

Mindfulness

An Interview with Mirabai Bush, Co-Founder, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

EDITORS' NOTE *Mirabai Bush teaches contemplative practices and develops programs through the application of contemplative principles and values to organizational life. Her work with individuals and organizations includes entrepreneurial project management, compassionate staff-board relations, organizational leadership, public relations, communication, networking, and strategic relationship building all through the lens of contemplative practice in action. She currently hosts a podcast on the Be Here Now Network entitled Walking Each Other Home. Her spiritual studies include two years in India with Hindu teacher Neemkaroli Baba; meditation in monasteries with Buddhist teachers Shri S.N. Goenka, Anagarika Munindra, and IMS guiding teachers; studies with Pir Vilayat Khan and Tibetan Buddhist lamas Kalu Rinpoche, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Gelek Rinpoche, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and others; and five years of intensive practice in Iyengar yoga and five years of Aikido under Kanai Sensei. Bush was a co-founder of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and served as its Executive Director until 2008. Under her direction, the Center developed its programs in education, law, business, and activism and its network of thousands of people integrating contemplative practice and perspective into their lives and work. Bush co-created Search Inside Yourself, a Google program attended by thousands of employees. She has a background in organizational management, teaching, and spiritual practice. A founding board member of the Seva Foundation, an international public health organization, she directed the Seva Guatemala Project which supports sustainable agriculture and integrated community development. Also at Seva, she co-developed Sustaining Compassion, Sustaining the Earth, a series of retreats and events for grassroots environmental activists on the interconnection of spirit and action. She is co-author, with Ram Dass, of Walking Each Other Home: Conversations on Loving and Dying, and Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service. Bush has organized, facilitated, and taught workshops, weekends, and courses on spirit and action for more than 20 years at institutions including Omega Institute; Naropa Institute; Findhorn; Zen Mountain Monastery; University of Massachusetts; San Francisco Zen*



Mirabai Bush

Center; Buddhist Study Center at Barre, Massachusetts; Insight Meditation Society; and the Lama Foundation. She has a special interest in the uncovering and recovery of women's spiritual wisdom to inform work for social change. She has taught women's groups with Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Sharon Salzberg, Joan Halifax, Margo Adler, Starhawk, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Vicky Noble, and other leaders. Earlier in her career, Bush was the first professional woman to work on the Saturn-Apollo moonflight at Cape Canaveral and later co-founded and directed Illuminations, Inc. Her innovative business approaches, based on mindfulness practice, were reported in Newsweek, Inc., Fortune, and the Boston Business Journal. She has also worked on educational programs with inner-city youth of color. Bush has trekked, traveled, and lived in many countries including Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica, India, Nepal, Morocco, Ireland, England, Scotland, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Germany, Austria, Italy, Pakistan, and the Caribbean. Her earlier religious study included 20 years of Catholic schooling, ending with Georgetown University graduate study in medieval literature. She holds an ABD in American literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

INSTITUTION BRIEF *The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (contemplativemind.org) is a global community of contemplative practitioners whose goal is the ongoing development of racial, social, economic, and environmental justice and the advancement of human flourishing. Its mission is to positively and progressively transform society through diverse contemplative practices.*

How did your interest and passion for the study of mindfulness develop?

I was in a PhD program at SUNY Buffalo in the late 1960s and teaching. It was a time of significant change and unrest in the country, and I was involved on campus in civil rights works and anti-war activism. It became very difficult to teach during this time, so I decided to take some time off and travel to try to find a way of living and being in the world that made more sense to me during this chaotic time. I traveled through Europe and the Middle East and then into Asia. When I got to India, I met someone who told me about a meditation course being

taught for Westerners for the first time by a Burmese Buddhist teacher, and I thought that it would be interesting. I had sampled wine and cheese in Paris and now it was time to sample meditation in India.

I went to the course which was being taught by a teacher who would have a big impact on this country. S.N. Goenka had been a businessman in Burma and wanted to teach these practices, which today we call mindfulness, in a way that people could integrate into their full lives. The course was taught for 10 days at a time – we started at five o'clock in the morning and meditated in silence with instruction until nine o'clock at night. I had never done anything like this in my life. As you can imagine, it had a major impact on me and others there as we realized the transformative power of these practices, which helped us see more clearly into our own lives. We asked S.N. Goenka if he would teach another course for us, and we stayed for four or five more courses. I had been, like most Americans, leading a super-busy, externally oriented life, and I had never before looked inside to see how my thoughts would rise and fall away. This work allowed me to focus more clearly on what was in front of me in each moment in a way that I never could before. It helped me pay better attention, need less stimulation, recover from negative experiences more quickly, see new opportunities, not take myself so seriously, be kinder, and appreciate other people. When I returned to this country, I wanted to integrate this into my own life and also share it with others.

How do you define the meaning of the word mindfulness and what led you to develop The Tree of Contemplative Practices?

Mindfulness is both a process (mindfulness practice) and an outcome (mindful awareness). It is the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose in the present moment non-judgmentally.

Mindfulness as it has been taught recently is mainly from the Buddhist tradition, but there are similar mindfulness practices in all traditions around the world, because it means being in the moment and paying attention with care and respect – it is a human practice. We designed The Tree of Contemplative Practices because these mindful practices are rooted in cultivating awareness, and on the tree of contemplative practices we show that there are many ways to cultivate it – there are stillness practices, like

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meditation and mindfulness; movement practices, such as yoga and tai chi; contemplative arts; contemplative reading; practices of pilgrimage where you are holding a thought, idea or prayer at the same time that you are moving to a sacred space; and many others.

On the Tree of Contemplative Practices, the roots symbolize the intentions that are the foundation of all contemplative practices. The roots encompass and transcend differences in the religious traditions from which many of the practices originated and allow room for the inclusion of new practices that are being created in secular contexts. The branches represent different groupings of practices. For example, Stillness Practices focus on quieting the mind and body in order to develop calmness and focus. Generative Practices may come in many different forms but share the common intent of generating thoughts and feelings, such as thoughts of devotion and compassion, rather than calming and quieting the mind.

The Tree of Contemplative Practices originally developed from a research project that we conducted to discover what practices were out there. The tree with branches came about as a way to show each of these practices being both independent and interrelated. There are so many because there are so many different kinds of people, and practices work for people at different times of their life depending on what they are dealing with at the time.

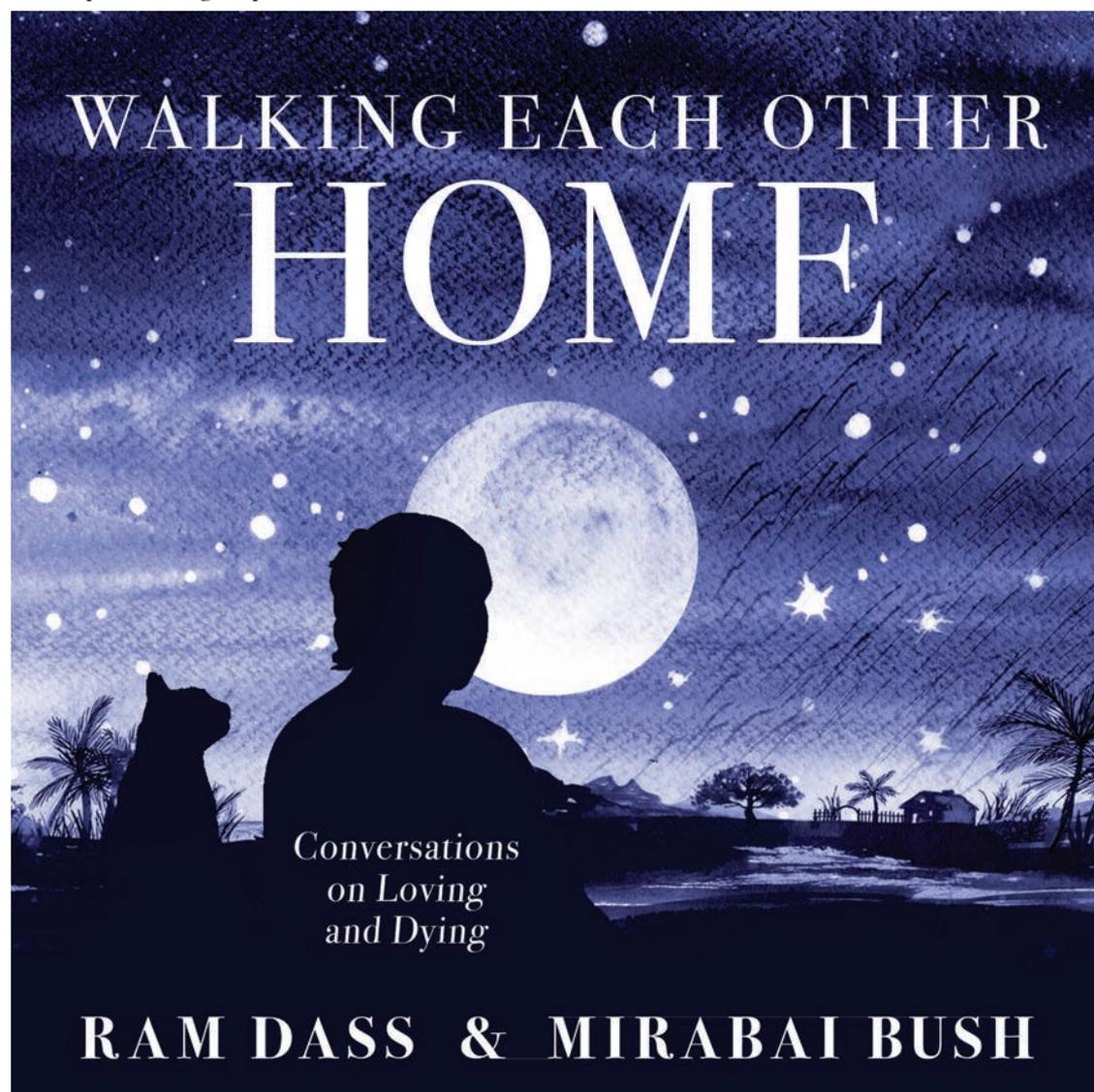
What do you tell people who say that they are too busy and do not have the time to devote to mindfulness practices?

You really have to experience it to fully appreciate what I am about to say, but contemplative practices, especially mindfulness, make time more elastic. It happens that the more you are present fully in the moment, the more effective you are likely to be. Things will take less time than they did before. You may be able to see things more clearly, so it takes less time to solve problems or to design a creative initiative. Even while mindfulness does take time to cultivate, often you will find that it helps in time management. When you are running an organization or leading a project, there are so many things to think about; these practices help you to set priorities more effectively and to be more aware and present. This work has the potential to transform the way you are in the world with yourself and others.

What was the vision for creating the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society and how do you define its purpose?

When I first came back from India, I knew I wanted to bring what I learned in Asia into what I was doing here. I spent about 10 years running a business and then spent another 10 years co-creating an international public health organization. I spent a number of years in Guatemala with this effort. In the mid-'90s, Bill Moyers hosted a show on public television called *Healing and the Mind*, and many people who were featured on that show were using what we called contemplative practices. I was part of a group at the time which was

looking at how we could introduce these practices into mainstream sectors of American life because we had seen on a small scale the positive difference they could make. Inspired by the Moyers series, we founded the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society with a great group of advisors and board members with the purpose of planting a few seeds and seeing what came up. They all did! The timing was right and the need in this culture to be more focused and see better connections was so great that people in many different fields and sectors were open to working with us. Now there are thriving contemplative programs offered in all of these sectors.



The mission of the Center is to positively and progressively transform society through diverse contemplative practices, and the Center is comprised of a global community of contemplative practitioners whose goal is the ongoing development of racial, social, economic, and environmental justice and the advancement of human flourishing. We have introduced contemplative practices and programs in law, technology, business, environmental leadership, higher education, social justice activism, journalism, philanthropy, the government (the FTC), and the Army.

Will you provide an example of the work you do with leading companies?

When I started working with Google, which was in 2007, no one in Silicon Valley was doing this type of work. Google was a company that was really open to trying new things and at that time they encouraged employees to spend 20 percent of their time on projects and activities that were important to them, as long as they had the potential to improve life at Google and were aligned with Google's mission.

I was invited to Google by Chade Meng Tan, an engineer from Singapore, who had an experience with meditation that helped him during a stressful time in his life and wanted to introduce it to Google. He offered Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, but there was little interest shown by other employees. After that, he asked me to help him figure out how to interest them in mindfulness. When I arrived, I noticed that the workforce was comprised of young, smart, competitive people who had spent most of their lives in front of their computer screens; they were the first generation of digital natives. While asking why they were not interested in mindfulness when it was first offered, I realized that they thought that they had the best jobs in the world. Google was a company recognized then as one of the best places to work, so how could they be stressed and need mindfulness practices? In addition, stress is what got them to be at the top of their college class and achieve at a high level, so their stress was good.

We decided that to be successful in offering these practices, we needed to focus not only on what we thought they could benefit from, but also on what they perceived they would benefit from. At that time, a lot of the research on emotional intelligence in corporations was being released, and it was pretty clear that, all things being equal, if you had emotional intelligence, you were more successful. So we focused on mindfulness-based emotional intelligence. Dan Goleman had been an advisor to the Center, and he was enthusiastic about this initiative. At Google at that time, they were good at working on their screens and writing algorithms, but they were just starting to work as teams, and they needed to get better at it. We brought in neuroscientists who were doing research that showed that your mind changes based on what you are practicing; it actually changes the structure of the brain. When we developed the course, which we called Search Inside Yourself: Mindfulness-Based Emotional Intelligence, since Google was teaching us all to search, many employees signed

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up because they could connect it to success. We included mindful listening, mindful e-mailing, and compassion practices that helped them focus on what others are saying and meaning when they work as teams. The compassion exercises helped in understanding people's differences while recognizing what makes us similar; they helped to build trust among members which proved to be critical to team success.

How is breathing work used in mindfulness?

Mindfulness uses the breath as a point of focus since it is always there, and it reminds us that everything is changing all the time. The practice is designed to cultivate attention, the ability in the mind to be present with whatever exists in any moment. When you notice thoughts, the mind wandering away from the breath, you simply bring it back to the breath and begin again. There are also mindfulness practices that don't use the breath, where you take your attention to a word or to other parts of the body, noticing whether your toes are warm or cold or the numbing pain in your back. In mindfulness, you are not trying to change anything – it is about noticing what is there. The breath can play a valuable role in helping us be wholly present in each moment which opens up many possibilities.

What interested you in writing the book, *Walking Each Other Home: Conversations on Loving and Dying*, and what are key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

I wrote the book with one of my close friends, whom I originally met in India and have known for 50 years, Ram Dass. After many years of teaching and writing, Ram Dass had a massive stroke about 20 years ago and even though he had an amazing recovery from it, greater than his doctors had ever seen, he was left with aphasia which impairs the ability to speak and communicate. We had written a book together before, and he told me that he wanted us to write one more book before he died. When I asked what he wanted to write about, he said “dying,” which seemed totally appropriate since we had both been doing this kind of work for many years and had studied with many great teachers. Dying was always a

part of spiritual teaching, so we both knew a lot about it, but Ram wanted to write a fresh book with the wisdom he had gained through his life. We made an agreement that when we spent time together talking about dying that we would “say what we know and not say what we don't know.” Over two years, we wrote a book that is as honest and true as we could make it. I feel it's important because in a culture where dying is largely invisible, we often repress our fear of death and there are helpful ways to face that fear. We need to remember that we are all going to die and make it real for ourselves since so many of our other fears come back to that. Acceptance of death makes each day precious and helps us make better choices about how to spend our limited time here on this earth. As I talk to people about dying, I find that many are afraid of the pain and suffering leading up to dying, but that is not the important thing about dying since much pain now is managed through advances in medicine. In order to die peacefully, feeling like we have led a meaningful life, we need to pay attention now to how we are living so we have few or no regrets. We might need to forgive ourselves and others, tell others how much we care about them and love them, or make changes in our lives so they are more aligned with what we hold important. The first step is remembering that you will die – bring it up in conversation, make it more familiar.

Since I had spent my life doing these practices and thought that I knew about dying, I was surprised when it turned out that I learned a great deal doing this book. It made me pay more attention to dying in my daily life. I feel more at ease now, and it has led me to live closer to my values.

Are you able to take moments to reflect and appreciate what you have accomplished?

Yes. Mindfulness allows me moments of reflection in the midst of what I am doing. It has helped me change course when I needed to. It reminds me to listen to and love the people close to me. I am currently writing a memoir, reflecting on my life and legacy. That is a great humbling and awakening practice that I recommend to everyone. It is giving me joy. ●