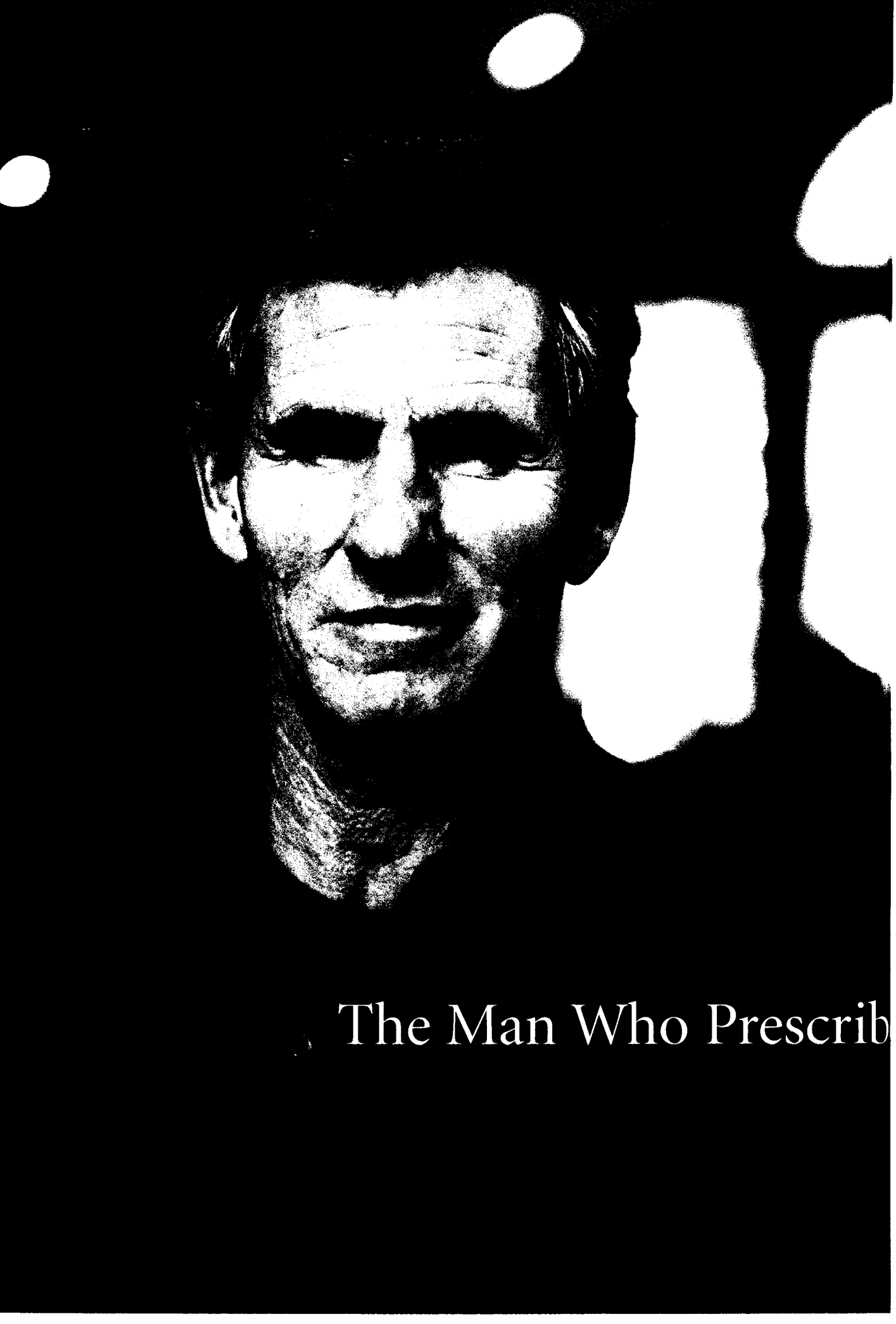
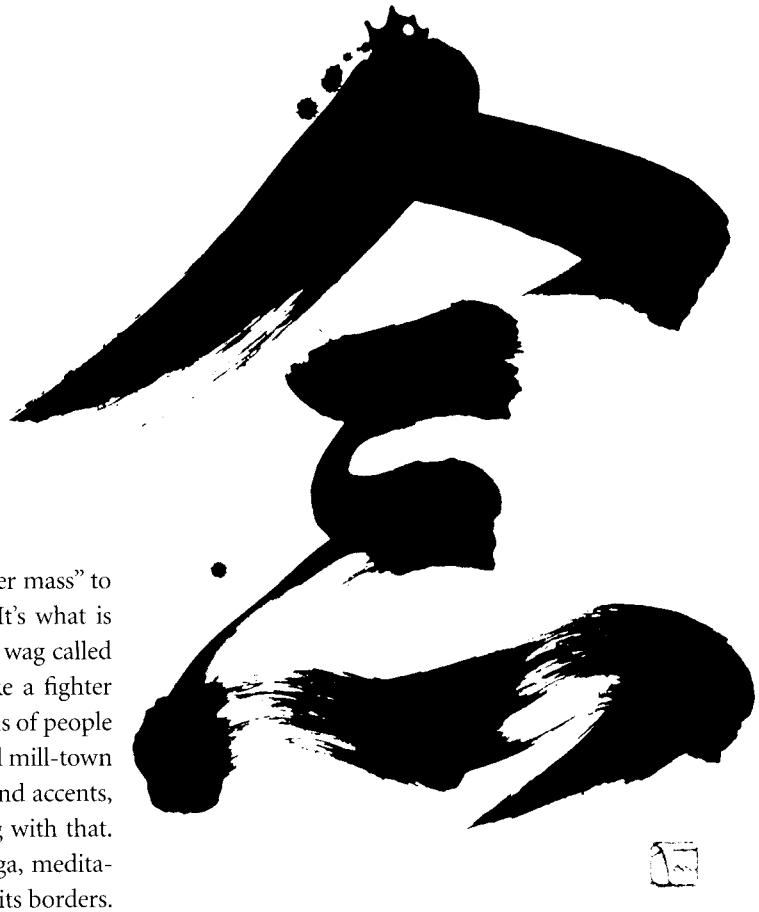


The Man Who Prescrib



Above: Mindfulness
Calligraphy by Kaz Tanahashi

the Medicine of the Moment

BARRY BOYCE profiles Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., whose mindfulness-based stress reduction program has brought the benefits of meditation practice to tens of thousands of suffering and stressed-out people. Now, in his most ambitious book, this unique scientist-meditator turns his attention to the human condition itself.

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS—that's "wooster mass" to those who know it—is not for the faint of heart. It's what is sometimes called a "post-industrial city." One nasty wag called it "New England's utility closet." But it's proud, like a fighter always making a comeback, a place where generations of people worked very, very hard in that staunch, New England mill-town sort of way. It is a place of strong ethnic identities and accents, and the tensions and attitudes that can come along with that. None of the top-ten Zip Codes for flyers about yoga, meditation, chi gong and feng shui would be found within its borders. And this is where Jon Kabat-Zinn started mindfulness-based stress reduction. Why? Not because he was a crusader, but simply because he was there and people were in pain.

The story has been told many times of how Kabat-Zinn ended up teaching people in a hospital function-room to eat a raisin as if for the first time, to scan each and every area of their body, to stretch, turn, twist, breathe, walk, and above all pay attention to moment after moment after moment. The son of an immunologist, he had trained at MIT as a molecular biologist but also practiced yoga. He was inspired by a talk

Participants at a mindfulness-based stress reduction workshop in Worcester, Massachusetts.

at MIT by Philip Kapleau Roshi and went on to become a student of the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn. When he took some time off from his job in the gross anatomy lab at the UMass Medical Center to do a meditation retreat, it occurred to him while practicing that patients in a hospital could use some mindfulness. It was one of those so obvious but so brand-new realizations that happens to scientists in labs every day: take the mindfulness to the hospital because that's where the pain is.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction was born in 1979. In the early years, it was a modest program. Then, in 1990, Kabat-Zinn put out his first book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, which contained detailed descriptions and instructions on all facets of the program he had developed in his stress-reduction clinic at UMass. It spurred a lot of interest, and then in 1993, Bill Moyers' documentary *Healing and the Mind* featured ordinary folks practicing at the clinic, and inquiries soared. So it was no surprise when Kabat-Zinn's second book, the shorter and more poetic *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, became an immediate bestseller in 1994. This year, both books have been re-released, along with the publication of his new work, *Coming to Our Senses*. There are also scores of papers and empirical studies demonstrating the program's benefits; a handful of other books on related topics, including one on parenting that he and his wife Myla wrote together; and three sets of tapes to guide students and instructors through the program.

An umbrella organization exists to chart the course of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), called the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society. However, it has little to no inclination toward proprietary control and doesn't keep scrupulous track of how many people are teaching the techniques in how many programs. Suffice it to say that there are hundreds of MBSR programs across the world, thousands of teache tens of thousands of people trained, and billions of moments practice logged in. Somebody somewhere is learning it right no

America is notorious for churning out Elmer Gantrys, peop with a cure-all for everything, who end up on talk shows a become larger than life. Jon Kabat-Zinn is modest. He's t much of a scientist to rely on one perspective. He's too interes ed in the work and the world to take his own story too persona ly. He says, "I could concoct this story a thousand different wa depending on my mood and what I want to convey, and no would be absolutely true. A quantum particle doesn't have o path; it has a probability for an infinite number of paths."

When asked what his innermost motivation has been, he w tell you it is "a love of science." He goes on to say, "When scien is at its best it asks deep questions about the nature of reality a then puts them to the test." In *Coming to Our Senses*, he posits t Buddha as a great scientist and also unearths several of Albe Einstein's more Buddha-like pronouncements, such as "the se aration between past, present, and future has only the meani of an illusion, albeit a tenacious one."

Like any good scientist, Kabat-Zinn is a preternatural networ er. More than that, he regards people themselves and all of exper ence as a centerless network. At the heart of his new book is t notion of -scapes, as in soundscapes, touchscapes, airscap smellscapes, and so on. Experience is just that, many interminglin sensory-scapes, where an exhilarating and terrific nowness reig but where nothing to take personally can be found.

The message of his book, delivered with more passion and greater length than he has done before, is that our interconnect network of networks needs attention. The soundscape is in dang from noise pollution and bloviated rhetoric, the airscape is endan gered by noxious fumes and claustrophobic spaces, and the min scape is endangered by our inability to stay with one thing at time. We talked together for close to three hours and a new ima

---

BARRY BOYCE is senior editor and staff writer for the Shambhala Sun. *His most recent feature article was a profile of Elaine Pagels in the November 2004 issue.*

struck his fancy: these -scapes that make up our experience are like national parks, precious resources that must be attended to, with mindfulness of what we are making collectively. Being mindful is not only about one person knowing how to eat a raisin.

AND YET IT IS. The planet is not going to up and become mindful through spontaneous combustion. It happens when one at a time people notice that it is possible to step into what one stress-reduction participant, Sid Hall, calls "the childlike world, where you have that vivid sense of the world around you that you learned to forget and push away." In the early pages of his first book, Kabat-Zinn lovingly introduced a cast of everyday characters—a truck driver, a nurse, a wrestler—and portrayed how they came in pain and began to emerge as more themselves over the course of a few weeks of paying simple attention. The pain was there, but so were they. These are not miracle-worker stories. There is, as Kabat-Zinn tells me, "no ultimate attainment. We have a koan, a journey with no arriving."

The core program of mindfulness-based stress reduction consists of eight weekly two-hour classes and one daylong class. It includes guided instruction in mindfulness meditation and "mindful yoga practices," exercises to "enhance awareness in everyday life," daily mindfulness assignments lasting from forty-five minutes to an hour, and methods for improving communication. The program strongly emphasizes working with the body: body scanning and yoga exercises are thought to offer "full-body conditioning" to strengthen the body and release muscular tension. To help participants continue practicing, they take away two guided mindfulness tapes and a workbook.

The schedule may be adapted to differing conditions but the fundamental curriculum is a constant. The program is promoted to help people with a wide variety of conditions, including anxiety, gastrointestinal stress, skin disorders, high blood pressure, heart attack and many others; it is also for people who simply

CONSIDER THE EFFECTS of not paying attention to what our bodies and minds are constantly telling us. For long stretches of time, of course, especially if we are fairly healthy to begin with, we can get away with not paying attention to anything. Or at least it seems that way on the surface. But if various signs and symptoms, even subtle ones, are ignored, left unattended for too long, and if the condition you find yourself in is too much of a burden on the body or the mind, this dis-attention can lead to dis-connection, the atrophying or disruption of specific pathways whose finely tuned integrity is necessary to maintain the dynamic processes that underlie health. This dis-connection can in turn lead to dis-regulation, where things actually start to go wrong, swing grossly away from the natural homeostatic balance. Dis-regulation in turn can lead to outright disorder on the cellular, tissue, organ, or systems level, a breakdown into dis-regulated, chaotic processes. This dis-order in turn leads to or manifests as outright disease, or put otherwise, to dis-ease....

By the same token, we can say that attention, and in particular, wise attention, not neurotic self-preoccupation and hypochondriasis, reestablishes and strengthens connection or connectedness. Connection in turn leads to greater regulation, which leads to a state of dynamic order, which is the signature of ease, of well-being, or health, as opposed to disease. And for this to take place, of course attention has to be maintained and nourished by intention, so attention and intention together play an intimate role in supporting each other, the yin and the yang underlying health and healing, as well as clarity and compassion.

feel that "the pace of their lives is out of control or they're just not feeling quite right." Kabat-Zinn recently told *Inquiring Mind* that "Having seen over 16,000 medical patients in our stress-reduction clinic...we can safely say that pretty much any individual with adequate motivation can learn to be less reactive and less stressed by cultivating mindfulness." He goes on to say that one's "interior world" can be influenced in the process, which could lead to improvement in "blood pressure, the functioning of the immune system, emotional balance...and making healthier choices in one's life."

People entering the program seem to be reaching a beginning much more than an ending. Elizabeth Berlasso, a long-time meditator and psychotherapist who has been leading MBSR classes for several years, says that people start out very anxious. "They don't have a clue what to expect, even though we've given them a thorough orientation," she says. "They are not scared of meditation per se. What they are afraid of, what they really are stressed out about, is what they might find—what they will discover in the quiet about who they are. At some level, people know they have elaborate patterns to keep themselves as far away from that deep experience as possible. Once they start, though, the most potent result they get from sitting still is that they experience kindness towards themselves in a way they never have before."

Jon Kabat-Zinn in his office, in conversation with Barry Boyce.

Kabat-Zinn is trained in Buddhism and espouses its principles, but he does not identify himself as a Buddhist. "Meditation is not a collection of techniques that belongs to any group," he says. "It is a way of being."

Alex Walsh counts himself a hard-driving, stiff-upper-lip kind of guy, who doesn't suffer fools gladly. An investment advisor, he's in an industry that puts a premium on a certain kind of aggressiveness and that carries with it the ongoing thrill ride of climbing and falling with the market. But a heart attack in his late fifties forced him to sit up and take notice of what was going on with his lifestyle. "I entered the training," he says, "with the attitude, 'I don't know whether this is going to help me, but I'd better do it.'" When a roomful of about forty people started to say what brought them there, he recoiled. "I didn't know these people. I didn't know anything about these people," he recalls. "I'm not particularly one who is fond of sharing intimate information with people I do not know. But when you start listening to story after story, you realize people are in tremendous pain. Walking through life, you encounter people constantly. A lot of them are probably hurting in ways you can only begin to imagine."

Kabat-Zinn tells a story about an old MIT colleague diag nosed with leukemia who had to have a bone marrow trans plant. "I hadn't seem him for twenty years," he says, "and h showed up in my office wanting to take the stress-reductio program. He was going to have to be in isolation for a long tim for the procedure and he wanted to learn how to best make us of that isolation. After a few days, he said he felt closer to th people in the stress-reduction program than to his longtim colleagues. At one point, he told the others, 'This feels to me lik the community of the afflicted. We are here because each one c us is carrying a burden.'"

Hearing the circumstances of just a few of the people comin to one class, one realizes how true this rings: a couple of peop just say, "I'm stressed out an I just need to figure out wh to do about it"; anoth knows he's speedy and fee he's missing out on so mar things, including quali moments with his childre who are growing up too fa another is going crazy tryin to be Supermom; a smal businessman who has alwa been physically fit has ju had a massive heart atta and needs to know wh another couple of peop have serious, chronic illness and one of them would li to stop letting the illness ru his life; another one referr by a psychiatrist needs t connect with her body; a yet another is heartbrok from a relationship that ju ended and wants to rela with his mind and emotio in a new way. This list can on and on, and hearing these stories cuts rather close to t bone: suffering is everywhere and also infinite in its variety. W are all the same person in pain. We are all "carrying a burden."

KABAT-ZINN TALKS ABOUT how etymologically our Engli word "suffering" indeed means to carry a burden. That it is t basis of Buddhism's first noble truth. From the beginning, Kaba Zinn felt that using explicit Buddhist terms—such as calli pain, suffering or stress by the Sanskrit word *dukkha*—would l off-putting and carry baggage that already-burdened people d not need to bear. "Dukkha-reduction" probably would not ha taken the medical community by storm, in any case. As he sa "People are just suffering. They're not looking for enlightenme or meditation or to become Buddhists or to give up their cultu

or any of that." Marion Stork recently began teaching mindfulness-based stress reduction, after years as a meditator, because she thought it was a way to reach people who would never come to a meditation center. She says many people she encounters in the program "would never go to a therapist or pick up a book, never mind go to a Buddhist meditation center. But if a doctor says, 'I'm recommending this,' they say matter-of-factly, 'OK.' Once they do the training, it's completely up to them what path they follow, but if they connect with it—not everyone does—they may be quite willing to go to a class or take a program at a meditation center. Many people simply come back and take the course over again, or take related courses."

Kabat-Zinn is trained in Buddhism and espouses its principles, but he does not identify himself as a Buddhist. "People don't need any more identifications than they already have," he says. "If you present the dharma as Buddhism, one half may love it and tell great Zen stories or romantic Chinese Chan stories or exotic Tibetan Vajrayana stories and be sucked into this whole orbit of how wonderful Buddhism is. The other fifty percent may be completely turned off, feeling that some Buddhist evangelist is trying to sucker them into a belief system and on top of that, they probably want money.

"The challenge we are faced with in mindfulness-based stress reduction is how to make use of a vocabulary, structure and format that will invite people into the deep practice of meditation in a way that lets the practice be American. That has happened in every country Buddhism has ever gone to. There are many differences between the Buddhist traditions, yet the heart of it is dharma. At this stage, for Buddhism to become Buddhism it may have to stop being Buddhism. Meditation is not a collection of techniques that belongs to any group. It is a way of being. After all, the Buddha was not a Buddhist."

"Doesn't institutional Buddhism offer some kind of protection against its teachings being perverted by personal aims?" I asked him. He responded that the teachings could be perverted inside or outside of Buddhism, as far as he could tell. One can practice, he says, and "create a gigantic CV of wonderful, wonderful experiences, but actually be following a completely spiritually materialist trajectory." When he was beginning his program, he talked to many knowledgeable Buddhists he respected about how he had to "protect the dharma" from harm as he spread it to people outside of a Buddhist context. Their response to him, he says, was universal: "You can't protect the dharma; you don't need to protect the dharma; the dharma takes care of itself."

Despite his strong feeling that Buddhism is a reification that may need to get out of its own way, he is not in any way strident about it or even remotely "anti-Buddhist." He honors many Buddhist teachers and is in ongoing dialogue with them. He has met with the Dalai Lama a number of times and is deeply involved in the Mind and Life Institute, which has been holding dialogues for the past eighteen years between scientists and the Dalai Lama. He thinks this collaboration has been particularly fruitful and notes with delight that His Holiness is the keynote speaker at this year's Society for Neuroscience meeting, which will be held in conjunction with the next Mind and Life dialogue in November in Washington, DC.

On a more intimate note, he recalls interactions with his teacher, the late Seung Sahn (known to his students as Soen Sa Nim), with obvious admiration and a discernible sense of the teacher's presence. Our discussion of Buddhism and not-Buddhism reminds him of his teacher pushing him into being a teacher. "I said to him," he recalls, "'Soen Sa Nim, I'm here to learn how to practice from you. I'm not interested in being a teacher; I want to be the student.' And he said 'If you are my student, then this is how you will learn to be a student, as you teach.' And I said, 'But I don't know anything. I

RESOURCES:

MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION PROGRAMS

To find a program in your area, search the website of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr/

BOOKS

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness (Delacorte, 1994); *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (Hyperion, 1994); *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* (with Myla Kabat-Zinn; Hyperion, 1998); and *Coming to Our Senses* (Hyperion, 2005), by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Heal Thy Self: Lessons in Mindfulness in Medicine, by Saki Santorelli (Bell Tower, 1999)

Boundless Healing: Meditation Exercises to Enlighten the Mind and Heal the Body, by Tulku Thondup (Shambhala Publications, 2000)

Medicine & Compassion: A Tibetan Lama's Guidance for Caregivers, by Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche with David R. Shlim, M.D. (Wisdom Publications, 2004)

Healing Beyond the Body (Shambhala Publications, 2001) and *Reinventing Medicine* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), by Larry Dossey

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse, by Segal, Williams and Teasdale (Guilford Press, 2001)

Finding a Joyful Life in the Heart of Pain, by Darlene Cohen (Shambhala Publications, 2000)

AUDIO & VIDEO

Guided meditation tapes by Jon Kabat-Zinn can be ordered at www.mindfulnesstapes.com

Break Through Pain, by Shinzen Young (Sounds True)

Good Medicine: How to Turn Pain into Compassion with Tonglen (VHS) by Pema Chödrön (available from Snow Lion)

Boundless Healing: Teaching and Guided Meditation, by Tulku Thondup (Rigpa)

Creating Health, by Christiane Northrup, M.D. (Sounds True)

Living the Practice/Being Happy, by Joseph Goldstein (Dharma Seed)

don't know what to do. I wouldn't know what to talk about.' And he said, 'Aawwwwww,' as if he really deeply understood what my issue was, 'no problem, you only talk about area you understand. Don't talk about area you don't understand.'"

Kabat-Zinn teaches the way a good scientist teaches, by learning. He instinctually collaborates. Very approachable, he knows many people and many people know him. It's not possible to catalog all the connections, and they keep growing. The National Institutes of Health held a daylong symposium last May called "Mindfulness Meditation and Health," as part of a larger seminar series. Nearly ten times as many people showed up for the symposium than for any other program in the series. Last June, Mind and Life held a weeklong retreat at the Garrison Institute for young scientists interested in doing research on the influence of meditative practices on neuroscience, behavioral science and clinical medicine. Last December, Kabat-Zinn traveled to China at the behest of the CEO of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority, who had contracted SARS and learned mindfulness to help him deal with his time in quarantine. He liked it so much, he invited Kabat-Zinn to come to train his whole medical staff. During the training, Kabat-Zinn projected on a screen images of four large calligraphies executed for him by Kaz Tanahashi. When he showed them the one for mindfulness, to them it said "thinking." When he asked if any of the four hundred people in attendance had read the *Tao Te Ching*, not one hand went up. He was bringing coals to Newcastle, and found they were actually needed.

Movements often suffer from an excess of dependency on a central figure—whether the central figure desires that or not. Mindfulness-based stress reduction is strong and will continue for a very long time, one senses, because it does not orbit around any one person or organization. Marion Stork, for one, was impressed by what Kabat-Zinn said at the end of the intensive she took with him. He told the group. "You can go back and teach and call your program Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction. I don't want to trademark this. I want people to take it, innovate with it, make it your own practice, so you can teach what you know."

She also enjoyed meeting one of Kabat-Zinn's main colleagues and collaborators, Saki Santorelli. Santorelli has worked with Kabat-Zinn in the stress-reduction clinic since the very early days. He became its director in 1995, and after Kabat-Zinn retired in 2000, he also became director of the Center for Mindfulness. His book, *Heal Thy Self: Lessons on Mindfulness in Medicine*, addresses how health care can be influenced by mindfulness and how patient and practitioner can interrelate, rather than one mechanically curing the other.

In speaking about the work of the center, Santorelli says that it focuses on education, clinical care, research and outreach, and is about transporting "meditation and mindfulness from the familiar territory of the monastery and meditation hall into the nitty-gritty diversity of everyday human affairs." While requests for some form of quality assurance have caused the center to start a certification program, one does not need the certification to teach MBSR. According to Santorelli, "We didn't invent mindfulness. We don't own it or hold a patent."

ANOTHER COLLEAGUE, Fernando de Torrijos, met Kabat-Zinn at the first Body & Soul conference in Boston in 1994. Since de Torrijos had just moved to Worcester, where his wife was from, they decided to get together. Over lunch, Kabat-Zinn asked him to direct the inner city program the clinic had begun two years before.

Kabat-Zinn is emphatic that we cannot simply treat the world as one in which we are subject and it is object. That all-too-familiar conceptual terrain may indeed be the disease of the world

The program is offered in Spanish and English and will soon be adding Portuguese to serve a growing Brazilian population.

"Worcester," de Torrijos says, "was a thriving city in the nineteenth century, but for a long time many industries were closing down and leaving the city." Even though it is the second largest city in New England and only forty-five miles due west of Boston, it is still outside the orbit of the high-tech revival that rejuvenated the metropolis.

The inner city clinic began with a grant from the Nathan Cummings Foundation, but when that expired, Kabat-Zinn pledged income from professional training programs to support the clinic for five years. It was hoped, de Torrijos says, that the program could become self-sustaining, but "that has been very difficult," he concedes. He does his work now in a large, full-service community health center that sits in the middle of a group of housing projects. The health center was interested in having the stress-reduction program because it would add a self-care component to their program of "managed care," a term that refers to methods for controlling the use, overuse or inefficient use of health care services. Although "managed care" can hide many evils, de Torrijos feels his clinic provides a missing link in health promotion for a segment of the population that is disproportionately unhealthy. Poverty makes you sick.

"Exercise, proper diet, rest. These are all excellent indicators for good basic health," he says, "but if people don't have something that brings them to self-awareness of the importance of taking care of themselves, no matter how many presentations, lectures or brilliant talks you give to the population, they will go home to neighborhoods where they have few resources, little much support, and high stress caused by crime and other conditions. They won't take care of themselves. If we empower them by teaching them mindfulness, people start to remember that being human is something wonderful." Kabat-Zinn notes that people taking this program are coming from "a difficult start-

➢ page

BY JON KABAT-ZINN

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is, ...

W.B. YEATS, "Sailing to Byzantium"

WITH REGARD TO DISEASE and dis-ease, we might say that the most fundamental dis-ease stemming from disattention and disconnection, and from mis-perception and mis-attribution, is the anguish of the human condition itself, of the full catastrophe unmet and unexamined.

As suggested by the opening sentence of our meditation brochures, which speaks of the unexamined whispered longings of the heart, virtually everybody has to some degree or other whispered longings from deep within the psyche, a secret life really, a life full of dreams and possibilities we usually keep hidden. The sad thing is, we usually keep it hidden from ourselves too. We suffer greatly as a consequence. The secret is sustained often for the whole of our lives with no inkling that we are complicit in a self-deception that can be severely life-eroding and self-destructive.

The real secret? That we really do not know who or what we are, for all the surface preoccupations, pretensions, and the inward and outward posturing we construct and hide behind to keep ourselves and everybody else in the dark.

For are not our hearts at various times filled with, driven, even tortured by unsatisfied and seemingly endless desires, great and small, no matter how outwardly successful and comfortable we may appear to be? And are we not vaguely aware on some subterranean level of the psyche that we are indeed "fastened" to a dying animal? And that we do not know who and what we actually are?

In three lines, Yeats captures three fundamental aspects of the human condition: one, that we are unfulfilled and suffer for it; two, that we are subject to sickness, old age and death, the inexorable law of impermanence and constant change; and three, that we are ignorant of the true nature of our very being.

Isn't it time for us to discover that we are already larger than we allow ourselves to know? Isn't it time for us to discover that it is possible to inhabit that larger knowing and perhaps free ourselves from the deep anguish of our persistent habit or ignoring what is most important? I would argue that it is long past time, and that now is also the perfect time.

True, we may feel at times intimations of our discomfort in vague stirrings within the psyche. Once in a rare while, we may even catch momentary glimpses of it waking up disoriented and frightened in the middle of the night, or when someone close to us suffers deeply or dies, or our own life's framework suddenly unravels as if it had always been primarily in some strange way merely imagined. But then, isn't it true that as soon as possible we go back to sleep literally and metaphorically, and anesthetize ourselves with one diversion or another?

This primordial human dis-ease of which Yeats speaks, that we know not what we are, feels too huge to bear. Thus, we bury it deep within the psyche, secreted away, well sequestered from daylight consciousness. Often, as we have seen, it takes an acute crisis to awaken us to it, and to the possibilities of true healing and freeing ourselves from the darkness of our fear and our ignoring.

We suffer greatly in body and mind from this turning away from these deepest intimations of our humanity. We may feel consumed, to use Yeats' word, literally "eaten up," and also diminished in countless ways because we neglect the full reality of what we are. Yet we might not know that with any clarity or conviction either.

This dis-ease of unawareness, of ignoring what is most fundamental in our own nature as beings, affects our lives as individuals virtually from moment to moment, and over the course of decades. It can produce short- and long-term effects on our health of both body and mind. It cannot help but color family life and work life in ways that often remain unseen, or that are not discovered until years after certain kinds of damage have been done and unwise roads unwittingly pursued. And its presence spills out to influence society through our collective ways of seeing ourselves and of doing business. It pervades our institutions and the ways we shape or ignore our inner and outer environments.

Everything we do is colored in one way or another by our ignoring the malaise of not knowing who we are and how we are. It is the ultimate affliction, the ultimate disease. And as such, it gives rise to many variants, to many different manifestations of anguish and suffering at the level of the body, the mind and the world. ♦