Section II

Settling the Mind
Saturday Morning • Settling the Mind

In this section of the book, you will listen to more inspiring stories, and learn essential healing skills rarely taught in the conventional medical system.

Recognizing your unique stress reaction and being able to settle your mind and body during the stressful phases of the cancer journey can make a tremendous difference in both your physical and psychological health. When your mind is settled, you are better able to appreciate all the goodness in the world that is both around you and within you.

Practicing mindfulness and meditation, as taught here, will help focus your attention on the practical issues of taking care of yourself, open you to the circle of giving and receiving, and, ultimately, deepen your awareness of the realm of spirit and the greater possibilities of healing.

At our website HealingandCancer.org you can watch full-length videos of the relaxation and visualization exercises, meditation, Qi Gong and Yoga taught at the retreat.
The Power of Mindfulness

Life only unfolds in moments.
The healing power of mindfulness
lies in living each one as fully as we can.
Jon Kabat-Zinn

Saturday morning. There is a positive buzz in the room as people find their way back to the healing circle. Some are excited to catch up with the people they met for the first time the previous evening. Others are still emotionally raw from listening to so many intimate stories all at once.

They are all looking for something they can do that can really make a difference on the cancer journey, something powerful, simple and practical.

Drawing on his experience of observing his own mind during years of meditation practice, Tim starts the first lecture of the day by asking people to consider what they experience during a medical appointment:

What happened in your mind when you first heard “You have cancer” or when your doctor talked about treatment options, side effects and what might happen in the future?

When most people first confront the shock and uncertainty that come with a cancer diagnosis, a flood of thoughts goes through their minds like “Oh my God, what about my family? What am I going to do? What about work and our family finances? How is this going to affect my body? How am I going to tell everyone? I’m going to fight this with everything I’ve got. I can’t believe this is happening to me!” and so on.

The first and most essential skill to learn in working with these racing thoughts and overwhelming emotions is ‘Mindfulness’. The practice of mindfulness has been taught in the contemplative traditions of the East for thousands of years. By introducing mindfulness-based stress reduction, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn popularized the power of mindfulness practice in the west. As a young man, Jon was devoted to his daily meditation practice while working on a Ph.D. in microbiology. Seeing how helpful medita-
tion was for his own wellbeing, he was inspired to offer mindfulness meditation and yoga to people who were suffering from chronic pain and other stress-related illnesses. The Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction Clinic began quietly in the basement of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979.

Patients were referred to Jon’s eight-week program with various medical problems, often when their doctors had nothing else to offer them. Many of these people began to get better. Jon and his colleagues administered pre and post-clinic testing and published their impressive results in respected medical journals. Jon captured the essence of his teaching and the transformative stories of his patients in the best seller “Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness.”

Health care professionals from around the world have attended teaching workshops lead by Jon and the stress reduction program has been replicated in hundreds of hospitals and clinics internationally. The medical literature now contains high-quality articles showing the benefits of mindfulness for every major medical illness, including cancer.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness means deliberately paying attention. To be mindful is to be fully present in the here and now. Mindfulness is the discipline of training your mind to return to its natural alertness, unclouded by judgments, concepts and the confusion that can be caused by clinging to your thoughts. With mindfulness, you can be receptive, inquisitive and tuned into the richness of your senses to appreciate the richness of life.

Perhaps it’s easier to explain mindfulness by showing its opposite. If you notice the nearly constant stream of thoughts going through your mind, you would probably find that much of the time your mind is not focussed on the present. You are either thinking about the past, such as rehashing a conversation from yesterday, or projecting into the future with vague hopes or worries. Your mind is somewhere else.

As an example, have you ever had that experience of driving to work, arriving at your desk, and thinking “How did I get here? I don’t remember any of it: getting into the car, driving, parking, getting out and walking up the stairs.” If this has happened to you, you were not present to the experience of driving because your mind was caught up in the waterfall of thoughts spilling through your head.
Mindfulness also helps us see that our thoughts can separate us from the world around us. The philosopher Gregory Bateson said “The map is not the territory.” To explain this idea, think of planning a romantic trip to France. Looking at a map and reading the travel guide about France would be vague and lifeless compared with the actual experience: walking through a cobblestoned town, hearing the village church bells ringing and dairy cows lowing, smelling lavender on the breeze, tasting the ripe grapes on the vine and the subtle flavours of wine and cheese, taking in the breathtaking views. Your actual trip is a feast of the senses; the map and guidebook are only someone else’s one-dimensional views.

So think about your cancer map. The map here is your thoughts, opinions, and pre-conceived ideas of what is happening. If you focus on the map, you tend to experience a distorted version of reality made by your thoughts. Worrying excessively about cancer and what might happen in the future distorts your ability to be present on your journey. Learning that you don’t always have to believe your thoughts is another important realization that comes with mindfulness practice.

Reconnecting our Minds to our Bodies

Not being mindful and living in our heads can also be harmful to our bodies. Often our minds and bodies are disconnected. The extreme version of disconnection in psychology is called dissociation. Mindfulness shows us that we all dissociate to some degree. When our minds are lost in thoughts and we are not present, we ignore the profound connection to our bodies.

Imagine a young couple with young children who have won a trip to Mexico for two. Their baby sitter quits on them at the last moment and they have no one to mind their children. They decide to go on the trip anyway, convincing themselves that “The kids will be alright. We’ll only leave them for a week. We’ll just get a lot of Cheerios and macaroni and cheese. They can watch TV and play video games. They’ll be fine, right.”

So they go to Mexico for a week and what happens? The house would be a total mess and maybe even burn down. The social workers would probably take the children into safe custody.

This is exactly what most of us do to our bodies. Our mind is on va-
cation, thousands of miles away, and no one is there minding the body. We need to pay attention to the needs of our bodies deliberately, from moment to moment.

Our bodies send us signals when we are thirsty and hungry, when we need exercise, and when we need sleep. We have a relationship with our bodies and, just as in all good relationships, we need to learn to listen. The more we train ourselves to listen, the more our bodies will tell us what to do. Sensitivity grows with time and effort so that we can pick up on more subtle messages guiding us towards health.

What do you do if the little red engine light on your car’s dashboard starts to flash? Most of us take heed of this signal and take our car into a service station or we might look under the hood ourselves. We look deeply into it, to solve the root cause of the problem. By contrast what do we often do if we have a headache or back-pain? Most of us take a pill to make the symptoms go away. This approach is similar to putting a piece of duct-tape over the flashing light in your car so that it won’t distract us while driving. Eventually it will lead to further problems and a breakdown of the system.

With mindfulness practice, we bring our attention back home into the body. Deliberate mindfulness works to repair important feedback loops that can heal patterns of disharmony in the physical systems that tend to go out of balance due to stress and illness. With mindfulness practice we can learn to love our bodies and love ourselves in this moment just as we are. When we do this we soften towards ourselves and natural healing begins to happen at all levels – uniting body, mind and spirit.

*Mindfulness also Means Heart-fullness*

In the east when people refer to mind, they often put their hand on the middle of their chest at the energetic heart center. When we bring mindfulness into our lives, we are also cultivating loving kindness.

Although the practice of mindfulness has been shown, through rigorous science, to have a profound and positive effect on the brain, we are not just talking about what happens in our heads. From a bigger spiritual perspective, ‘Mind’ is really a boundless open system of intelligence that involves the body, the brain, the senses and the whole world perceived by the senses. Sometimes the word ‘heart-fullness’ is actually a better way to convey what we mean by mindfulness because it includes a quality of ‘Heart’: love, connection and gratitude for our world and our life.
Practicing heartfulness means deliberately cultivating your natural capacity to experience love and kindness as a powerful healing presence in your life. The emotional turmoil that comes with a cancer diagnosis often triggers old patterns of self-judgement, fear and negativity. So many of us have a hard time truly accepting and loving ourselves in everyday life, let alone with the added stress of a major illness. With mindfulness we practice acceptance and non-judgement noticing our current state whatever that might be. We begin to notice the mental and emotional patterns that can cause further suffering. This mindful and heartful attention then arouses our natural intelligence and gradually we learn to let these patterns go. With time we also learn to accept and love ourselves just as we are in this very moment. This essential skill is like planting a seed of healing in your heart that grows daily as you nurture it.

Practical Benefits of Mindfulness

There are many practical benefits of practicing heartfulness and mindfulness on the cancer journey. As you practice, your ability to discern is sharpened and this helps you to negotiate the medical system, and choose a healthy lifestyle. Remembering to love yourself softens judgments, helping you to work with stressful situations, difficult thoughts, and disturbing emotions. Mindfulness gradually expands into awareness and arouses innate intelligence which guides the decisions you make, the words you speak, and the actions you take in life. Heartfulness helps you to feel connected in giving and receiving love.

Mindfulness may appear to be a very simple concept, yet to practice it can have a profound effect on every aspect of your life. If you think about it, the only time you actually have to live your life is right now. Only in this very moment can you experience joy, inspiration or compassion. Only in the present moment can you learn, love, heal and grow. With mindfulness, you heighten your awareness of the mystery of life as it unfolds.