

“A SKILFUL AND ACCESSIBLE GUIDE”  
—STEPHEN BATCHELOR  
(AUTHOR OF BUDDHISM WITHOUT BELIEFS)



# The Art of Letting Go

eight new ways to step up  
your mindfulness practice

by Stephen Schettini

“The Art of Letting Go is a skilful and accessible guide to the practice of mindfulness as an integrated way of being in this world. While drawing deeply from Buddhist sources, it discards the chrysalis of Buddhism in order that the butterfly of a renewed life can fly free.”

—Stephen Batchelor, author of *After Buddhism*.



Is mindfulness tough for you? Is it hard to keep up a practice because you lack confidence or discipline? Are you afraid you're just no good at it? I know what it feels like to fall back into reactivity, especially when the whole point of mindfulness is to LET GO of reactivity.

Let's work on that.



# THREE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT MINDFULNESS

## 1. LETTING-GO

We all want to let go of stress, pain, anger, insignificance, uncertainty, loneliness, boredom—all those different ways of being stuck. But when you're stuck, you're *stuck*; you can't let go.



Letting go is not just an act of will or a technique. It's an art—something you cultivate and make your own; a process of discovery and of self-reliance.

There are many things you might be hanging on to, but we all hang on to one universal bad habit: REACTIVITY. ↗

## 2. REACTIVITY

Reactivity is an instinctive reflex that protects us in unfamiliar situations. It's probably saved your life on countless occasions, especially when you were young and inexperienced.



Reactivity is also a habitual response to familiar situations—a brainless autopilot. It *seems* safe, but it gets us into trouble because no two situations are the same.

We can learn to be more conscious and respond thoughtfully. The key is to understand reactivity, not with theories or beliefs, but by paying ATTENTION. ↗

## 3. ATTENTION

Attention is well known as 'being in the present moment,' but it's far more specific than that. What makes real change possible is paying close attention to how you hang on to reactivity.



Gradually, you can let go of reactivity and learn to respond strategically. It all begins with letting go, and you do that by cultivating attention at all times, specifically in these EIGHT NEW WAYS. →

## 8 NEW WAYS TO PAY ATTENTION TO & LET GO OF REACTIVITY



The eight key ways (left) in which we shape our lives are generally a mass of more or less unconscious patterns, but the simple practice of ATTENTION raises them to full consciousness and opens you up to the possibility of real change.

One of these eight is attention itself, the chief tool of mindfulness, which is so powerful because of the mind's amazing ability to perceive itself. The same word at the root of mindfulness (sati), may also be translated as RECOLLECTION—seeing with new eyes what we've already seen, or REMEMBERING—reminding ourselves of what we're paying attention to. It's precisely because the mind is self-reflective that it's also capable of profound change.

The eight new ways are not ideas. They're a practice. Like the way you write or drive a car, they adapt to your personality and say something about you.

They have nothing to do with the way things 'should' be. They're about what's best for you. They express the fundamental ethic of Buddhism: DO NO HARM.



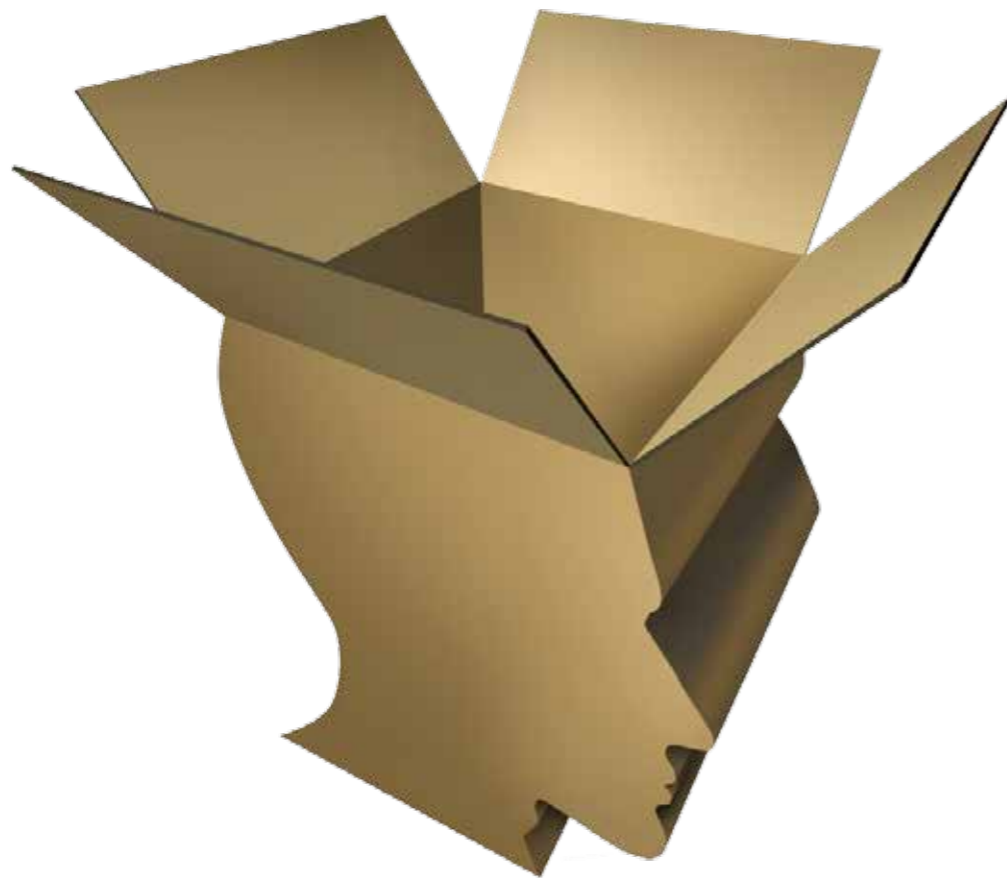
## 1 NEW OUTLOOK

Your outlook on life enables you to rationalize it to yourself and to describe it to others. It's a construct based on such things as experience, culture and education. We feel that our outlook is objectively real, but in fact it's entirely relative and subjective.

Swapping one relative outlook for another doesn't change much. However, being always mindful that every outlook is relative and subjective, changes everything. You hold opinions without being stuck in them. You no longer defend yourself whenever the facts or other people contradict you. It's a healthy state of mind, passionate and yet detached.

To let go of reactivity your new outlook needs to be discerning. It knows right from wrong and recognizes consequences. It adapts to different situations.

This new outlook is unsentimentally realistic. You accept that life and everything in it is temporary and unpredictable. You get how everyone pretends otherwise, and you sympathize, but you don't join in.



## 2

## NEW THINKING

We tend to believe that we do what we do because we've thought it out beforehand, that we're rational creatures and that there's a reason for everything. It's comforting, but it's simply not true.

Illusions like this help us cope with life's scary unpredictability, but they come at a price. By not taking the time to see how they're working for us we remain reactive, cut off from the transformative power of our own minds. Reactivity sometimes gets us what we want, but blinds us to what we need.

To exit reactive mode and become fully conscious takes new thinking, something that finds a new balance between being hopeful and being real.

The first step is learning to pursue your goals without expecting them to work out. If you're stuck in illusions this seems self-defeating, but letting go of what you want frees you to deal with what actually happens. Go for outcomes that are bigger than yourself, that add to the world you live in. Especially, before you act consider everyone else. Do no harm.



### 3

## NEW TALK

This new, more realistic outlook and thinking will be reflected in how you talk and what you say. You can also create a positive feedback loop by speaking more deliberately, taking care to avoid harsh talk, idle gossip, secrecy, lies and chit-chat. Take time to express yourself clearly, avoiding intellectualized jargon and flowery or verbose language. In other words, speak plainly, honestly and understandably.

This is not just about controlling what comes out of your mouth but also tuning in to who you're talking to, becoming empathetic, thoughtful and caring. In this way you'll accept human frailty, grow more tolerant and communicate more effectively.

In particular, new talk makes you more assertive in ways that get you heard. Sometimes, people need to be criticized, even shouted at. You'll do so with clarity, speaking neither defensively or aggressively.

Talking expresses who you are. Doing so mindfully is a sign of real transformation. Through it you begin to experience the great freedom of letting go.





## 4 NEW BEHAVIOR

The sort of behavior that helps you let go of reactivity is deliberate and mindful of consequences. Being good is not just about following rules and fitting in. It's about living an intelligent, ethical life. When rules are wrong and laws are unjust, that sometimes means standing apart.

At the very least, you scrupulously avoid hurting others and never take what belongs to them. At best you step up your new behavior to make the world a better place, starting with yourself. This is an ambitious goal for which you must grow resourceful and self-reliant, willing to take risks and able to learn from mistakes. New behavior takes courage.

Its rewards are great. You become more comfortable in your skin. Life intimidates you less. You laugh more easily—even at death itself. This doesn't mean that nothing scares you, but that you don't let your fears stop you, that you embrace your potential for growth and change knowing you're contingent and mortal. You become an inspiration to others.



## 5

## NEW LIVING

Conveyor belt education and the competitive pressures of consumerism nudge millions of us into unfulfilling jobs and careers. We try to maximize our income and follow others' notions of success while ignoring the things we're passionate about. This is described as 'getting real,' and 'not being a dreamer,' as if dreaming were irresponsible. New living resists these pressures and seeks a whole and enriched life that brings something better to the table.

It also avoids the opposite extreme: trying to become spiritually superior by avoiding material pursuits. This is unbalanced. We need to be independent in ourselves *and* in the world. Society needs people who are passionate, intelligent and constructive about money and power. It makes no sense to give up the levers of society to the greedy, the ruthless and the misguided.

To the extent we pursue our spiritual and material dreams, new behavior helps us make a good living by honouring our own intelligence and others' welfare.



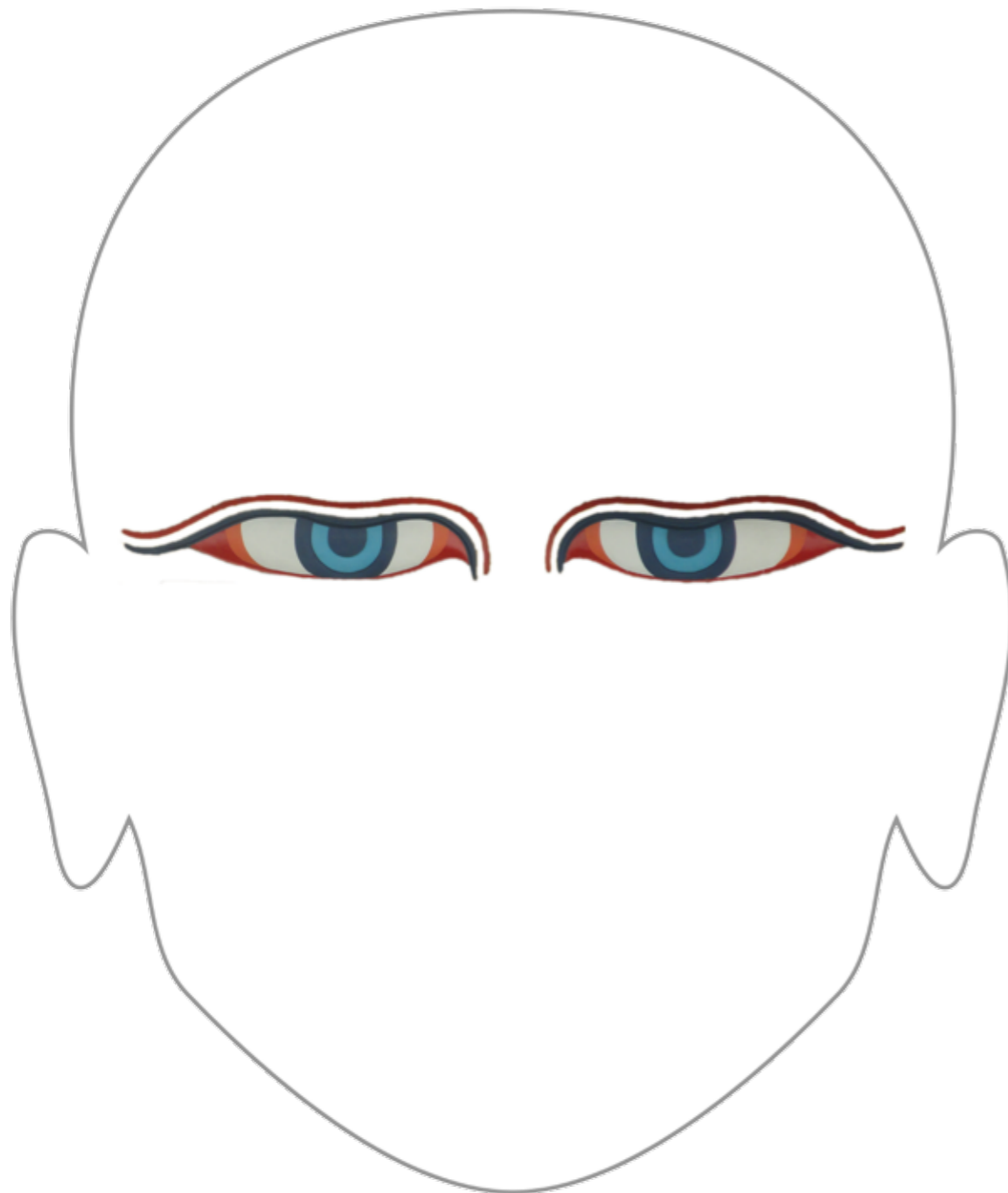
## 6

## NEW EFFORT

Feeling stressed or pressured makes us react in ways that look energetic and determined, but which are merely strained. Strain is diffuse and wasteful. Intelligent effort is poised, economical and focused.

The sort of effort that lets go of reactivity is not just a matter of form. It's also ethical and guided. Balance and economy require clear thinking. They're blocked by dishonesty and desperation.

Without feeling stressed or panicky, we put into practice what we learn about consequences, we watch out for and avoid those things that do harm, and become proactive about doing good. This means not interfering in other people's lives but being mindful of our insights and how they serve our new thinking.



## 7 NEW ATTENTION

When we're reactive, we give up our power. Our attention is entranced in the continuity of things happening outside of us. Attention that leads to letting go starts within us. It's aware of events and the feelings they evoke, but is not triggered by them.

Attention is not passive. When a response is called for we engage thoughtfully and energetically, constantly reflecting and ready to stop once we've done whatever is called for.

Attention is detached but not withdrawn. It is careful and compassionate, alert to each moment. Emotions, judgments and opinions arise, but they too become objects of quiet attention.

Attention is not indiscriminate. It remembers that every outer and inner perception is temporary, and that hanging on to real or imagined situations is stressful. It doesn't identify with the emotions they trigger but lets them go. This new level of attention leads to real, useful insights, producing ever deeper engagement with the world we inhabit.



## 8

## NEW FOCUS

Life is busy, stressful and demanding. We keep going until exhaustion overtakes us, then we fall into oblivion. While we need to sleep and dream, we also need to consciously recharge.

We do this by intentionally focusing the mind, to concentrate on one thing like the bullseye of a target or the sensation of our own breath. It's a simple, steady practice that strengthens the muscle of the mind, but it can be addictive.

It's easy to sink into the pleasant withdrawal of focusing on one thing and excluding everything else, but this gets you nowhere. New focus depends on a perfect balance of your inner and outer life.

This focus must be firmly embedded in the other seven new ways—outlook, thinking, talk, behavior, living, effort and attention. It is dignified and at rest, but always alert, ready for action, good and strong.



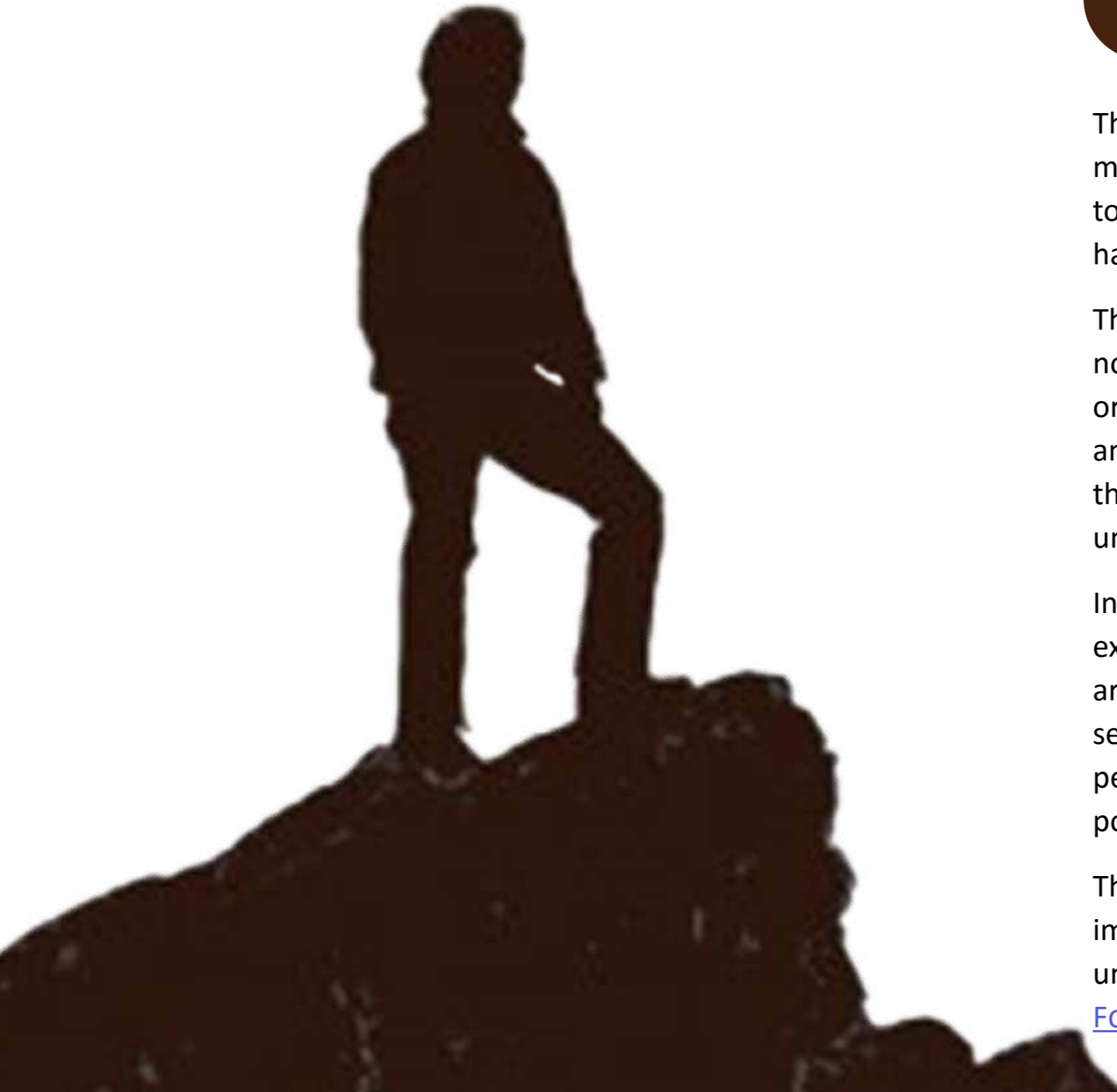
## SUMMING UP

You let go of reactivity by catching yourself in the act. That means paying attention to all you feel, think and do. It sounds tough, but paying attention is a natural mental process that calms the mind and feels good. With confidence and discipline you can change your ways. There are two things to watch out for:

**SELF-DOUBT:** We sometimes doubt our resolve, our ability, ourselves. It all seems too much: reactivity is rooted in patterns we pick up so early in life that it's as if we're trying to let go of who we actually are. But 'who we are' is a moving target. We don't come ready-made. We're continually reshaped by life.

**PROCRASTINATION:** When you're alone it's tempting to put things off. What helps is the support of friends of like mind and a personal mentor. Your connection to them should be natural, comfortable and utterly open. There's no time for pretense or conformity.

Above all, cultivate patience and understanding. Change doesn't happen overnight; setbacks are inevitable. Be kind to yourself.



## STEPPING UP

These eight new ways step up your practice of mindfulness from a short-term stress reduction tool to a long-term lifestyle change. Things don't just happen to you any more. You take charge.

There's no textbook for this kind of transformation, no religious, scientific or businesslike map. It's organic and unpredictable, different for everyone and unique to you. Getting there and staying there is an art. It's the ongoing exploration of your undiscovered self.

In this exploration there's no substitute for an experienced mentor. At every step of the way there are things you don't see, simply because you can't see everything at once. A mentor broadens your perspective, pinpoints your reactivity and opens new possibilities in every experience.

The moral support of like-minded people is equally important. It is vital to connect with others who understand the challenge of these eight new ways.

[FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT THE AUTHOR.](#)