

## What Happens in Mindfulness by Cynthia Bourgeault

### WHAT HAPPENS IN MINDFULNESS

JOHN TEASDALE. GUILFORD PRESS (WWW.GUILFORD.COM), 2022. PP. 268.

Reviewed by Cynthia Bourgeault

Like mom and apple pie, mindfulness has an unassailable reputation for virtue and wholesomeness. But what actually goes on in the brain and the psyche to deliver the goods? What are we actually signing up for when we embrace a path of mindfulness? In this important new book John Teasdale deftly weaves a course between the Scylla of cognitive science and the Charybdis of classic spiritual teaching to create a clear and compelling understanding of how mindfulness actually works to support the deep, unitive transformation of mind and heart traditionally known as “awakening” or “enlightenment.”

Teasdale’s credentials are blue chip; as a Fellow of the British Academy and the Academy of Medical Sciences, he is a revered elder within the British scientific community. Together with Mark Williams and Zinder Segal, he is one of the co-founders of CBMT (cognitive based mindfulness training), and together with Phil Barnard he is the principal architect of ICS (Interactive Cognitive Systems), a unique, process model for understanding how discrete brain systems (sensory, cognitive, emotive, etc.) work together to purportedly generate the perceptual field we call “consciousness” and the sense of selfhood emerging from it. He will draw heavily on this model in his presentation; it is just here, in my estimate, that the book’s most original and helpful contributions lie.

But Teasdale is also a committed spiritual seeker (I am honored but a bit embarrassed that he counts himself as one of my students), and his decades of inner work on both Eastern and Western spiritual paths bear fruit in this book’s wise, accessible, and kindly demeanor. It is itself his “Exhibit A” of the wisdom transformation he will gently lay before us here.

His underlying thesis may at first sound like simply a rebooting of the old “left-brain/right brain” dichotomy, popularized a decade or so ago by Jill Bolte Taylor and recently reinvigorated by Iain McGilchrist. Teasdale launches his exploration from the same fundamental premise, namely that we humans come equipped with two independent cognitive processing systems, which he calls “conceptual thinking” and “holistic intuitive thinking.” But if you think you’ve heard this all before, hold on—Teasdale is headed in a different direction. While it’s true that only one brain can ultimately be in the driver’s seat at any given time, the goal is not to demonize the conceptual brain, but to synchronize the two systems so that they work together in harmonious dialogue. In fact, he argues, the central driveshaft of mindfulness—what makes mindfulness what it is, i.e., an integrated field of conscious perceptivity— lies precisely in the dynamic dialogue between

these two systems. Authentic mindfulness is not simply “turn off the brain and smell the roses,” as in the popular stereotypes but a powerful integrative capacity at higher levels of consciousness and within a certain configuration of attention. Putting his ICS model fully to work for him, he describes how this dialogue engages the mind’s innate capacity for “whole-making”—i.e., the capacity to detect, process, and in fact create, higher and higher levels of interpretive pattern (“novel mental models,” as he calls them), which in turn makes possible a flexible and creative response to life’s ever-changing circumstances. Weaving insights from systems theory, Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi’s classic 1970s study of flow, and traditional spiritual teaching on awakening mind, he is able to demonstrate how a mindful self “bootstraps its way” deeper and deeper into responsive and hypervitalized reality, the “presence” so universally cherished among mindfulness aficionados.

Conceptual knowing is indeed a powerful analytical and problem-solving tool; Western civilization rose on its back. But the difficulty arises when we try to use it to attain the one thing it manifestly cannot deliver: lasting personal happiness. The reason for this failure is ultimately attributable neither to human sinfulness (as Western spiritual teaching has tended to emphasize) nor to human illusion (as the Eastern tradition has taught), but to an inbuilt limit of our operating system. The Catch-22, as Teasdale explains with his signature wry clarity, is that any kind of desiring or grasping for an external object or goal triggers what’s known as the “SEEKER-affect,” one of the core response patterns evolutionarily embedded in the human brain. This in turn causes an immediate shift in the shape of the mind: a constriction of the field of attention and an “instrumental” quality to the awareness, so that it is no longer open to the wealth of impressions available in any moment but hell-bent on the one goal it has taken on for itself. And alas, as soon as conceptual knowing kicks in, authentic mindfulness goes out the window, since it is itself an emergent property of the holistic intuitive way of knowing. I am sure that many spiritual seekers, impaled on the horns of this catch-22, will recognize themselves in Teasdale’s wry portrait of Luciana, “a case of instrumental knowing” (see below).

The exaggerated subject/object polarity which is the fundamental driveshaft of conceptual knowing creates the illusion of “thingness,” i.e. a world made up of discrete bits and pieces, each with its intrinsic qualities, and out of this emerges the greatest illusion of them all: the mirage of the separate “self.” Echoing a number of Buddhist-leaning scientists Teasdale adds additional evidence that this narrowed, objectified, and instrumental configuration of the attention is the primary culprit in generating the illusion of separate selfhood in the first place. “Grasping is not something done by the self, but rather, self is something done by grasping,” he writes, citing Buddhist scholar Andrew Olendski, and while the source of this mirage may prove to be an illusion, its consequences in human pain and suffering are all too real.

As a person who has spent the better part of her life as a spiritual seeker, pursuing inner awakening along classic spiritual pathways both Western and Eastern, I found considerable relief in Teasdale’s gentle, phenomenological approach. As he helped me cut through the frustrating moralizing of my own Christian tradition and the equally frustrating ko’an thickets of Eastern teaching (“Just wake up!”), I found myself in the presence of solid, helpful guidelines I can actually work with (that is, if I stay relaxed and don’t flip myself back over into conceptual knowing.) An awakened mind is not an unattainable or spiritually presumptuous goal; there is an actual way to get there with only two simple (but not easy) requirements: 1) you must learn to prefer the shape of your mind to the content of your story, and 2) insofar as you possibly can, work to preserve your mind in that state of open, non-instrumental awareness in which holistic intuitive knowing will kick in and you find yourself in that dynamic give-and-take with the

whole rich tapestry of awareness available to you in every second that you truly and fully live with all your interconnected systems of human intelligence open and online. An awakened mind may not be that difficult to attain; it's simply that most of us are not yet prepared to give up that "pig we know," our familiar sense of selfhood.

If this all sounds a bit like Gurdjieff's "three-centered awareness," I believe this is so. Teasdale's "interactive cognitive systems" are not exactly a dead-ringer for Gurdjieffian "intellectual, emotional, and moving center," but they come close enough to spark a lively dialogue. It seems patently clear that "conceptual knowing" correlates closely with the intellectual center working in isolation, which is indeed the bete noir of Western civilization and primarily responsible for what Jean Gebser famously called the "hypertrophied ego": that exaggerated sense of personal selfhood that has caused so much alienation and misery in the West. The Gordian knot of selfhood is untied by reversing the direction in which it was originally formed. As one strengthens the input of the other centers (for Gurdjieff, feeling and sensation; for Teasdale primarily the auditory, visual, and body-state subsystems), one comes into authentic three-centered awareness (or holistic intuitive knowing). The grasping, craving self, created primarily by the intellectual center "gone rogue," loosens its stranglehold, and one catches perhaps the slightest whiff of something standing behind, be it Gurdjieffian "Real I," or simply the cloud dissolving in sunlight.

John Teasdale's wonderfully wise new book strengthens my own growing conviction that the Gurdjieffian Work can best be characterized as an early run-up on mindfulness training, dropped onto the planet a century before either the language or cognitive science were there to support it. As a devoted though admittedly maverick student of this tradition, I find his book particularly helpful as a bridging tool for those who are attracted to the Gurdjieff teaching but put off by its esotericism and convoluted language. Teasdale confirms that Gurdjieff was indeed on the right track and that his insights are in substantial alignment with the best of contemporary cognitive science. I will be making much use of this book for years to come, both for my personal work and for renewed confirmation that the synthesis I have been slowly working toward in my own teaching is finally bearing fruit. ◆