# Preface

As Jon Kabat-Zinn made famous in his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, mindfulness can be thought of as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (1994, 4). Different people define mindfulness differently, but this definition and the many scholarly programs on mindfulness that have emerged alongside it offer some sustained key points about the processes and benefits of its practice. Mindfulness, it is suggested, is centrally about the present moment; it helps one to develop positive emotions; it is about empowering the self; it is practiced without moral judgment; and through its practice it helps one to be a better, healthier person. Mindfulness is often understood to draw predominantly from Buddhist thought, and especially from the Theravāda Buddhist, Pali-language term *sati*, but mindfulness in its current form can also be considered modern, scientific, and even a-religious. It is not, people will point out, necessarily a Buddhist concept at all, even if it draws so largely from the Buddhist tradition. Mindfulness is often considered

a-contextual, a-cultural, more a universal capacity and disposition than an idea tied to any one time or place.

At the time that a growth of interest and a development of mindfulness as a modern and scientific concept were occurring during the past ten or fifteen years in America, I was carrying out doctoral dissertation research as a graduate student at the University of Chicago on what at first seemed to me to be a fairly different topic: the psychological anthropology of Buddhist practice in Thailand. In my research I came across mindfulness often, in the monasteries and homes of people in the small rural community I was working in the rural far north of the country. There, I realized, mindfulness is not considered to be a trendy or new idea, although in some of its more recent expressions it is considered that in Thailand too. For most people in Thailand, mindfulness is considered less of a stand-alone, a-religious concept and more of an integrated part of a large complex of Buddhist teachings, ones that are followed by more than 95 percent of the people in the country. I came across talk of mindfulness in Thailand first in my own meditation retreats in the country, and later as part of casual conversations with friends reminding themselves and each other to not "lose" one's mindfulness. In Thailand, people consider it to be a kind of mental power and health to be mindful, while lacking mindfulness is seen as unhealthy, and even dangerous. It was only later that I started to notice some of the connections mindfulness has in Thailand that seemed different from those in America. Back in Thailand, while learning about supernatural spiritual experiences across cultures as part of a comparative, collaborative project that I became involved in as a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University, I found that people talked about mindfulness as connected to ghostly encounters and to powerful social, psychological, and even political meditative achievements. For many people in Thailand, mindfulness is understood to tie in to a kind of mental potency, or power, that is more than just a general capacity to feel happy or healthy. When one loses mindfulness, I was told, the effects of others, even supernatural others, can be felt; and on the other hand, the negative affective influences of these forces can be kept out, and controlled, when one achieves high levels of attainment.

Talk of ghosts does not usually come up in American conversations about mindfulness. Instead, science is seen to sterilize or denude the local folk understandings of what might be considered a nonscientific Buddhist

past. The more I heard about mindfulness as I traveled back and forth between research trips in Thailand and the United States, the more it seemed that two parallel, though intertwined, discourses were at play. When I arrived at Washington State University as an assistant professor of psychological and medical anthropology, I decided to investigate what these differences might entail, and the meanings that people made of them in the context of their own cultural models of the person. *Remembering the Present* is the result of that investigation.

Through two years of data collection gathered from over six hundred research participants I found that the ways people understand and practice mindfulness in Southeast Asia do in many senses echo the ways that people in the United States do: in both contexts there is an emphasis on being aware in the present, on cultivating desired feelings, on accessing a kind of power or potency of practice, and on using this in a positive way to improve one's life. Yet within these general similarities I also found some significant differences, ones that I do not think have been fully recognized or explored in current contemporary Western contexts. Among some Western scholars the dominant assumption in mindfulness studies is that science is taking culture out of the picture; but instead of decontextualizing mindfulness, the Western assumptions about mindfulness and its workings and purposes may be recontextualizing it in their own new contexts. For many people in America this new contextualization works well, and there is a robust body of evidence that suggests as much. But while mindfulness is being understood in new ways, other, different, and possibly beneficial meanings can be lost in the reconstruction. People in Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Sri Lanka—part of a region I here call Theravāda Asia, the part of the world where Theravāda Buddhism (the "School of the Elders," one of the main branches of Buddhism) is followed by the majority of the people—told me again and again that mindfulness is not only about attending to the present but also about "remembering" it, suggesting different relationships to time; these relationships have to do with issues of affect, or emotion, as mindfulness was described as developing calmness over happiness. People feel that they access a magical, social, and political potency of the practice along with self-empowerment, suggesting a broader engagement with issues of power. I learned again and again that being aware of goodness is especially important in mindfulness, suggesting a central ethical component. And people invoked mindfulness

as pointing to an alternate picture of the person, different from what I was used to at home, bringing into question issues of the self.

Attending to these meanings among people who today are practicing mindfulness within wider Buddhist contexts allows us to broaden and clarify current Western understandings that seek to encompass universal (and not only culturally bound) contexts. This in turn allows for not just the improvement of Western mindfulness but also that of mindfulness in the areas in Asia that continue to grapple with ongoing pressures of westernization and modernization. More broadly, attending to the meanings of mindfulness in contemporary Buddhist Asia, and "remembering the present" in them, can help us to better understand how all psychological concepts are made in and through, rather than apart from, the historical, power-laden, social influences of cultural practice.