

SEVEN



Befriending Our Feelings

How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races—the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses. Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are only princesses waiting for us to act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

So you must not be frightened if a sadness rises before you larger than any you've ever seen, if an anxiety like light and cloud shadows moves over your hands and everything that you do. You must realize that something has happened to you; that life has not forgotten you; it holds you in its hands and will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any miseries, or any depressions? For after all, you do not know what work these conditions are doing inside you.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, *Letters to a Young Poet*

ANYONE WHO STARTS OUT ON AN ADVENTURE knows that there will be obstacles along the way that may seem insurmountable. Climbers train for months, knowing that gentle slopes will give way to large overhangs that look impossible to scale. They pore over detailed maps until they can see the terrain they'll cover in their sleep. Still, no amount of preparation entirely eliminates the challenge of the real thing. Every climb has one overhang that can seem impossible when confronted. We have now reached just such a critical juncture in our quest to reverse the cycle of unhappiness.

The challenge before us at this point is to see if we can be with our unwanted emotions without making them worse. The very notion may seem strange and the task impossible because we so easily fall into aversion and the doing mode. Yet such an intentional, conscious gesture, which amounts to a paradoxical embrace of what we fear most, can be a powerfully liberating act. Yes, the mind's readiness to leap in to meet difficult emotions in problem-solving mode, its aversion to unpleasant experiences, and our reflexive self-castigating response to even fleeting sadness may all stand in our way. But mountain climbers reach "impossible" heights all the time by using the skills and knowledge they have developed in the course of their training. Working through this book offers training in exactly the skills and the knowledge needed right now to address the challenge of our most difficult emotional states.

In the last chapter, we explored a group of exercises that can help us tune in to the body's signals of aversion and unpleasantness. We may have gotten so adept at avoiding negative emotions in the past that we no longer recognize them or the aversion that would serve as our "get-away car." In this chapter, we'll go one step further and learn to recognize, approach, accept, and befriend those emotions so that they do not so easily trigger a downward spiral into depression.

Befriending emotions that we've viewed as the "enemy" for so long may run counter to all of our self-preservation instincts. But, when it comes right down to it, what else is there to do? The alternative so far has been to struggle and suffer whenever things have not gone as we had hoped they would. Perhaps it's time to explore another path.

We are not claiming that cultivating mindfulness in the face of a tendency toward sadness, low mood, and depressive rumination is easy. But it is doable. What is more, it draws on what is deepest and best in us. In this book we offer many suggestions for relating more skillfully to unpleasant experience. But ultimately, through the cultivation of mindfulness, each of us will discover our own ways to transform our relationship with what we find unpleasant, difficult, and threatening.

Making use of the mindfulness practices we have already described, we are well on the way to reversing our habitual rejection of

the difficult and the unpleasant. Bringing a gentle openness and interest to something troublesome is, in itself, an enormously important part of acceptance. It will be invaluable if we can remind ourselves, again and again, of a simple but powerful truth: *Intentionally holding something in awareness is already an affirmation that it can be faced, named, and worked with.* In fact, it is also an immediate embodiment of facing it, naming it, and working with it.

PLACING OUR TRUST IN BODY AWARENESS

The key here is to uncouple our experience of unpleasant feelings from the knee-jerk reaction of aversion that habitually follows it—of, if we are already caught up in aversion, to free ourselves from its grip. Just as we were able to focus on body sensations to help us identify aversive reactions, we can work mainly through the body to respond more effectively to the events that trigger aversion. Working through the body keeps difficulties in play long enough for us to discover that even the worst circumstances we find ourselves in are indeed workable. This is particularly crucial to keep in mind when every fiber of our instinctual being is telling us to fix or get rid of the difficulty as quickly as possible.

Whenever something unpleasant arises, the systems in the brain that warn us about potential threats are activated: it is as if a loud alarm is sounded, and the mind gives high priority to attending to whatever caused the unpleasantness. We may do many things to try to distract ourselves—such as turning on the TV—but the alarm is insistent and doesn't shut off. Worries keep intruding on our consciousness. Sooner or later, with the TV on or off, the disturbing thoughts and feelings come flooding back.

Here is that critical moment. If, paradoxically, we can turn and face whatever it is that we are finding scary, difficult, or depressing rather than perpetually distracting ourselves to no avail, we are actually still doing what the brain wants us to do: giving high-priority attention to the matter at hand. It's just that we are no longer giving it

attention in the old "doing" way. We are approaching the moment—whatever it is, however it is—not by reacting but rather by responding, by bringing an open, spacious, and affectionate attention to the feeling in the moment as it expresses itself in the body. Now we are in relationship to the alarm in a new way, one that provides us with a viable alternative to endlessly thinking about it.

By now we have seen time and again how we react automatically to difficult emotions by triggering the doing mode of mind, so dominated by thinking. The sequence may begin with our worrying about all the things that could go wrong and would make things worse, and then move on to what to do about it. We dig up old memories and get caught in the stream of endless rumination. Because these reactions all register as "unpleasant" on our internal barometer, another unconscious cycle of aversion is triggered.

But now there is another possibility. The very fact that we are learning to read this internal barometer and can be aware of this attempt to push away the unpleasant, and that we can locate the accompanying uncomfortable sensations in the body—as muscle tightening and overall contracting, or bracing—gives us the opportunity to use this information from the body to break the downward spiral into rumination and depression. *We do this by trusting ourselves to hold difficult feeling states in awareness—an awareness that includes how it feels in the body.* By opening up even the tiniest bit of breathing room—between the experience of "unpleasant" when first detected and the tendency to react almost instantaneously with aversion—we give ourselves powerful and precious opportunities to nourish and shape our ability to see and respond to what is happening. We tap into the deep wisdom in our own mind, a wisdom that does not rely on thought, to respond to difficulties in ways that can be transformative and freeing. Here's how:

Once we notice an unpleasant feeling, we focus, as best we can, on *how we experience it in the body*. This is aided enormously by connecting our awareness of the breath in that very moment with whatever the unpleasant experience is—what we were calling in Chapter 6 the gesture of "breathing with." This breathing with whatever arises in and of

itself tends to steady the mind. As we learned in Chapter 6, it involves expanding the awareness of our breath sensations to include awareness of other relevant sensations we are experiencing in the body. Practicing in this way includes intentionally *breathing in* to any area of painful or uncomfortable sensations, exploring its “edges” and any changes in intensity, and allowing our awareness to simply hold it all. In such a moment, we have an opportunity to recognize any signs of aversion manifested in the body as contraction. Tying awareness of the breath to awareness of other sensations in the body makes the breath a vehicle for the movement of awareness just as it was in the body scan. But since this awareness can also hold thoughts and feelings, if those should arise, the field of awareness can readily recognize and accommodate them as well, without having to do anything at all. The awareness itself does all the work.

We can start to learn this new way to relate to unpleasant sensations and feelings through the mindful yoga introduced in the last chapter. You may like to read the following section and then put the book down for a few minutes and do some of these stretches, following along with the CD (Track 3). As best you can, approach these stretches in the spirit we now describe.

WORKING THE EDGE

We almost inevitably encounter at least some degree of bodily discomfort in key places when we practice stretching through mindful yoga. This is what makes this practice such an effective vehicle for learning how to approach difficult and unwanted moments and experiences with greater acceptance, curiosity, gentleness, and kindness. What is more, the new skills we develop in working with even a mild degree of physical discomfort can be directly applied later to situations of emotional discomfort, however intense they may be.

Let’s imagine we have our hands above our heads, we are stretching upward with our whole bodies, and it is beginning to feel uncomfortable in our shoulders and upper arms. One way to react (the *avoid-*

ance option) is to back off as soon as we feel any discomfort, perhaps immediately lowering our arms and turning our attention to some other part of the body or even out of the body altogether, maybe into a stream of thoughts or images. Another possibility (the *unkind option*) is to grit our teeth, tell ourselves we just have to put up with the increasing pain and discomfort, and not make a fuss, as if this were the aim of the practice. We would then put even more effort into pushing ourselves to stretch further. Here, too, we are likely to numb out, removing our awareness from those regions of the body experiencing the discomfort.

But there is also a third option, one that strikes a balance between withdrawing at the first sign of discomfort and forcing ourselves to meet some self-designated standard of endurance. This *mindful option* calls for approaching the situation in a spirit of gentle nurturing, using the stretch to extend our ways of relating to discomfort. We direct our attention right into the area of discomfort as best we can, using the breath as a vehicle to bring awareness right into that region, as in the body scan. With a gentle curiosity we then explore what we find there—physical sensations and feelings, coming, going, and changing. We sense them directly, perhaps focusing on any changes in intensity over time. The idea is not to hold a posture until it is painful. It is rather to experience the limit of the movement in any particular stretch or posture and then to linger there without forcing or pushing through strong sensations. All the while we keep our attention on the sensations and feelings themselves, as best we can. We focus on the physical qualities of the sensations, on any sense of tightness, holding, burning, trembling, or shaking, *breathing with* the sensations, as best we can. We allow our thoughts about what these feelings mean to simply come and go in awareness.

We can play with the intensity of sensation by actually varying the stretch itself, experimenting with working the edge of our discomfort and our acceptance, exploring for ourselves just how the body responds directly to every tiny change we introduce. This approach gives us some sense of being able to modulate the intensity of unpleasant sensations. This is also a way we can be gentle and nur-

tuning toward ourselves while still learning how to relate to whatever arises in a new way. We don't try to force things beyond our limit of the moment.

The body provides a wonderful arena in which we can directly witness the effects of aversion and the power of an accepting awareness to dissolve it. For example, as we continue to hold our arms stretched out above our heads and we become aware of an increasing sense of discomfort, we might invite ourselves to briefly scan the body to see if we can pick up regions where the muscles are tense and contracted, even though they are not directly involved in holding up the arms. It is quite common to become aware of tension and contraction in the face, such as the jaw or forehead. Clearly, these regions are making no essential contribution to holding the arms up. Why, then, are they contracted? Their contraction is simply a sign that we are reacting with aversion to the experience of discomfort. Knowing this, we can breathe a gentle, curious, nurturing attention into these regions of the body on the in-breath while on the out-breath we allow ourselves to let go of any sense of resistance or holding. As best we can, we let any tension leave with the out-breath, to the extent that it will. In all likelihood, a sense of increased ease and lightness in the face will give us direct feedback that we have mindfully released ourselves, to one degree or another, from our automatic habit of tensing and bracing in aversion against discomfort.

Mindful stretching provides a very useful training ground for exploring new counterintuitive ways to respond to discomfort. It also of-

The face can be a "weather vane" for the tension that signals aversion in action. Increased softness in the muscles of the face can indicate some degree of mindful release from aversion.

fers, in itself, an invaluable way to shift modes of mind when we feel ourselves sliding into unhap-

pines. We can put on Track 3 of the CD, for instance, and perhaps re-

cover our clarity of mind just by attending to the body's movements and sensations over a relatively short period of time. When our mood has deteriorated, when we may be finding it difficult to concentrate, it is helpful to be able to ground ourselves in awareness of the tangible sensations that arise as we stretch and twist and work with our bodies. This gentle yet always challenging physical activity can also have a direct enlivening and arousing effect that may cut through the lethargy that can rear its head as unhappiness deepens. In fact, it is very difficult to remain sad or anxious while doing yoga in a mindful way. It is as if we were literally and metaphorically sweeping the body clean—and, along with it, the mind.

Working the Edge in Sitting Meditation

We saw in Chapter 6 how we might run into a certain degree of discomfort in the sitting meditation simply by being still for an extended period of time, even more so when sitting cross-legged on the floor. One or both knees, the back, neck, or shoulders might start to ache, and the ache can intensify with time, sometimes quite dramatically. Recall that the sitting meditation invites us to first let our attention settle on the breath sensations themselves, and then gradually expand the field of awareness once it is relatively stable, to include a sense of the body as a whole or any particular regions that might be giving rise to intense sensations. So here is another effective opportunity, just as in the mindful yoga, to develop our ability to work the edge, befriending our experience in the body by turning toward and opening to whatever is present, even if our initial reaction is strong aversion. As we saw in Chapter 6, when our attention is repeatedly drawn to such uncomfortable sensations, we can include those areas of greatest intensity within the field of awareness and experience them moment by moment just as they are, even if it is just for a few moments at first. Here we are again, working the edge, gently and lovingly zeroing in on our boundaries and limits by moving into and embracing the sensations themselves, until we sense that we have reached our limit for the moment. Then we intentionally and caringly back off, and shift our attention from the region of greatest intensity, ready to return when we have

gathered and regrouped our resources. We might do this in a number of ways:

- One possibility is to shift attention within the general region of intensity, rather than focusing on the region of maximum intensity, we focus on an area of lesser intensity.
- Another possibility is to *breathe* with the discomfort, holding awareness of the intense sensations together with awareness of the breath, in the background.
- Or, if the intensity is becoming overwhelming, we can shift the focus of attention away from that region entirely and focus attention exclusively on the breath.
- And we always have the option of moving the body intentionally, of shifting our posture during the sitting meditation practice if the intensity becomes too great. This is an act of kindness and intelligence in itself and not a measure of failure. And we can be aware of shifting our posture too, so that there is a continuity of awareness regardless of how we are responding to the intensity of sensation.

The point here is that the practice itself allows us to discover different ways to stay in relationship to our inner experience, even when it is unpleasant and difficult. It reminds us that we don't have to throw ourselves in all at once. It's more like dipping just the big toe in the water to test the temperature.

What we are learning here about the power of awareness to contain whatever arises without our needing to push it away or to try to escape from it, can be applied to any other intense experience of physical or emotional pain. We discover that we can take care of ourselves by actually embracing and befriending whatever we are feeling in awareness, an awareness suffused with qualities of kindness and a gentle openness and interest in what is arising within us—whatever it is.

Anthony's Story

Anthony's experience illustrates the transformation that cultivating mindfulness makes possible. He had come to mindfulness classes because he felt constantly tense and ill at ease. Yet focusing on his body had simply made him more aware of his discomfort. He could not just "be with" the feelings of tension in his body at first. He kept wanting things to be different and was frustrated that he did not feel any better when he tried to meditate. Then one day while walking in the woods his dog disturbed a hornet's nest. After dragging his dog away, Anthony found his own leg covered in the insects. Several stung him, and he had to get home quickly to put on some ointment. After a day or two, the stings had stopped being painful but had become intensely itchy. Anthony had been told emphatically not to scratch, but he could hardly bear it, so strong was the itch. He decided to experiment with bringing his awareness to the itching and discomfort, "breathing into it" to investigate it more closely. He noticed that the itching was not just one sensation but many. What's more, this bundle of sensations changed from moment to moment, some of the sensations shifting rapidly, some more slowly.

Later, Anthony was able to apply the skills he had developed in dealing with the physical discomfort of itching to discomfort related more directly to emotion. When his body felt tense, rather than getting fed up or trying to ignore it, he was now able to stay inside the tension, breathing with it, moving up close to it, in intimate contact with the various sensations associated with it. He found that he was able to bring a greater sense of compassion toward his body and a more accepting attitude toward himself.

Anthony was learning the difference between avoiding (shutting himself off from experience) and approaching the difficult (being open to experience). He discovered that the difference can be very subtle, yet very liberating. Such a sense of freedom comes because the shift from avoidance to openness is accompanied by a shift from the brain pattern that underlies avoidance to a new brain pattern that underlies approach. As in the mouse-in-the-maze experiment this new pattern allows for a greater flexibility of response.

When we are able to sense in the body that we are tensing up or bracing ourselves in anticipation of something threatening, that

is an indicator that the brain is switching into *avoidance* mode. In response, our mindfulness brings in approach qualities such as curiosity, compassion, and goodwill, and balances out the brain's tendency to switch into its *avoidance* pattern with a pattern associated with "welcoming."

Mindful awareness and learning to be with unpleasant feelings are not about striving for some ideal of happiness in the face of the difficult—that would be just another goal we are fixating on. Rather, it is as if we are bathing the difficult situation, and even our aversion to it, in an open, compassionate, and accepting awareness, just like a mother embracing a suffering child. We can take this stance not only toward physical discomfort but also toward emotional discomfort.

TRANSFORMING DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

Unpleasant emotions are invariably accompanied by sensations and feelings in the body. If we gently focus our attention right into these areas of intense sensation and discomfort, we bring about both immediate and longer term effects. We immediately short-circuit any unhelpful avoidance tendencies of the mind. We also disrupt the automatic links among body sensations, feelings, and thoughts that perpetuate vicious cycles and downward mood spirals. In the longer run, we develop more skillful ways of being in relationship to uncomfortable experiences. Rather than seeing them as "bad and threatening things," a view that triggers avoidance and gets us stuck in suffering, we begin to see unpleasant experiences for what they are: passing mental events—bundles of bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts. As best we can, we greet them with a sense of interest and curiosity, rather than with a sense of unease, hatred, and dread. We welcome them in, as they are already here anyway.

In the MBCT program, we have specifically designed a practice for investigating the texture of emotionally challenging situations. The practice helps us explore and cultivate more skillful responses in those critical moments. We start by deliberately inviting a difficult scenario or circumstance to come to mind. We then work with it in the body, bringing awareness to it, breathing into it, and discovering a wider space within which it might exist. The instructions follow. We suggest that you settle by focusing on the breath and body for a few minutes before starting to follow the instructions.

Inviting a Difficulty In and Working with It through the Body

Sit for a few minutes, focusing on the sensations of breathing, then widening the awareness to take in the body as a whole (see *Sitting Meditation: Mindfulness of the Breath and Body*, pp. 130–131).

When you are ready, see if you can bring to mind a difficulty that is going on in your life at the moment, something you don't mind staying with for a short while. It does not have to be very important or critical, but it should be something that you are aware of as somewhat unpleasant, something unresolved. Perhaps a misunderstanding or an argument, a situation where you feel somewhat angry, regretful, or guilty over something that has happened. If nothing comes to mind, perhaps you might choose something from the past, either recent or distant, that once caused unpleasantness.

Now, once you are focusing on some troubling thought or situation—some worry or intense feeling—allow yourself to take some time to tune in to any physical sensations in the body that the difficulty evokes. See if you are able to note, approach, and investigate inwardly what feelings are arising in your body, becoming mindful of those physical sensations, deliberately directing your focus of attention to the region of the body where the sensations are strongest in the gesture of an embrace, a welcoming. This gesture might include breathing into that part of the body on the in-breath and breathing out from that region on the out-breath, exploring the sensations, watching their intensity shift up and down from one moment to the next.

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Once your attention has settled on the bodily sensations and they are vividly present in the field of awareness, unpleasant as they may be, you might try deepening the attitude of acceptance and openness to whatever sensations you are experiencing by saying to yourself from time to time: "It's okay. Whatever it is, it's already here. Let me open to it." Then just stay with the awareness of these bodily sensations and your relationship to them, breathing with them, accepting them, letting them be, allowing them to be just as they are. It may be helpful to repeat "It's here right now. Whatever it is, it's already here. Let me open to it." Soften and open to the sensations you become aware of, letting go of any tensing and bracing. Say to yourself: "softening" or "opening" on each out-breath. Remember that by saying "It's already here" or "It's okay," you are not judging the original situation or saying that everything's fine, but simply helping your awareness, right now, to remain open to the sensations in the body. If you like, you can also experiment with holding in awareness both the sensations in the body and the feeling of the breath moving in and out, as you breathe with the sensations moment by moment.

And when you notice that the bodily sensations are no longer pulling your attention to the same degree, simply return 100% to the breath and continue with that as the primary object of attention.

If in the next few minutes no powerful bodily sensations arise, feel free to try this exercise with any bodily sensations you notice, even if they have no particular emotional charge.

Amanda's Story

Amanda, a participant in our program, had trouble with this practice at first. When asked to bring a difficult situation to mind, her first reaction was "I'm not sure I'm going to be able to do this. I can't think of anything." She got worried that she was going to miss out on this exercise. Then suddenly something came into her mind. It had to do with her son.

"He's been giving us a really hard time recently—staying out all hours, hanging around with people we don't trust. We had a real crisis

two months ago involving the police. As soon as this came into my mind I knew this was going to be difficult to get out of my mind again. I try not to think about it at all, but every time I do, I think *Where have I gone wrong?*"

Amanda believes she won't be able to get this difficulty out of her mind because her experience is that she has "failed" at it before. She is now judging and blaming herself, questioning what she has done to produce this dilemma. Notice that this troubling situation immediately sets off the driven mode of thinking that we call "rumination."

The next instruction, to focus on body sensations and feelings, was very difficult for her. Initially it was as though her breathing had stopped completely. Then she recognized that large areas of her body were extremely tense. Normally, she would have tried desperately to think of something else—to distract herself, to think positively. But here she was being invited to bring attention to, and to breathe into, those regions in her body that felt most tense. Realizing just how tense she was in that moment, Amanda purposefully expanded her attention to include the whole body and breathed into the places where the tension and contraction were most intense.

Then something happened that was totally unexpected. She suddenly became aware that she could give those feelings some room. "It suddenly became like a great big empty space, with the air coming in and out," she said. "You know, sometimes when you come back from a vacation and the house is a bit musty, so you open all the doors and windows to let the air blow through? Well, it was like that—having doors and windows open, and with curtains blowing and air was coming in and out. And it was really amazing. The tension about my son was still there. I thought, *Oh, you're still there, but never mind—the wind's blowing through, and that's all right.*"

The unexpected difference seemed to be that Amanda could look at the difficulty. The feeling in her body was still a bit tight, but the area of tension seemed to be much smaller, with a sense that the air could flow around it.

Amanda's experience shows that it is indeed possible to work with

difficult feelings and memories in a way that acknowledges them, allows them to exist, and does not push them away. We can so easily think of meditation as a clever way to get rid of these frightening states of mind. But it is important to keep in mind that mindfulness is not about getting rid of anything, nor is it about "not having" such feelings arise in the first place. Rather, the intention behind cultivating mindfulness of emotional states is to learn how we can relate to them in ways that will not get us stuck in unhappiness. One way of knowing that we are on the right track is having a sense of spaciousness in how we are holding these feelings. The feelings are still here, in this very moment, just as they were for Amanda, but it is as if, somehow, they do not take up all the space in the mind. They are seen and held in a greater awareness, an awareness that is discerning and openhearted. And, interestingly enough—and this is something that you can explore for yourself and play with—the awareness itself is not in pain, or unhappy, or caught in any way at all.

Amanda's description of her experience with her particular difficulty is revealing. "To begin with," she said, "it was like a solid mass of rock. It was huge. It was so solid that you couldn't get around it, but then it shrank to a small stone. It was still stone, but it was small. It's really good. Because I think probably I have been pushing the issue away, sort of sitting on it and not letting it come up fully to the surface. I haven't allowed it before to simply be here. I thought it would just overwhelm me. It was too much to let in, and so my natural reaction

Deliberately bringing attention to the difficult with the hope that this will help to get rid of it may simply get us more stuck.

would have been just to tense up and push it away and not face it at all."

Amanda was discovering the transformative power of allowing something to be here as it is. As we saw with the mouse-in-the-maze experiment described in Chapter 6, the same action performed to escape from a feared object can have very different consequences than when it is motivated by approaching the positive.

Meg's Story

The point of the practice we have just described is to provide, within the laboratory of a therapeutic program and the meditation practice itself, opportunity after opportunity to explore and develop more effective ways of responding to unpleasant feelings and emotions. These skills, developed in this admittedly highly contained formal learning situation, can then be used where they are really needed: in our everyday lives. Sometimes the effects can be quite dramatic, as Meg found out:

"I awoke yesterday feeling really angry. I was fuming. I knew exactly what it was about. The day before I had had a meeting with my supervisor (I was doing an evening course to get qualified—well, we've all got to do a project). She had promised to read my draft project write-up before we met so she could give me feedback on it. The deadline is coming up soon, and I had lots of other work to do, so I needed her comments now so I could work on it over the holiday. When I got there, she apologized and said she hadn't been able to get to it yet. She'd been away, etc., etc. She flicked through it and gave me some general comments for how to redraft it and said I'd be fine. The meeting finished, and I felt pretty much okay about it. I decided to start redrafting it the next morning and went to bed. That was the day before yesterday.

"But the morning after I'd seen her, I woke up really bitter. I had all these angry thoughts going round and round in my head: *She knew when the draft was arriving; she just doesn't care. Perhaps she doesn't want to supervise me. Well, if that's how she feels, I'll leave the course. I don't have to continue. I'll simply leave a note for her and tell her I'm not coming back to the class. She'll be sorry then.* I told myself that I was stupid to be thinking like this, that I was overreacting. But as soon as I thought I had calmed down, another angry thought would come, or I would imagine her opening my note or imagine me walking out of college.

"I suppose I lay there for about five minutes, fuming away. Then I

remembered something we had learned about what to do when we get locked into this sort of self-talk: about moving away from thinking—and shifting awareness to how the thoughts and emotions were felt in my body. I shifted my attention to my body and was able to feel, very clearly, a tightness in my chest and stomach. I lay in bed and simply held in awareness the sense of these feelings as they were occurring in my body. The next moment the sensations were gone and with them the anger. Just like that, in a flash. I couldn't believe it; like a soap bubble I had just touched—and it disappeared.

"I got up, went over to my desk, turned on my computer, and worked on redrafting the project. Although from time to time since, I still think of her not reading the work, it does not have the same ability to charge me up."

This almost looks like magic. Indeed, people who have been through mindfulness-based training programs sometimes use words such as *miracle* to describe experiences like Meg's. As mindfulness develops, we can more and more observe thoughts and emotions as if they were bubbles rising from the bottom of a pot of boiling water; we simply watch as they burst at the surface. It sometimes feels as if the awareness itself, in touching the thought or feeling, makes it go "poof," just like Meg's soap bubble. Tibetans sometimes say in this regard that thoughts "self-liberate" in the field of pure awareness.

Meg's experience shows that, when we experience difficult and unwanted emotions, we can transform our experience by intentionally bringing a kindly/allowing awareness to these feelings and emotions as they are experienced in the body. Once more, we see that cultivating awareness by working through the body in the very moments that the first inklings of emotional reactivity arise allows us to sidestep a possible descent into persistent unhappiness and depression. It provides a way to be with any persisting unpleasant feelings without struggle, offering the possibility of fully experiencing being alive, even in the midst of whatever difficulties we are challenged with.