



Ryan M. Niemiec

# Mindfulness and Character Strengths

A Practitioner's Guide to MBSP

2nd edition



# Mindfulness and Character Strengths

# About the Author

Ryan M. Niemiec (pronounced “knee-mick”), PsyD, is a leading international figure in the education, science, and practice of character strengths that are found in all human beings. Dr. Niemiec is chief science and education officer of the renowned VIA Institute on Character, a nonprofit organization in Cincinnati, Ohio, that leads the global advancement of the science of character strengths. Ryan has been at the center of this work, positively impacting many millions of people.

Ryan is an award-winning psychologist, certified coach, annual instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, and special guest faculty member at five coaching and positive psychology institutes. Ryan received the Distinguished Early Career Award from the American Psychological Association, was awarded the title of Fellow of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), and has also served on their Council of Advisors. He is cofounder and president of the Spirituality/Meaning Division of IPPA.

As a writer, Ryan has authored 14 books, over 100 academic papers, and several hundred user-friendly articles (his blog on *Psychology Today* is called “What Matters Most?”). His books include the best-selling consumer book, *The Power of Character Strengths* (with Robert McGrath), and books on stress management, strengths in teens, positive movies, and strengths for disabilities and abilities. He’s also author of the two leading practitioner-focused books in positive psychology – *Character Strengths Interventions* and *Mindfulness and Character Strengths*. The latter book (of which you are reading from the second edition) contains the evidenced-based program he founded, *mindfulness-based strengths practice* (MBSP), now used by practitioners and researchers in more than 50 countries. He created an MBSP Certification in 2021, the first character strengths certification program.

As a practitioner, Ryan has led hundreds of mindfulness-based program sessions for clinical and lay audiences and has led the MBSP program in particular over 20 times. For more than 2 decades he has led mindfulness-oriented retreats to help people experientially connect with the present moment, themselves, others, and the world. He previously conducted over 10,000 hrs of psychotherapy when he functioned as a full-time clinical psychologist.

As a scientist, he collaborates with multiple research groups across the globe, and since 2021 has catalyzed studies involving hundreds of thousands of participants. His research areas include character strengths, MBSP, positive interventions, peace psychology, nature and environment connection, spirituality, life meaning, disability, and positive health.

As an educator, Ryan has been interviewed by a number of luminaries, including the legendary Larry King in 2020. He’s given over 1,000 presentations on positive psychology topics, including a character strengths world tour in 2009–2010, a speaking tour of Australia in 2014, a TEDx talk in 2017, and keynote addresses at Harvard and conferences across the globe. He was one of the invited speakers for the grand opening of the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health at Harvard University in 2023.

Ryan cofounded Blooming Strengths Sangha, an open, global mindfulness and character strengths community that focuses on practices, experiences, and mindful living community building. His lineage name, in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, is Fullest Breath of the Heart, and he is an aspirant for ordination in the Order of Interbeing.

Peer-reviewed journal articles have been written about Ryan and his work (e.g., MacFarland, 2022; Jarden, 2012).

Ryan lives in Cincinnati with his wife and three young, zestful children. His highest strengths are hope, love, honesty, fairness, spirituality, curiosity, and appreciation of beauty. In his leisure time, he plays tai chi, tennis, basketball, and chess, is a zealot of Michigan State University athletics, a superfan of The Walking Dead series, a collector of vintage and rare Pez dispensers, engaging in creative writing, and building communities in mindfulness and character strengths.

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**Ryan M. Niemiec**



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# Praise for the First Edition of This Book

In this remarkable book, Ryan Niemiec brings alive the synergy between the rich body of mindfulness teachings and a pioneering model for understanding character strengths. By demonstrating how mindful attention can be directed in a systematic and precise way to awaken our full potential, this guidebook makes a unique contribution to the field of transformation and spiritual awakening.

*Tara Brach, PhD, author of Radical Acceptance and True Refuge*

*Mindfulness and Character Strengths* is a cogent, nuanced articulation of the principles and practice of mindfulness as applied in the context of positive psychology. Ryan's rich experience as a meditation practitioner illuminates the work.

*Sharon Salzberg, author of Lovingkindness, The Force of Kindness, and Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation, and co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society*

By bringing together two powerful practices – mindfulness and character strengths – Ryan Niemiec has created a practical, effective, and inspiring program that can benefit individuals and organizations. Reading and applying the ideas in this book can help you fulfill your potential for happiness and success.

*Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, bestselling author of Happier and Being Happy*

The fields of positive psychology and mindfulness have been separate for too long. This fascinating book shows how mindfulness and character strengths complement and enhance each other and describes an innovative 8-week program for anyone seeking awareness, insight, and the cultivation of the best within themselves.

*Ruth A. Baer, PhD, Professor at University of Kentucky; Editor of Mindfulness-Based Treatment Approaches and Assessing Mindfulness and Acceptance Processes in Clients*

Ryan Niemiec, with solid scholarship in both mindfulness and character strengths, has now become the first scholar to integrate these two paths of healing and growth in his book *Mindfulness and Character Strengths* to create an avenue that offers powerful healing and flourishing to many. Using his own strengths of humility, love of learning and creativity, Ryan has synthesized two relevant fields, producing a brilliant and profound mélange of ideas which gently nudge readers to observe themselves mindfully and also let their awareness not escape their innate goodness of kindness, compassion, curiosity and gratitude so they can harness their inbuilt negativity bias. Ryan's book is a unique blend of elegant ideas melded in innovative methods – all rooted in good science. It is a must read for anyone who is interested in exploring contentment – of their own and of those around them.

*Tayyab Rashid, PhD, CPsych, Psychologist & Researcher, University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada*



*Mindfulness and Character Strengths* weaves together the perennial wisdom of mindfulness with the modern scientific study of character strengths, in a beautiful tapestry that will benefit professionals across many disciplines, as well as the people whose lives they touch.

*Shauna Shapiro, PhD, Associate Professor at Santa Clara University, CA and co-author of The Art and Science of Mindfulness: Integrating Mindfulness into Psychology and the Helping Professions*

This book is amazing! Dr. Niemiec has both a deep understanding of mindfulness and a working expertise in the strengths-based approach of positive psychology. This book adds unique insights, and represents an important contribution to the field. The writing is both clear and detailed – I highly recommend this book.

*Richard Sears, PsyD, MBA, ABPP, faculty member of the Doctor of Psychology Program at Union Institute and University and Director of the Center for Clinical Mindfulness and Meditation; lead author of Mindfulness in Clinical Practice*

An excellent and very practical book that well integrates mindfulness and the development of character strengths. The book is surely to be helpful to many people from all walks of life and blends positive psychology with this important contemplative approach. Many tips and examples are well-supported with evidence-based research findings too. I'll surely recommend the book to clients, colleagues, and students, which I know will be well received and appreciated.

*Thomas G. Plante, PhD, ABPP, The Augustin Cardinal Bea, S.J. University Professor and Director of Spirituality & Health Institute, Santa Clara University, CA; author of Religion, Spirituality, and Positive Psychology and Contemplative Practices in Action*

Character strengths have been shown to be involved in a variety of positive outcomes in private and work life and their use is beneficial to adults and youth. This book goes one step further and introduces Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP), a program combining mindfulness and strengths that is aimed at guiding individuals and organizations to flourishing. This new book by Ryan Niemiec includes a variety of useful worksheets, exercises, homework assignments, etc. that the reader and trainee will enjoy.

*Willibald Ruch, PhD, Professor of Psychology; Director of Character Strengths Lab, University of Zurich, Switzerland*

# For Rhys

(1st edition, written in 2012)

my precious son  
how might I completely express my love for you?  
words alone cannot  
actions alone cannot  
savoring cannot  
time spent cannot  
mindfulness use cannot  
strengths use cannot  
my only hope ...  
is to model a life well-lived

(2nd edition, written in 2022)

my precious son  
ten years have passed  
I continue to ponder how to completely express my love for you?  
Is it through my spotting of your leadership with your siblings,  
your kindness to worms and trees,  
your zest-filled humor that elicits giggles, your stated gratitude for our family,  
our bonding over Star Wars, Spartans, the sky, and your sports,  
and late-night chats?  
Yes and yes.  
But, you must know, the chains of autopilot are thick, crafty, and confusing,  
and strengths can be forgotten in a half-second,  
Yet, my intention is clear,  
my default of love is steadfast,  
and you will *always* be  
my treasure





# Acknowledgments

For the first edition, I listed 100 individuals by name, as well as many groups and organizations, across several pages, to whom I was grateful for their support, trust, and wisdom surrounding this special case of integrating mindfulness and character strengths. Gratitude does not disappear, so I remain grateful to those important people and groups. For this edition, I wish to express my gratitude differently and more simply.

I am grateful to my whole family – immediate, nuclear, and extended. Thank you all for your love. And, R<sup>4</sup>xM forever.

I am grateful to my innovative and groundbreaking employer, the VIA Institute, and each talented person on the core team, the VIA faculty, and VIA consultants. Thank you for expressing your talents to the world through VIA.

I am grateful to my publisher, Hogrefe, and their whole team. Thank you for believing in me, my writing, and for helping to bring this important work to the world.

I am grateful to the many MBSP participants I have taught, to the MBSP leaders whom I've met and not met, to those who are MBSP certified or candidates. Thank you for your inspiration and personal growth which will benefit many.

I am grateful to my sanghas – local (Being Peace Sangha) and global (Blooming Strengths Sangha) – my Order of Interbeing training program in Southeast Asia, the Plum Village community, and my teacher, the late, continuing Thich Nhat Hanh.

I continue forward, strongly, because of each of you.

I bow to all of you.



# Foreword to Second Edition

Ryan Niemiec is one of the foremost practitioners of well-being research in the world today. I have had the good fortune of hearing him present his work on a number of occasions, both in the context of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program I direct and teach in at the University of Pennsylvania and at the World Congress on Positive Psychology organized by the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA). Our pedagogical model in the MAPP program is to include not only instruction by Martin Seligman and other faculty from the University of Pennsylvania but also to invite many of the world's leading researchers and practitioners in positive psychology and related fields to address our students directly. For over a decade now, we have asked Ryan to lead a module on the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues for our students. We have found him to be deeply informed, passionate, and compassionate in his presentations on strengths, and our students respond by giving him standing ovations.

When Ryan told me he was considering writing a book connecting strengths and mindfulness, I told him I thought it was a good idea. Now that I have had the privilege of reading the resulting volume, I think it is an outstanding idea. As you will shortly see, Ryan masterfully leverages the expertise on strengths he has honed as the Chief Science and Education Officer of the VIA Institute on Character (the nonprofit organization that advances the science and practice of character strengths) together with his extensive experience leading hundreds of mindfulness meditation groups over the last 10 years. What he has accomplished as a result is a work of insightful integration.

Most obviously, this book integrates two evidence-based domains of well-being research and practice. Academic research tends to develop in silos, with scholars rewarded for conducting studies on a single topic or approach. Evidence-based practice all too often follows academic precedent by focusing on the delivery of a single type of intervention, or by cobbling together a series of interventions. In contrast, Ryan's accomplishment here is to provide a deep practical integration of two influential lines of research. Beyond simply pointing out that both mindfulness meditation and character strengths are important for human flourishing, he argues convincingly that strengths can support mindfulness and that mindfulness can enhance strengths. Even more importantly, his *Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice* (MBSP) program provides a detailed model for putting these insights into practice and MBSP has now been found to provide numerous well-being benefits in multiple studies. Ryan's work constitutes an outstanding example that I hope other researchers and practitioners will follow to integrate other domains for the enhanced cultivation of human flourishing.

Less obvious, perhaps, than the integration of mindfulness and character strengths (but just as important) is the contribution Ryan's work makes toward the integration of other aspects of human flourishing that should not be separated. First is the unfortunate divide between the mind and the body. In positive psychology, many of the leading researchers come from the tradition of cognitive psychology, so it is not surprising that so many positive interventions have a cognitive emphasis. Although the body is necessary to carry out these positive interventions, it is almost always treated incidentally, with no explicit guidance on ways the body can enhance the effectiveness of the intervention. The philosopher

Richard Shusterman (2012) has argued extensively that biases against the body in Western culture have constituted an obstacle to human flourishing. To counteract these biases, he founded the field of somaesthetics, which “concerns the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning” (p. 27). One effect of Ryan’s work in this present volume is to help bring the body to positive psychology practices to enhance the cultivation of human flourishing. With its great emphasis on an awareness of the body, mindfulness meditation introduces a welcome somatic dimension in work on character strengths, a dimension that is largely lacking outside of the MBSP approach.

A second general integrative contribution of Ryan’s work has to do with the overall orientation of psychological interventions. Kenneth Pargament (2007) has pointed out that psychology (at least in the United States) is largely a “psychology of control,” since it focuses on helping people gain greater control in their lives. He contrasts this with a “psychology of acceptance,” which focuses on helping people come to terms with the things in their lives they cannot control. Clearly, both of these approaches are important in the right balance. Applying this distinction to the themes of this book, it seems clear that character strengths tend to focus on helping people gain more control in their lives, and mindfulness meditation tends to focus on helping people toward greater acceptance. Of course, this distinction is not absolute, since some character strengths (gratitude and spirituality, for example) seem more oriented toward acceptance, and since mindfulness relies on our ability to manage our attention and may result in greater control over our behavior. By bringing strengths and mindfulness together, however, Ryan invites us to examine this distinction in greater detail and opens up possibilities for a more effective balance between control and acceptance in human life.

Finally, Ryan’s work points out the value of an integration of the science of well-being and the culture of human flourishing, and of the application of this integration in practice. Both the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues and mindfulness meditation demonstrate the value of a partnership between science and culture. In both these cases, advances have been made because scientists have looked to culture for an understanding of the nature of human flourishing and for ways of cultivating it. Culture has provided a wealth of wisdom and practical knowledge, and science has contributed empirical methods of inquiry that are used to document the value of this cultural treasure and to investigate the most effective ways of applying it in various contexts. These examples indicate that the quest for human flourishing must be an interdisciplinary endeavor and that it progresses best through a collaboration between science and culture. From this perspective, Ryan’s work can be seen as an important contribution to the new field of the positive humanities, which studies the connection between culture and human flourishing (Pawelski, 2022).

In sum, I believe this book is path breaking in several ways: It brings together two key elements in the quest for human flourishing; it uses an integrative approach that provides a robust model for future work in positive interventions; and it helps overcome harmful oppositions between the mind and the body, between the psychology of control and the psychology of acceptance, and between science and culture. I hope you will have an opportunity to hear Ryan present this material in person – as a part of a future MAPP class, at an upcoming IPPA World Congress on Positive Psychology, or at some other venue. In the meantime, I hope that you enjoy this book as much as I have and that you are able to put its contents to good use in your own life and in the lives of those you touch.

James O. Pawelski  
July 2023

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# Contents

Praise for the First Edition of This Book . . . . .	v
Dedication . . . . .	vii
Acknowledgments . . . . .	ix
Foreword to Second Edition . . . . .	xi
Preface . . . . .	xvii
 <b>Section I: Primers</b>	
Chapter 1: A Primer on Mindfulness . . . . .	3
Chapter 2: A Primer on Character Strengths . . . . .	31
 <b>Section II: Integration</b>	
Chapter 3: The Integration of Mindfulness and Character Strengths . . . . .	67
Chapter 4: Practice I: Strong Mindfulness (Bringing Strengths to Mindfulness) . . . . .	83
Chapter 5: Practice II: Mindful Strengths Use (Bringing Mindfulness to Strengths) . . . . .	113
 <b>Section III: MBSP Overview</b>	
Chapter 6: Overview of MBSP: Science and Practice . . . . .	137
 <b>Section IV: MBSP Sessions</b>	
Session 1: Mindfulness and Autopilot . . . . .	175
Session 2 : Your Character Strengths and Signature Strengths . . . . .	195
Session 3 : Obstacles and Struggles Are Opportunities . . . . .	217
Session 4: Strengthening Mindfulness in Everyday Life . . . . .	233
Session 5: Your Relationship With Yourself and Others . . . . .	249
Session 6: Mindfulness of the Golden Mean . . . . .	267
Session 7: Authenticity and Goodness . . . . .	281
Session 8: Your Engagement With Life . . . . .	295
 <b>Section V: MBSP Retreat, MBSP Leader Insights, Other Features, and Adaptations</b>	
Chapter 7: MBSP Retreat . . . . .	307
Chapter 8: MBSP Leader Insights, Additional Features, and MBSP Adaptations . . . . .	317
References . . . . .	333

## **Section VI: Resources**

Appendix 1: Notes on Supplementary Material

Appendix 2: About the VIA Institute on Character

Appendix 3: MBSP Fact Sheet

Appendix 4: Character Strengths Q&A

Appendix 5: MBSP Certification

Appendix 6: Pathways to a Full Life – The VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues, and Valued Outcomes

Appendix 7: MBSP Session-By-Session Summary and Centerpiece Activities

Appendix 8: MBSP Learning Objectives

Appendix 9: What Is New and Improved in MBSP in the 2nd Edition

Appendix 10: Reading Activity 1.1: Overview of Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice

Appendix 11: Practice Worksheets for Character Strengths 360

Appendix 12: MBSP Feedback Form

Appendix 13: Website Resources

# Preface

*The faculty of bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will...an education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.*

William James

It's an honor to write this book, again. I am on the same journey of awareness and growth as each person reading these sentences, and it is humbling to describe my observations, experiences, and understanding of the advancement of the sciences and practices relating to these topics.

These topics are extraordinary ones. To merge mindfulness and character strengths is to bring a deep awareness to our best qualities and to use these qualities to improve our awareness. Mindfulness and character strengths deepen one another. Mindfulness offers *the how* for the practice of character strengths. In other words, to practice using strengths with mindfulness is to be intentional and conscious about noticing and deploying your best qualities. Character strengths draw upon mindfulness itself (e.g., curiosity, self-regulation), providing *the fuel* to help you make mindfulness an ongoing part of your daily life. Truly, this integration is the ultimate uniting of our mind and heart.

This book is about using mindfulness and character strengths in everyday life. Can you practice more mindful living and strengths-based living in your life? Absolutely, you can, no matter what your lifestyle, work demands, or family situation. It will look different for each person. For me, I have three very active young children, a long-standing marriage filled with the various habits of being while my wife and I have full-time jobs, with a dog that often prefers not to be house-trained, a myriad of exciting writing projects, and multiple activities for our children each week. Yet, mindfulness and character strengths can be imperfectly woven into this lifestyle. Another person might have a highly demanding, on-call position at a hospital; another is struggling in a difficult unhappy relationship; and yet another person lives alone experiencing quite a bit of loneliness. Each individual has their challenges – and it is fruitless to compare the complexity of one person's situation with the next. Instead there's the reality that mindfulness and character strengths can be central tools and ways of living for each of us.

## Beginnings

My formal connection and practice with mindfulness began in the 1990s when I was introduced to the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, a humble and prolific Buddhist monk. I began to read and practice the principles contained in several of his books, especially *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, *Being Peace*, and *Peace Is Every Step*. His observations on tuning into the present moment struck a deep chord in me. I was astonished at how the words and the

practices were simultaneously simple and deep. They were simple in that they were immediately understandable and could be quickly applied in daily life in a meaningful way, and his words were deep in that upon reflection it was clear that they offered solid wisdom about how to live a fulfilling life. This naturally led me to the work of other popular mindfulness teachers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn.

I attended mindfulness retreats and conferences and seriously studied mindfulness as espoused by both secular and nonsecular teachers (including Buddhists and Christians), and more important, applied mindfulness in my daily life – practicing meditation, engaging in mindful walking, applying mindfulness to mundane tasks such as washing the dishes, and using mindfulness when stressed or anxious. As a psychologist, I found that mindfulness connected well with my holistic conceptualization of people, fit neatly with the emerging trend toward mind–body therapies, and offered a powerful path that could help clients who were suffering. I began to lead meditation experiences for a wide range of clients, helping professionals, and the general public, and I used these workshops to teach participants how to integrate Eastern and Western philosophies and practices. Soon, I was being invited to lead day-long mindfulness training programs for practitioners and weekend mindfulness retreats for the general public. At this time, interest in mindfulness was spreading; however, it was in its infancy, either an unknown or a mere curiosity to most professionals, compared with its popularity in today’s world.

One day, in 2002, the late Dr. Bob Wilke, the director of the Psychology and Religion Program at Saint Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute, called me into his office. He was pleased with the success of the mindfulness groups I’d been leading for priests, nuns, friars, and other ministers. Bob pointed to a green book on his desk titled *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression* (Segal et al., 2002), and he said, “Ryan, I want you to *do this* in our program.” Being a fairly agreeable person, trusting Bob’s judgment, and intrigued by the book’s title, I responded, “Sure.” I soon came to understand that the research and practice in this book was both solid and significant, as well as cutting-edge psychology. I studied the approach, attended workshops on the topic, continued my personal mindfulness practice, and wove *mindfulness-based cognitive therapy* (MBCT) into my work.

A hybrid model began to emerge in my practice – one that merged the wisdom and mindful living qualities of Thich Nhat Hanh, the structured, scientific-based approach of MBCT, and the widely applied scientific work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. I was privileged to bring mindfulness to groups and individuals, to those suffering with medical and mental illness, addictions, and everyday problems and stressors. This involved leading hundreds of groups in clinical and nonclinical settings. I was inspired by the immediate joy people often experienced, the healing that came about, and the excitement that was generated when someone began to grow and change as a result of implementing these new behaviors and practices.

Seven years later I was hired by a nonprofit organization, the VIA Institute on Character (see Appendix 2), where I currently conduct science, design best practices, and educate both clinicians and nonclinicians about the latest research and knowledge in working with character strengths. This position allowed me to spend my time exploring the research on working with strengths in general, as well as the latest specific research on each of the 24 character strengths, collaborating with leading scientists, practicing from a strengths-based approach, and teaching practitioners around the world how to improve their work with strengths.

While conducting trainings, the topic of mindfulness as a mechanism for working with strengths repeatedly came up. In addition, the main model for working with character

strengths – aware-explore-apply (Niemiec, 2013) – happens to begin with mindfulness. Research was documenting more and more that mindfulness could be applied successfully to help people manage a variety of problems, disorders, and struggles, and, at the same time, bring about greater balance, coping, and resources. So why not bring mindfulness explicitly to what is best in individuals? An important synergy was developing. Despite widespread popularity, there were no programs focused exclusively on training individuals and groups on the VIA character strengths. I saw a natural opportunity and began to experiment with integrating these topics. I presented on the integration in several countries during a VIA World Tour of character strengths in 2009–2010, had conversations with practitioners in each country and cutting across industries, and developed several iterations of what eventually became *mindfulness-based strengths practice* (MBSP). Early versions of the program were tested by me and a handful of expert practitioners from several countries, and the original data were positive. The first edition of this present book was published, and I sat back and observed what was to come, while continuing to lead MBSP groups each year. The full manual for MBSP is found in Section III and Section IV of this book.

## Humble About Our Limitations

About 2 decades ago I was asked to be part of a mindfulness colloquium that involved professors, educators, and meditators from different disciplines, along with a special presentation by a Bhikkhu. A Bhikkhu is an ordained Buddhist monk, and this particular Bhikkhu was a well-known scholar who was widely revered. As the star of the show, the Bhikkhu opened his candid presentation with humor and humanity. He wished to show the audience that he was a human being with normal emotions and playfulness just like everyone else. And, knowing that I, *the psychologist*, was to be presenting after him, he decided to offer a joke at my expense. He commented on the limitations of the profession of psychology and added, “Psychology has been around for over 100 years and look at how much progress society has made,” he quipped. The audience roared with laughter.

While I realize my profession is an easy target (just watch any movie that portrays a psychologist or psychiatrist), I wasn’t happy that the monk had made no effort to clarify or explain what psychology has accomplished. Instead, he sat down, leaving the exclusively negative comments for further audience interpretation and potential perpetration of stereotypes.

Later, when it was my turn to present, I stood up and arranged my PowerPoint presentation to the opening slide with my credentials thus revealing my vulnerability to the Bhikkhu’s earlier comment – my topic was the integration of mindfulness in psychotherapy. I turned to the audience of a few hundred people, with my PowerPoint slide looming large over my head, and said, bowing deeply, “With all due respect to the Bhikkhu, Buddhism has been around for not 100 but over 2,600 years, and look at how much progress society has made.”

Perhaps my statement was not exemplary from the perspective of forgiveness and letting go (which actually is a high strength for me), but there is a message of humility in this story. We need to be humble about what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. Mindfulness, when practiced well, beckons us to humility ... to let go of a focus on ourselves and be present to our true nature, our connectedness with others. My comment, similar to the Bhikkhu’s, was good-natured teasing. Indeed, both Buddhism and

psychology have accomplished much over the decades (in the case of Buddhism, over the centuries), and each continues to teach society.

It is important for me to express humility with regard to the topics in this book and their integration. While humanity has greatly evolved over the centuries (Pinker, 2012), there is a substantial amount of work to be done. It is hopeful to know that new research and practices are emerging and being developed each month that will continue to inform, update, and improve the integration of mindfulness and character strengths.

## We All Need Support

One week I was running late for my sangha gathering (a *sangha* is a meditation community in which members support one another in their meditation practice). While making a quick turn onto one of the side roads on the way there, I safely but abruptly cut off another car. As I continued to drive along, I found myself hoping the person I had cut off would turn down a side street. Instead, they continued on behind me. They were not chasing me; they were simply the car behind me on a divided road.

When I made the turn down the long, quarter-mile driveway toward the sangha building, the other car turned as well. My embarrassment elevated. This was a road that dead-ended right at my destination, and I would soon be face-to-face with the individual I had cut off! We got out of our cars at the same time. I recognized the man from our weekly gatherings. I initially hoped he didn't realize that I was the person who had cut him off. He smiled at me in a way that demonstrated that he sensed my embarrassment. His expression was soft, friendly, and forgiving.

I turned to him and apologized, noting: "Now you understand why I need to come to sangha?"

As mindfulness teacher, Jon Kabat-Zinn has commented, "There are not too many people I know who cannot benefit from a higher dose of awareness." This is true for me now, and I am convinced will remain true for the rest of my life. The same is true for character strengths.

## We Have Come a Long Way

For the first edition of this book, I said:

The topics in this book are new and old at the same time. Mindfulness has a deep, wide, and rich history, as does the study of virtues and strengths and the other positive qualities that reveal our humanness. At the same time, the scientific study of mindfulness and of character strengths are both quite young; each has a smattering of studies and important articles that date back a few decades. However, it has only been in the last decade that each has flourished, especially mindfulness. As is common with new psychological domains that promise to help others, practice often jumps out ahead of science. This is particularly true of the science of character, which has moved along nicely for a new field; however, not nearly as rapid as the explosion of studies, programs, and practices involving mindfulness meditation.

Interestingly, almost nothing has been written on the formal integration of these two fascinating

areas. Apart from an unpublished study, a blog or two, and a couple of recent publications, there's not much one can find on how mindfulness informs character strengths and how character strengths inform mindfulness practice. This book fills this gap. (Niemiec, 2014, p. xv)

Here in this second edition, we have 10 years of new science on character strengths, mindfulness, and MBSP (see Appendix 3); validation of MBSP outperforming the globe's leading mindfulness program (i.e., *mindfulness-based stress reduction* – MBSR) across multiple variables; hundreds of MBSP participants across the globe; MBSP leaders on every continent applying it across clients and contexts; 20 MBSP cohorts on the VIA Institute site; an MBSP Certification program for one cohort per year; insights from hundreds of presentations, including an MBSP tour of Australia; a university in Mexico that brings MBSP to all students, faculty, and staff every year – 60,000 people across 20 campuses; a university in the UK that has made MBSP the core of its master's degree curriculum; and dozens of new MBSP insights, practices, and improvements. Indeed, *the gap* has been closed.

In the first edition, I had remarked that 2 million people had taken the VIA Survey to learn their character strengths over the preceding 12 or so years (see <https://www.viacharacter.org/>). The number is now approaching 30 million (at the onset of 2023), and the 100 or so research studies of character strengths have increased to more than 900 in this time. Mindfulness studies have been surpassing an astounding 1,000 studies *per year*, each year since 2019 (American Mindfulness Research Association, 2022).

Nevertheless, what follows in this book is not a collection of golden truths. It is not flawlessly glowing in perfection. Nothing should be viewed that way. Rather, readers and participants should use the content as catalysts to examine their perceptions – of themselves and others. They should use it as a catalyst to initiate and/or deepen their personal practice and inspire others to do the same. The science and practice of mindfulness and of character strengths is to improve humanity, building well-being and reducing suffering. Thus, I turn this work to myself, and I turn it to you, the engaged reader.

## The Approach at Hand

While divided into five formal sections, I have always described this book as having two main parts: one part is the rationale, science, and practice of the integration of mindfulness and character strengths, and the second is the full manual for MBSP.

Here's a more detailed look at what you'll find in this book.

I begin with primers on mindfulness (Chapter 1) and on character strengths (Chapter 2). These treat each area as a separate topic, examining the core concepts, related ideas, research, and practices. Chapter 3 offers a theoretical rationale for the integration of mindfulness and character strengths, and summarizes the existing research on the connections between mindfulness and the 24 character strengths. Chapters 4 and 5 look closely at the two main ways to integrate these areas – bringing character strengths to mindfulness (referred to as strong mindfulness) and bringing mindfulness to character strengths (referred to as mindful strengths use). Chapter 6 marks the third section of the book which is the manual for *mindfulness-based strengths practice* (MBSP) – a program designed to foster strong mindfulness and mindful strengths use, to simultaneously boost well-being and manage suffering, and to help lead people toward the better angels of their nature to benefit society. MBSP is the first formal training program of character strengths. This chapter offers a



summary of the science of MBSP, the participant and facilitator experience of MBSP, the ego of the facilitator, the change process, ethics, and important details for running MBSP such as the internal structure of sessions, the many levels of preparations needed, details about elements in the sessions (e.g., the Virtue Circle, journaling vs. tracking), managing challenges, and common Q&A. This is followed by Sessions 1 through 8 describing each session of MBSP and including outlines, worksheets, scripts, exercises, debriefing strategies, case examples, and practices. The chapters then resume with Chapter 7, which details the MBSP Retreat, a 5-hour experience occurring during the MBSP program to help participants deepen their practices and apply them right into their daily life experience. Chapter 8 offers insights and tips from various MBSP leaders, optional strategies to help facilitators in between sessions and after MBSP, and a discussion on adapting MBSP to align with certain populations, settings, and topic areas. Appendices follow to support the learning along the way. Hundreds of references to scientific studies, best practices, scholarly works, and wisdom literature are included to support the work.

## What's New in this Second Edition?

This edition is considered not just a second edition but a revamping. As plenty has unfolded in the science and practice in the 10 years since the first edition, the entire book is updated. The MBSP program has been fully updated following the author's leadership of the program more than 20 times and development by other MBSP leaders across the globe. What follows are some of the improvements for this revised and revamped second edition of *Mindfulness and Character Strengths*.

- Multiple advancements in the MBSP program, including improvements to every session, adding in new activities shown to have a big impact, and improvement in flow.
- New strength models such as the spot, explain, and appreciate (SEA) model of strengths-spotting, the opening, arriving, returning, and strengthening (OARS) model for retreat experiences, and the  $E = mc^2$  model for all character strengths-based practitioners.
- New sections on ethics with mindfulness and strengths approaches, the question of how big your mindfulness is, issues of the ego of the MBSP leader, and obstacles to practicing.
- Over 100 new research studies sourced, including reviews of MBSP research, and integration of the recent studies in the fields of mindfulness and character strengths.
- New tables such as Four Types of Mindfulness Practice (Table 2); Four Types of Character Strengths Practices (Table 5), and Uncommon, But Integral Ways to View Mindfulness and/or Mindfulness Practice (Table 1).
- New practical activities shown to be effective in MBSP, including the Character Strengths Fluency Builder (Session 2), Mental Subtraction activity (Session 2), Loving-Gratitude Meditation (Session 5), and Awakeness Meditation (Session 1).
- Strategies for virtual MBSP programs are highlighted in many of the MBSP session discussions.
- New audio meditation files include the Loving-Gratitude Meditation (Session 5: Audio Track 8) and the Mindful Pause (Session 6: Audio Track 11).
- Additions to the popular Questions and Answers sections (see Chapters 6 and 7; Appendix 4).
- A new chapter for the MBSP Retreat (Chapter 7).

- Several new appendices including description of the first-ever certification in character strengths (called MBSP Certification; see Appendix 5).
- And much more embedded throughout the book!

It is also important to know that there is a brand-new companion book, *The Mindfulness and Character Strengths Workbook*, for the general consumer and general public. It is a stand-alone book for anyone wanting to explore the topics for themselves *and* it is a resource for MBSP leaders of groups, courses, and individuals to assign for their students, employees, and clients to get while participating in MBSP work.

## The Audience for This Book

This book is written for the practitioner, whatever their profession. There are many professions that help people, and therefore many professionals who can put the ideas in this book to good use. A few examples include:

- Counselors, psychologists, and social workers
- Coaches, mentors, medical professionals, and other helping professionals
- Educators, professors, and teachers who give presentations to the general public and those who work with university students and other youths
- Business professionals, such as managers, executives, consultants, executive coaches, and various leaders in organizations
- Researchers, who will find a programmatic template that can be studied empirically; and those who want to advance the science of character strengths and mindfulness

This is intentionally a wide net. The benefits of mindfulness and character strengths extend far beyond such categories. These are universal concepts that help people become stronger. For the astute layperson, this book offers introductory, intermediate, and advanced concepts in learning about mindfulness and character strengths practices that can help the individual deepen their mindfulness practice and/or enhance their well-being. The book includes numerous practical tips for enhancing these ideas in daily life.

I encourage practitioners and researchers to study the program, and I welcome your comments and questions. Feel free to contact me by e-mail and peruse the cited websites for articles, sample meditations, and other MBSP resources and updates.

With gratitude for your inherent goodness, and with the hope that it be expressed widely and mindfully.

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July 2023



# Section I: Primers



# Chapter 1

## A Primer on Mindfulness

*My experience is what I agree to attend to.*

William James



### Chapter snapshot

Mindfulness is a widely popular topic in the social sciences, in both research and practice. This chapter offers a primer on mindfulness, reviewing general concepts and ideas, such as scientific and practical definitions, misconceptions, the nature of autopilot, and the mindfulness continuum. Important background and historical information on mindfulness are discussed, followed by the presentation of research on a variety of mindfulness programs, underlying mindfulness mechanisms, and mindfulness in everyday life. Mindfulness practices are discussed, and practice tips are reviewed throughout the chapter.



### Opening story

During weeklong retreats with renowned mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (referred to as “Thay,” which is Vietnamese for “teacher”), there was an opportunity for participants to pose a question to the venerable teacher to respond to. On one retreat, I recall Thay’s sharing about an instance with a nuclear physicist who came up to the front of the retreat hall to ask a question in front of nearly 1,000 retreatants. The physicist shared that as he was beginning to deepen his mindfulness practice and see his life more clearly, he was coming to realize that his professional work seemed to be contributing to the advancement of potential danger and destruction rather than helping or creating a better world. He explained the suffering he had begun to feel because of this and his emerging thoughts of quitting his job. “What should I do?” he asked Thay. After a few deep breaths and careful reflection, Thay turned to the man and encouraged him to continue practicing mindfulness at his job; he explained that with a position of that level of seriousness, it’s better to have someone practicing mindfulness giving deep thought and reflection to each action, potential action, and impact of these action rather than to have someone else functioning mindlessly and carelessly.

A core theme of mindfulness emerges from this story: whatever you are doing, do it mindfully. As the story indicates, rather than trying to take away the bad, avoid the negative, change who you are, or make a series of life changes; often the best response is to bring greater mindfulness to the current task.

## Mindfulness Background and History

Mindfulness is an ancient practice that has come into focus in recent decades. Psychologists, neuroscientists, and a variety of clinical professionals are investigating and/or applying mindfulness in their work. Mindfulness originated in ancient Buddhist practices from over 2,600 years ago and was brought to Western countries by teachers who emigrated and by Westerners who travelled to Asia to study and practice it before it became known in the West. Many people in research and clinical mental health fields have become mindfulness practitioners (and vice versa), so it was probably only a matter of time before Western culture started to examine mindfulness in a thorough and serious way, moving beyond regarding it as an Eastern curiosity or esoteric practice.

In the Buddhist framework, mindfulness is one of several qualities of mind that are exercised in order to ultimately achieve *awakening* or *enlightenment*, a state in which one experiences physical and emotional pain without suffering. This involves an experience of self-transcendence and is accompanied by a great sense of well-being, compassion, and altruistic motivation. Mindfulness is mentioned in the earliest known Buddhist texts of Theravada Buddhism (the Pali Canon), but as a core essential of Buddhist principles it remained a central part of Buddhism as it spread across cultures and time, including in the Mahayana (e.g., Zen) and Vajrayana (e.g., Tibetan) schools. Formal Buddhist meditations are sometimes simplified into two basic practices: *samatha* or *samadhi* (concentration, one-pointed meditation) and *vipassana* (insight meditation). The former refers to the development of calm and concentration, while the latter refers to looking deeply and developing insight. Indeed, many Western mindfulness practitioners integrate both concentration practice and insight meditation into the framework of mindfulness groups and programs. In Buddhism, negativity emerges from misperceptions and misunderstandings about others and the universe, and the fundamental life motivation is viewed as the quest for happiness (Wallace & Hodel, 2008).

One could argue that mindfulness came to the awareness of Westerners through Buddhism because Buddhism places such a central emphasis on it and has developed a wide variety of practices to develop it among practitioners. Buddhist psychology is also explicitly aimed at the reduction of suffering and promotion of well-being, which makes it easily applicable to Western research and clinical fields. Further, Buddhism places a great deal of emphasis on empirical observation over faith, and as such does not require any particular beliefs that cannot be verified through observation. The effectiveness of mindfulness as an approach/way of life or intervention does not require subscribing to any particular religious beliefs.

While Buddhism is the tradition that is most responsible for articulating and introducing mindfulness to Western cultures, mindfulness is arguably present to a considerable degree in all of the major world religions. Elements of mindfulness are most evident in the mystical or contemplative branches of religions emphasizing introspection, humility, and patience, including Christianity (e.g., the Desert Fathers of 3rd-century Egypt; Carrigan, 2001; and numerous mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross), Sufi Islam, Jewish Kabbalah, Taoism, and Hinduism (e.g., Advaita Vedanta or nondualism). For example, there are equivalent terms for the attentional aspect of mindfulness developed in contemplative traditions: *recollection* in Christianity, *zikr* in Islam, *kavanah* in Judaism, and *samadhi* in Buddhism and Hinduism. Anthony de Mello, a renowned and widely published Jesuit scholar from India, integrated Buddhist and Hindu prayer forms into Christian



spirituality. His first book *Sadhana* (de Mello, 1978) offers a number of practices on beginner's mind, gratitude, perspective, spirituality, appreciation of beauty, and mindfulness of body, breath, and sounds. The book's title is an Indian word with many meanings – discipline, technique, spiritual exercises, and approach to God. More recently, Christian scholars have examined mindfulness and framed it as “finding God in all things” (Rehg, 2002).

Mindfulness is also addressed in several secular philosophies. For example, Pyrrho of Elis and other Skeptic philosophers trained themselves to regard thoughts and experiences with a suspension of belief, leading to a sense of tranquility – that is, *ataraxia* (Kuzminski, 2007). This is essentially the “decentering” aspect of mindfulness discussed later in the chapter. The 18th-century Scottish economist, Adam Smith, suggested adopting the perspective of an “impartial spectator” of one's experience to overcome difficult emotions and act in an empathic and ethical manner.

More contemporary views include those of Herbert Benson, a late Harvard physician who emphasized the concentration aspect of mindfulness and who stated that, regardless of a person's religious or nonreligious practice, the following four elements are present:

1. A quiet environment
2. A mental device (a constant stimulus)
3. A passive attitude (redirecting attention)
4. A comfortable position (a posture sustained for at least 20 minutes, e.g., sitting, kneeling, swaying)

He called the experience that is triggered by these four elements the *relaxation response* (Benson, 1975). Benson added additional advice that is consistent with mindfulness practice: to not cling to a single posture or technique, to not force the practice onto oneself, and to not expect particular results.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk who has frequently been referred to as “the father of mindfulness” (e.g., *Time* magazine), had a profound influence on mindfulness practices around the world, especially the West. He authored over 100 books on peace and mindfulness, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 by Martin Luther King Jr., and for decades, traveled the world widely leading mindfulness retreats for practitioners and laypeople, averaging around 1,000 attendees at each retreat. He created dozens of monasteries and the Order of Interbeing which is a global community of laypersons, monks, and nuns focused on mindfulness practice, ethical behavior, and compassionate action in society. He passed away in 2022 in Vietnam, where he had originally become a monk.

Of course, there are a number of other mindfulness teachers from Eastern and Western backgrounds who have served as catalysts for the popularity of mindfulness in the world, especially in the West. There are far too many to list here, but some include Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990), Tara Bennett-Goleman (2001), Tara Brach (2003), Pema Chodron (2016), Joseph Goldstein (1976), Jack Kornfield (1993), and Sharon Salzberg (1995).

The widespread accessibility and applicability of mindfulness makes it very amenable to study and implementation in Western and other contexts, outside of any particular cultural or religious belief system. Despite the heavy Buddhist influence on the development of mindfulness practices in the West, and the ongoing dialog between Buddhist teachers and Western scientists, it is clear that mindfulness seems to be a universal human phenomenon that does not belong to any one religion, and it cuts across religious–secular distinctions. This is not an attempt to divest mindfulness of any spiritual significance for those who practice it in that context. On the contrary, it reinforces and deepens the relevance and importance of the practice and application.