

THE
MINDFUL
WRITER



NOBLE TRUTHS
of the WRITING LIFE

DINTY W. MOORE



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The Mindful Writer

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Dedicated to all sentient beings—
especially those struggling with the
arduous but magnificent koan
of the written word



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Introduction:

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS *of* THE WRITING LIFE

AS THE AUTHOR of a memoir exploring my potholed attempts to fit Buddhist practice and philosophy into a typically busy, overindulgent modern lifestyle, I am often asked to explain how the Dharma teachings have influenced my writing. Despite the frequency of the question, however, for many years I found myself unable to provide anything close to a satisfying answer.

I knew that the Buddha's core teachings had seeped deep into my life, in ways that I had not originally anticipated, but I could not honestly say that my writing habits had changed as a result, or that I had taken on a "Buddhist approach" to the highly deliberate routine of

choosing words, composing sentences, and accumulating pages. My work, it seemed, went on as it always had: ploddingly, unevenly, and with consistent difficulty.

Yet the question—“You are a Buddhist, so can you tell us how your Buddhism affects your writing?”—kept returning, and I kept offering feeble and evasive responses.

Then one day it occurred to me: my inability to articulate a satisfying reply might mean that I was, in fact, trying all along to answer the *wrong question*. It was not Buddhism that had influenced my writing, but quite the opposite. The river of influence, perhaps, ran in the other direction.

Rather than seeing mindfulness and Buddhism as shaping my efforts on the page, what I’ve come to understand is that my lifelong pursuit of writing and creativity has helped to open me to the path of Buddhism. The innumerable lessons learned in struggling with my writing over the years has made me already aware (albeit in an

inarticulate, subconscious way) of the simple wisdom of mindfulness and nonattachment presented in the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

Life is full of discontent, the Buddha told us, and that discontent (sometimes translated as *suffering*) comes about due to our grasping at things, our craving and clinging—the desire to make permanent what will always be fleeting. There is, however, a way to make the inescapability of discontent less problematic in our lives. The Way, the Path, is through right action, right speech, right livelihood; through living a deliberate and intentional life.

As a writer, I had learned the power of releasing my control of a story, of letting the words, the characters, the images, the mysterious underpinnings of a piece of prose take me in unexpected directions. The less I grasped at and choked my writing, the more it seemed to expand into areas that surprised and pleased not just me but the reader as well. Even my “noncreative” writing—

business memos, application letters, proposals, and reports—were strengthened by this realization.

From the other end, I had seen how my ego and desires would inevitably lead me toward writer's block and self-loathing, how worrying about critical responses or negative reactions would eventually dry up whatever creative flow I had managed to bring forth.

I had come too to understand the importance of examining my motives for writing, of rooting out insincerity. Dishonest motives, such as writing to “get back” at someone who wronged you or pretending to be more decent or devout on the page than you are in real life, are as dangerous to a writer as just about anything I can name.

These lessons had already been learned and re-learned many times over in my writing life, so when I first encountered the Four Noble Truths, they seemed familiar and true to my experience.

None of this is easy, of course. The deeper

practice of intentional living and mindfulness remains an ongoing effort to be aware and awake, but at least I am not wondering if it all can work. I have seen with my own eyes, observed it directly, in my daily task.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has written and lectured often on the subject of mindfulness, and he remains one of my most valued teachers because his message is so beautifully simple: if you want to promote peace, be peaceful as you walk across the room; if you want to promote love, love yourself and those immediately around you; if you want to reach enlightenment, be entirely awake and in the moment, whether awash in an oceanfront sunrise or merely washing the dinner dishes.

Mindfulness begins with an awareness of the

simplest action: breathing in, know that you are breathing in; breathing out, know that you are breathing out. This may sound ridiculously basic, but this attentiveness is difficult—and it forms the heart of meditation. Through the simple awareness of breathing, you can eventually expand your mindfulness to the more complex and involuntary actions of your life.

For instance, when you are listening to your child, just home from school and crushed by the unkind teasing of a classmate, true mindfulness means that you are aware and present, hearing closely what your child is saying (not rushing to quickly dismiss the hurt feelings, or worrying that the problem is going to be a disruption in your busy day). Moreover, you remain alert, focused, listening—not distracted by the ringing telephone, the need for dinner preparation, or your own frustrations at the office.

In the context of writing, mindfulness means

that at those moments when you are focusing on an elusive line of poetry or a stubborn plot obstacle in a story, you are able to remain attentive to the task at hand, seeing the words that are before you, hearing the possibilities in your mind, not succumbing to the thousands of other willing and ready distractions.

More than that, mindfulness means being aware of why you want to write, who you are writing for, and how to balance your desires for recognition with the demands of clear-headedness and honesty.

Finally, mindfulness includes a conscientious and thorough consideration of who you are as a writer, where you are in your life, what you are feeling, and what is inside of you that wants (or needs) to be written.

Or to put it another way, consider the Four Noble Truths, transposed into a writer's credo:

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS FOR WRITERS

- The writing life is difficult, full of disappointment and dissatisfaction.
- Much of this dissatisfaction comes from the ego, from our insistence on controlling both the process of writing and how the world reacts to what we have written.
- There is a way to lessen the disappointment and dissatisfaction and to live a more fruitful writing life.
- The way to accomplish this is to make both the practice of writing and the work itself less about ourselves. To thrive, we must be mindful of our motives and our attachment to desired outcomes.



This book offers a series of quotations and brief responses to those quotations, illuminating how, in my view, writing and mindfulness can intersect in positive and productive ways. Most but not all of the quotations come from writers and artists. A few of these people are Buddhist, but the majority of them are not. One need not be Buddhist, of course, to be mindful and alert. In fact, seeing how often non-Buddhist writers offer advice that seems entirely compatible with what I encounter in my Buddhist studies reinforces all that I have come to believe about the convergence of the two.

The book is divided into four sections:

- ⇒ **The Writer's Mind:** Where do writing and creativity originate?

- ⇒ **The Writer's Desk:** What does mindfulness mean when you are directly at the task of writing?

→ **The Writer's Vision:** How do writers mindfully engage their own writing, writing habits, and need for growth?

→ **The Writer's Life:** What does it mean to be a writer in the world, to have dedicated oneself to the craft of writing?

Often, in researching this book, I ran across quotes from equally experienced and accomplished authors that appeared to be in total contradiction. In trying to reconcile the divergent perspectives, I inevitably decided both views were correct. Accordingly, in all cases, the advice offered should be taken in the spirit of suggestion, not edict.

And remember this as well: just as we should avoid unproductive attachment to our own thoughts or words, it is not a good idea to cling too fiercely to the advice of others . . .

• 1 •

The Writer's Mind



1.

A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.

~ THOMAS MANN

BEING A WRITER can seem like a struggle at times: there is the challenge of trying to constantly refine the words that make up the stories you want to tell, and there is the difficulty of sustaining a belief in yourself and in the idea that your stories (or poems, or essays, or ideas) are of enough value that all of the work is worth the effort.

Yes, it can seem daunting, but Mann is assuring us that this is natural and fine. He is reminding us that iron is forged in fire, and the very fact that writing takes great determination—no matter who you are—is what makes the practice worth your effort.

So, why is writing *more* difficult for the writer than for others?

Because we care about finding the precise word, the clearest expression, and we understand

that sometimes a thought needs to be revised tens or hundreds of times before we find the perfect way to say what we really mean.

The good news? On the days it all seems too hard or nearly impossible, you can just reach around and pat yourself on the back.

The frustration simply means that you are going about it in the right way.

2.

The advice I like to give young artists, or really anybody who'll listen to me, is not to wait around for inspiration.

Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work.

~ CHUCK CLOSE

LET'S DISPENSE with inspiration from the start, because nothing causes more dissatisfaction and disappointment in a writer's life than the myth of the thunderbolt.

I have met, through the years, so many frustrated writers who have spent hour upon hour waiting for inspiration to arrive, waiting for that One Big Idea to land in their frontal lobes and fulfill their fantasies of becoming geniuses. Oh, I know the feeling well enough. I am not immune to the vagaries of desire. But artist after artist, writer after writer, will tell you that this is simply not how it works—and I know from my own experience that they speak the truth.

Instead of the lightning bolt to the forehead, the million-dollar insight, a writer finds the best ideas in trial and error, in sentences that start out one way and surprisingly, uncontrollably, end up pulling in another direction, in the toppled mess of a third draft that tumbles into a pile of half-finished thoughts.

This is perhaps the first and most important application of mindfulness for a writer:

Show up and get to work, as Close suggests, and at the same time, listen to where the writing wants to take you. Understand that the writing itself will often provide far richer material than your logical, predictable mind. Even more “intellect-driven” writing—for instance, a dissertation—can benefit from the cognitive leaps that occur when you stand back from the manuscript a moment and listen to your intuition.

Often our ideas about where we think a poem, story, or essay should go are all too willing to drown out the small whisper that is suggesting,

“No, that’s not really as honest as this impulse over here. No, that’s not quite right.”

Listen to that whisper.

3.

Don't try to figure out what other people want to hear from you; figure out what you have to say. It's the one and only thing you have to offer.

~ BARBARA KINGSOLVER

NEARLY EVERY WRITER worries about having enough “material” to fill the page, or the chapter, or the book. We worry whether what we have written is worthy of attention, or whether we have exhausted all that we had to write about in the first place.

Writers worry as well about audience: Is what I am writing now what was popular last year? Is this the kind of writing that will be in vogue next year? Will I get the desired response from the reader, editor, agent with this sort of work?

And yet—to my mind—all of these worries are missing the point.

What we have is ourselves, and that is all we can really write about.

Now this is not to say you cannot enrich your experience. Your path as a writer may include travel to some foreign destination to chronicle the extreme hardships of poverty there. Or maybe you need to visit a neighborhood grocery store in a part of town to which you rarely venture, just to remind yourself of how rich a culture exists within your own city. Perhaps all you need to do is stop to talk for three minutes with the elderly neighbor up the street with whom you'd barely found the time to speak before. "So, how is your garden this year?"

Every writer does well to step away from the desk at regular intervals, to confront life where it is most tangible, most urgent: not on the page, but out in the world.

But even in these cases, it is only what *you* see, what *you* hear, what strikes *you* as important and significant, that you can write about. We have ourselves, our feelings, our reactions to the world, our insights, and the metaphors that

spring to our minds. That is the clay with which we make our sculptures, the notes available to play our music.

But what if you are not interesting enough, you ask?

You are.

Yes, it may take some work on your part—to understand yourself, to explore those parts of your life and your mind that rest below the surface memory and thought. But the material *does* *surely* exist. The material always exists.

Notice how Kingsolver closes her quote: “It’s the one and only thing you have to offer.”

Make an honest offering, and readers will respond.