

Present-Moment Awareness

An Interview with Susan Kaiser Greenland

EDITORS' NOTE Susan Kaiser Greenland is an internationally recognized leader in teaching mindfulness and meditation to children, teens, parents, and professionals. She developed the Inner Kids model while volunteering in public schools teaching secular mindfulness. Inner Kids is a hybrid of classical mindfulness and meditation practices adapted for children and one of the first mindfulness programs in education. Greenland and her husband,



Susan Kaiser Greenland

the author Seth Greenland, founded The Inner Kids Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that taught secular mindfulness in schools and community-based programs in the greater Los Angeles area from 2001 through 2009. Research on the Inner Kids elementary school program was published in the Journal of Applied School Psychology. Greenland played a foundational role in making mindfulness practices developmentally appropriate for young people. She helped pioneer activity-based mindfulness with her first book, *The Mindful Child*. Her second book, *Mindful Games*, offers simple explanations of complex concepts, methods, and themes while expanding upon her work developing activity-based mindfulness practices. In addition to her work sharing mindfulness with kids, Greenland has recorded a series of brief guided meditations for grownups entitled, *Mindful Parent*, *Mindful Child*. She also collaborated with the creators of the award-winning app, *Stop, Breathe, Think*, to develop an app for children, *Stop, Breathe, Think Kids*. Her work is featured in numerous magazines and newspapers, and she speaks widely at prestigious institutions and meditation

centers in the United States and abroad. Greenland serves on the Advisory Board of the Tergar Schools Project, which is under the direction of Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche.

Where did your interest and passion for mindfulness develop?

At the time I was a practicing lawyer representing owned and operated radio and television stations for Capital Cities/ABC and it was a high-pressured job. I had one young child and another one on the way and, at

this same time, my husband had been diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. He's the one who got me into meditation when he told me we were going to a local Zen center. I had assumed he wanted to go for himself, but he told me that we were going for me since I was so wound up and was driving him crazy. I had a terrible experience the first time I tried to meditate. I was supposed to spend a half an hour sitting on a cushion looking at a white wall and could not do it. I went running from the room after just a few minutes. Later, I realized it was the first time I had been still since my husband's cancer diagnosis, and I could not sit with my thoughts and emotions without reacting to them. However, I also realized that I needed to do something to manage my anxiety and this began my journey with mindfulness and formal meditation practice.

How do you define the meaning of mindfulness?

I think the word mindfulness as it is used today in popular culture has become basically meaningless because so many meanings are linked together. As with many things, there's a

plus side to the blurring of the meaning of the term in that the growing use of the word has made the concept of mindfulness more acceptable. I think that the important thing to focus on is the aspect of mindfulness that describes kind or friendly awareness and a stance of attention where we know what is happening without adding a layer of story or analysis around it. In other words, mindful awareness is a stance of attention where you know what is happening while it is happening.

What do you say to busy people who feel that they do not have the time for mindfulness practices?

This is a real issue and I think it's the responsibility of those of us who are out there working in the field to make these types of practices accessible to busy people. The key is not to present mindfulness as an add-on, as something else for busy people to do, but rather to give busy people awareness-based activities that they are able to integrate into what they are already doing. For example, in working with teachers and healthcare professionals, we do our best to understand their workday routines and then make suggestions about how they can integrate simple, awareness-based practices into what they are already doing to help them recognize the joy, compassion and wisdom in every moment.

What are your views on the emphasis on breathing practices today?

I think that the overemphasis on breathing is unfortunate. Clearly breathing is an excellent practice and a helpful tool, but breath awareness and purposeful breathing (or yogic breathing) are just some of the mindful awareness practices that offer insight into the world around us. Breath awareness or mindful breathing practices are not necessarily the most appropriate activities for

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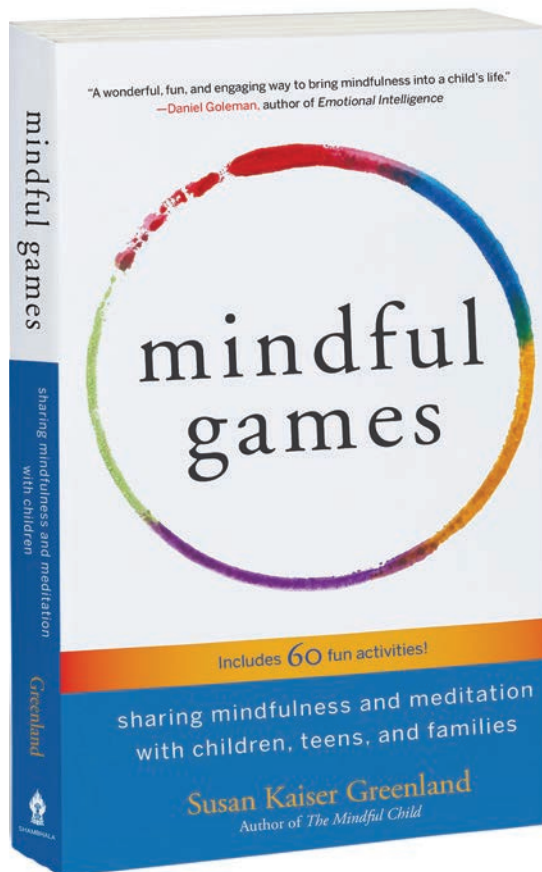
some people at certain points of their lives – an inner-directed practice like tuning into the breath can at times be less helpful than a more outer-directed practice that brings you in touch with sensory experiences, like walking in nature. It is important to understand the many transformative practices that are available, breathing being one of them, in order to understand what is best to address each person’s specific situation.

How important is it to begin to educate and inform children and young people about these practices?

I think this is key. When we work with children, we work with the entire system since we are also reaching parents, grandparents, teachers and school administrators. When one person in a system shifts, the entire system shifts. Working with children who are naturals at present-moment awareness is one way to make a seismic shift in an entire system and I am delighted to see how many people are embracing this as an idea to incorporate in schools.

How has the pandemic impacted the need for this type of work?

The last few years have brought with them an incredible need and my colleagues and I have never worked harder in making these practices available through Zoom calls and other channels, especially for kids, parents, and in schools. This time has highlighted the need for self-regulation and the importance of learning to be with big emotions in a calm and regulated way. When we are all worked up, our critical thinking can go offline as we shift into a fight, flight or freeze mode. Then, we can’t listen and learn and see the whole picture. The ability to self-regulate and see clearly, especially when we’re stressed or in a conflict, is key, not only for kids, but for parents and teachers as well.



Then, there is also the benefit of being openminded as everything is changing and uncertain. There are joyful moments even in the most challenging times. When we appreciate the good and soak it up, it’s easier to be kind, resilient, and strong during the tough times.

What do you say to business leaders who may feel that anxiety and stress are part of what has made them successful in their careers?

We hear this often among successful people who are concerned about losing their edge. I explain that there are tried-and-true awareness practices that have been proven over many years to build your capacity to be with difficult emotions and experiences. These practices develop your capacity to stay steady and not be reactive when faced with conflict and/or an overwhelming amount of input. Further, when you are reactive – even mindful people are reactive sometimes – mindfulness helps you recover quickly. Many successful people in business are often already doing what we call mindfulness, even though they may not realize it, but what they may not be doing is taking the moments for joy and appreciation in what they are doing. They may not be seeing that sometimes the harder we push against an obstacle, the less we achieve – the more we resist, the more it persists. If I walk into any boardroom to observe a successful executive, I will come out with five things that they are doing that in my world we would call an awareness practice or a mindfulness practice. It is about helping them to see the things they are already doing that are consistent with this philosophy and way of being and then building upon it.

Are you able to take moments to reflect and appreciate how you have impacted so many people through your work?

I am now. I take tremendous pleasure in seeing the people I trained going out and doing amazing work and making a difference. It is like everything in life – there is always more to do, but when I see the next generation taking the lead and doing things in new and creative ways, it gives me great joy. ●

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