

# Mindfulness for Seniors

Blair O'Neil, Founder, Teacher, and Author

Full Bio - Part 1



Born in the vibrant, sun-drenched communities of Southern California, a lifelong journey of exploration and discovery began. Growing up amidst an eclectic mix of blue collar workers and a fading local industry, a broad ethnic diversity, against the backdrop of a vibrant artist, musician and performing arts community, beach lovers, and spiritual seekers in the adjacent communities of Santa Monica and Venice, I was immersed in a world of diverse perspectives and experiences. This formative environment sparked an early curiosity about the world, people, various lifestyles, spirituality, and even mindfulness, launching me on a path that would shape the contours and colors of my life.

As the years progressed, the transformative power of literature was an added catalyst for my life journey in my later teenage years and beyond. Titles such as Hermann Hesse's "Siddhartha" opened my eyes to the depths of human experience and the potential of transformation. Works by Alan Watts (such as "The Way of Zen"), Paul Reps's "Zen Flesh, Zen Bones," Shunryu Suzuki's "Beginner's Mind," Aldous Huxley's "The Doors of Perception", Ram Dass's "Be Here Now!", and many other authors and titles further fueled my exploration of not only Zen Buddhism and many other mainstream faith-based philosophies, but also more exotic and esoteric spiritual approaches and traditions.

Culturally, this was a time of rapid change and transition, a bridge between the 1960s and 1970s, where the echoes of the Beat Generation mingled with the emergence of new subcultures and perspectives. It was here that I witnessed the stark contrasts of life, ranging from the darkest raw struggles of addiction and

hopelessness to the boundless expressions of creativity and joy. The continual stream of new experiences, coupled with seemingly random encounters with diverse spiritual teachers, laid the foundation for a lifelong journey, always with mindfulness woven into the mix.

During this heady time, my mother, Godfather, and family friends became concerned by my immersion in this unconventional world. They helped me relocate to Northern California, to start anew, enrolling me in the local community college, and doing what they could to refocus my life trajectory. Despite their best intentions, and my curiosity and sense of adventure undaunted, I continued to encounter the full range of what humanity had to offer. Ranchers and ranch hands, winemakers and laborers, farmers and pickers, counter culture personas, and more, a diverse mix of all nationalities with different approaches to life. My new home area now exposed me to an even broader set of different cultural contexts and even spiritual approaches, ranging from Hinduism, Christianity, Esoteric Christianity, traditional Native American practices, Sufism, other Mystical Traditions, and more. This would become a pattern of my life—consistent encounters with individuals who have shaped and influenced my spiritual perspectives and practices, shaping and guiding me on a wildly circuitous path of continuous exploration, discovery, and insight.

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## Part 2

While my spiritual explorations broadened and deepened, I also encountered many powerful opposing forces and viewpoints that not only bracketed our cultural norms of the times but also shaped my understanding of the world's myriad creative expressions. At one end of the spectrum, I witnessed rigid, unyielding perspectives coupled with extremely biased viewpoints that sought to control and restrict not only the larger world but anyone who entered their sphere of influence. On the other extreme, I also encountered overly strident and exclusive spiritual practices that demanded complete surrender, devotion, and rigorous engagement to the exclusion

of the larger world. These extreme approaches that sought to curtail and control life led me to seek a more balanced and inclusive approach. An approach that would weave the diverse spectrum of all of humanity to rest within a functional and inclusive worldview.

The college years added another layer to the fertile ground of my intellectual and creative explorations. I delved into formal philosophy, Native American studies, biology, art, and art history, seeking to understand the entirety of diverse worldviews that shaped human experience. I immersed myself in the world once again. From athletes to artists, and the laborers to the community leaders, I considered and explored their views and cultures, observing and helping, but also questioning their approaches and expressions. I explored life in every way I could, from successful business leaders to the unbound creative expressions of the world of art, to exploring the lives of those whose good fortunes had run dry, all adding to my understanding and appreciation of all of life.

This period was marked by a convergence of every walk of life and religious perspective and approach. It was a time of profound change... the landscape of the old and familiar gave way to the new. Each generation brought a new perspective and focus, while past generations either adapted or faded away. Cultural shifts and political changes marked the times, and it all influenced my perspectives and approach to life.

Eventually, a "resonant path" began to emerge that allowed me to navigate and even enjoy this crazy world, a world that seemed to be continually at odds with itself at every turn. A formative time in my mindfulness journey that shifted not only my ideas about spirituality, but also about the role of mindfulness. My rigid ideas of either-or had lost their grip, and a gentler and inclusive approach was revealed. A relaxed approach that would be flexible enough to complement any religious practice, personal philosophy, or life situation for anyone interested in giving it a try.

## Part 3

During the years of life explorations, I was very fortunate to have a circle of dear and supportive friends, "brothers and sisters" who shared my zest for life and philosophical curiosity. Countless hours were spent exploring life and the world together. Ideas flowed, expression flourished, and life was richly enjoyed. Their unwavering support and intellectual camaraderie were invaluable, and now, many years later, with the last of the last of those friends now passed, a fresh commitment has been rekindled in my heart and mind to honor those "brothers and sisters" and the life we shared.

But let me be clear, while my journey may seem to be rooted in the more relaxed and joyful side of life, I have immersed myself in the world of hard labor and demanding professional responsibilities. Everything from construction, commercial fishing, farming and ranching, the logging industry, to various entrepreneurial ventures, learning the value of commitment, honesty, hard work, and adaptability.

These experiences, combined with my earlier years of philosophical explorations and artistic pursuits, gave me a valuable appreciation of life's complexities while also learning to work with and live alongside people from all walks of life.

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## Part 4

By the age of 30, my life had been remarkably full and looked bright and promising indeed, when suddenly it took a dramatic turn when I was involved in a catastrophic head-on collision with a drunk driver, with a devastating and life-altering result. 32 broken bones, a traumatic brain injury, multiple surgeries, numerous physical, mobility, and cognitive deficits, with lingering emotional trauma. A long and arduous recovery ensued. 18 months of physical therapy, 12 months of cognitive therapy, relearning basic skills, and reengaging with life in a meaningful and fulfilling way were all part of this new life.

This experience, though profoundly difficult, became a catalyst for a new journey of personal growth with a profound shift in my life's direction. I now had to seek new ways of coping and healing. Part of my healing journey was aided by my past engagement with mindfulness approaches, now more relevant and meaningful than ever before. It became my anchor of calm and my place of solace and strength amidst the chaos and upheaval that my life had become.

After the arc of recovery, I felt a strong desire to serve and support others in their time of crisis, and so I embarked on a new career path in the field of emergency services. First as a volunteer firefighter, then EMT, and eventually into the role of 911 Paramedic. This path allowed me to leverage my own experiences of trauma and life challenges, combined with my diverse people skills, to make a meaningful difference in people's lives. For 10 years, serving as a Paramedic, Supervisor, and Field Training Officer, while facing life-and-death situations and providing critical and potentially life-saving care to those in need, was both a rewarding and challenging career.

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## Part 5

Additional hardships and upset during this period were also a part of the mix. I experienced the profound emotional and financial hardships of a bitter divorce after a short four-year marriage, a deeply unsettling and sobering experience in itself. Later, after transitioning from paramedicine, I remarried and embraced the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood. My wife and I were 45 when our son was born, a profoundly transformative event. The increased financial responsibilities of caring for our new family, while simultaneously launching a solo graphic design career, added another layer of anxiety and complexity to my life.

Fatherhood was a transformative chapter, filled with the boundless joys and humbling responsibilities of raising a child. While continuing to build a solo graphic design and marketing consulting career, I embraced the adventure of family life.

When our son was four, we embarked on a new adventure, relocating from Santa Rosa to the Reno area, a move that brought new opportunities and perspectives, while I continued to serve and maintain my valuable connections and clients in the San Francisco Bay Area and the surrounding counties.

During my early years in Reno, life presented me with yet another defining moment, a moment which incongruously happened during my time appearing for jury duty, which remarkably was a high-profile murder trial that had the prospect of the death penalty as the outcome if the party was found guilty. Forced to confront my deepest-held beliefs, I found myself declaring to a judge during my intake conversation, "Your honor, with respect, while you may have the legal authority to put someone to death, I do believe you have the moral authority to do so." This act of conviction, and the profound question of "Who do I stand with now?" that followed, led me to fully commit to the path of Buddhism. It was a surrender, a leap of faith, and a pivotal turning point in my spiritual journey. From that moment on, my exploration of Buddhist philosophy deepened, evolving into formal training in the Madhyamaka and Vajrayana traditions, and eventually leading me to the liberating embrace of Radical Dzogchen.

Now, as I enter my seventh decade of an amazing life, a new awareness has begun to dawn, as I become ever more aware, both in myself and in my peers, of the profound and uniquely personal challenges that accompany the aging process, no matter our station in life. Having had seniors as constant companions and wise teachers throughout my life, I have always felt a deep connection and kindness for the elders in my life, and now feel I have something of value to share that may ease some sorrows and sweeten some of the joys.

Fast forward to today, and I now recognize a gap in mindfulness resources tailored to the specific needs of seniors. My intention to help fill this void, and so I have embarked on a new journey: to create a program that offers a flexible and accessible approach to what has been for me, extraordinary life tools that have been

my companions through both the most difficult of times as well as the most joyous of times.

The program I am building moves away from the more rigid structures and prescriptive approaches of many traditional mindfulness traditions, instead emphasizing and focusing on easy-to-use tools and strategies that are focused on flexibility and adaptability so they can be used on-demand and as-needed. Ranging from single breath and micro-movement exercises to incrementally more in-depth approaches, all designed to be seamlessly woven into everyday life, no matter how full or busy the schedule is.

While my approach is rooted in the time-honored wisdom traditions of Buddhism and Dzogchen, I present a secular approach to help seniors navigate the complexities of aging while also revealing a sense of gratitude and joy.

I am committed to making mindfulness accessible to all, particularly seniors, using clear, jargon-free language and avoiding the clinical jargon or divisive methodologies that can create barriers to enjoying or continuing with mindfulness. My goal is to share life tools with seniors who are receptive to these approaches, and share what has been effective for me, and show that there is an easy and relaxed path to joy, comfort, and ease.

Throughout my life, I have witnessed and experienced extraordinary things and tremendous loss. Somehow, amidst all the physical and emotional trauma, I find myself still standing, while so many of the pivotal figures in my life—friends, family, spiritual teachers—have passed on.

And while the question of "why?" will always remain unanswered, one thing is clear: this time in my life has become about sharing this approach and this message of ease and hope. It is a culmination of my experiences, a testament to what some may call "my resilience," but mostly it is a heartfelt offering to those seeking solace and strength in the face of life's inevitable challenges and changes.

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