



How to Ground Yourself in an Earthquake

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What is mindfulness?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, University of Massachusetts medical researcher and founder of the renowned Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, defines mindfulness like this: paying attention in a particular way—on purpose, nonjudgmentally, and in the present moment.

The power of the mind

This gets at one of the key features of the human mind—we have this amazing ability to learn from the past and imagine the future. This capacity is especially amazing when we're called upon to try to prevent and manage crises.

The downside of the power of imagination

But it does have a downside, too. In being able to wander off into the past or into an imagined future, we can get trapped in obsessing on what *might* have been or what *must* happen for us and those we care about to be safe, healthy, and happy. With that obsession loop come sometimes debilitating experiences of frustration, anger, anxiety, exhaustion, and despair.

The refuge of mindfulness

Mindfulness training lets us remember that, in reality, we can't live in the past or the future. The only place we're actually living in—the only place we can ever live in—is this moment. Right here, right now. This realization is like a refuge to which, with practice, we can keep returning in the midst of a crisis. Psychological and neuroscience research are showing that just this realization, this practice, can be enough to ground us and liberate us from the prison of obsessive emotion and thought loops.

The earthquake's threat

Several years ago, I was visiting California with my family. We were in a museum. While I was standing in one of its rooms, the floor started sliding back and forth and things on the walls started swinging. I remember thinking, wow, they've designed this museum to move! I mean, it was California, after all—home to so many theme parks. But of course it wasn't intentional. We were experiencing tremors from a minor earthquake. What interested me at the time was how the tourists tended to panic and the people who looked like they were locals just took it in stride.

The earthquake's teaching

Earthquakes are terrifying not only because of the threat of something falling on you, but also because the ground, which we've learned to trust as so solid and supportive, is suddenly shifting beneath our feet. We don't know where to turn to find stability. But people who are familiar with earthquakes know the truth about the earth: it's always moving and changing, sometimes unnoticeably, sometimes dramatically. That's just the earth's nature.

Surviving an earthquake

I think mindfulness practice offers us the same peace of mind that knowledge of—and responsiveness to—the true nature of the earth can provide. There are three steps to surviving an earthquake: *Drop, Cover, Hold on*.

How to ground yourself in the midst of your own earthquake

Here's an idea to play with. Returning to Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness—paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, nonjudgmentally, and in the present moment—we can employ these same three steps in our efforts to ground ourselves in the midst of our current earthquake: *Drop* into the experience of the present moment without judgment—how it feels in your body to be alive right here, right now. *Cover* yourself with an understanding and acceptance of the reality of existence—the earth is always moving; nothing is permanent. *Hold on* (gently) to this experience of the present moment because, in truth, this moment is the only one we actually have. Sometimes I practice this last step through the sense of touch, one of the most direct and profound ways we can connect with the world. Hand on the heart, feeling the warmth and heartbeat. Holding a stone in my hand, relishing its solidity and deep history.

They say that mindfulness practice is simple, but not easy. The reason for this is that, in practicing it, we're confronting all of our mind's habit loops and conditioning. So, trying to practice mindfulness in the midst of our own earthquakes can be especially challenging. It's my hope that putting into practice the mindfulness-based version of the three steps for surviving an earthquake—*Dropping* into your present experience, *Covering* yourself with acceptance of change, and *Holding on* to the miracle of being alive in this moment—will help you find some peace of mind.