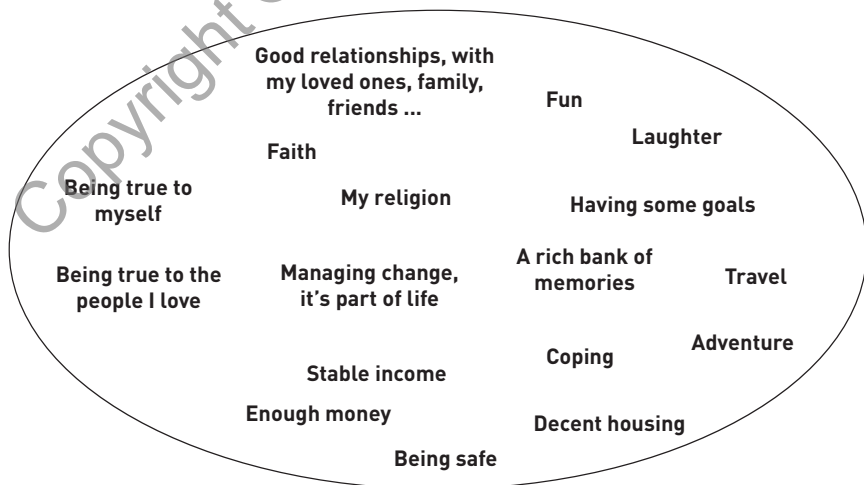


# Introduction

## *A Life Well Lived: Beginning with the End in Mind*

Hiking in the Lake District of England, I stopped for lunch in a cemetery. There was a headstone with a name and this simple inscription: “A Life Well Lived.” What does a life well lived look like? It’s a question that we’ve all asked in one form or another. It’s a question that has been asked for millennia by artists, from musicians to painters, dancers, sculptors, poets, and rappers, as well as philosophers and contemplatives.

An average life, around the world as of 2020, lasts 72 years, 4,000 weeks, or 26,000 days. As I write this, more than likely I’ve lived the balance of my days. How many years, weeks, and days have you lived of your life? And what does a life lived well look like for you? When I have asked people this question, here are some of the most typical responses:



Of course, everyone is different, and everyone will have a different list. What we value also changes at different stages of life. I'd like to suggest that a life well lived means living with a sense of direction and purpose, accompanied by good friends, awake to all of life's myriad and varied moments, equipped to cope with the inevitable ups and downs of life.

## Is This Book for You?

If you're interested in living your life well, this book is for you. You may have a nagging feeling that your life isn't quite as you'd imagined. Or maybe you appreciate that you have a good life—and you'd like to keep it that way or even build on these foundations, because who knows what the years ahead may bring. But what does mindfulness have to do with this?

## Mindfulness: Three Keys to Living Well

Mindfulness offers three keys that can help you unlock a life well lived. This book gives you access to them no matter how familiar you are with mindfulness. Perhaps you've been intrigued by the term, or taken a course, or practiced mindfulness for a while but let it lapse, as so many of us do. This book offers you a way to keep the three keys to hand for life.

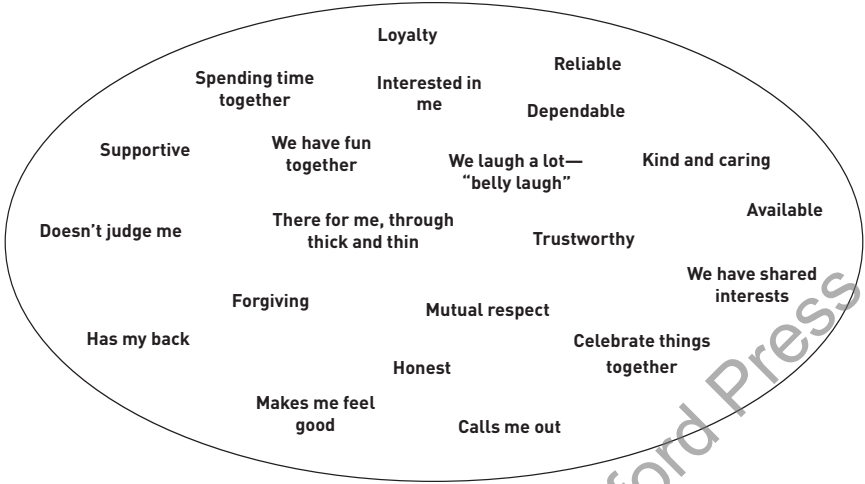
### Key 1: Befriending Your Mind

"My mind can be my worst enemy or best friend," said Raheem Sterling, a young English soccer player. Sterling is known for inspiring others through his work ethic, for his family values, and for raising awareness of important social issues. He meditates because it helps him befriend his mind, which in turn helps him with his sport, mental health, and wider work.

What does friendship mean to you? What words or phrases best describe your friendships? What does a good friend do for you—now and over years, through the good and the bad patches of your life?

Mindfulness is about our mind being and becoming our best friend.

I've posed these questions to hundreds of people in workshops around the world, and here is what people said most often:



Does your idea of a good friend describe how you feel about your own mind? Maybe you already talk to yourself in affirming ways, with messages like “You’ve got this,” “Steady,” “Take a breath,” “I’ve got your back; it will be okay.” Or maybe the voice you use with yourself is critical—“I can’t do that”—or demanding: “I don’t have time.” If you already have a sense of your mind as a friend, this book will help you develop that friendship further. You can choose to befriend your mind so that it becomes as practiced and natural as putting on your shoes before you go out. If you don’t feel like your mind is your friend, you’ll learn in the following pages how to change that, whatever challenges it throws up and amid whatever life circumstances you’re in.

## Key 2: Using Your Values as Your Compass

Certain ideas and values have become mainstream:

I measure myself by how much I get done, what I’m bringing in, whether it’s on a personal level or for the greater good, sort of like my “Gross Domestic Product.”

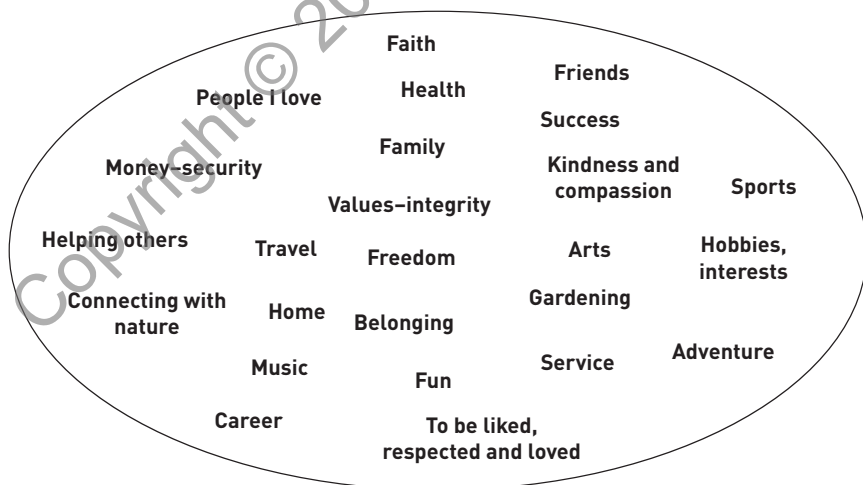
- I put myself first because it is a dog-eat-dog world.
- I’ve got to always be on point—you know, look amazing, stay youthful, stay in shape, be attractive, and show that I’m making it in life.
- If I let my guard down, I’ll get taken advantage of.
- Busyness is good.

- Being tough is good; being kind is soft.
- Being in the spotlight, that's what gives my life meaning. I'm *this close* to striking it rich, if only I can score the perfect job, hit that jackpot, blow up as an influencer, or just start hanging with the right crowd.

From an early age, we feel pressure to have an opinion—about who we are, other people, what we like and don't like, our favorite this or that, what we want to do when we grow up. We may claim certain “values” just to avoid uncertainty or to avoid feeling ashamed of not knowing what our values are. With all the pressure on us to do well, be better, achieve, prove we deserve our place in the world, or look a certain way, we may simply adopt prevalent ideas without question. When we do, we may end up pursuing someone else's vision for our life. Of course productivity is necessary, but few people at the end of their lives look back and say, “I had a good life because I was productive and successful in this dog-eat-dog, getting-ahead world.” And if they do, did it make them and the people around them happy? Ask yourself right now what makes *you* happy. What or whom do you care most about? What are you passionate about? No need to overthink, just note what comes up, then let it go and see what else comes up. And don't worry if not much arises; that's fine too.

Your answers to these questions of what matters most point to your values. We're all different, and an important part of living well is knowing what's meaningful to us.

Here are some of the values that people often mention.



Values are at the root of mindfulness; they guide how we are in the world and what we say and do. And just as important, they guide what we don't say or

do. If family is a foundational value, this shapes choices and even lives. Faith provides a sense of belonging and meaning. Everyone's story involves learning a set of values. My father had a strong work and family ethic, developed in very difficult circumstances when he found himself the "man of the family" as a young boy interned in a concentration camp with his mother and younger sisters and brother. Throughout his life he provided selflessly for his family through hard work. I know he regarded the savings he left behind to provide for my mother and my sisters and me a key part of his life work.

This book will bring to life how your values can be your sense of direction, your compass, the route map on your phone. In the pages ahead you'll explore your values and how they can guide you. I'll encourage you to embrace your values and to be courageous enough to value what is truly important. The landscape of our lives, our family, our school, workplace, community, planet is created by human minds and hearts. It can be tempting to retreat to routine, to where we feel safe, to what we know. But try asking, "Is this enlarging and in line with my values or reassuring but ultimately diminishing?" Enlarge your mind, your relationships, your life, your sense of what is possible in the world. Seek out what enlarges you, whatever that is. It may be people in your life, sports, art, a favorite phrase, or an idea. Who and what enlarges you? Can they be what protects you, vitalizes you, and gives you a sense of purpose?

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, your values, like a compass, point you in the right direction.

### Key 3: Waking Up and Paying Attention

There are a lot of pulls on our attention, and this can give us a sense of being fragmented. With all the demands on us, it's easy to react by checking out and sleepwalking through life. Zoning out can be comfortable, but there are many good reasons to live with a sense of being fully awake.

Attention is one of your most important resources. What you focus on shapes what you think, your decisions, what you feel, and ultimately, your reality. It's like the spotlight that illuminates certain conversations, people, successes, problems, feelings, while leaving others in the shadows. How much of today have you been awake? I don't mean awake literally; I mean awake in the sense of feeling alive. Twenty-five percent, 50 percent, most of the day? In the pages ahead you'll find ways you can learn to pay attention to how you spend your days—and the moments of each day. Every moment is already here, waiting for you to pay attention to it. In a sense

Leading the life we want means waking up and paying attention.

you don't need to do anything differently. It is more of an adjustment in *how you approach your day*, choosing to pay attention, on purpose, with attitudes of curiosity and friendliness.

*When you're guided by your values, you befriend your mind, and you live with awareness, you focus on what matters, and your deepest values and daily life come together in a way that feels whole. Vulnerability can align with strength, kindness can be a force for positive change, compassion can be tough, and love can seep into and out from the people in your life.*

## Developing Mindfulness—through Practice and through Life

You can make friends with your mind, figure out what truly matters to you, and reclaim your focus by practicing mindfulness. When you wake up and stay aware, you can develop these qualities and skills in your everyday life. In time life itself becomes the mindfulness practice.

Although many people associate mindfulness with meditation, in this book we use the term “mindfulness practice” because of the importance of the word *practice*. You're practicing so you can apply the three keys to living well in your daily life. Each chapter in this book presents mindfulness practices, each with a specific purpose and approach. Some help you discover what's important to you, some help you maintain focus, some foster qualities like kindness, and some lead to deeper understanding. But mindfulness can also be integrated into your life by changing how you approach your regular activities, and that is also a big part of each chapter in the book.

What might mindfulness practice look like in your life? Like everything else, it will evolve over time, and I invite you to discover what mindfulness for life can mean for you. No doubt you know that most things that are worthwhile take effort and time. This is certainly true of cultivating our minds and bodies. And when you see mindfulness practice as a way to renew and replenish yourself, rather than something you should do, it becomes something you genuinely want or even need to do.

## Questions and Obstacles: An Integral Part of Learning Mindfulness

Inevitably, obstacles and questions arise when you practice mindfulness for life. These are not only to be expected but can teach us something. Of course this

doesn't make the journey easy; it means acknowledging difficult stuff we may have been pushing away and reveals the disconnect between how we'd like our lives to be and how they are. But by staying aware of this gap, with interest and care, we can begin to explore where we are and what path it is pointing us to.

Each chapter will name the common questions and obstacles and help you with responses. You will meet two guides that are there to help throughout the book: the Ancient Oak, who has a deep and wide knowledge that draws on contemplative traditions, philosophy, the humanities, and the arts; and the Barefoot Professor, who knows a lot about psychology but also has a passable knowledge of other mainstream science. These characters don't take themselves too seriously—not because what they're saying isn't important, but because they know that the more you know, the more you realize that things are complicated and there is still so much to learn.

### *The Ancient Oak: Obstacles as Teachers*

There is a story of a monastery where there was one monk who coughed during the meditation, snored at night, and broke wind without compunction. The other monks complained to the abbot, "He's ruining our meditation, makes it hard to sleep at night, and stinks the place out. Can you please do something about him?" The abbot smiled and responded, "I pay that monk to be here; his coughing, snoring, and flatulence are all intended to help you develop your patience, equanimity, and kindness."

## Can Mindfulness Practice Really Help You Live Well?

Over many years, skepticism about mindfulness has been prevalent. One of the most common myths about it is that it's something we must do—another major task to undertake. After doing some mindfulness training, many people say, "I did it for a while, but then I stopped"—because it was too hard, it didn't pay off in big ways, they didn't have time, it didn't seem to fit with their modern lifestyle. But what is "it," and what does it mean not to be able to "do it?" Every skill we've discussed—awareness, paying attention, learning—is an innate human resource. It is simply impossible to stop doing "it." I'd like to suggest a different way of thinking about mindfulness. If we don't go to the gym, we lose our strength; if we don't work out, we lose our fitness. While this analogy is often used for mindfulness practice, you can't unlearn something that is natural or unknow something you've learned deeply. Mindfulness training is simply revealing and cultivating natural human qualities. Is it worth the effort to continue practicing? Only you can decide.

Of course, mindfulness isn't for everyone. And we all resist change, at least at first. Hedonistic pleasure is nice. Waking sleep is seductive; it means we don't have to face up to all sorts of realities and challenges. Fear is a powerful emotion. How we deal with these obstacles to practicing mindfulness for life will be addressed throughout the book, with each chapter troubleshooting the most common issues as they come up.

With practice, I hope you'll see why mindfulness is becoming mainstream: it can help us live well in the contemporary world. It is an antidote to busyness and distractedness, however compelling these can be. Many mindfulness practices have been used by people for thousands of years. The science of mindfulness is coming of age. This confluence of ancient and modern is what gives it depth and realism. Mindfulness can be masculine and feminine, it can move in

Mindfulness is not a magic fix. It requires a sense of curiosity, realistic expectations, an ongoing commitment, and discipline.

and retreat, it is strong and vulnerable, ordinary and profound, eminently practical and potentially transformative. Mindfulness skills have extraordinary potential to help us respond to some of the challenges we're facing in today's world. It can help us understand how we react and behave. It can help us respond with greater wisdom and compassion.

When I say "us," I mean us as individuals, but also as communities and as wider humanity. But for this potential to be realized we need it to be taught and learned well, applied with care and always with solid foundational values.

I hope that you will integrate the ideas and practices into your life, rather than viewing them as a temporary Band-Aid or a sort of optional hobby. Like the commitment of a lifelong friendship, we don't make it lightly. We make it because the friendship is important to us, we know it will require hard work and we'll sometimes neglect it.

To help you integrate mindfulness into your life, it helps to ask questions like:

- What, or rather how, do I want to be? Busy, jangled, compulsive . . . ?
- Why should I make this commitment? What value might mindfulness add to my life?
- How can I integrate mindfulness into my life, so it is relevant and helps me?
- How can I stay motivated to use these ideas and mindfulness practices in my busy life?
- How can my mindfulness practice evolve through the different stages of life, as my needs and responsibilities shift and change?



### *The Ancient Oak and the Barefoot Professor: Living a Good Life*

**The Ancient Oak:** Aristotle thought that a life well lived means character (*ēthikós*), purpose (*telos*), and virtue (*arete*). These three together create a sense of contentment, meaning, and well-being (*eudaimonia*). What is helpful about this? First, Aristotle is saying that well-being is something much deeper and enduring than happiness. And second, living well is something we can become good at. There are lots of ways these ideas have been developed. Iliana Singh, a professor at the University of Oxford, has suggested that a good life includes not just an individual, but also the groups of people and the wider world the person is part of.

**The Barefoot Professor:** Often we think money, having pleasant experiences, and avoiding pain are what make us happy. And of course, laughter, good food, buying or having nice things, excitement, entertainment, physical intimacy, beautiful things. These all make us feel good, but usually only for as long as we have them (this is sometimes called hedonic pleasure), or we're always striving for more, better (this is sometimes called the hedonic treadmill). Psychology has shown that we get in the way of our own happiness through our tendency to want more, to judge what we have against what others have, or what we feel we should have. This makes hedonic pleasure quite fragile compared to the more enduring contentment Aristotle and wider well-being Iliana Singh are pointing us to. Psychology may be a lot younger than ancient wisdom, but it has yielded some scientific studies showing how mindfulness can support well-being in different groups of people and settings—and when it doesn't.

This book will show you how you can learn to become aware in ways that help you live well. It will help you wake up, pay attention, get to know your body and mind, learn to appreciate the good things, while also dealing with stress, problems, losses, and pain. You'll discover how to gain a fresh perspective, be kind to yourself, know when to accept things, and when to make changes. All of this will help you take care of yourself and others with wisdom, courage, and openness to learning.

### **Mindfulness in Real Life—for Life**

Throughout our lives, we encounter significant milestones such as starting school, going through puberty, leaving home, beginning work, forming and ending relationships, switching jobs, retiring, and dealing with changes in our health. What you'll learn can help you stay attuned to your evolving aspirations, values, and beliefs, and the new directions you want to take during

the various stages of life. Inevitably we'll face unexpected challenges: losing a job, relationships breaking down, ill health, people dying, our own inevitable decline and death. We have the capacity to show extraordinary resilience in the face of these challenges, as is plain to see if we look at our personal and collective history. Think back on some of the changes you've weathered. Even in the last hundred years, collectively we've weathered world wars, changes in the world's demography, economic booms and downturns, and pandemics like Covid-19. I want this book to help you on a lifelong journey of learning mindfulness, from first being introduced to mindfulness, through integrating it into to your life, through going further and deeper with the development of awareness, understanding, and compassion.

### **Bringing Mindfulness to Life: Sam, Mohammed, Ling, and Sophia**

Over the years I've learned so much from my teachers and mentors, people who participated in my classes and workshops, and colleagues, as well as in my life more generally. Out of these experiences I've created four people, composites of individuals I've met, to show how mindfulness can take shape in real life. They have the job of illustrating not just what can be learned, what's new, interesting, and joyful, but importantly all the problems or issues that require troubleshooting along the way.

Sam is a nurse in his 20s, training as an ICU specialist nurse practitioner, who was drifting through his life until he reset with a few simple realizations.

*SAM: My job is more than just work to me, I'm seriously passionate about it. And honestly, I'm not complicated—hitting the pedals, and gaming, love it. Just like how I keep my bike in check with a weekly tune-up, I've gotta do the same for myself, making sure I eat right and catch up on sleep when I go a bit too hard.*

If, as for Sam, mindfulness helps us tune in to what is good in our life, and feel better, we get curious and want to learn more.

Mohammed is in his 30s, a former athlete, father, husband, now a full-time homemaker—his faith is foundational in his life. To live well, he had to learn to live with chronic pain, the legacy of an injury that ended his athletic aspirations.

Ling is in her 40s, divorced, a single mother to teenage kids, juggling to keep all the balls in her full life up in the air, working a job she doesn't like much.

LING: *You know, I never really picked up swimming when I was a kid. So, when I first got introduced to mindfulness, it kinda felt like someone was trying to nudge me into diving into my friend's most-loved swimming hole. I had this vivid image of standing on the brink, testing the waters of mindfulness—all the excuses I had for just turning back and not giving it a shot. But you know what? I took that first step, “dipped my toes” into it. And after that? Honestly, it's been quite different from what I thought.*

Waking up was not easy or painless for Ling, and she realized she needed to make changes to her life.

Sophia is a retired teacher, mother, grandmother. Retirement was a major transition for her.

SOPHIA: *I feel like I have been granted two lives, the first, and the second when I woke up and realized I only have one life!*

These four characters have, in their own way, first been introduced to mindfulness, then integrated it into their lives, and then made a commitment to taking it further so it is a lifelong process. My hope is they will inspire you to integrate these ideas into your life in the same ways.

## Twelve Stepping Stones to Mindfulness for Life

This book contains twelve chapters that you can think of as a series of stepping stones. Early stepping stones are about inhabiting your body, vulnerable and resilient, constant, and ever changing, life seeking and ultimately mortal. Your body and mind are united; joy or suffering in one reverberates in the other.

Later stepping stones are about how you can keep a sense of perspective and balance and live as best you can with the inevitable changes and challenges in your life.

You can visit each chapter again and again, so you learn more about the ways you can integrate all that you're learning that will be helpful in your life. In this sense the idea of stepping stones becomes more like a set of skills you can use in different ways at different times, throughout your life.

## Being the Change You'd Like to See in the World

Mahatma Gandhi suggested that the best way to change the world is by *being* the change we want to see in the world. We've started with the end in mind, so

you can glimpse where we're headed and the path you're walking. We'll return to the idea of being the change you want to see in the world again and again. And in the last chapter of this book we'll take stock. As you go along, you'll have to see for yourself if this is true for you. A friend alongside you might say, "Laugh along the way, have fun, be brave, accept the missteps, maybe even learn from them, celebrate the successes—we're in this together and I've got your back."

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