great-my-life-is false covers. The anxiety needed to keep up that shtick is crippling, and it’s catching up to us. Behind each luxury lifestyle is a real person, with real issues, real needs, and a real story. So, when people start living and sharing from that vulnerable place, we’re drawn to it.

The longing for this authenticity, I believe, is a deep, primal, existential craving . . . a hunger . . . no . . . *starvation* for some permission . . . a permission to be our real human selves. Permission to feel hurt. Permission to be confused. Permission to be wrong. Permission to feel joy. Permission to love. Permission to cry. Permission to desire. Permission to care about things, deeply. Permission to not have to maximize every minute. Permission to actually feel just how big and beautiful this complex thing called life is, without grandiose ideas of “mastering it” or “winning.”

This is the first dimension of presence: *softening the walls we put up, the masks we wear, and the judgments we hold that keep us constantly having to be something other than what we are, unable to honor the many parts of what it is to be human.*

But that's not the whole story.

We need something else: We need minds that are equipped to be with the complexity of life. Minds that can stay grounded, centered, and open to the full range of being human—the highs and lows, the twists and turns, the relationships we're enjoying right now and the ones that are challenging us—without having to numb, shut down, or retreat to looking down at our phones or TVs when we feel too burdened or bored.

At the heart of presence is the capacity to stay open to the fullness of ourselves and the world around us. Developing the internal resources to do that not only enables us to live in harmony with our world and relationships therein, but also creates some of the deepest levels of well-being.

Being present is something you do, presence is something you have. Presence is the opposite of missing your life.

WHAT YOU WILL GET FROM THIS BOOK

To summarize, this journey toward *presence* (and really to start living your life more fully) requires two things:

1. Softening the walls that cause us to shut down to life ← LIFE!
That's a big thing.
2. Building the resources to stay open to life ← so we don't shut down and miss it!

Take a moment to ponder those two points. What does it feel like to consider developing them?

Both of those are big endeavors, and even if this doesn't readily appeal to you, I will argue that the journey toward each leads to what you might say you want most:

You want focus? It's in here.

You want intimacy? This, too.

You want to feel less anxious? Yup.

You want to sleep better? Sure.

You want to be more productive? Done.

You want a better relationship with your partner and kids? Got it.

You simply want to enjoy life and more of what it can offer? Even that.

We often try to develop these things in isolation. But you're not going to be able to focus well if you're dealing with unprocessed anger. You won't be able to experience intimacy without letting your guard down and being truly vulnerable. You won't be able to manage your anxiety without first developing a mind that feels safe and equipped to navigate complexity.

The things you most want are extensions of your ability to be integrated—all the parts of you working together—which requires softening the walls that keep us shut down to our life, and building new resources to stay open to life. This takes focus, a settled nervous system, an open mind, creativity, love, compassion, boundaries, acceptance, and more. As we develop our ability to stay open, we nourish these many parts of ourselves, which directly impacts all of our relationships and what we most care about in the world.

A few areas we will look at:

- ✦ How all of us have experienced some degree of trauma, and why we can't talk about presence without acknowledging the way trauma has impacted us
- ✦ How we build internal walls, which I refer to as "the pain box" that used to protect us but now inhibit us from connecting deeply with others and living a meaningful life
- ✦ Why it feels like a risk to be our true selves in the world, and why *safety* (which does not mean comfort) is one of the necessary ingredients to experiencing presence

- ✦ How prematurely portraying presence can actually cause us to bypass the very things we need to meet, and work through, in order to develop presence
- ✦ The four pillars of presence—focus, allowing, curiosity, embodiment—and how practicing them is our key to deepening presence and not missing our life
- ✦ How we can create new behaviors, stop sabotaging our own growth, and let go of the things that hold us back from a fuller life
- ✦ Why meditation doesn't necessarily improve our relationships and communication, and what is really required to create intimacy and connection
- ✦ How to use a relational meditation practice called circling to practice the art of connecting deeply with others

Stop Missing Your Life is for those who sense there is a deeper, more expansive, and more fulfilling way to be in the world. It's about recognizing that all of life has nuance and uncertainty, and in order to thrive we must develop a mind that is equipped to be with this constantly changing landscape.

So, no, I don't think being present for the sake of being present is compelling. But being present for the sake of cultivating *presence*? That's something I can stand behind. And that's what this book is about.

ONE LAST (IMPORTANT) NOTE

This book is different from other books.

I'm sure all authors say that about their book, but there are a few things that make what we're doing here unique.

We're going to come out of the gate being real. The first two chapters discuss "The Trauma of Life" and "The Risk of Being You." These aren't exactly positive and uplifting.

And that's precisely the point.

I want us to acknowledge upfront that being human is not easy. Experiencing all life offers us is often more challenging than avoiding it. Being deeply present is not automatic. If it were, everyone who ever read a personal development book or an article on mindfulness in *Time* magazine would be happy and fulfilled.

It doesn't work that way, and I don't think we're doing a service to anyone when we pretend that it does.

The difficult part of guiding you to deeper presence through a book, however, is that I'm not with you in person—I don't know what your past has been, and I don't know what you're currently going through. Because of this, there's no way for me to specifically tailor these teachings to you, such as moving more slowly if it feels like too much, too soon. And, although I have quite a bit of training in helping people navigate pain and trauma, I am not a doctor, and this book is not purporting to give medical advice.

So, I want us to make an agreement: If at any point something feels too overwhelming, I ask that you prioritize your own intuition and self-care over what I might be suggesting you try. You can take a break from reading, skip sections, or close your eyes for a few moments, and come back when you're ready. If you're working with a therapist, you can also share what practices (such as meditation) you're doing and ask for support.

We're going to have a lot of fun in this book. My teachings are intended to be practical, relatable, playful, and with no shortage of corny jokes. But we are also taking a direct journey into the heart of what is required for real change, growth, and happiness. Sometimes that's easy, and sometimes that's difficult.

Go at your own pace. Trust your instincts. And practice self-care.

I'm already proud of you for making it this far.

Let's begin our journey.