

## HEALING THE BODY POLITIC



Everything that we have touched on so far in our explorations of mindfulness on the personal level applies equally well to our behavior in the world as a country and as a species. Look at any event going on today. Do we actually know what is really happening? Or are we merely forming opinions based on liking and disliking, wanting or fearing certain things, getting caught in the surface appearance of things, or imagining what is going on beneath the surface but without actually knowing? Can we apply the non-dual lens of mindful awareness to what is going on in the world and to our interface with it as an integral unit of the body politic that is our society and our country? Can we bring mindfulness to what presents itself to our senses in the form of “the news”? Can we be aware of those events, big and little, that have various degrees of impact sooner or later on our own private and personal lives, but which are often very much once-removed from our direct experience and what is actually occurring in our daily lives; that is, until they are not, and we find we are swept up and powerfully affected by forces we have not fully understood, whether they be primarily economic, social, political, military, environmental, medical, or some complex combination of these, forces that are much larger than we are, and for which our personal concerns and needs are not of primary im-



portance because “much larger issues” are at stake? Can we be orthogonal? Can we be inclusive? Can we be compassionate? Can we be wise? These are our challenges when it comes to the outer world, as with the interior world of our own minds and hearts. Being reflections of each other affords infinite opportunities for shaping them both and being shaped by them. Perhaps here too, as a society, there is every possibility to greet ourselves arriving at our own door and to love again the stranger who was ourself.

We only need to hark back to the old lady/young lady figure, or the Kanizsa triangle to remind us that we can easily see certain aspects of things and not others, or believe strongly in the reality of something that may be more an illusion than an actuality. And those are simple examples compared to the fluxing complexity of issues and situations we face in our lives every day, to say nothing of those that are faced by our leaders in interpreting events and making decisions about establishing priorities and directing our energies. All of us, especially if we do not accord attention to *how* we see and *how* we know, wind up all too often mis-perceiving complex situations and getting attached to an incomplete or partial view, only to suffer for it ourselves and also often create a good deal of suffering in others as a consequence if we are adamantly attached to an interpretation of events or possibilities which may be true only to a degree. Might not our institutions and our politics become healthier and wiser if we all engaged even a little bit in expanding the field of our awareness inwardly and outwardly to entertain the possible validity, at least to a degree, of ways of knowing, seeing, and being that may be profoundly different from our own?

Whatever opinions you hold or don't hold, whether they be political, religious, economic, historical, or social, or just positions you take within your family about the various issues that come up daily around raising children and keeping the home together, you might want to consider for a moment all those who hold a diametrically opposite opinion. Are they all completely deluded? Are they bad people? Is there a tendency in yourself to dehumanize them, to stereotype them, even to demonize them? Is there a tendency to generalize about a “them” and make sweeping statements about them and their character or intelligence or even their humanity? If



we start paying attention in this way, we may find that this can happen even with the people we live with and love the most. That is why family is usually such a wonderful laboratory for honing greater awareness, compassion, and wisdom, and actually embodying them in our everyday lives. For when we find ourselves clinging strongly to the certainty that we are right and others are wrong, even if it is true to a large degree and the stakes are very very high (or at least we think they are and are attached to our view of it), then our very lenses of perception can become distorted, and we risk falling into delusion and doing some degree of violence to what is and to the truth of things and of the relationships we are in, far beyond the “objective” validity of one position or another. When I examine my own mind, I have to recognize that I am subject to all those tendencies every day, and have to watch out for them to not become deluded, and I imagine I am not unique in that regard.

If there is even a bit of that going on—and the same is, in all likelihood, going on for those who hold opinions opposite to your own, when they think about you and those who see things “your way”—is this situation even remotely likely to capture what is really going on, and the potential for the recognition of at least some common ground and shared interests and a greater truth? Or has the way we are seeing and thinking so polarized the situation or topic or issue and so blinded us that it is no longer really possible to see and know things as they actually are, nor perhaps even to remember that we don’t know, and that there is power in that not knowing and not merely ignorance, a power beyond building walls, or pointing fingers, or going to war on pretext?

Knowing that we don’t know, or only know something to a degree, can provide huge openings and orthogonal emergences to arise in our minds and hearts that would not be otherwise possible. Remember what Soen Sa Nim would do with anyone who was clinging to any position. “If you say this is a stick, or a watch, or a table, a good situation, or a bad situation, or the truth, I will hit you thirty times. And if you say this is not a stick, or a watch, or a table, a good situation, or a bad situation, or the truth, I will hit you thirty times. What can you do?”

Remember, he is actually reminding us to wake up from this or that,



black or white, good or bad thinking. It is an act of compassion to put us in this quandary, or to point out that we actually get there all the time on our very own.

Yes, what can you do? What can we do? And can't we call a spade a spade? What about genocide, murder, exploitation, corporate crimes, political corruption, patterns of deceit? Yes, of course, we can, and sometimes, morally, we must call a spade a spade, when you actually know it is a spade. But if you know it, and you are really seeing it and not clinging to your idea of "spade," then you will see instantly that calling it a spade may not be the most important thing, especially if that is all you do. There may be something more appropriate to the situation than putting forth a concept or a name, however important standing up and accurately naming what is happening is, and it is extremely important. There may be the necessity to act, and act wisely, to find some way you can be in relationship with what is unfolding, and something you can actually *do* that goes beyond naming, or agreeing with others who are naming.

If it were literally a spade, then maybe picking it up and beginning to dig might be appropriate. Acting to embody our understanding in any moment is the best we can do in any moment, and would approach wisdom incrementally if we were willing to learn from the consequences of our actions. Everything else may devolve rapidly into empty talk. The politician running for office says it is a spade, and something has to be done about it. Once in office, why is it that his or her view of its reality, and importance, can alter so radically and so rapidly? Metaphorically speaking, is it still a spade, or was it just a spade for convenience in that moment, as a stepping-stone to something else?

Paraphrasing Bertrand Russell, human beings have learned to fly in the air and descend underneath the sea. But we haven't yet learned to live on the land. The last frontier for us is not the oceans, nor outer space, as interesting and enticing as they may be. The last and most important and most urgent frontier for us is the human mind. It is knowing ourselves, and most importantly, from the inside! The last frontier is really consciousness itself. It is the coming together of everything we know, of all the wisdom traditions of all the peoples of this planet, including all our different ways of knowing,



through science, through the arts, through native traditions, through spiritual inquiry. This is the challenge of our era and of our species, now that we are so networked together throughout the world in so many ways, so that what happens in Baghdad or Kuala Lumpur, or Mexico City or Washington, or Kabul, or Beijing or anywhere else can wind up deeply affecting people's lives the next day or the next month virtually anywhere and even everywhere else in the world. It is not suggesting that we bury our head somewhere and only preoccupy ourselves with our own self-interests and try to maximize our own safety or happiness or gain. Rather, our entire exploration of mindfulness and the possibilities of healing our lives and the world is offering us a way to be in the world that does not get so caught up in minute preoccupations with individual trees and branches, as important as that level of understanding may be. It is reminding us to look around at the forest itself from time to time and know it directly in its fullness, without the distorting lenses of narrowly conceived and unexamined thoughts and opinions, usually driven by wanting, or aversion, or delusion.

Not to say that there is not a place for opinions and strongly held views. Only that the closer those views can be to the inter-embeddedness of things, the better our ability to interface with the world and with our work and with our longing and our calling in ways that will contribute to greater wisdom and harmony, as opposed to greater strife and misery and insecurity.

Now, more than ever before, on virtually all fronts, we have a priceless opportunity and the wherewithal, both individually and collectively, not to get caught up and blinded by our destructive emotions, but rather to come to our senses. In doing so, perhaps we will wake up to and recognize the dis-ease that has become increasingly a chronic condition of our world and species over the past ten thousand years of human history, and take practical steps to envision and nurture new possibilities for balance and harmony in how we conduct our lives as individuals and our diplomacy among nations, ways that minimize our destructive tendencies, which only feed dis-ease and alienation, inwardly and outwardly, and maximize our capacity for mobilizing and embodying wisdom and compassion in the choices we make from moment to moment about how we need to be living, and what we might be doing with our creative energies to heal the body politic.



Throughout this book, we have been exploring the metaphors of disease and dis-ease in attempting to define and understand, from many different angles, the deep nature of our disquietude as human beings, and why so much of the time we feel so out of joint, so much in need of something we sense is missing in order to feel complete, even though, materially and in terms of education, we are far better off in developed countries than the vast majority of human beings have been in any generations preceding ours. If a relatively high standard of living, material wealth and abundance, and even better health and health care than ever before in history, are not sufficient for us to be happy, contented, and inwardly at peace, what might still be missing, and what would it take for us to appreciate who we are and what we already have? And what is our discontent telling us about ourselves as a country and as a species that we might benefit from knowing? How might we cease being strangers to ourselves and come home to who we actually are in our fullness? How might we know and embody our true nature and our true potential?

Looking inwardly for a moment, we might ask ourselves, actually what *would* it take for us as individuals within the body politic to feel whole and happy right now, when, in fact, as we have seen over and over again, we are undeniably whole and complete in this very moment. One thing that it might take is to expand out beyond living so much of the time in our heads and caught up in our thoughts and desires and the turbulence of reactive emotions, endlessly attempting to arrange external causes and conditions that will, we always hope, finally bring about a better situation in which we believe we will finally be able to be happy and at peace. Underneath even that, we might recognize our habitual, seductive, but ultimately inaccurate preoccupation with a persistent but amazingly ungraspable sense of a solid, enduring, unchanging personal self. That elusive solid self feeling is an illusion, yet it continually mesmerizes us and drives us here and there in pursuit of its seemingly endless needs and wants. When we wake up for brief moments to the mystery of who we are, that self-construct is seen to be so much smaller than the full extent of our being. This is as true for the country and for the world as it is for



us as individuals. In the end, these insights all stem from cultivating greater moment-to-moment intimacy and familiarity with our own minds and bodies, and with realizing the interconnectedness of things beyond our perceptions of them being separate and disconnected, and beyond our delusion-generating attachment to their being under our tight control and for our own narrow benefit.

Our wholeness and interdependence can actually be verified here and now, in any and every moment through waking up and realizing that, in the deepest of ways, we and the world we inhabit are not two. As we have seen, there are any number of ways to cultivate and nurture this wakefulness through the systematic practice of mindfulness. All apply equally well in taking on a more universal awareness of and responsibility for the health of the body politic in any and every sense of it.

Through the practice of looking deeply into ourselves, we have been cultivating greater familiarity and intimacy with what might possibly be the ultimate, root causes of our disquietude and our suffering, the dynamics of greed, hatred, and unawareness as mind states, and how many different ways they have of manifesting in the world. Perhaps we have come to see or sense to some extent how we might, each one of us in our own way, more effectively contribute to reducing suffering, mitigating suffering, and transcending suffering, our own and that of others, and to extinguishing the human *causes* of suffering at their root, inwardly and outwardly, wherever possible.

Perhaps it may have also dawned on us that we cannot be completely healthy or at peace in our own private lives, inhabiting a world that itself is diseased and so much not at peace, in which so much of the suffering is inflicted by human beings upon one another, directly and indirectly, and upon the Earth, primarily as a consequence of our lack of understanding of interconnectedness and often, it seems, a lack of caring even when we “know better.” Of course, this is endemically human behavior, but it too can be worked with if we are willing to do a certain kind of inner work as individuals and as a society. Even endemic small-mindedness is amenable to change if we come to see the potential value in learning to live differently, with a greater awareness of the interdependency and interembed-



something. It is an invitation to engage in mindfully investigating the very process by which we form opinions and then make a strong link between identifying who we think we are and those very opinions.

It is also an invitation to begin imagining new metaphors for understanding ourselves and our place in the world, and for honoring the very real complexities of the “real world” without losing sight of the fact that the minds of human beings have in large measure created, you could say fabricated and proliferated, many of the problems we now face as a country and as a species, and that, like everything else, they are not as permanent, enduring, or as real as our minds make them out to be. This insight alone may afford us new and imaginative ways of dealing with what often seem like intractable situations and enmities. It may be worth reminding ourselves here of those two comments we cited earlier from Albert Einstein. In the first, he said, “Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.” In the second, he said, “The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them.” Both of these observations are worth keeping in mind as we cultivate mindfulness in full face of the human condition.

We might say that the human mind has fabricated the very notion of the “real world” along with the constraints we usually impose on ourselves in thinking about it and about what might even be possible in the same way it constructs a reified notion of a permanent self. If we examine and become acutely aware of how our minds perceive, apprehend, and conceive of both ourselves and what we call the world, then many of those self-imposed, illusory constraints may dissolve as we find new ways to act based on this rotation in consciousness.

The specifics will come out of our ongoing practice in the conduct of our day-to-day lives. The mentality that merely wants to fix things and set everything straight by imposing some special “solution” or reform that we believe in very strongly is not likely to be entirely helpful by itself, however important such efforts are. A more global healing of our ways of seeing and being is also needed. This requires a broad-based rotation in consciousness on the part of large numbers of people, all of us, really, and a willingness to recognize things as they are and work with them in imaginative orthogonal



ways, making use of all the vast resources and expertise available to us, inwardly and outwardly. Rather than hoping for some special “savior” in the form of a charismatic leader who will “do it for us” or “show us the way,” perhaps we have reached the point in our evolution where we need to move beyond a history governed by heroic and galvanizing personalities, no matter how larger-than-life they may be, on the good side or the nefarious side, and find ways to let the responsibility and the leadership be more distributive and cooperative, just as the heart and the liver and the brain do not fight among themselves to dominate the organism, but work together for the seamless well-being of the whole, as do all the trillions of individual cells which together comprise a healthy body.

Faced with an underlying possible root diagnosis of dukkha, which we might alternatively call “world stress,” and with an understanding of some of the underlying causes for it, if there is a prescription here for a treatment for our current situation as a species, it is a generic one: that, strange as it may sound, whoever is touched by the dilemma we find ourselves facing as a species and as a society engage in the cultivation of greater mindfulness, as a practice, as a way of being; that we bring it gracefully and gently to every aspect of our lives and work, without knowing or having to know what will come of it, whoever we are, whatever our work and our calling; and that we practice it and embody it as best we can, individually and collectively, as if our lives and our very world depended on it.

How we choose from moment to moment to live and to act influences the world in small ways that may be disproportionately beneficial, especially if the motivation our choices come out of is wholesome, i.e., healthy, and the actions themselves wise and compassionate. In this way, the healing of the body politic can evolve without rigid control or direction, through the independent and interdependent agency and efforts of many different people and institutions, with many different and rich perspectives, aims, and interests, but with a common and potentially unifying interest as well, that of the greater well-being of the world. At its best, this is what politics both furthers and protects.

Of course, not everyone is going to take up the practice of mindful-



ness, either in the near term or the long term. But bit by bit, as has been happening for years, through many different improbable or even heretofore unimaginable avenues, those who are choosing this path to greater sanity and wisdom are growing, both in number and in potential influence. In the next few generations, say in the next several hundred years, as well as, for us, in this very moment, we have a remarkable opportunity—as individual human beings, as a nation, and as a species—to realize the full potential of our creativity and our ability to see clearly, and put them to work in the service of wholeness and healing, and of what we all claim we most desire and would give us the greatest chance for feeling secure and happy: justice, compassion, fairness, freedom from oppression, equal opportunities for living fully and well, peace, goodwill, and love, and not just for ourselves or those we identify with, but for all human beings, and for all sentient beings, with whom we are inextricably linked in so many life-giving ways.

We are sitting atop a unique moment in history unfolding, a major tipping point. This time we are in provides singular opportunities that can be seized and made use of with every breath. There is only one way to do that. It is to embody, in our lives as they are unfolding here and now, our deepest values and our understanding of what is most important—and share it with each other, trusting that such embodied actions, on even the smallest of scales, will entrain the world over time into greater wisdom and health and sanity.

That is one hell of a practice. But again, for each one of us, what else is there worth doing with our one wild and precious life?