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## MY VIPASSANA EXPERIENCE

I wake up with a start, wondering whether the bell had really gone off or I had merely imagined it. I close my eyes tightly, hoping it's the latter, and wait with bated breath to see if the bell goes off again. *I need more sleep*, I tell myself; *between 8 and 9 hours each night*. Which means I would need to go to bed at a ridiculously early hour—like 8 pm!—to get enough sleep by 4:00 am, which is when wake-up bell goes off at the Vipassana meditation retreat. *I made a mistake by joining the retreat*, I think; *it's not for people like me who need a lot of sleep*.

Before I have the next thought, I hear the bell again, not very loud, but very clear all the same. *Reality has trumped imagination*. The bell gets progressively louder as the volunteer ringing it makes his way down the corridor towards my room. *ting...ting...ting...ting*. The sound evokes a cocktail of emotions in me, all negative. But these emotions are almost immediately supplanted by a distracting thought—the thought that the sound of the bell should start fading, now that the volunteer has passed my room. This expectation is confirmed, and the negative emotions return. I let out a sigh.

I tell myself that I am going to sleep in today. As if to solidify this intention, I turn from lying on my back to lying on my side and press my upper arms against my ears to shut out all noise, including the sounds of other participants getting ready. *Surely, I won't lose much by missing just one meditation session?*, I think. But even as I have this thought, I know that I can't bring myself to miss the morning session. *The early morning sessions are the most precious*, I can hear my friend telling me. Plus, I had promised to myself that I would be at my diligent and open-minded best at the retreat. I had resolved to not just participate in every session, but to follow all the instructions to a T. It would've been hypocritical of me to do anything less; after all, I demand both diligence and open-mindedness from my own students!

But there's a reason why I don't feel up to participating in the meditation session this morning. I hadn't bargained for the way things have gone. Almost everyone who had been to the retreat had reported experiencing intense bliss and joy at some point. Granted, it's only been three days since I've been at the retreat and there are seven more days to go, but surely, I should've had at least a *glimpse* of bliss or joy by now? Not only had I experienced neither, I hadn't even come close. The emotion—if you could call it that—that I had experienced the most was discomfort. Sitting cross-legged for hours on end, I had discovered, is painful. Next to discomfort, the emotion I had experienced the most was anxiety. During the previous day's afternoon session, my heart had, for some inexplicable reason, begun to pound so hard that I feared I was having a heart attack. *Poor guy*, I could hear my friends saying at my funeral, *his end came at a meditation retreat, of all places. What a way to go!*

Thankfully, just as inexplicably as it had arisen, the pounding in my heart had ceased. But the relief from this was short-lived, since something else replaced my pounding heart as source of anxiety: *the thought that the organization running the retreat was a cult*. Once this thought popped into my head, I couldn't get rid of it. Indeed, it got stronger with time. Everything about the retreat seemed to confirm the hypothesis that the organization was a cult. The fact that we weren't allowed to talk to each other or even meet each other's gaze. Surely, that rule was meant to quash any potential uprising from the students? The fact that we weren't allowed to retain our cell phones or laptops. Surely, that was to make sure we were trapped at the retreat with no recourse to outside help? The fact that "they" had full control over what we ate. If not to control our minds through our diets, what purpose did it serve? The fact that we couldn't leave the premises for ten whole days, the fact that the meditation sessions always took place in the same room (very convenient for spraying us with drugs through the air vents)...everything pointed to one, and only one, inescapable conclusion: *the organization running the show was a cult*.

*How could I have not seen this earlier?*

I tried hard to think of everything I knew about the organization. What had I found out again when I googled "dhamma.org," "Vipassana," and "Goenka" (the figurehead of the

organization? But try as hard as I might, I couldn't recall any thing. I wasn't sure if this was because my anxiety was blocking my memory or if, in fact, I hadn't done much due diligence. I concluded, at long last, that the latter was probably closer to the truth. *So typical of me*, I chided myself; *I had decided to join the retreat based on blind trust*.

Or was my decision based on blind trust? I recalled the many conversations that I had had with good friends and acquaintances about the retreat. Several of them, including my good friends Nilesh and Nipun and my colleagues like Dave and Matt, had recommended it to me quite strongly; they had felt that I would really benefit from it. Recalling this made me feel better. Surely *all* of these people would not have recommended the retreat to me if they felt that the organization running it was a cult?

I allowed myself a smile of relief. *Man*, I thought to myself, *how powerful—and sly—the mind could be, making a mountain out of a molehill!* What did Milton say? *The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell and hell of heaven*. He couldn't have hit the nail on the head any better.

But the relief from these thoughts was short-lived. At some point in the middle of the night, I woke up suddenly to the possibility that my friends and colleagues may have been so thoroughly brainwashed by the organization during their retreats that they were no longer in control of their own minds; they had been reduced to zombies, *seemingly normal on the outside, but completely subservient to the organization and its goals on the inside*.

That thought sent a chill down my spine. I spent the rest of the night vacillating wildly between thoughts that confirmed the “cult hypothesis” and those that ruled it out as completely baseless.

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Despite my grogginess and negativity, I drag myself to the meditation hall. It is exactly 4:30 am as I troop in with a handful of other participants. I feel ill-prepared for a 90-minute session of discomfort and potentially anxiety inducing experiences. But I will myself to at least

start the session. I give myself permission to bail if my discomfort or anxiety levels reach unacceptably high levels.

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### **A turning point**

The instructions for the day are different, which is refreshing. Unlike the past three days, when we were asked to focus on the sensations at or around the tip of the nose—a practice called “ana pana” (pronounced aanaa paanaa)—we are being asked today to focus on sensations that arise in other parts of the body, beginning with the face. We are told that the ana pana practice was meant to “sharpen” the mind, to make it capable of noticing subtle and fleeting sensations. This goal had been at least partly achieved in my case—the one good thing that had happened so far.

I had begun the ana pana practice wondering *what* there is to notice at the tip of one’s nose; the area seemed as devoid of activity as a graveyard in the middle of a cold winter’s night. But I was wrong. The process of breathing in and breathing out triggers a set of sensations that makes the tip of the nose as agog with activity as a traffic junction of a major city at rush hour—*providing one had the ability to pay sufficiently close attention to subtle sensations*. Among the first things I notice is that the incoming breaths are a little cooler than the outgoing ones. I also notice that breathing happens predominantly through one (left or right) nostril for a while, before switching to the other. With time, I begin to notice even subtler things; I notice that the incoming and outgoing breaths put some—very subtle—*pressure* on the walls of the nasal passage. I then start to notice something so subtle that it requires a very still mind: *the movement of nasal hair*. I am fascinated by how the tips of the hairs flutter like flags in the wind with each inhalation and exhalation! At one point, when my mind reaches a state called *shamata* in Sanskrit, a state of single-pointed and laser-sharp focus, I feel that I can actually *trace my incoming breath down to my lungs!* The excitement from this discovery jolts me back to “normality” and I am no longer able to notice the subtle sensations.

My mind becomes “monkey- like” again, scattered and agitated, and the pain in my ankles and knees returns with renewed force.

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*What if I manage to focus as intensely on the pain in my ankles and knees today as I focused on my breath the other day?*

I ask myself this question I take my seat. Such an intention is actually quite consistent with perhaps *the* most important tenet of Vipassana, which is to completely accept any and all sensations, without clinging to or avoiding them. Our natural tendency is, of course, to cling to pleasant sensations and to avoid unpleasant ones. Doing so makes adaptive sense. Our body and mind have evolved to be excellent at discerning what’s good for us from what’s bad, and they use sensations and emotions to guide us towards the things that are good for us and away from the things that are bad. This is why “good” things—like nutritious food or fertile land—smell pleasant and look attractive. This is also why “bad” things—like a dangerous bug or rotting food—look and smell aversive. So, at first blush, the idea of disobeying our sensations and emotions, and merely observing them instead, might seem maladaptive. And in many cases, it is. For example, merely observing the pain from holding your hand over hot fire would be maladaptive; the pain is there for a reason: it’s telling you to retract your hand from the fire, and doing so would be adaptive. But in situations in which one is safe—or *should* be safe (like at a meditation retreat)—it’s worthwhile checking out what happens if one were to merely observe one’s sensations and emotions rather than either clinging to or avoiding them.

I realize that I have failed to adhere to this fundamental tenet—of merely observing my sensations and feelings, particularly over the past 12 hours. Far from merely observing my anxiety, for instance, I had pretty much *obsessed* about getting rid of it.

*What if I tried to adhere to the tenet of merely observing my sensations and feelings now?, I ask myself; what if, instead of trying to avoid my anxiety, I observe what it feels like at the level of bodily sensations?*

I resolve to dedicate the meditation session to this objective.

At some point in the next half hour, I hit a turning point in the retreat.

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### **“Bare awareness” versus “mind awareness”**

There is a memory that I retain from way back when, when I was a child of nine or ten. Along with my parents and sister, I am driving in a car from the plains of Guwahati, to Shillong, a town up in the Himalayan hills. This is the first time that I can remember driving up into the mountains, and am surprised by two things. First, I expect that it’s going to get hotter as we go up the hills; my child-like rationale being that we are, after all, getting closer to the sun! The fact that it gets cooler up as we climb up surprises me. The second surprise has to do with clouds. From the plains, the clouds look so thick and opaque that I expect that I won’t be able to see much when I am inside one. But soon, we enter a cloud, and I discover that they are so...transparent and *insubstantial*. So insubstantial, in fact, that I am not sure that we have even entered one; it’s only by checking with the others in the car that I know we are already inside a cloud.

I am reminded of this imagery of the cloud as I observe what pain and anxiety feel like at the level of bodily sensations. From the perspective of the mind, pain and anxiety can seem scary, solid, and permanent. But as soon as one observes them more closely—not from the perspective of the mind, but from the perspective of something that researchers call “bare awareness”—they become insubstantial. At first blush, observing something from the mind may seem quite similar to observing something from “bare awareness,” but the two couldn’t be more different. As I will shortly through the use of another metaphor, observing from the mind involves *commenting* about the object of observation; it involves categorizing (e.g., “I feel anxious”), judging (e.g., “the anxiety I feel is quite intense”), or ruminating (e.g., “it’s ironic that I should feel anxious at a meditation retreat!”). Observing from bare awareness, by contrast, involves *stepping outside the mind*, taking the position of a “mere” witness. That is, bare awareness is not a product of the mind; it is independent of it. If, in the attempt to merely observe something (say, the breath), one’s mind happens to pass a judgment (e.g., “the breath is shallow”)—as it invariably does—then, from the perspective of bare awareness, that

judgment of the mind would be treated like a passing cloud, something that serves as a momentarily distractor that obscures one's focus on the breath. Any subsequent comments and judgments ("I hate it when I get these distracting thoughts!") would, again, be a product of the mind, and thus treated as momentary distractors, rather than of bare awareness.

Bare awareness, in other words, is like a mirror—with no real content of its own, but capable of "holding" everything in its presence all the same. It takes time, patience, and practice to sustain bare awareness for any significant length of time. But that morning at the retreat, I was able to do it—that too without trying too hard; it felt *natural* to observe things from the vantage point of bare awareness. And from that vantage point, the label "pain" seemed entirely inadequate to describe the richness, nuance, subtlety and ever-changing nature of the sensations that I was experiencing in my ankle and knees. The thing that was "pain" to my mind was just a combination of sensations to my bare awareness. Words such as "tingling," "stretching," "pressurizing" and "pulsating" come to mind as descriptors for some of these sensations, but for a vast majority of them, I can think of no words.

At one point, when my mind has fallen so silent that my focus is entirely on the various sensations in my ankle and knees, I realize that the experience no longer seems painful—*even from the perspective of the mind!* It is as if my mind has been silenced into submission by bare awareness and, in the process, the so-called "pain" in my ankle and knees have morphed into something more akin to *intense vibrations* than anything unpleasant or aversive.

In the process of merely observing my pain, in other words, I have arrived at a point where I no longer felt like avoiding it. A similar thing happens when I turn my attention to the bodily sensations associated with what my mind has labeled "anxiety." From the perspective of bare awareness, the anxiety has reduced to various sensations—clamminess in my palms and feet, a slightly faster heart rate, "undulations" (or "butterflies") in my stomach—nothing, in other words, inherently unpleasant. What had previously been an aversive experience was now an interesting and intriguing experience: an orchestra of sensations, completely devoid of venom and sting.

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## Why “bare awareness” mitigates negativity

On that eventful morning at the retreat, I had come to experience, first hand—and in a manner that can never be understood by *thinking* about it—what an impressive number of studies on “mindfulness” have repeatedly shown: the practice of merely observing something, even if the thing being observed is unpleasant, lowers stress by mitigating the emotional intensity of feelings. That is, when you view things from the vantage point of bare awareness, negativity loses its teeth.

Why does this happen? Could it be that when you observe something from bare awareness—as opposed to “mind awareness”—you’re putting a bit of distance between yourself and the emotion? Yes and no. At one level, taking the position of bare awareness does involve observing things as if they were happening to someone else. But if you do it right—that is, if you manage to keep your mind out of it—you realize that observing from bare awareness involves the *opposite* of putting a distance between yourself and the object of your observation. Observing the bodily sensations associated with negative feelings, for example, involves getting in *intimate* touch with these sensations. Indeed, if you manage to keep coax the mind to keep out of the way and become completely “silent,” then you experience something that the English mystic, Douglas Harding, called “heedlessness”—the feeling that *the observer in you and the object of your observation merge and become one*.<sup>1</sup>

This then raises a question: how could it be that getting in intimate touch with the bodily sensations associated a feeling—say, anxiety—*mitigates* the sensation, rather than intensifying it? Shouldn’t one feel *more* anxious if one “becomes one” with the anxiety?

The answer is “no” and the reason for this is that when you observe a negative feeling from bare awareness, you are not stoking and fueling it; rather, you are letting it abate on its own accord. By contrast, when you observe the negative feelings from your mind—which is to say that you categorize, judge, comment, or ruminate about it—you keep it alive for far longer

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<sup>1</sup> For a great description of this feeling of heedlessness, see *Waking Up* by Sam Harris. As Harris notes in the book, the experience of heedlessness is not something that you can experience by thinking about it; rather, thinking about it will likely come in the way of experiencing it.

than would otherwise be the case. To understand how the mind fuels feelings and keeps them alive, it will be useful to consider something that I call the “GATE web.”

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### **The “GATE web” and why “mind-awareness” intensifies negativity**

Imagine that, as you’re reading this sentence, the following thought suddenly pops into your head: “Oh my goodness! It’s 6:00 pm already; I’m going to be late picking my son from daycare!” Typically, when we have such a thought, it triggers another thought (e.g., “I should get more on top of things; I always slip up and never finish things on time!”) This thought, in turn, is likely to trigger an emotion (e.g., shame), which could trigger an action (e.g., slamming the book shut and rushing to the car) or a goal (appeasing one’s son for being late by getting him a snack).

In this example, the original thought (“I’m late”) has triggered a web of consequences involving other thoughts, emotions, actions and goals. If you stopped to think about it, you’d realize that it’s not just this thought, but almost every thought that evokes other thoughts, emotions, actions and goals. So, one way to characterize what constitutes our ordinary, day-to-day, experience is that we are immersed in a web of GATEs—Goals, Actions (or Action-tendencies), Thoughts and Emotions. Or, put differently, our life involves being caught in a web of consequences that life’s experiences, interacting with the GATEs of our mind, weave for us. For instance, if we get shouted at by our boss, we experience negative feelings that in turn trigger negative thoughts that trigger certain actions which trigger other feelings that trigger another set of thoughts or goals that trigger new actions, and so on.

This is, of course, “normal”—in the sense that almost all of us operate this way most of the time. Now, if the web in which we are caught happens to be a good one—for example, when the boss shouts at us, we react in a healthy fashion—then it’s not so bad. But what if our default propensity is to weave a GATE web that’s not healthy? Imagine, for example, that our default response to being criticized by someone is to engage in denial or retribution, rather than, say, an attempt to assess the validity of the criticism in an objective fashion?

Unfortunately, as findings from research on “overthinking” and “rumination” show, and as the findings on “mental chatter” that I shared with you in the Introduction show, many of us are caught in negative, unhealthy GATE webs. This is particularly true when we are confronted with a negative stimulus, like negative news of a terrorist attack. This is the reason why observing something from the perspective of the mind—that is categorizing, judging, commenting or ruminating—intensifies negative feelings, rather than mitigating them.

One way to break an unhealthy GATE web is to replace the “deadly happiness sins” with the “habits of the highly happy.” Doing so makes it more likely that the web triggered by an event or outcome will be more positive than negative. In particular, emotion regulation tactics, which as you may recall from Chapter 4B, includes deploying attention to positive stimuli and re-interpreting things to evoke more positive feelings, are all about replacing counterproductive and negative GATEs with productive, positive, ones. But there’s another way to disrupt a negative GATE web, and this way, which complements adopting the habits of the highly happy, is to practice *mindfulness*. That is, it involves merely observe our feelings from the perspective of bare awareness so that they die a natural death.

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### **Defining mindfulness and bare awareness**

I’ve mentioned the term “mindfulness” and “bare awareness” a few times in this chapter without formally defining them. Hopefully, this hasn’t proven to be too much of an impediment to following along. But before moving forward, it will be useful to define mindfulness more formally, and to gain a sharper understanding this thing called bare awareness.

Mindfulness may be defined as follows: *it is the act of bringing awareness to the object of one’s choosing in a kind and non-judgmental way*. So, mindfulness is not a “plain vanilla” sort of awareness, whereby one reacts to life’s events in a conditioned or preprogrammed sort of way—the way that we would if we blindly obeyed the impulses generated by the GATE web. Rather, it involves “non-judgmental” awareness—awareness without getting caught up by the

mental baggage of the GATE web. Mindfulness also involves being aware in a “kind” way. Although not strictly required, kindness—particularly to oneself—is critical for the practice of mindfulness. This is because sustaining bare awareness is extremely tough, and in attempting to do so, one is likely to fail far more often than one succeeds, especially in the initial stages. For many of us, the default and knee-jerk reaction to failing, as we saw from the work of Professor Kristin Neff in Chapter 2B, is self-flagellation, which triggers negative emotions like shame, anxiety or guilt. These negative feelings, in turn, trigger other negative elements in the GATE, which makes it all the more difficult to sustain bare awareness.

So, that’s why kindness is a very important aspect of mindfulness; without it, sustaining bare awareness would be even harder.

That brings us to the question: exactly what is bare awareness? And how is it different from “mind awareness”?

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### **Explaining “bare awareness” through the analogy of being a fly *in the wall***

Imagine that you’re given the opportunity to be a fly on the wall for any event. Which event would you choose? Would it be for a surreptitious meeting between JFK and Marilyn Monroe? Or would it be for the meeting between Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Mountbatten on the night that India achieved freedom from Great Britain?

Whatever event you choose, the idea of being a fly on the wall is that you are a disinterested observer. Not an *uninterested* observer, but a *disinterested* one. Uninterested means being bored and not interested. Disinterested means being unbiased, neutral. So, one could be disinterestedly interested in something, which is what you would want to be if you were a fly on the wall for a momentous event. That is, you would want to merely observe whatever was going on without adding to or taking away anything from it. Further, as a fly on the wall, you wouldn’t want to attract attention to yourself or change what was happening. In fact, even if you wished to change something—say, for example, you would have liked for JFK to sing “happy birthday” to Marilyn Monroe instead of what actually happened (not that I know

for sure), or say, you would have liked Lord Mountbatten to be dressed like Gandhi when they met—you would know that, as a fly on the wall, you don't have the power to change things. You'd simply have to accept whatever was going on and be thankful for the opportunity to watch the momentous event unfolding.

Now imagine that, instead of being a fly on the wall for an external momentous event, you're a fly *in* the wall—in the wall of your head, to be precise—for an *internal* momentous event. For which internal momentous event, you ask? For the *current* internal momentous event, of course!

Like the fly *on* the wall, as a fly *in* the wall, you wouldn't want to attract attention to yourself, or change anything was happening. The one difference would be that you *could* change things in your head if you wished. For example, if you had the thought, "I am a despicable slob for polishing off a whole tub of ice-cream in 10 minutes flat," you could change the thought to "What do you expect? I'm through a rough patch; anyone in my shoes would've done the same!" But imagine, for a moment, that you are able to control the urge to change things and were thus capable of merely observing what was going on.

In a nutshell, that's what bare awareness is all about; it is the metaphorical equivalent of being the fly in the wall of your head. That is, bare awareness involves observing whatever is going on in your head with great interest and curiosity, but in a non-clingy sort of way. You could, of course, be mindful of something that's going on outside of you as well—like a sunset or a meal. But typically, the practice involves observing an aspect of one's internal environment, such as one's own thoughts or the breath.

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### **A most remarkable feature of mindfulness**

Earlier, I discussed how, although mindfulness involves getting in more intimate touch with the object of one's observation, being mindful of negative feelings mitigates, rather than intensifies, them. This seemingly paradoxical feature of mindfulness is all the more remarkable when you consider what happens when one is mindful of positive feelings. If being mindful of

negative feelings mitigates it, you would think that being mindful of positive feelings would have a parallel effect on positive feelings—that is, mitigate them. But as it turns out, that’s not what happens. Rather, it turns out that *regardless* of what you are feeling, you feel better when you are mindful than when you are not!

In a mega-study involving over 16,000 participants from all parts of the US, researchers Killingsworth and Gilbert examined what happens to people’s happiness level when they are mind-wandering versus not. You could think of “mind-wandering” as roughly the opposite of mindful. When mind-wandering, your mind is all over the place, and isn’t focused on any one thing. (The mind of the guy in the cartoon below, for example, is definitely wandering in some pretty stereotypical ways.)



So, back to the research, what did Killingsworth and Gilbert do? First, they asked participants to download an app on to their phones. The app was programmed to beep at various random times of the day for a whole week. Whenever the app beeped, the participants were instructed to answer three questions. First, they were asked to indicate the activity in which they were engaged when the app beeped. They could select any one among 22 different activities—like sleeping, working, exercising, being stuck in traffic, having sex—that differed in pleasantness. Second, they were asked to indicate whether they were mind-wandering or not, that is, whether their mind was focused on what they were doing or not. Finally, they were to indicate how happy or unhappy they were.

Here's what the findings showed: regardless of whether the activity in which they were engaged was positive or not, people were happier when they were mindful (i.e., not mind wandering) than when they were not. Or, put differently, they found that people are happiest, even when doing something unpleasant, when their mind was in the here and now than when not. This means, that you are *always* better off, from the perspective of enhancing your happiness levels, being mindful than not.

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### **Happiness as our default nature, and the 7<sup>th</sup> deadly happiness sin: ignoring the source within**

I find this feature of mindfulness—that it both mitigates negative feelings *and* magnifies positive ones—to be more than just intriguing. I find it to be a puzzle wrapped in a conundrum. Why? Because, as you may recall, the reason mindfulness mitigates negative feelings is because of the lack of mental activity. So, as mentioned earlier, this suggests that mindfulness should dampen positive feelings too. But, in fact—as we have just seen from findings of Killingsworth and Gilbert—and several other studies confirm, it enhances positivity under all circumstances.

So, mindfulness pulls off a seemingly logically infeasible—perhaps even magical—feat.

What could explain this conundrum?

There appear to be three potential reasons why mindfulness enhances positivity while, simultaneously, mitigating negativity. The first reason has to do with something that I call the “BAA” phenomenon, which is short-hand for Behavior Affects Attitude. We all know that our attitudes affect our behavior. So, for instance, a person who believes that “life is a zero-sum game”—that one can only win if someone else loses—is more likely to seek superiority than one who believes that “life’s pie can be grown.” Likewise, a person who trusts others by default is more likely to be willing to sign-off a deal on a handshake than one who distrusts others by default. What many of us don’t realize, however, is that our behaviors can shape our attitudes too. So, for example, someone who regularly practices gratitude will likely be less likely to chase superiority. Similarly, practicing kindness and compassion will likely mitigate neediness or avoidance. One reason behavior affects attitude is because of something called self-

perception<sup>2</sup>: when we observe that we have behaved a certain way (e.g., compassionately), we search for explanations for that behavior, and conclude that it must be because we have the attitude that's consistent with that behavior. So, in other words, behaving as if we are compassionate (even if we don't feel compassionate at first), eventually leads us to thinking and feeling like a compassionate person. (Almost all of the happiness exercises work on the BAA principle, which is why they are worth trying out even if you don't believe that they will work for you.)

The BAA principle offers one explanation for why mindfulness makes us happy: when we are mindful, we behave *as if* we are happy. To understand what I mean, consider how a happy person behaves. Consider, in particular, that happy people are in the moment, as findings on flow reveal. Specifically, a prominent feature of flow is being in the moment and, as we saw in Chapter 2B, flow enhances enjoyment. Now, consider that a prominent feature of mindfulness, too, is being in the moment. So, it follows—from BAA—that being mindful would make you feel happy. Indeed, one could argue that mindfulness is an even more powerful determinant of happiness than flow. Why? Because, unlike flow, which is dependent on the cooperation of external circumstances—specifically, a match between available and required abilities—mindfulness is less dependent on external circumstances. That is, you could be mindful of an activity (e.g., breathing) for which available ability overwhelms required ability. From the perspective of flow, such situations should evoke boredom and, normally, they do. However, if you can train your mind to be capable of paying attention to subtle and nuanced features of the object of your observation, then it's possible to experience states of absorption just as deep as those evoked in flow. This means that mindfulness is a skill that can be employed across a wider variety of situations than can flow, which makes it more powerful.

Another reason why mindfulness enhances happiness is that practicing it literally changes the brain structure to make it a “happier brain.” Specifically, as I'll elaborate a little more in the next chapter, the practice of mindfulness thickens parts of the brain associated

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<sup>2</sup> See self-perception theory by Bem, Darryl (1972). Cognitive dissonance theory, extended first by Festniger (1964) offers an alternative explanation for BAA.

with well-being (e.g., left pre-frontal cortex), and thins out those parts (e.g., amygdala) associated with worrying and stress.

Of course, it's not entirely clear *why* our brain structures change in response to mindfulness. After all, all mindfulness is, is observing something in a non-judgmental way. That is, at its core, mindfulness is about letting reality play itself out without intervening or controlling it in any way. Why should this generate positive feelings? Consider that letting reality play itself out could just as easily have had a disastrous effect on our brain structures: it could have thinned out parts of the brain associated with well-being and thickened the parts associated with anxiety and depression, leaving us feeling terrified and in a state of panic. The fact that the opposite happens leads me to the third, and rather intriguing, reason why mindfulness enhances happiness: *happiness is our fundamental nature*.

This idea—that, at the most fundamental level, our nature is to be joyful and blissful—is a prevalent theme in some of the world's oldest religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. So, in that sense, the idea is not new. What's new, however, is that the science of mindfulness appears to back this claim. Unsurprisingly therefore, at least some scientists believe that the old wisdom traditions might be on to something. Alan Wallace, a world-renowned expert on mindfulness and author of several books including *Minding Closely* and *Balancing the Mind*, for example, believes that *happiness is the default state of the mind*.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Shauna Shapiro, a professor at Santa Clara University and a researcher who works on mindfulness, believes that “we are of Buddha nature,” meaning that our fundamental nature is one of positivity.

If our fundamental nature is to be happy, then *there is a source of happiness right within us*. This makes the fact that most of us are unaware of this source or don't know how to tap into it a happiness sin—the sin of “ignoring the source within.” The good news is that, thanks to the science of mindfulness, we now have a reliable way of tapping into this source. The bad news, however, is that the tapping into the “source within” is a darned tough thing to do, as we about to find out in the next chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Search Inside Yourself* by Chade Meng Tan, p. 32.

