There are some really nice things in life that naturally reinforce each other, and in doing so, they form virtuous cycles with each other. For example, if you enjoy performing an activity that requires some level of skill, you may find yourself doing it a lot and getting better at it. And as you get better at it, you may derive even more enjoyment from it. And when you enjoy it more, you do it even more and get even better at it, and so on. So in this case, skillfulness and enjoyment form a virtuous cycle in which one strengthens the other—hence you end up benefiting from both at once, at no extra cost.

Joy and meditation are another pair of really nice things that form a virtuous cycle with each other. Meditation is training of the mind. Joy becomes highly accessible in a trained mind. With training, the mind learns to access inner joy with increasing ease and frequency. At the same time, the joyful mind is at peace, a peaceful mind is easily focused, and a focused mind becomes more trainable, thereby making meditation practice even more effective. Thus a virtuous and joyful cycle forms. Once you put it into motion, the meditation practice that perhaps you thought you’d never have can be sustained, and joy becomes a dominant factor in daily life.

# Habit

A habit is a loop that consists of three parts: a cue, a routine, and a reward.[7](9780062378941_Notes.xhtml#ch2en7) The cue is something that activates the habit—it leads to the routine. The routine is the behavior itself—it leads to the reward. The reward is the perceived benefit that comes from doing the behavior, and it reinforces the habit so that the next occurrence of the same cue is more likely to automatically activate the routine. Thus a loop forms.

**INFORMAL PRACTICE: CREATING A HABIT OF TAKING MINDFUL BREATHS**

Choose a cue, something that, when it occurs, activates the habit of taking a mindful breath. The cue I most highly recommend is any situation when you have to wait.

Whenever the cue occurs, take one slow, deep breath and bring some amount of attention to that breath. For safety reasons (for example, if you’re walking or driving), you may need to maintain an appropriate amount of attention to your surroundings as you pay some attention to your breath.

If taking that mindful breath makes you feel any better, simply notice that. It will be the reward that reinforces the habit.

# Meditation is not about not thinking

One of the biggest misconceptions about meditation is that it involves “emptying your mind of all thoughts.” This one misconception is more responsible for turning people away from meditation than any other that I know of. Meditation is about allowing the mind to settle on its own terms, in its own time, which includes allowing thoughts to arise as and when they want to. It is true that over time, with practice, as the mind becomes more deeply settled, the stream of thoughts slows down and eventually goes from being like a raging waterfall to being like a fast-flowing river, then more like a slow-flowing stream, and finally, the mind is like a placid lake. Over time (in my own case, after many, many hours of meditation practice), the mind learns to quiet down on demand, but that does not come from suppressing the process of thinking—instead, it comes from learning to give the mind the space and time to settle on its own terms. Meditation is not what you think, or not think.

A skillful meditator periodically does three things: periodically he arouses mental energy, periodically he calms the mind, and periodically he watches the mind with equanimity. Simply put, skillfully managing energy in meditation boils down to balancing three mental factors: **mental relaxation, mental energy,** and **equanimous watching.**

# Easing into joy

Resting the mind to put it into a state of ease. Being joyful at rest, no ego stroking or sensual pleasure required. Cultivating this form of inner joy begins to free us from overreliance on sense and ego stimulation for pleasure. This means joy becomes increasingly available anyplace, anytime.

**Whenever there is any experience of joy,  
just notice it. That is all.**

**FORMAL PRACTICE: NOTICING JOY IN ONE BREATH**

Do the One Mindful Breath exercise from Chapter 2, which is simply to take one deep breath mindfully. If any hint of joy arises anytime during the exercise, **simply notice it,** that is all. If no hint of joy arises, no problem either; we simply **notice the absence** of joy.

# Inclining the mind toward joy

Next, we learn to notice joy and give it our full attention. We learn where to look in order to see and appreciate joy that is already available to us, in moments that we hadn’t noticed before. The more the mind becomes familiar with joy, the more it perceives joy, inclines toward joy, and effortlessly creates the conditions conducive to joy.

**FORMAL PRACTICE: INVITING AND ATTENDING TO JOY**

Sit in any posture that allows you to be alert and relaxed at the same time, whatever that means to you. You may keep your eyes open or closed.

Let us take three breaths. In the first breath, bring gentle but intense attention to the process of breathing. In the second breath, calm the body. In the third breath, bring up joy. If necessary, bring up a smile or a half smile, whatever the words *half smile* mean to you. If any joy arises, bring full attention to it. If you like, repeat this three-breaths practice a few more times.

# Uplifting the mind

Here, we learn to uplift the mind with wholesome joy, especially joy arising from goodness, generosity, loving-kindness, and compassion. The wholesomeness of such joy benefits mental health the same way wholesome food benefits physical health.

**INFORMAL PRACTICE: ATTENDING TO THE JOY OF PLEASANT DAILY EXPERIENCES**

Whenever you engage in an activity that involves a pleasant experience, take at least one moment to attend fully to the joy that pleasantness invokes. Some examples:

At each meal, attend fully to the enjoyment of at least the first bite.

When seeing a loved one, especially a beloved child, take one moment to appreciate that he or she is there, and attend fully to that joy.

When holding hands with a loved one, take one moment to attend fully to the joy of that contact.

When taking a shower, attend fully to at least one moment of the enjoyment of the body’s contact with water.

When relieving yourself in the toilet, attend fully to at least one moment of the pleasure of relief.

When out on a nice day, take one moment to attend fully to the enjoyment of the weather.

When walking, take one moment to attend fully to the joy of being able to walk.

In general, when seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching something pleasant, bring full attention to the joy for at least one moment, and when interacting with a beloved person, bring full attention to the joy of being with that person for at least one moment.

**INFORMAL PRACTICE: AWARENESS OF MORTALITY**

At least once a day, either in the morning shortly after waking up or in the evening shortly before sleep, or anytime in the day, remind yourself of these two things:

•Someday, I will die. I will die. Every moment I have is precious.

•Someday, every single person I love dearly will die. They will all die. Every moment I have with them is precious.

**INFORMAL PRACTICE: NOTICING THE ABSENCE OF PAIN**

Periodically, perhaps once a day, perhaps more frequently, bring awareness to the body to see if there is any experience of pain. Do you have a headache, a toothache, neck pain, back pain, or a stomachache? If any of those parts of the body is not in pain, you may remind yourself, “I do not have a headache / toothache / neck pain, etc., right now.” If any joy arises due to that thought, bring attention to that joy.

Periodically, perhaps once a day, perhaps more frequently, bring awareness to the mind to see if there is any experience of mental or emotional pain. Are you experiencing the pain of grief, sorrow, hatred, anger, jealousy, envy, want, grasping, fear, or desperation? If you are not experiencing any of those sources of pain right now, you may remind yourself, “I am not afflicted by the pain of grief / sorrow / hatred, etc., right now.” If any joy arises due to that thought, bring attention to that joy.

**FORMAL PRACTICE: JUST NOTE GONE**

Sit in any posture that allows you to be alert and relaxed at the same time, whatever that means to you. You may keep your eyes open or closed.

Sit in meditation for as many minutes as you like. Apply intense attention to the end of every out breath, clearly seeing the moment it ends. At the end of an out breath, if you like, you may silently note to yourself, “Gone.”

If any thought or sensation arises, see if you can watch it until it fades away. If it ceases at any time, even if for one moment, note its cessation. If you like, you may silently note to yourself, “Gone.”

You may end this meditation at any time. At the moment the meditation ends, take note of its ending. If you like, you may silently note to yourself, “Gone.”

**INFORMAL PRACTICE: WISHING FOR RANDOM PEOPLE TO BE HAPPY**

During working hours or school hours, randomly identify two people who walk past you or who are standing or sitting around you. Secretly wish for them to be happy. Just think to yourself, “I wish for this person to be happy, and I wish for that person to be happy.” That is the entire practice. Don’t do anything; don’t say anything; just think. This is entirely a thinking exercise.

If you prefer, you can do this at any time of the day for any amount of time. You can also do it at any other place. If there is nobody present, you can bring someone to mind for the purpose of this exercise.

If you like, you may pretend you are firing a “happiness ray gun” at them and make “pew, pew” sound effects in your head. Batteries not required.

**FORMAL PRACTICE: ATTENDING TO THE JOY OF LOVING-KINDNESS**

Sit in any posture that allows you to be alert and relaxed at the same time, whatever that means to you. You may keep your eyes open or closed.

Repeat this cycle once per minute: Bring to mind someone for whom you can very easily feel loving-kindness. Wish for him or her to be happy. The joy of loving-kindness may arise, and if that happens, bring full attention to the joy until it fades away. For the rest of the minute, just rest the mind.

When the next minute begins, start the cycle again, for a total of three minutes.