I found the experience of sitting undisturbed for three days amid pristine breezes and starlight, with nothing to do but contemplate the mystery of my existence, to be a source of perfect misery—for which I could see not so much as a glimmer of my own contribution. My letters home, in their plaintiveness and self-pity, rivaled any written at Shiloh or Gallipoli.

So I was more than a little surprised when several members of our party, most of whom were a decade older than I, described their days and nights of solitude in positive, even transformational terms. I simply didn't know what to make of their claims to happiness. How could someone's happiness *increase* when all the material sources of pleasure and distraction had been removed? At that age, the nature of my own mind did not interest me—only my life did. And I was utterly oblivious to how different life would be if the quality of my mind were to change.

Our minds are all we have. They are all we have ever had. And they are all we can offer others. This might not be obvious, especially when there are aspects of your life that seem in need of improvement—when your goals are unrealized, or you are struggling to find a career, or you have relationships that need repairing. But it's the truth. Every experience you have ever had has been shaped by your mind. Every relationship is as good or as bad as it is because of the minds involved. If you are perpetually angry, depressed, confused, and unloving, or your attention is elsewhere, it won't matter how successful you become or who is in your life—you won't enjoy any of it.

Most of us could easily compile a list of goals we want to achieve or personal problems that need to be solved. But what is the real significance of every item on such a list? Everything we want to

accomplish—to paint the house, learn a new language, find a better job—is something that promises that, if done, it would allow us to finally relax and enjoy our lives in the present. Generally speaking, this is a false hope. I'm not denying the importance of achieving one's goals, maintaining one's health, or keeping one's children clothed and fed—but most of us spend our time seeking happiness and security without acknowledging the underlying purpose of our search. Each of us is looking for a path back to the present: We are trying to find good enough reasons to be satisfied *now*.

Acknowledging that this is the structure of the game we are playing allows us to play it differently. How we pay attention to the present moment largely determines the character of our experience and, therefore, the quality of our lives. Mystics and contemplatives have made this claim for ages—but a growing body of scientific research now bears it out.

A few years after my first painful encounter with solitude, in the winter of 1987, I took the drug 3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine (MDMA), commonly known as Ecstasy, and my sense of the human mind's potential shifted profoundly. Although MDMA would become ubiquitous at dance clubs and "raves" in the 1990s, at that time I didn't know anyone of my generation who had tried it. One evening, a few months before my twentieth birthday, a close friend and I decided to take the drug.

The setting of our experiment bore little resemblance to the conditions of Dionysian abandon under which MDMA is now often consumed. We were alone in a house, seated across from each other on opposite ends of a couch, and engaged in quiet conversation as the chemical worked its way into our heads. Unlike other drugs with which we were by then familiar (marijuana and alcohol), MDMA produced no feeling of distortion in our senses. Our minds seemed completely clear.