How to be an Adult in Relationships
by David Richo

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How It All Began

Man is a giddy thing.
—SHAKESPEARE, *Much Ado about Nothing*

We are born with a capacity to dance together but not with the necessary training. We have to learn the dance steps and practice until we move with ease and grace. The joy in it requires work. Some of us have been damaged physically or in our self-confidence, and we will have to practice dancing more than others. Some of us have been so damaged we may never be able to dance well at all. Some of us were taught it was a sin to dance.

It is exactly the same in relationships. Our early experience forms or deforms our adult relationships. As children, some of us were so injured or disabled psychologically—by neglect, inhibition, or abuse—that it may take us years of work and practice before we can dance a graceful adult commitment. Some of us were so abused that we feel compelled to abuse others in revenge. Some of us were so damaged in the past that we may never be able to relate in an adult way.

Most of us, however, had good-enough parenting—reasonable fulfillment of our emotional needs for attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing: the five A's. And so in adulthood, we are reasonably facile at relating to others in healthy ways. This means relating mindfully, without either blind possessiveness or a crippling fear of closeness. Yet no one relates with perfect ease without learning the

skill, just as no one dances with perfect ease without instruction. Some people master dancing, and others never quite get it right—though perhaps others do not fully notice. A relationship, likewise, may look successful, but it may not be providing true intimacy or commitment—a real problem if it has led to marriage and children. As dancers we can refuse to improve our skill with little consequence to anyone else, but if we do the same thing in a relationship, someone may get hurt. (*Relationship* in this context means intimate involvement, while living either together or apart.)

Then there are those of us who suffered serious childhood abuse and lack of need fulfillment and thereby were damaged in such a way that we cannot easily be intimate. In time, we too may learn to relate intimately, but only if we work through our early issues. It is our responsibility to expend the energy it will take to practice and become skillful at relating well. It does not come automatically. We will have to learn, be taught, grieve our past, work in therapy, get to know our true self, undo years of habits, practice with a partner, follow a spiritual practice—and read and work with a book like this. The good news is that we, like all human beings, have a psyche calibrated to do the work. Eventually, the awkwardness and missteps give way to harmonious and cooperative movement that reflects the love song behind it all.

We have heard about the harm our childhood wounds can do to our adult relationships, but I take a generally positive view of the childhood phase of our human journey. What happened to us then is not as important as how we hold it now: positively as something we have grown by or negatively as something that goes on wounding us and our relationships. If we can mourn the past and thereby diminish its impact on our present lives, we can then maintain our boundaries while still bonding closely to a partner. As long as we have a program for dealing with adversity, no problem can lead us to despair.

We have heard people being labeled as "codependent" when they cannot leave a painful relationship that has no future. Yet our sense of self is radically embedded in our negotiations with original family members. If a relationship reconfigures an original bond with our father or mother, leaving it may pose a terrifying threat to our inner security. Then

all prospects of change—even for the better—represent a threat. We are challenged to be compassionate toward ourselves for the time it takes to make changes. Taking our time does not have to mean we are cowardly or codependent, only that we are sensitive to pressures and meanings from regions of our psyche still in the grip of an old regime. Our failed and failing bonds have preoccupied us all our lives. To repeat is human; to reframe is healthy. As we replace, however slowly, defensive reactions with different ways of doing things, new capacities open and new skills come into play in our relationships. It's not only a matter of breaking out of the enclosing arc of childhood. We humans require the animating sustenance of our fellows. We have to know that an echoing and enthusiastic resonance to our unique existence is available somewhere in this vast and ravaged world. We cannot make that happen, but we can be open to it and welcome it.

If we found total satisfaction in childhood, we would have no motivation to reach out to the wider world. The journey of adulthood begins when we leave, as we must, the secure nest provided by father and mother and try to find a partner in the adult world. Without such a need we might be seduced by the comfort of home, isolate ourselves from the larger world, and thus never find our unique place in it. This also explains why no person or thing will ever be enough to satisfy the full breadth of our human potential. Nature cannot afford to lose any of her stewards, so she has calibrated the heart so it is never permanently fulfilled. But she does grant moments of satisfaction with things and with people, and they can sustain us. Once that happens, we have found ourselves. This was expressed so touchingly by the character of the knight in Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal:* "I shall remember this hour of peace—the strawberries, the bowl of milk, your faces in the dusk. I shall remember our words and shall bear this memory between my hands as carefully as a bowl of fresh milk. And this will be a sign of great contentment."

Love from another adult does more than just satisfy us in the present. It ripples back in time for us, repairing, restoring, and renovating an inadequate past. Sincere love also sets off a forward-moving ripple and a resultant shift inside us. We get to the point where we can think: "Now I

don't have to need quite so much. Now I don't have to blame my parents quite so much. Now I can receive love without craving more and more. I can have and be enough." Only the person whose journey has progressed to that point can love someone intimately.

A holding environment—the safe and reliable context of the five A's—is necessary for all growth, both psychological and spiritual. We are like kangaroos developing in a pouch. We experience being held within the womb, within the family, within a relationship, within support groups, and within civic and spiritual communities. At every stage of our life span, our inner self requires the nurturance of loving people who are attuned to our feelings and responsive to our needs. They are the ideal sources that foster our inner resources of personal power, lovability, and serenity. Those who love us understand us and are available to us with an attention, appreciation, acceptance, and affection we can feel. They make room for us to be who we are.

Our work, then, is to become the healthiest possible version of who we uniquely are. The healthy ego—what Freud called "a coherent organization of mental processes"—is the part of us that can observe self, situations, and persons; assess them; and respond in such a way as to move toward our goals. We do not let go of this aspect of ego but build on it. It assists us in relationships by making us responsible and sensible in our choices and commitments. The neurotic ego, on the other hand, is the part of us that is compulsively driven or stymied by fear or desire, feeding arrogance, entitlement, attachment, and the need to control other people. Sometimes it is self-negating and makes us feel we are victims of others. This neurotic ego is the one we are meant to dismantle as our spiritual task in life. Its tyrannies frighten intimacy away and menace our self-esteem.

Western psychology places major importance on building a sense of self or ego. Buddhism, in contrast, places major importance on letting go of the illusion of a freestanding, fixed solid self. These views seem contradictory until we realize that Buddhism presupposes a healthy sense of self. It does not recommend abdicating the adult tasks of building competence and confidence, relating to others effectively, discovering life purpose, or fulfilling responsibilities. Indeed, we first have to establish a

self before we can let go of one. That self is a provisional and convenient designation but not ultimately real in any enduring, unchanging way. To say that there is no limited, fixed self is a way of referring to the boundless potential in each of us—our buddha mind or buddha nature. We can transcend our limited selves. We are more than what appears in our limited egos.

Great mystics feel the oneness experienced in meditation as soothing at first, but then as a force propelling them into the world with a sense of service. (This is why ours is a heroic—and paradoxical—journey.) This does not mean that all of us have to live a life of constant service to humanity. That is a special calling requiring special graces. *We are fulfilled when we live out our personal capacity for loving. Our spiritual practice is perfect when we show love in every one of the unique and peerless ways that are in us.*

The Power of Mindfulness

> Meditation is not a means of forgetting the ego; it is a method of using the ego to observe and tame its own manifestations.
>
> —MARK EPSTEIN

Self-actualization is not a sudden happening or even the permanent result of long effort. The eleventh-century Tibetan Buddhist poet-saint Milarepa suggested: "Do not expect full realization; simply practice every day of your life." A healthy person is not perfect but perfectible, not a done deal but a work in progress. Staying healthy takes discipline, work, and patience, which is why our life is a journey and perforce a heroic one. The neurotic ego wants to follow the path of least resistance. The spiritual Self wants to reveal new paths. It is not that practice makes perfect but that practice is perfect, combining effort with an openness to grace.

Authentic practice combines effort with an openness to grace, a free gift of progress or awakening that comes to us unbidden and unconjured from buddha mind. Bread takes the effort of kneading but also requires sitting quietly while the dough rises with a power all its own. We are not

alone in our psychological or spiritual evolution. A higher power than ego, wiser than our intellect and more enduring than our will, kicks in to assist us. Even now, as you read this, many bodhisattvas and saints are gathering to become your mighty companions on your heart's path.

Mindfulness is an elegant Buddhist practice that brings our bare attention to what is going on in the here and now. It does this by freeing us of our mental habit of entertaining ourselves with ego-based fears, desires, expectations, evaluations, attachments, biases, defenses, and so on. The bridge from distractions back to the here and now is the physical experience of paying attention to our breathing. The classic sitting pose plays an important part in mindfulness meditation by encouraging us to stay still and become centered physically. Furthermore, sitting is earth-touching, and earth, because of its here-and-now concreteness, grounds and centers us in the face of compelling mental seductions. We sit as a practice for how we will act throughout the day. Mindfulness, however, involves more than sitting. It is moment-by-moment nonclinging to ego and calm presence in the simplicity that results when we experience reality without the clutter produced by the decorative arts of ego.

The word *mindfulness* is actually a misnomer since the act itself involves mind-emptying not mind-filling. It is the only nonaltered state of mind, the pure experience of our own reality. Meditation is the vehicle to mindfulness in all areas. Mindfulness meditation is not a religious event or a form of prayer. It is an exploration of how the mind works and how it can be stilled so as to reveal an inner spaciousness in which wisdom and compassion arise with ease.

Mindfulness is not meant to help us escape reality but to see it clearly, without the blinding overlays of ego. Meditation is not escapism; only the layers of ego are. To stay with that vision leads to letting go while, ironically, escaping leads to holding on. In the haunted valley of human paradox, *we gain and go on by losing and letting go,* and mindfulness is the good shepherd within.

In mindfulness we do not repress or indulge any thoughts, only notice them and return to our breathing, gently guiding ourselves back to where we belong as a kindly parent does to a straying child. Meditation is entirely successful when we keep coming back to our breathing in a patient and nonjudgmental way. Mindful awareness is the condition of the fair and alert witness rather than the judge, jury, prosecutor, plaintiff, defendant, or defense attorney. We notice what happens in our minds and simply take it in as information. This does not mean stoicism or indifference, because then we would lose our vulnerability, an essential component of intimacy. To witness is not to stand aloof but to stand by. We then can act without compulsion or disquiet, relating to what is happening rather than becoming possessed by it.

There are two kinds of witnessing: compassionate and dispassionate. In compassionate witnessing we observe from a loving perspective. It is like looking at photos in a family album. We are suffused with a kindly feeling with no sense of grasping. We look and let go as we move on to what may appear on the next page. In dispassionate witnessing, on the other hand, we look with passive indifference. We are stolid and unmoved, with no expectancy for what comes next or appreciation of what has gone before. This is like looking at the scenery from a train window. We simply watch it go by without inner responsiveness. Mindful witnessing is compassionate witnessing, a committed presence free of fear or clinging.

Mindfulness is watchfulness more than watching: We look at reality as custodians of its truth. Sister Wendy Beckett says great artists make great paintings because they have learned "to look without fixed ideas of what is fitting." This is mindfulness. It can be either consciousness without content (pure awareness with no attention to any particular issue or feeling) or consciousness with content (attention without ego intrusions, called mindfulness of the mind). Generally, the latter style is the one I mean when I refer to mindfulness in this book.

Mindfulness is thus a courageous venture because it is trusting that we have it in us to hold and tolerate our feelings, to grant them hospitality no matter how frightening they may seem, to live with them in equipoise. We then discover a strength within us that is the equivalent of self-discovery. From that self-esteem comes effective relating with others. Because mindfulness leads us to let go of ego by letting go of fear and grasping, it is an apt tool for healthy relating. It makes us present to oth-

ers purely, without the buffers of the neurotic ego. We simply stay with someone as he is, noticing not judging. We take what a partner does as information without having to censure or blame. In doing this, we put space around an event rather than crowding it with our own beliefs, fears, and judgments. Such mindful presence frees us from constricting identification with another's actions. A healthy relationship is one in which there are more and more such spacious moments.

Mindfulness is a path to giving others the five A's, the essential components of love, respect, and support. The word *mindfulness* is a translation of Sanskrit words meaning "attend" and "stay." Thus, we pay attention and we stay with someone in her feelings and in her here-and-now predicament. When I accept someone in this serene way, shifts occur in me, and both of us begin to discover the skillful means to more appreciative affection and commitment. To accept is also the first step toward letting go of control and allowing freedom. Thus, this mindful acceptance is our working basis for relationships. *The five A's are the results of and conditions for mindfulness.*

Mindfulness is inherent in human nature. We were built to pay attention to reality. Indeed, paying attention is a survival technique. Over the years, though, we learn to escape and take refuge in illusory sanctuaries built by an ego frightened of reality. We notice that it is easier to believe what will make us feel better, and we feel entitled to expect that others will be what we need them to be. These are man-made chains that look like links to happiness. But once we commit ourselves to experience divested of ego wishes and attachments, we begin to act straightforwardly, becoming truthful with one another. We relax into the moment, and it becomes a source of immense curiosity. We do not have to do anything. We do not have to search in our bag of ego toys for something to face the moment with. We do not have to put our dukes up. We do not have to become the pawns of our fixations or our fixed conceptions of reality. We do not have to find a pigeonhole. We do not have to go on the defensive or devise a comeback. We can simply let things unfold, attending to reality as it is and staying through it as we are. This is a lot more relaxing than our habitual reactions, and we use the original equipment of the human psyche rather than the artificial con*trap*tions

concocted by ego over the centuries. This is why mindfulness is also called waking up.

A holding environment is necessary for all growth, both psychological and spiritual. Like kangaroos developing in a pouch, we experience being held within a family, a relationship, or a community—including a community of fellow recoverers or practitioners. At every stage of life, our inner self requires the nurturance of loving people attuned to our feelings and responsive to our needs who can foster our inner resources of personal power, lovability, and serenity. Those who love us understand us and are available to us with an attention, appreciation, acceptance, and affection we can feel. They make room for us to be who we are.

Though it may sound odd to say so, mindfulness is itself a holding environment. When we sit, we are never alone because all the saints and *bodhisattvas* (enlightened beings) of the past and present are with us. Meditating mindfully means contact and continuity with a long tradition. To sit is to be assisted and held. When Buddha sat on the earth, it was as if he sat in a lap. It is the same for us.

Mindfulness is being an adult. It is unattainable for someone who lacks inner cohesion, personal continuity, and integration. Being a fair witness requires a healthy ego, because distance and objectivity are unavailable to someone with poor boundaries, no tolerance of ambiguity, and no sense of a personal center. Meditation may be threatening to someone who is unstable and in need of mirroring, the reassuring and validating reflection of one's feelings by another person (see chapter 2). The Buddha's ruthless commitment to acknowledging impermanence will be terrifying and destructive to someone without a firm foundation as a separate and autonomous and intelligently protected self. Finally, the call to live in the present comes at the wrong time for someone who needs first to explore the past and be free of its stubborn grip. This is why both psychological work for individuation and spiritual practice for egolessness will always be required as dual requisites for the enlightenment of beings as beautifully and mysteriously designed as we.

Meditation is not to be attempted in any serious way if we are not psychologically ready for it. At the same time, we can begin simple meditation daily as an adjunct to psychotherapeutic work. This book advocates

working on the psychological and the spiritual simultaneously and in bite-size chunks. This is based on the fact that some spiritual attitudes contribute to psychological health and vice versa. For instance, the spiritual attitude of acceptance helps us bear necessary and appropriate grief, while the psychological ability of assertiveness helps us stand up for justice for ourselves and others and so increases our compassion. The Buddhist social activist and author Ken Jones says: "Systems of maturation like Buddhism teach that it is only through unflinchingly facing our afflictions and opening unreservedly to our feelings that we can come to experience an empowerment that is other than this trembling self [ego]."

When ego is deposed, mindfulness leads to the higher Self, Jung's approximation of buddha mind. This Self is unconditional love, perennial wisdom, and healing power (the very qualities that foster evolution). We are never without it. To find ourselves spiritually is to acknowledge our destiny to use our ego skills to serve the purposes of the Self. Thus, we strive for intimacy with the whole universe, not just with one person. After all, we cannot expect from a partner what can only come from the Self/universe/higher power. This is why pursuing our own spiritual path is so important to the health of a relationship.

Mindfulness does not mean that we have no desires, simply that we are not possessed by them. We may feel fear and desire, but they no longer drive, shame, or stop us. Instead we hold them, without the elaborations our brain so habitually adds. We handle fear and enjoy desire and move past both of them with ease, like Ulysses, who heard the sirens' song and sailed on. As the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Go through it, give in to it, experience it. . . . Then the most powerful energies become absolutely workable rather than taking you over, because there is nothing to take over if you are not putting up any resistance."

A Positive Spin on How It Was and Is

It may seem like a sign of weakness to have needs. Actually, needs direct us to grow in the ways we were meant to. Childhood yearnings for

attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and the experience of being allowed to be ourselves are not pathological but developmental. In trying to get a parent to pay attention to us, we were seeking what we needed for our healthy evolution. We were not being selfish but self-nurturing, and there's no need to feel ashamed about it now.

Childhood forces influence present choices, for the past is on a continuum with the present. Early business that is still unfinished does not have to be a sign of immaturity; rather, it can signal continuity. Recurrence of childhood themes in adult relationships gives our life depth in that we are not superficially passing over life events but inhabiting them fully as they evolve. Our past becomes a problem only when it leads to a compulsion to repeat our losses or smuggles unconscious determinants into our decisions. Our work, then, is not to abolish our connection to the past but to take it into account without being at its mercy. The question is how much the past interferes with our chances at healthy relating and living in accord with our deepest needs, values, and wishes.

For better or for worse, our psychic development is the result of a lifelong continuum of relationships. The adult goal is to work through each of them. We wrestle with past relationships respectfully, like Jacob with the angel, until they yield their blessing. The blessing is the revelation of what we missed or lost. Knowing that gives us momentum to let go of the past and find need fulfillment in ourselves and in other people who can love us in self-affirming ways. Such love restores or repairs the psychic structures that were lost or damaged in early life, and we begin to get a coherent sense of who we are, which in turn makes it possible for us to love others in the same powerful ways. We receive from others and thereby learn to give, for love teaches generosity. Thus, maturation consists not in leaving needs behind but in recruiting supportive others who can give age-appropriate and generous responses to our needs.

Among childhood habits, defenses in particular have been looked upon as signs of inadequacy and pathology. However, we need many of our defenses for psychological survival. We are defending ourselves from things for which we don't yet feel ready—for example, closeness or full commitment. We learned to stand guard over our unique wishes and needs in early life if showing them was unsafe. We learned to defend the

delicate and vulnerable core of ourselves from humiliation, depletion, or distrust. Those were skills, not deficits.

If we feel unsafe as children we may still feel that way and still be using our old defenses. We may run from or defend ourselves against intimacy now for fear of a replay of childhood betrayals that left us crouching behind a wall of fear. On this wall are graffiti that besiege our self-esteem: "Don't let anyone get too close." "Don't commit all the way." "No relationship will ever really work." "No one can love you as you really need to be loved." "Men/women can't be trusted." Our work as adults is to replace these governing principles of behavior with healthy and more optimistic ones. Governing principles that limit our full potential for lively energy—the manifestation of our own unique life-force—are like the governor on a truck accelerator that prevents the truck from ever getting up to full speed.

Most of us have unrelenting longings for whatever was missing from our childhood. Every intimate bond will resurrect these archaic yearnings, along with the terrors and frustrations that accompany chronically unmet needs. But this puts us in an ideal position to revisit those thwarted needs, to revive our energy, and to reconstruct our inner world in accord with life-affirming principles. A solid bond in a relationship—as in religious faith—endures despite the impact of events, so our resistance is the only obstacle to the growth that can emerge from pain. As we mend the broken fabric of ourselves, what was arrested in the past is released. We are back in touch with who we really are and can live in accord with that rediscovered essence.

Every person needs the nourishment of food throughout life. Likewise, a psychologically healthy person needs the sustenance of the five A's—attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing—all her life. It is true that unmet needs for the five A's in childhood cannot be made up for later in life, in the sense that they cannot be fulfilled so absolutely, so immediately, or so unfailingly. That absolute, immediate fulfillment of needs by one person is appropriate only to infants. But needs can be fulfilled, in short or long installments, throughout life. The problem is not that we seek gratification but that we seek too much of it all at once. What we did not receive enough of before, we cannot receive enough of now; what we did receive enough of before, we can receive enough of now.

We do not outgrow our early needs. Rather they become less overwhelming, and we find less primitive ways to fulfill them. For example, an infant may need to be cradled and carried, while an adult may be satisfied with a supportive remark and a kindly glance. Sometimes a lifelong need can be fulfilled by just such little moments of mindful love. However, we still need to be cradled at times.

If our emotional needs were fulfilled by our parents, we emerge from childhood with a trust that others can give us what we need. We can then receive love from others without distress or compulsion. Our needs are moderate. We can trust someone to help fulfill our needs while we help fulfill hers. This provides a foundation for a life of compassion and equanimity.

Mothers play the primary role in our growth. In the first phase of development, a mother is the container: She provides the holding environment in which we learn and feel the safety it takes to start to become ourselves. But eventually we need to separate from our mothers to establish an identity. Thus, the first stage of development confronts us with a paradox: The safety it requires is meant to help us go! If a mother's embrace is too seductive or too tight, we might not be able to separate from her. If we heard and heeded the words "Don't go!" we might eventually turn them into "I can't go," so that later, in an abusive adult relationship, we stay where it hurts.

In the second phase of parenting, the mother is a safe base. Now we say, "I can go and come back." From the time we can crawl, we are separating, leaving the warm embrace to explore the unknown, though we still need to know that our mother is nearby, the safe harbor to which we can return. If this stage goes well for us, we don't equate absence with abandonment or departure with loss. This developmental achievement is an expansion of object constancy, whereby we can let someone go and still believe he loves us and is available to us. In adolescence, the need to separate reaches a climax, but we still need the safe base to return to.

In the third phase, the mother becomes a coadult who loves us as a peer and respected advisor. Now we have fully separated and have es-

tablished our own identity, and we live apart from our mother but still with undimmed mutual respect and support. The goal of the work of becoming an adult is, after all, not to reunite with Mother but to find in ourselves and others as much as we can find of what she was meant to provide: the five A's.

In the first phase, we have no sense of boundaries, of where we begin and where our mother ends. In the second phase, we establish boundaries, which may become rigid by adolescence. In the third phase, we honor one another's boundaries. Interestingly, these phases of parenting resemble the three phases in an adult relationship: closeness in romance, distance in conflict, reunion in commitment. The archetypal heroic journey is an extended metaphor for human development, since it takes the hero through the same three phases: leaving the comforts of the familiar, finding a separate identity away from home, and returning home renewed and interdependent. Returning home is a metaphor for the integration in oneself of psychological and spiritual powers.

The mother with adult consciousness will not only soothe her child but show him how to soothe himself when she is absent or unavailable: "Whatever resources I have, I help you find within yourself." Such a mother will show how her child's natural gifts can be inner resources for self-soothing. For instance, a child who loves to draw can be reminded of the comfort he finds in that activity. (Creating art often soothes us because it offers contact with the anima, the feminine source of nurturance that exists within each of us.) What is found in the healthy style of parenting is also found in adult relating and in mature spirituality. In healthy intimate relationships we do not seek more than 25 percent of our nurturance from a partner; we learn to find the rest within ourselves. Likewise, an authentic spiritual teacher is one who teaches practitioners to appreciate that enlightenment is an interior reality, not something to be drawn from the teacher. Thus, parent, partner, and teacher point us toward our own inner parent, inner partner, and inner guru.

We are all in intense love relationships from birth onward. Love keeps mother nearby. This is how humanity has survived. Baby's love and smiles keep Mother attached to him so his survival can be assured. Thus, our cellular memory equates presence with safety and distance with danger. This is why the prospect of abandonment is so terrifying. At the same time, the play between mother and child is encoded in our memory as an essential ingredient of authentic love. In short, our higher powers and most cherished psychic structures of sensitivity and caring for one another derive from early love and mirroring, not from biological drives.

Can fathers provide the container for the holding and separating experience so crucial to growth? It seems unlikely. Their role is to protect us from being contained too long! Women can provide a safe place for us to express our feelings and make our unique choices. Men can show us a safe exit into the larger world. And if fathers are sometimes so demanding that they undermine a developing child's freedom to be himself, this is where grandfathers can step in to give male nurturance mindfully, without expectation or demand.

We begin in a containing womb and then move to an embrace. Alchemy, the transformation of something into its opposite, also happens in a container. A vessel is required in which the lead of ego can be transformed into the gold of the higher Self. Only then can the giant of fear be faced and conquered. Therapy or a support group might be an appropriate vessel when we face difficult transitions. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, can play this role for someone moving from addiction into sobriety. Our identity cannot grow in isolation, because we are dialogical by nature. "Only in the arms of someone can the first 'I am' be pronounced, or rather risked," British psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott says.

The original emotional needs of life were fulfilled in the holding environments of the womb, our nursing mother's arms, the warmth of our home, and parental protection, which are the requisite loci of serene development. In such a safe and embracing environment, children feel they are living in a folder of security that is also roomy enough for them to express feelings freely. They feel their parents can handle their feelings and mirror them back with acceptant love—in short, that there is room for their true self at the inn.

If their needs are unmet, on the other hand, they may have difficulty trusting a higher power or acknowledging the need for spirituality in adult life. (*Higher power* is my term for what I believe to be the perfect source of the five A's.) Faith commitments call for trust in an invisible

source of nurturance, and when visible sources of nurturance have let us down, we are less likely to trust the invisible sources. Yet Jung says the longing for the spiritual is as strong in us as the desire for sex. We therefore ignore an inner instinct when we totally deny the possibility of a power greater than ourselves. Another face of this same problem is religious fanaticism, or a negative, abusive religiousness that is full of guilt and obligation.

When we did not receive fulfillment in one or more of the five A's, a bottomless pit was created in us, an unfulfillable yearning for the missing pieces of our puzzling and arid past. Mourning an unfulfilled childhood is painful. We fear grief because we know we will not be able to control its intensity, its duration, or its range, and so we look for ways around it. But engaging with our grief is a form of self-nurturance and liberation from neediness. Paradoxically, to enter our wounded feelings fully places us on the path to healthy intimacy.

Is this my problem? Have I been afraid to grieve what I did not get from Mom and Dad and so have demanded it from partners, strangers, and innocent bystanders? Am I unable to find it in myself because I have been investing all my energy in looking for it in someone else?

To retrieve the past and to undo the past are our paradoxical goals in relationships. No wonder they are so complex! Their complexity is not about the transactions between two adults but the fact that such transactions never begin: instead, two children are tugging at each other's sleeve, shouting in unison, "Look what happened to me when I was a kid! Make it stop, and make it better for me!" In effect, we are asking an innocent bystander to repair a problem he has no knowledge of and little skill to repair. And all the time and energy that goes into that transaction distracts us from the first part of our work: repairing our own lives.

The cold ground of our psyche is like a cryogenic laboratory where our unmet needs from childhood remain frozen in their original state, awaiting healing and fulfillment, usually without revealing to us the full extent to which we felt forlorn and bereft. The path to love begins in our own past and its healing, then moves outward to relationships with others.

Even if our childhood needs were met, we may need to work on ourselves as adults. Nurturant parents make sure our childhood environment is safe and soothing, and as adults, we may keep looking for the people or things that can recreate that miracle. The recurrent fantasy of, or search for, the "perfect partner" is a strong signal from our psyche that we have work to do on ourselves. For a healthy adult, there is no such thing as a perfect partner except temporarily or momentarily. No one source of happiness exists, nor can a partner make life perfect. (The fact that this happens in fairy tales says it all.) A relationship cannot be expected to fulfill all our needs; it only shows them to us and makes a modest contribution to their fulfillment. We ask: *Could it be that I would not have learned what I needed to learn if I had met the perfect partner?*

The perfect partner is the mirage we see after crossing the desert of insufficient love. Mirages happen because we lack water—that is, we lack something we have needed for a long time. They are normal, nothing to be ashamed of. We should notice them, take them as information about where our work lies, and then let them go. If we do this, we will come to the real oasis, nature's gift to those who keep going, who were not stopped by the mirage.

Yet it is a given of life that nothing is permanently and finally satisfying. Despite this fact, many of us believe that somewhere there is a person or thing that *will* be permanently satisfying. Such a chimerical belief, and the restless, desperate seeking that follows from it, can become deeply disheartening and self-defeating. In mindfulness we can surrender to reality with all its impermanence and frustration, and from that position of surrender something wonderfully encouraging can happen. We find that we want a partner who walks beside us in the world, not one we hope will change its givens or provide an escape-hatch from them. *We find a pleasing balance between surrendering to the given of the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of life while at the same time maximizing our opportunity for contentment.* This is our discovery of the felicitous pass between the snowy peaks of delusion and despair. From this point of view, moderate need fulfillment, experienced in days or even just moments, becomes satisfactory. Emily Dickinson, making every word count, called this "a glow / as intimate, as fugitive / as sunset on the snow."

"Moderate" is the key word for giving and for receiving the five A's. A

nonstop flow of them would be quite annoying, even to an infant. Our fantasy mindset makes us long for just what we would soon flee. Hence, what seems like an unsatisfactory compromise is actually the adult's best deal.

The hospitable sanctuary and the generous waters of an oasis can be enjoyed for one day or many, but not forever. Sooner or later they will cloy, and our hearts will long for what comes next. The desert and what lies beyond it, whatever their mystery and hardship, beckon, and they cannot be evaded or renounced. Journeying is built into us no matter how beautiful our home. The idea of change excites us no matter how pleasing our present circumstances. This may be what the poet George Herbert meant by the lines in which God says of the newly created Adam: "Yet let him keep the rest, / But . . . with repining restlessness, / Let him be rich *and* weary."

> As long as you hold onto wanting something from the outside, you will be dissatisfied because there is a part of you that you are still not totally owning. . . . How can you be complete and fulfilled if you believe that you cannot own this part [of yourself] until somebody else does something? . . . If it is conditional, it is not totally yours.
>
> —A. H. Almaas

The Five A's: The Keys that Open Us

We know deep down, and have always known, that need fulfillment and good parenting mean the five A's: attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing. As children, we noticed how our parents did and did not fit the bill. We then looked for someone who could fit the bill better or more consistently. This process is like looking at a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* but noticing it is blurred and the color is not right. We know how it should look, and we keep our eye out for a sharper print with brighter color. As adults we look for the partner who will be just right. At first that means a replica of our parents with some of the better—or missing—features added. So we find the man who controls but is also loyal. As we mature we no longer seek the negative traits, only the positive ones. So we no longer look for controlling men but for loyal men who let us be ourselves. In full maturity we do not demand perfection at all, only notice reality. We access our resources within. A partner who cooperates in that is a gift but no longer a necessity. The five A's begin as needs to be fulfilled by our parents, then become needs to be fulfilled by our partners, and someday become gifts we give to others and to the world.

Because we are dialogical beings, our self-esteem emerges from contact with others who provide us with the five A's. The five A's are not extras. They are the components of the healthy, individuated ego: Attention from others leads to self-respect. Acceptance engenders a sense of being inherently a good person. Appreciation generates a sense of self-worth. Affection makes us feel lovable. Allowing gives us the freedom to pursue our own deepest needs, values, and wishes. When the five A's were not forthcoming we might have felt we were to blame. That may leave us with a gnawing need to make reparation all our life. Such reparation is futile and misleading since the true task is a journey out into the world to find some of what was missing and then to discover it in ourselves too.

We feel something missing when we speak and do not receive attention, show ourselves and are not accepted, ask for love and are not held, or make a choice and are not allowed to pursue it. In contrast, when others grant us the five A's, we feel fulfilled and at ease with ourselves. An adult can unabashedly ask for the A he needs if it is not freely offered. He is only asking for what it takes to achieve the commencement of full humanness. That tender and ever so gingerly ventured bid to be loved is precisely what makes us humans so lovable.

Nature never intended us to find all we needed from two individuals, our biological parents. Indeed, one or both might have died or left us, leaving holes inside. But we were endowed with sockets too. These are the archetypes of mother and father, innate receptacles in our psyches for mother and father energies. These can be filled by stand-ins. The aunt or uncle, the older sibling, the grandparent, the minister, the teacher, or anyone offering even one of the five A's will do. No set of parents is sufficient to fulfill our parenting needs, no matter how nurturant

they may be. It is necessary and healthy to receive need fulfillment from other sources all through life. An archetypal longing encourages us to keep an eye out for those who offer it. An adult sensibility releases us from expecting any person to fulfill it totally.

In addition, in an adult partnership, as in childhood, the expression of the five A's changes throughout the relationship. A mother shows attention differently to a twelve-year-old than to a one-year-old. A partner shows a different kind of attention in the conflict phase than in the romance phase of a relationship (more on these phases later). *To expect everything to remain the same is to miss the analogy between adult relating and growing up.* The quality and the amount of all the graces of love change with time. This is not because lovers are less generous in what they offer but because they are more conscious of ever-shifting needs and resources.

The five A's are the essential ingredients of love, respect, security, and support. In addition, they form the essence of spiritual practice: what we cultivate in meditation and the path of compassion. The practices in this book suggest techniques and insights to bring meditative awareness and compassion to relationships. *These suggestions are not strategies to stay together but keys to the practice of love, our life purpose and our fulfillment.* Indeed, we stand to gain so much when we show the five A's. They are given to others but all of them make us more loving as we give them. They are therefore the components of building the virtue of love in ourselves. To love is to become loving.

ATTENTION

> It is a joy to be hidden but a disaster not to be found.
>
> —D. W. Winnicott

Every mammal feels instinctively that it needs and deserves full parental attentiveness. When a parent is only halfway attentive, the child notices and feels uneasy. The mother leopard does not have her mind on her own grooming while she is feeding her young. Nor does she demand that her young groom her and wait for their dinner. Her single-minded attention gives them healthy priorities later in life. Children's psychic life

becomes confused if they have to take care of a parent or make sense of one, because that is the reverse of what children instinctively expect.

Attention to you means engaged focus on you. It means sensitivity to your needs and feelings. Did your parents pay at least as much attention to you as they did to the TV? Did your father notice and attend to your feelings and fears with the same care he showed his car? Did he ever concentrate on you for as long as he did on a ball game?

Watching your every move, even if it comes from a desire to protect you, is not attention but intrusion or surveillance. In truly loving attention, you are noticed not scrutinized. Overprotectiveness is a rejection of your power (and thus of you). Authentic attention comes to you any time, not just when you present a problem. Such statements as "Children should be seen and not heard" are odious to a parent committed to paying attention to his child. "My father turned to me as if he had been waiting all his life to hear my question," says a character in one of J. D. Salinger's novels. *Was I listened to like that? Did I matter that way?*

If we missed out on attention when we were children, we might have learned to attend to ourselves, to become more and more creative, to look for attention from adults other than our parents. In this way, a deficiency became something beneficial, the pothole that became the portal. Likewise, our ability to reach out as adults may be directly proportional to our recognition that what we needed in our childhood was not there to be had. Seeing that deficiency in the past will help us see it in a present relationship and not keep looking for something we need in a container that is empty.

Attunement is mirrored attentiveness from one person to another. Attentiveness means noticing and hearing words, feelings, and experience. In a moment of authentic attention, we feel that we are deeply and truly understood in what we say or do and in who we are, with nothing left out. Likewise, we can attune to others' feelings, needs, bodily reactions, comfort levels with closeness, and degrees of willingness—for example, whether someone is acting out of coercion and compliance rather than true concurrence. We cannot attune if we assume certain feelings are right and others wrong. To attune to someone, we need neutrality toward all feelings, moods, and inner states and the fearless openness of

mindfulness. Only with such pure attention can we see beyond his bravado to his terror, beyond his stolidity to his turmoil. This is how attention becomes compassion.

What has failed to find attunement stays folded up within us or becomes a source of shame. Faulty attunement in early life may lead to fear of standing up for ourselves later or keep us from trusting that others will come through for us. Faulty attunement can make us scared and lonely, too. We fear exposing some regions of our psychic topography because of our inbred despair of ever finding the requisite human mirroring.

Attuned attention creates an ever-widening zone of trust and safety. We feel encouraged to look for—rather than wait for—our submerged longings to emerge and our stunted hopes to assume their full dimensions. We believe they will be attended to at last. This is love in the form of mindful attention, and we feel safe in it. Implicit in such attentiveness to our truth is truth from the one providing it. We trust him to say what is true to him; that is where our sense of safety comes from.

The first A is the core of mindfulness. Attention means bringing something or someone into focus so it is no longer blurred by the projections of your own ego; thus it requires genuine interest and curiosity about the mysterious and surprising truth that is you. A parent or partner who has gotten to know you in a superficial way may only be meeting up with her beliefs about you. Those beliefs, or biases, can endure for years, preventing the person from taking in the kind of information that would reveal the real you. The real you is an abundant potential, not a list of traits, and intimacy can only happen when you are always expanding in others' hearts, not pigeonholed in their minds. Our identity is like a kaleidoscope. With each turn we reset it not to a former or final state but to a new one that reflects the here-and-now positions of the pieces we have to work with. The design is always new because the shifts are continual. That is what makes kaleidoscopes, and us, so appealing and beautiful. Parents and partners who give us attention love to see the evolving mandala of us.

The desire for attention is not a desire for an audience but for a listener. Attention means focusing on you with respect, not with contempt or ridicule. When you are given attention, your intuitions are treated as if they matter. You are taken seriously. You are given credit when it is due. Your feelings have such high value to those who love you that they are on the lookout for them. They even look for the feelings you are afraid to know and gently inquire whether you want to show them.

When others give you attention, they also confront you directly when they are displeased, harboring no secret anger or grudges. But they always do this with respect and a sincere desire to keep the lines of communication open. Attention, like the other four A's, is given in a trusting atmosphere of holding.

ACCEPTANCE

In Buddhism there is a phrase, "the glance of mercy," which refers to looking at other human beings with acceptance and understanding. Acceptance means we are received respectfully with all our feelings, choices, and personal traits and supported through them. This makes us feel safe about knowing and giving ourselves to others. Our ability to be intimate grows in accordance with how safe we feel, and that safety is based primarily on how authentically we were accepted in early life. But even after we grow up, moments and months of acceptance by other adults can fill in some of what we may have missed as children, so that intimacy is still an option for all of us. As with all five A's, it is never too late to find acceptance or learn to show it.

If we lacked acceptance in childhood, we might have felt ashamed or inadequate. But we also might have compensated for the lack in a positive way by finding a center of evaluation in ourselves, thus becoming less dependent on others' approval, so now as adults we are swayed by neither criticism nor flattery. We learned early on to ground our self-worth in the depths of our own psyche. This not only builds our self-esteem but also makes it easier for us to accept others. Since we are not trying to get something from them, we can appreciate them as they are. *How much my parents missed out on when they could not let this happen between us!*

To accept their children, parents must be free of preconceived plans or agendas for them. These parental representations can begin before birth and range from "This will be a boy" to "This baby will be a spark plug in

our marriage; he will make it work" or "This girl will do what I couldn't do." Each is a subtle rejection of our individuality, with its limitations and potential. Parents can accept us only after they succeed in dismantling their original representation of us in favor of the person we are turning out to be. This means not being disappointed with us for breaking a bargain we never made. Acceptance is unconditional since it means validating someone's choices and lifestyle even when we do not agree with them. It is the opposite of moralizing. Acceptance is a style of pure mindfulness. We see all that is and feel all that we feel about what is, but then we focus only on what is as it is.

Acceptance is approval, a word with a bad name in some psychologies. Yet it is perfectly normal to seek approval in childhood and throughout life. We require approval from those we respect. The kinship it creates lifts us to their level, a process referred to in self-psychology as transmuting internalization. Approval is a necessary component of self-esteem. It becomes a problem only when we give up our true self to find it. Then approval-seeking works against us.

In attention, you are heard and noticed. In acceptance, you are embraced as worthy, not compared to your siblings but trusted, empowered, understood, and fully approved of as you are in your uniqueness. You sense a kindly support of your path, no matter how unusual; of your feelings, no matter how disturbing; of your deficiencies, no matter how irritating. These are not only tolerated but encouraged and cherished. You are perfectly you, and that is enough. Rather than expecting you to meet a standard, your parents eagerly await your full emergence as yourself, no matter how different you may be from them or how divergent from their wishes. *Yes, there really are people who love like this.* Did your parents believe in you? Did they come through for you? Were they reliable? Did they stand up for you? Did they refuse to give up on you, no matter what? The psychologist Heinz Kohut wrote: "The more secure a person is regarding his own acceptability, the more certain his sense of who he is, and the more safely internalized his system of values, the more self confidently and effectively will he be able to offer his love . . . without undue feelings of rejection and humiliation."

APPRECIATION

Appreciation gives depth to acceptance: "I admire you; I delight in you; I prize you; I respect you; I acknowledge you and all your potential. I appreciate you as unique." To acquire the riches of personal worth and self-confidence, we need just such encouragement. Human evolution proceeds from human accomplishments and consequent validations. But it also proceeds from one person's faith in another's value. A parent's belief that a child has great potential actually engenders potential in the child. Long-held and continually affirmed belief gives people the capacity to make it come true. Many centuries of belief in the healing power of faith, for instance, make more and more faith healings happen. In this and in all five A's, fulfillment of the need instills that quality in the personality.

Appreciation also includes gratitude for any kindness or gift we might bestow. Appreciation as gratitude recognizes us and how we extend ourselves. Because intimacy is about giving and receiving, appreciation fosters closeness. When we give, we instinctively await a thank you. This is not a middle-class or selfish expectation but a wish that the transaction be completed in the normal way. We know something is missing in a relationship if gratitude is lacking.

Is the following description of mindful appreciation familiar to you? Someone acknowledged and cherished your unconditional worth without envy or possessiveness, expressing these feelings verbally and nonverbally. The appreciation came as an understanding of what you were capable of or what you felt, validating the mystery of you. It also came as a word of praise, a wink when you did something well, a pat on the shoulder when you excelled, a loving look when you were just yourself, thanks for something you did or gave or simply were.

The ratio of appreciation to complaint in couples that stay together is five to one, according to the research of psychologist John M. Gottman, Ph.D., of the University of Washington in Seattle. Indeed, *behind every complaint is a wish for one of the five A's.* When we blow up or feel dejected, we may be experiencing the lack of one or more of the five A's. "I see you are feeling unappreciated," may be an accurate and compassionate response to a partner who is angrily complaining.

To give and receive love is our primary need. We express love emotionally, spiritually, and physically. An affectionate touch or hug from someone who really loves us can penetrate our bodies and restore our souls. All our fears, no matter how deep, can be erased by a single loving stroke.

Love cannot be defined in a universal way because our experience of love is ours alone. Just as there is no single, universal signature but only unique, personal signatures, so there is no love in general, only unique love uniquely experienced by each unique person. I learn what love is when I first feel loved. It is then encoded in every cell of my body, and the love I feel later in life may have to replicate that original experience.

If I first felt loved by being held when I was hurting, or by being given credit, or by being paid attention to, or by being given things, my body will remember that all my life, and when it happens again, I will feel it as love. I may perceive loving as receiving things, so I keep trying to get others to help me or give me things. Someone may appear to wink at me, and I may take that as love and cling to him even though he may have only been clearing a speck from his eye.

Love in adulthood is a re-experiencing of the love our every cell remembers. The way we were loved in early life is the way we want to be loved all our lives. Most of us know just what it takes for us to feel loved. What we have to learn is how to ask for it. A partner is not a mind-reader, so it is up to each of us to tell our partner what our brand of love is. And if we have to teach our partner how to love us, we also have to learn how to love him. Knowing this makes it clear that love is not a sentimental feeling but a conscious choice to give and receive in unique and often challenging ways.

Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut wrote: "The child's bodily display is responded to with a gleam in his mother's eye." Affection throughout life includes being loved as we look—with our body shape, our style of grooming, our choice of clothes, whether or not they conform to the current model of excellence. Our way of being present is more descriptive of what we are about than anything we have done or do. Intimate contact is with a living presence not a set of genitals or words that promise love. As adults, we may see a beautiful body and think: "Having that to myself will make me happy." What happened to us that made us so confused as to think our needs could be fulfilled by a pretty face? So much of attraction is intuitive and a matter of physical and psychic history. It is not to be taken too personally. To let go of ego is to let go of taking things personally.

The word *affection* comes from *affect*, feeling. *Affection* refers to closeness both on the physical and on the feeling level. Physically, it includes the spectrum of touch, from holding to sex. Affection is also a quality of feeling. In this respect it includes kindliness, considerateness, thoughtfulness, playfulness, and romantic gestures like giving flowers or remembering a special anniversary. Affection flows from a genuine *liking* of someone.

If affection is only a strategy for sex, it is not intimate but manipulative. In adult relationships, there is intimacy without sex at times and sex with intimacy always. Affection looks different in the romantic phase of a relationship than it does in the conflict stage. In the former it may have more of a sexual dimension; in conflict it may mean patient working through of mutual concerns. Finally, sex is meant to manifest all five A's. In healthy relationships, sex is attentive, accepting, appreciative, affectionate, and wildly allowing.

As a wise adult, I will know the difference between sex with someone who is doing it the way he does it and sex with someone who does it in a way that arises from our specific bond. Real love does not come off the rack; it is uniquely tailored by the lover to the beloved. Part of the pain of letting go of someone who really loved you is letting go of being loved in that special way.

Affection includes nearness, or loving presence. We receive real affection when someone is committed to being beside us often. This does not mean constant cohabitation but reliable availability. It is the opposite of abandoning and distancing. A child is abandoned every time a parent notices distance and lets it go by without comment or amendment. That child may grow up to say, "I felt abandoned and hurt when Mother saw my pain and did not comfort me." Another adult may say: "In my child-

hood, I felt something was being taken from me when I was hugged or held. So when I'm touched, I'm afraid of losing myself." Contemplating this pain and the pain that caused our parents to act the way they did leads to compassion for ourselves and the other flawed characters in our touching story.

Mindfulness is the path to loving presence. Mindful contact is unconditional in granting the five A's and unconditioned by the creations of the ego such as fear, demand, expectation, judgment, or control. Is the following description of mindful affection familiar?

You are loved the way you are. The need for affection is fulfilled when you are loved unconditionally all the time and genuinely liked most of the time. This loving and liking is demonstrated both verbally and physically. Such love/liking confers a sense of personal power, as Freud says: "To enjoy a mother's love is to become a conquistador." In childhood physical contact has no sexual component or price. This makes it possible to feel safe and prized for who you are rather than for what you can provide to fulfill the inappropriate needs of a parent. Every cell of your little body knew the difference between being held supportively and being clutched to fulfill a parent's needs. You knew when something was being given and when it was being taken.

Compassion is a form of affection. It is love's response to pain. This means being willing to acknowledge pain and caring about how you feel within it. It is a willingness to be in it with yourself. This empathy has a soothing quality, a sure sign of being loved. In fact, the empathy we receive throughout life is the equivalent of parental nurturance.

Since your parents' opinion was so crucial to you in early life, to be unloved may make you feel unlovable and responsible for it. Love can later be equated with measuring up to another's standards and can be tied to a sense of obligation. You may feel this way toward partners all your life and never know the ancient story behind it.

Finally, as one finger is not the hand, so affection is not love but only part of it. To be held and cuddled but not allowed later to make choices freely and without blame will soon be revealed as inadequate and untrustworthy.

ALLOWING

In a good-enough holding environment in early life, I learn that it is safe to be myself, knowing and showing my deepest needs and wishes. This happens in a family with an embrace wide enough to include all of me. Given such a welcome in the world, I gain a sense of stability and coherence, and I develop a reliable source of self-support, a nurturant inner parent who knows how to tolerate my feelings, no matter how contradictory or painful they may be. I reach out for healthy relationships, that is, those that give me all five A's.

But not everyone has the benefit of such a childhood. Some parents set rigid strictures on eating, sleeping, clothing, and grooming, all to suit their own needs or standards, rationalizing that such strictures are crucial to a child's health. In our childhood home it may have felt unsafe to be ourselves. We may have noticed that to be real meant losing the love of those from whom we needed it most. We may then have become whatever others needed us to be as the price of being loved. The false self that resulted must eventually give way to a truer version if intimacy is ever to work for us. If it was never safe to be ourselves—if we had to conceal what we were—we may not really believe in our talents and virtues now, feeling like impostors and frauds. Trying to live in accord with the needs and wishes of others is like being a cygnet and trying to become a duck just because you find yourself living in a duck pond. The false self is that of a conformist who is a royal heir in hiding.

Psychologically healthy adults come from a background of flexibility, not severity. Early needs (like all needs) are best fulfilled in an atmosphere of joy and forgiveness. In such a garden, crocuses ceaselessly pop up, yielding blooms of personal stability and self-nurturant powers, just the qualities that make intimacy possible in later life. Without healthy allowing in childhood, we may choose a controlling partner and tell ourselves, "I have to do it his way or else." We do not notice others' attempts to manipulate us. We can be fooled by a relationship that looks good but is full of demands and expectations.

Yet even standing amid the ashes of continual submission, we may

someday find a personal internal liberty, insisting on agreements made bilaterally rather than unilateraly, on cooperation rather than dominance. Submission is compliance with the deepest needs, values, and wishes of others and not our own. But compliance can become defiance.

We do not allow others to control us once we are healthy, but we do understand and feel their pain when we realize that control is a compulsion. Most controlling people cannot help themselves; they are not in control of the controlling. They are not insulting us by trying to control us; rather, they automatically take charge and dominate people and situations. They do this because of a chilling fear that they cannot handle letting the chips fall where they may. It takes a spiritual program to be liberated from the compulsion to be controlling and to become compassionate toward controlling people. A higher power than ego has to kick in, because ego will not give itself up easily or become so gently tolerant.

Yeats wrote of the special person who "loves the pilgrim soul in you." Mirroring freedom means encouraging the liveliness and passion in others rather than squelching it for our own good or safety. The "pilgrim soul" also implies going. True allowing also means letting someone go. To allow is to stand aside when someone needs space from us or even leaves us. This is an "A" in courage. Emily Dickinson wrote: "They shut me up in prose / As when a little girl / they put me in the closet / Because they liked me still." Her poems tell us "they" did not succeed. Some people just have the pluck to resist control, or they learn it along the path of life, making it impossible for others to prevent their self-emergence. "She won't let me be myself" becomes "She can't stop me." This formula applies to love as well. "He won't let me love him" can become "He can't stop me from loving him." Thus unconditionality is the profoundest key to personal power.

Is the following description of allowing familiar to you?

You instinctively seek the full range of motion and emotion in the course of your development, yet you can feel in the psychological air of your home a heartfelt permission to be yourself, to have your own thoughts and to express them without punishment, to make your own choices, even to step out of line. You have the freedom to accomplish the two primary tasks of maturation: to separate from your parents and to develop as a unique person. The relationship is not at risk no matter what feelings you express. You think: "I always knew I could say or feel anything here." You are allowed by your parents to see; tell; talk; touch; be separate; protect yourself; and pursue your own talents, relationships, and interests.

You do not often hear "You have no reason to be scared," "You had better not get mad or sad (or even glad)," or "How dare you say no?" When love is the life force of a relationship or a family, each member becomes fully complete as himself. This is the alternative to control, which generates a false self.

If you didn't receive the gift of freedom, you may have heard things like "You will never do as well in school as your brother does." As a child, did you feel "There is no way to say it"? Did you have to ask yourself, "What does it take to matter here?" Or did you know deep down that all it took was to be yourself? Did your parents represent the world as scary: "You always have to be careful" instead of "You have it in you to take care of yourself"? Were you not surprised when you first went to school and felt scared and controlled because you had been taught that was how the world was?

What is the difference between control and limit-setting? Control is meant to make you what others need you to be. Limit-setting makes it safe for you to be yourself. Paradoxically, we can't achieve freedom without limits. They are the holding environment in which we flourish. Limits are at first the arms around us and then the word *no*. Even a sanctuary has gates around it. How else can it provide safety?

There is a connection between freedom and self-confidence: When you are kept from expressing your deepest needs and wishes, you lose trust in their validity and in your own judgment. You survive by finding out the rules and following them, thus hiding what you really want. You make it your purpose in life to please others rather than to affirm yourself.

If you felt free within your family, you can more easily trust a supportive authority such as a loving teacher or therapist. This is mindful authority, without blame or unilateral judgment—the elements of ego that create opposition to authority. As we saw earlier, in transmuting internalization parents gradually share their power with us, a process that

proves to be a necessary component of a stable sense of self. We discover what Shakespeare referred to in *Measure for Measure:* our own "unknown sovereignty." Human authority and hierarchy are useful and legitimate when they empower us to take our own initiative but not when they subjugate and belittle us. When authority, civil or religious, mirrors healthy parenting, it is honorable and wins our respect.

Unconditional Presence versus the Five Mindsets of Ego

Together, the five A's are the components of unconditional presence. But there are also five major mental habits that interrupt authentic, unconditional presence and may cause others to feel unloved. They are virtually involuntary mental reactions that are common to people the world over. These mindsets are like bullies who enter unbidden and intrude upon our pure experience of the present and of the people we meet in the present. The spiritual practice of mindfulness is a rescue from the siege of these invaders.

Here are the five fundamental mindsets of ego that interrupt our ability to be here now and that distort reality:

- *Fear* of or worry about situation or of this person: "I perceive a threat in you or am afraid you may not like me so I am on the defensive."
- *Desire* that this moment or person will meet our demands or expectations, grant us our needed emotional supplies, or fulfill our wishes: "I am trying to get something from this or you."
- *Judgment* can take the form of admiration, criticism, humor, moralism, positive or negative bias, censure, labeling, praise, or blame: "I am caught up in my own opinion about you or this."
- *Control* happens when we force our own view or plan on someone else: "I am attached to a particular outcome and am caught in the need to fix, persuade, advise, or change you."
- *Illusion* overrides reality and may occur as denial, projection, fantasy, hope, idealization, depreciation, or wish: "I have a mental picture of or belief about you or this and it obscures what you are really like." (The central illusion in life is that of separateness.)

Any of these five interpretations by the editorial board of ego may be accurate but they still interfere with our experience of the present. Each is a minimization that imposes our personal dramas upon reality and makes fair witnessing impossible. In this sense, they are causes of karma. The gate to enlightenment opens when mindfulness closes down the show, even for a moment. The gate to empathy and compassion opens when we see human experience, no matter how unsavory or disfigured, without the mindsets of judgment and fear. At both gates we pronounce the "open sesame," the unconditional "yes" to reality.

The five mindsets are not to be construed as bad. Each of these pirates is full of energy that can be recruited for the invincible ship of mindfulness. The task is not to disown the mindsets but to redirect their energies so they can serve us and others. Thus, fear can be mined for wise caution. Desire makes it possible to reach out. Judgment includes intelligent assessment. Control is necessary in most daily activities. Fantasy is the springboard to the imagination and creativity. When we find the useful kernel of these mindsets, the trespassers can become our bosom buddies.

We cannot provide the five A's as long as these five mindsets are engaged because they distance us from authentic contact and suspend or disable direct perception of reality. *Throughout this book, these five mental defenses are referred to as the layers or overlays of ego.* We cannot stop our minds from engaging in these distractions, but mindfulness reduces their impact and helps us catch ourselves in the act. Mindfulness is the watchdog or rather the seeing-eye dog of the psyche, watching for the raiders of reality and walking us safely past them.

When we come *to* others with the five A's, we are profoundly present and closeness happens. When we come *at* others with the five mindsets, we are caught in a personal agenda and distance happens. The commitment to intimacy is a journey from the ego's favorite resorts to the paradise of mindful love.

The unconditional presence of someone who loves us hearkens back to the past and repairs our childhood sense of being unwanted. At the same time, no human being can or is expected to be fully and unconditionally present all the time. An individual can only offer moments and

hours of presence without mindsets. Only pieces of presence can come from beings like us, "kings of shreds and patches." If any one of us were whole and totally satisfactory, we would not be motivated to go on the journey that makes our life so wonderful. Adults have always known this. Religion has responded with a comforting assurance that there is an eternally and unconditionally loving presence, not in pieces but whole. The mature religious view finds that reality deep within our own souls. Thus, even in the spiritual world, we are hurled back to ourselves, and others are partners not providers.

Finally, keep in mind that it is always acceptable not to know what something is or means. This ability to endure mystery is what Keats called "negative capability," or "being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without irritable reaching after fact and reason." It is in mindfulness that we act in just that way: enduring our unknowing and yet sitting serenely. From that position a unique meaning is allowed to ripen over time, in its own time. This is an alternative to the ego's frenzy to impose a makeshift meaning from its lexicon of standard mindsets.

Mindsets are minimizations, since every reality and person is actually an infinite field of potential, a vast open space beyond limit. Without mind-conjured limits, all is perfect and exuberantly provocative just as it is. Joy is the energy that happens in freedom from mindsets. We no longer feel *obliged* to figure out what people are up to. We are finally free to be fully mindful.

Practices: Our Skillful Means

Practice does not mean forcing yourself to improve but trusting your potential to open. All the suggestions for practices that follow have a single purpose: to provide a program of skillful means for you. To become a psychologically healthy and spiritually conscious adult alone, in one-on-one relationships, and in and for the world. In these practices, psychological and spiritual work are meant to be done not sequentially but simultaneously. As we do our psychological work, we become more spiritually enlivened. As we engage in spiritual practices, we become more psychologically adept. Couples who work things out together with the help of therapeutic tools can greatly improve the psychological health of their relationship. But spiritual practice together deepens their bond at the level of the soul. Soul mates, after all, are those whose spiritual paths have met. Sitting together in meditation makes as powerful a contribution to bonding as holding one another in a sexual embrace, because mindfulness is the best tool for communication and for processing issues that arise in a relationship. So to sit is relationship practice, not just spiritual practice.

The practice sections in this book consist mainly of leading questions meant to challenge you to face and admit your own truth. They are meant to be answered in your journal and, when appropriate, aloud to your partner. If specific agreements for change can emerge from the responses, so much the better. But do your own work only. Do not attempt to design your partner's program of change or even judge what she should do or say.

You may want to discuss your practices with one person you trust in addition to your partner, looking for ways to apply what you are learning to your friendships and to your dealings with all people. This program is not only about making your intimate relationships more effective but also about lighting the way to an efficacious love of everyone.

Psychological work and spiritual practices are not ruggedly individual enterprises. Effort is important, but so is grace, the assistance of forces beyond you. Enlist and acknowledge the aid of higher powers than ego as you begin each practice. When you trust that your efforts are in the embrace of larger purposes, you feel supported, sustained, and held.

The practices show us our vast potential to be healthy adults who know how to love. They also show us where our constrictions in and resistance to love may be lurking. The practices raise our self-esteem as we observe ourselves activating our potential for love and letting go of our barriers to it. No matter how inadequate or flawed we imagine ourselves to be, we have it in us to find wholeness. The words and practices in this book offer moments of repair and new adjustments that can make pain less impinging or intimidating.

The practice sections expand on the ideas and themes that have been

explored in each chapter and should be read whether or not you choose to try the exercises themselves. These sections complement and enhance the text. But also note that you do not need to do all the practices. Some practices are designed for introverts and some for extroverts. Some are tailored to specific problems and therefore do not apply to everyone. But I believe you will find the whole experience of this book much more exciting if you try some practices from every chapter. Choose those that appeal to you, challenge you, or fit your circumstances and personality. You will notice your relationship—and yourself—being enriched in powerful and touching ways as a result.

Finally, be sure to notice your bodily sensations as you read this book and work through the practices. They tell you so much about where your work may be, what holds you back, and what holds you.

DAILY MEDITATION • The first practice is to meditate daily. Begin with a few minutes a day and increase to about twenty as an ideal minimum. It is best to sit together as a couple, but sitting alone is certainly appropriate and valuable also. Sit in a quiet space with your eyes open or closed, your back straight, and your hands on your knees or thighs. Pay attention to your breath. When thoughts or anxieties enter your mind, simply label them as thoughts and return to awareness of your breathing. Do not attempt to stop thinking. The practice requires only that when you notice thought, you return to consciousness of your breath. When your meditation ends, try to get up slowly and see if you can maintain the same sense of awareness throughout the day. Eventually, breath becomes more real, and more interesting, than our stories.

There are a variety of meditation techniques and postures, and you should find the meditation style that works best for you. Some good introductions to meditation are *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki (New York: Weatherhill, 1993), *The Path of Insight Meditation* by Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), *What Is Meditation?* by Rob Nairn (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999), and *Thoughts without a Thinker* by Mark Epstein (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

LETTING GO OF CONTROL • Healthy control means ordering our lives in responsible ways—for example, by maintaining control of a car or our health. Neurotic control means acting on the compulsive need to make everything and everyone comply with our wishes. Control is what we decided to seek when we noticed the implacable givens of our existence and felt helpless in the face of them. We were not yet able to say, "I will stay with this predicament and see what it has to offer me. I notice I seem to get stronger this way." Saying yes to our experience in this mindful way leads to empowerment. Can you make a decision, a commitment to be less controlling and to dedicate yourself to this as your present project?

OPENING UP TO FEEDBACK • When you are committed to the work of making yourself a more loving person, you no longer rely on your own brain for all your information. You are happy to learn about yourself from your partner or anyone else you trust. You are open to finding out how you appear to those who see your shadow or dark side. You want to be ex-*posed* so you can drop your poses and let your authentic self emerge. You welcome feedback about how others are affected by you. A commitment to working on yourself—the whole point of these practices—includes this openness to feedback. Zen Master Wuzu reports: "The ancients were always so glad to hear of their mistakes." If you find that your ego cannot tolerate being called to task or shown to be inadequate or wrong, then the work begins here. A sine qua non of the work is a willingness to let go of ego. *I commit myself to find some truth in any feedback I receive.*

As a step toward achieving this willingness, ask your partner to describe something that has been upsetting her and notice when you are judging what she says, wanting to control her reactions, feeling afraid of her, wanting to fix her, and so forth. Acknowledge each of these reactions as ego distractions and return to listening openly. When your partner has finished, tell her what distractions interrupted your mindful hearing of her story and acknowledge them as ego. Make a commitment to notice them in future conversations. You can commit yourself instead to listening with your heart, where the five A's are. How can that happen? By the

mindfulness habit you are building in meditation, by returning to your breath undistracted by mindsets.

Here is a practice that uses mindfulness for responding appreciatively and yet self-protectively when someone gives you critical feedback:

- Approach any person who has an issue with you with a conscious intention to give her the five A's. Say this aloud to her and maintain it in your heart as she speaks; it describes a profoundly loving way to listen, useful at any time of life and in all communication:

  I am paying close attention to you now.
  I accept you as you are in this moment.
  I allow you to be yourself.
  I appreciate you for what you have been and are.
  I have real affection for you, no matter what.

- Establish eye contact while really listening mindfully, without defensiveness, anger, or plans to retaliate or prove the person wrong.
- Acknowledge the impact you have had on the other and the feelings you aroused in her. Do not use denial to protect yourself. Do not minimize or discount your impact by contrasting it with your good intentions. The impact matters more than the intention.
- Commit yourself to taking what the other person says as information, not as censure.
- Speak up, however, if the feedback includes blame, insult, ridicule, or put-downs. You will not permit that when you are taking care of yourself.
- Make amends when appropriate, design a plan to change, and ask for support.

This practice instills the virtue of humility and makes you more open and endearing.

ATTENDING TO NEEDS • In the film *The Sixth Sense,* the main character, a young boy, was released from his fear of the ghosts that haunted him when he finally asked them, "What do you need from me?" Focusing on other people's needs allows us to stop fearing them. Needs come

from the heart and are heard by the heart. To listen with the heart is to listen for what someone needs without fear, judgment, criticism, moralism, contradiction, or projection. That is successful communication, and it results from mindfulness. We are present in the here and now without mental interferences. With a mind free of bias, we can really notice when another person needs our attentiveness, acceptance, appreciation, affection, or allowing. Philosopher Martin Buber spoke of the "empathic connection," which cannot happen when we are judging, only when we are witnessing. Write out these sentences in your journal and complete each one with as many particulars as you can think of:

I see my partner in these same old ways: _____.
I believe s/he will never change these behaviors: _____ .

As long as we believe a partner to be the same as always or to be what we imagine her to be, we operate from that image and not from consciousness of her needs. We can change this mental habit by giving her the five A's and really hearing her needs. A person who knows we have pigeonholed her in our minds will not trust us and will therefore not show us her needs. Then communication fails, and defensiveness or arguments take over.

Using the five A's as guideposts, ask yourself what you need most from a partner or a friend. Ask your partner or a friend what he needs from you. Be careful not to confuse needs with requests, plans, or remedies. For example, to say "I need you to listen" describes not a need but a request. To say "I need more space in this relationship" describes not a need but a plan. To say "I need a drink" describes not a need but (your idea of) a remedy. Tell your partner your present desires, plans, and ideas for remedies. Then identify the need behind each of these and ask him to hear it. For instance, behind the desire to be listened to may lie the need for authentic attentiveness, an undistracted focus on your words and feelings with respect and sincere appreciation.

FEELING LOVED • Begin this exercise by recalling memories of feeling loved in childhood, and notice any connections to the kinds of love you seek as an adult. Then ask your partner what feels like love to him

and share what it feels like to you. You may not feel loved by someone who truly loves you because she shows it in ways you do not understand as love. This is like hearing a foreign language and presuming it is gibberish. Ask for a translation: The challenge of intimacy for adults is to expand our original concept of love to accommodate a partner's unique way of loving. We can still ask for what we want while trying to accept an approximation of it and opening ourselves to new versions of love.

Consider these questions in your journal: What feels like love to me? Who makes me feel that way? Do I feel loved in bodily resonant ways by my partner? Who was the first person in my life to make me feel loved? Have I thanked him/her enough? Can I tell my partner what feels like love to me? Can I ask her the same question? What will I do with the information? Is the love I offer childlike, parental, or adult? Is the love I seek childlike, parental, or adult? When we feel little or no love coming our way, we may look for proof of love. The more proofs we seek, the more our partner feels threatened, tested, and on the spot. Am I in either of these positions?

THE TOUCH • Becoming an adult does not erase or cancel our fundamental needs. We all feel a need to be held at times, no matter what our age. This comes from an instinct for personal validation. We are always on the lookout for the mirroring and holding that may have been inadequate or missing in early life. When someone loves us, cares about us, and respects us, that person's body becomes a resource for repair of the neglect or abuse in our past.

Some of us fear, quite reasonably, the letdown of finding closeness and then losing it again. We want to be sure a potential partner deserves our trust, and it is always a gamble. If we can get past the inhibiting fear, we may open ourselves to the touch of others, however limited, and find it holds a healing power. Being held with tender attention—for example, in someone's lap or side by side with arms around each other—supplies the mirroring love that may have been missing in our childhood. It feels embarrassing only at first; once the ice is broken, it feels natural. Try this kind of holding sometime with your partner or a close friend. You may offer to hold a partner on your lap or cuddle side by side and read a part of this book to him or her. We do not outgrow the need for such comforting forms of childhood closeness and there is no shame in it.

OFFERING SUPPORT • Emotional support means a generous giving of the five A's. Yet, how do we know exactly what kind of support a partner needs in a given moment or situation? For instance, our partner is weeping. Will it help most to hold her or to give her space?

The Little Prince acknowledged: "It's such a secret place the land of tears." There is sometimes a recondite, unreachable, unnamed feeling in a person's experience. She herself does not know what she really feels or needs in the moment. Support may consist simply in honoring that inner mystery. We may not find out how to help. Then, like Hamlet, we can only say: "Sit still my soul."

At other times sensitivity may take the form of inquiry. When your partner seems distressed and willing to communicate, practice asking her what kind of help she needs. This is a way of honoring—and encouraging—her comfortableness in asking for support from you, another contribution to intimacy. Here are some examples of how to ask: "I see your pain. Please tell me how I can be here for you now." "I want to support you in this moment. Please let me know what will work best for you." "I am available in any way I can be. How can I nurture you best at this time?" "If you do not know what you need right now, I can simply be here with you."

NOTICING MINDSETS • Loving presence takes five forms: attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, allowing. Mindfulness is the path to such loving presence. Mindful contact is unconditional in granting the five A's and unconditioned by the mindsets of ego such as fear, demand, expectation, judgment, or control. Look at the chart below and journal examples of how you find yourself on both sides in your way of relating to a partner. Show your results to your partner and ask for feedback in making changes and for a compassionate response too.

The Five A's (based on mindfulness)	*Their Opposites* (based on mindsets)
Being attentive	Ignoring, refusing to listen, being unavailable, fearing the truth
Being accepting	Trying to make someone over to fit our specifications, desires, or fantasies
Being appreciative	Criticizing
Being affectionate	Acting selfishly or abusively
Allowing	Being controlling, demanding, or manipulative

SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT TO THE FIVE A'S • The five A's are purposes, or ends in themselves. Giving and receiving them are not only the ways we are fulfilled but also the spiritual practices by which we fulfill our heroic destiny of bringing the world the benefits and treasures we find on our path. Viewed in spiritual terms, they can be explained like this:

- Attention means consciousness of the interconnectedness of all things.
- Acceptance means saying an unconditional yes to the sobering givens of existence, the facts of life.
- Appreciation means the attitude of gratitude.
- Affection means the love we feel for others and for the universe.
- Allowing means that we grant to others and protect in ourselves the right to live freely and without outside control.

Turn these five needs/purposes into affirmations and commitments, which you can then repeat daily or more often if possible. Use the following as examples:

- I feel unity with all human beings and with nature. I notice their pain and their joy. I make decisions that make me feel more connected and closer to them.
- I accept the givens of existence, both those that seem positive and those that seem negative. I surrender to what cannot be changed and trust it to be useful on my life's path.

- I am thankful for all that has been and open to all that will be. I show appreciation for everything I receive.
- I show my love in my every thought, word, and action.
- I cherish my right to live in accord with my own deepest needs, values, and wishes. I respect that right in others.

Finally, practice this meditation style: As you breathe in, think or say one of the five A's as an adverb (for instance "attentively," "acceptingly," "appreciatively," and so forth). Move from one word to the next with each in-breath or simply repeat the same word. An adverb modifies an adjective, verb, or another adverb. To use an adverb on its own in this way creates an automatic sense of incompleteness in the mind—we naturally seek an object. That object might be a difficult emotion or experience you're going through, or it could be the next person or circumstance you meet.

An alternative is to breathe in and out with two words, one from the five A's and the other a virtue you are working on, for instance, "attentively compassionate," "appreciatively generous," etc. Or you can imagine a particular immediate issue, concern, or person occupying your thoughts, and, while breathing consciously, you might say: "I hold this _____ compassionately or attentively," etc.