Introduction
How Wonderful

Many years ago, I was a Buddhist monk. Every day for six years I wore robes of burgundy and saffron and meditated in order to attain the end of suffering and to experience deep, profound inner peace. I lived in a Buddhist community and we all studied the teachings of our guru, an old Tibetan monk who had come to the West decades ago to teach the path of inner peace. One day a senior monk, one of the guru's original students, told us a story that summed up what 'training the mind' meant for earnest meditators.

Many, many years ago, the senior monk said, the guru and his students were preparing for a big meditation festival. There were hundreds of people coming for days and days of teachings and discussions and meditation. It was a big deal, but, as the days ticked down for the big event, things were not going well. The schedule was collapsing, vital equipment wasn't turning up and the whole event was on the brink of imploding. Even by the standards of amateur religious enthusiasts it was looking like a memorable disaster. The monk was asked to come to the festival headquarters to help bail out the sinking ship.

As the monk walked through the front door the guru happened to be there, and he greeted the newly arrived monk with the words, *We have SO many problems!* He paused for a

moment and then said with a huge smile, *How Wonderful!*

The guru was a meditation master and he looked at things differently from most people. To him the annoying problems of daily life were great opportunities for training the mind and that made them 'auspicious'. The possibility of this high-profile event going down in flames and becoming a huge embarrassment just made this problem even better for training the mind, and so now it was all 'very auspicious!'

For a Buddhist meditation master any situation, no matter how uncomfortable, was an opportunity to train the mind and was, therefore, something to be welcomed. *How Wonderful* was the correct Buddhist response to any situation, whether it appeared horrifying or delightful. The senior monk's story was a reminder to me to have a healthy attitude before I tried to interact with the outer world.

Simple, really.

I was to hear the phrase *How Wonderful* a lot during my time as a monk. It was often said through gritted teeth by someone whose life had just been turned upside down. It was frequently accompanied by a reluctant smile and a shake of the head. I heard people say it while sobbing. Sometimes it was said with a tone of surprise when things actually went according to plan. It was something I'd say like a mantra to remind myself that I could be mindful, no matter what the circumstances. It was what I said when I didn't know what else to say.

How Wonderful!

It is a powerful message. If I can be aware and acknowledge and accept what I'm feeling and thinking then I can transform what I'm feeling and thinking. If I can be mindful in the midst of my depression then I can step out of it, even if it's only for a moment. That one moment can remind me that I am not my depression and inspire me to ask for support. Eventually, after many such moments of witnessing my depression and asking for support, I started to change my relationship with the part of me that was so often depressed. Curiosity and hope slowly

replaced fear and repression, which naturally improved my experience of life.

Instead of my depressed, tormented mind just leading me around, I started to learn how to witness what my depression was telling me. Using Buddha's teachings I started creating an alternative story. I was no longer incurably depressed; I was now deluded, and there is a cure for that: mindfulness.

For me inner peace meant an end to the depression I'd experienced since my teenage years. In the past I had tried ignoring it by drinking beer and spending too much time at work. Like many people I put a lot of energy into ignoring my problems and I just ended up carrying them around everywhere and exhausting myself. Buddha had a radical idea: why not use all that energy to face the problem? Use those times when we're depressed or afraid or overwhelmed to practise mindfulness and use all that energy to heal and grow rather than distract and hide.

Buddhism taught me how to face my depression by bringing mindfulness into my daily life. I consciously cultivated a positive attitude by deciding that my daily challenges were the perfect place to train my mind. Buddha said, *We won't become enlightened despite our problems, we become enlightened because of them.* As Stoic philosophers said, *The obstacle is the path*.

This can be the start of a really useful reframe, because if I can transform 'my problems' into inner peace training then suddenly I don't have problems anymore.

In the years to come *How Wonderful!* would sum up the challenge of mindfulness for me. To say those two words was to remind myself that it is possible to learn and grow from anything, no matter how bad it felt or looked. It was a reframe that regularly brought me out of my fear and isolation, helping me to work with what was happening in the moment rather than staying upset about what wasn't.

For me this reframe was the best antidepressant of them all. Instead of simply blindly reacting to my problems I began

to meditate on how to consciously respond to them. The burden of my depression became fuel for my personal mental fitness training. I wasn't wallowing in suffering anymore; I was now studying suffering so that I could escape from it. *How Wonderful* inspired a curiosity, a wish to know more about what was going on inside me, and that was the first rung of a ladder that I used to climb out of some very dark places. This book is my story of climbing that ladder.

How I respond to life is my responsibility, simply because no one else can respond for me. Responsibility begins with mindfulness; it begins with being aware of what is going on and then acknowledging and accepting that so I can move forward. This is a simple and undeniable truth that I tried to ignore for as long as I possibly could, but this is how conscious change works. This is mindfulness in action.

For most of my life I wasn't mindful. Instead I blamed my suffering on something outside myself. It could be anything: 'society', the Catholic Church, the government or anyone in the headlines who I didn't like. Buddhism helped me see the uselessness of blame and guilt and inspired me to instead go within to find some real answers to important questions. Questions like Why did I find existence such a crushing burden? Why was I so unenthusiastic about everything? Why did I daydream so much? Why did the world look so bloody awful all the time?

When I began practising mindfulness – awareness, acknowledgment and acceptance – I started to find genuine answers and then things changed. More and more I could flow with life rather than struggle against it. When I could be aware and acknowledge and accept then I had some control over my life, and from there I could create a future that was different from my past.

While this book is based on my life journey, it is a work of fiction. The events and the people described here are based on things I've seen, heard and done; but my priority was to explain

my inner world and how I learned to take care of myself. Sometimes to tell a complicated truth we need to simplify and streamline the story so that the essential points come across, rather than simply present a laundry list of items that doesn't convey precious insights and discoveries. The people in these pages are – with a few exceptions, such as my wife and my family – composite characters drawn from various life experiences that taught me something useful

I'm telling my story because many people with depression struggle to explain how life is for them. After years of being silent I'm now in a position where I can share how mindfulness helped me deal with childhood emotional neglect and adult depression and anxiety. By telling my story I hope it will be helpful for anyone interested in understanding mental health, whether it's their own or somebody else's.

I'm not suggesting that anyone do any of the practices that I describe in this book; I'm neither recommending them nor warning against them. I'm simply offering them as an illustration of what one person's mental health path has looked like. I found support in Buddhism; you might find it in the gym, your career or raising a family.

It's about discovering how best to meet your own needs. In the end we must walk our own path, and part of that is discovering who we are.

I spent years wondering why life felt so difficult and unrewarding before I finally discovered where my depression came from. The reason it took so long to figure things out was that the origin wasn't straightforward. My depression didn't come from something that happened to me; my mental illness came from what didn't happen for me.