INNER PRODUCTIVITY

A Mindful Path to Efficiency and Enjoyment in Your Work

Christopher R. Edgar

PRAISE FOR *INNER PRODUCTIVITY*

"Why, in spite of good intentions, organizational skills, and productivity tools, do we still tend to avoid and resist actually doing stuff? Chris Edgar has taken an exploratory dive into the procrastination pit and come up with a cogent explanation of this phenomenon as well as an elegant set of techniques to transcend it. It's a great read and a useful guidebook for turning the daily grind into something much more interesting and engaging."

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"Real productivity doesn't come from forced behaviors. *Inner Productivity* can help you connect with the inner state of being that can empower you to act in new ways, choose new perspectives and have a different experience. There is no greater productivity than connecting with your true self."

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INTRODUCTION

"If your mind becomes pure, your surroundings will also become pure."

— Buddha

This book is about cultivating what I call *inner productivity*—the mental and emotional state that allows you to get the most done and find the most enjoyment in your work. While most productivity techniques focus on arranging your external environment to become more efficient—reorganizing your e-mail inbox, color-coding your folders, holding shorter meetings, and so on—inner productivity is about becoming aware of and transforming the way you think and feel about what you do.

Why is it important to develop inner productivity? I'll illustrate with a story I suspect will resonate with you. My friend Dan, in the language of some productivity-oriented websites, would easily qualify as a "productivity ninja." He unfailingly follows the latest books, articles and blog posts on organization and time management.

Dan's latest goal is to reduce the time he spends checking e-mail so he can focus on more important tasks. His plan for achieving this goal sounds promising in theory: check his e-mail only twice a day, at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. Unfortunately, despite about a month of trying, he's never been able to stick to this

schedule.

Dan's recurring problem works like this. When he arrives in the office in the morning, he's usually able to get in about half an hour of fully-focused work. For that brief period, he manages to hold out even if he's nagged by curiosity about what's waiting for him in his inbox.

But when that half-hour mark rolls around, Dan's curiosity about his e-mail starts becoming so intense that it actually begins to cause physical discomfort. His shoulders start tensing up, and if he tries to keep working, the tension intensifies into an ache, and sometimes even a sense of shortness of breath. At this point, he can only endure a few more minutes of work before fleeing for the safety of his inbox to relieve the tension.

In short, even though Dan knows all the "rules" of time management and organization, uncomfortable thoughts and sensations effectively keep him from following those rules, or at least from following them consistently.

Dan's story certainly isn't unique. I worked with a client a while back, Gail, who was one of the most organized people I knew. Gail's desk was always immaculate, she had about 50 subfolders in her e-mail inbox, and she made a list of what she'd do each day on an index card she carried around at all times. Unfortunately, none of this stopped her from procrastinating— she'd find herself spending hours each day surfing the Web, checking e-mail and instant messaging with friends.

The reason was that, whenever Gail sat down to work by herself, she'd start feeling painfully alone, and she'd feel compelled to turn to e-mail or instant messaging to remind herself there were people out there who cared about her. No matter how organized she got, it seemed, she couldn't stay productive in the face of her own thoughts and emotions.

Of course, these are only a few examples of the myriad ways our mental and emotional "clutter" can disrupt our motivation and focus. In my work coaching people in finding productivity and satisfaction in what they do, I've come across— and I'm sure from time to time you've experienced some of—the

following issues:

- A concern that it would be "selfish" for you to achieve your goals;
- A lack of motivation because you're convinced no one will care about your work;
- Anxiety about whether you "have what it takes" to reach your career objectives;
- Your attention jumping between tasks and issues in a way that seems beyond your control;
- A paralyzing obsession over the risk that you'll disappoint your boss or someone else with your work;
- A worry that you're missing out on other opportunities by staying on your current career path; and
- A reluctance to fully devote yourself to your work, out of fear that others might steal or take credit for what you've done.

As I suspect you know from experience, the list goes on and on.

What's Missing From Most Productivity Advice?

The stories I offered vividly illustrate why, despite the number of articles, CDs, seminars, and other information out there about productivity, more of that kind of literature keeps coming out. I suspect people are still hungry for organization and time management techniques because the usual advice doesn't address the biggest obstacles to our productivity: *our own minds and bodies*. If our attention is scattered all over the place, or our bodies are tense and uncomfortable, learning more creative ways to rearrange our workspace won't do much to help us get our work done.

This is a theme I consistently see in my personal coaching practice. Like the people I mentioned earlier, most of the clients I've worked with are well-versed in making to-do lists, decluttering their offices, writing terser e-mails, and all the other

techniques productivity writers usually recommend.

These people's problem isn't that they don't know enough "tips and tricks." Instead, the problem they almost always face is that some persistent pattern of thinking or feeling is making it hard to stay focused on their work. As psychologists Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen write in *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What To Do About It*, "if you don't understand why you're putting things off, then all the practical suggestions in the world aren't likely to help, because you won't let yourself use them."

How do we change our ways of thinking and feeling so they help rather than hinder us in our work? I see this process as having two basic steps.

The first is to start getting conscious of what I call your *inner experience* of working—the thoughts, emotions and sensations that tend to come up as you move through your daily routine. We can't begin to work with our inner experience until we're actually aware of it and how it's limiting what we can accomplish. The second step is to transform that experience in a way that has you feel more focused and motivated, and even actually enjoy what you do.

Transcending the "Work/Life" Split

Becoming conscious of the thoughts and feelings that tend to disrupt our work is more complicated than it sounds. Paying attention to our inner experience runs counter to the conventional wisdom in our culture.

The common belief seems to be that we should ignore or push away the thoughts and sensations that come up while we're working, and "deal with them," if at all, "on our own time." Take a break, listen to music to distract yourself, numb yourself to what you're feeling with drugs or alcohol—whatever you need to do, just keep your inner experience out of the workplace and to yourself.

Here's an example you're probably familiar with. At some point, you've probably had to go to work while you were

feeling overcome with grief or despair—perhaps over the loss of a loved one, or the end of a relationship. If you worked around other people, I imagine you were expected to work and interact with others as if everything was "okay." If you had customers or clients, you were expected to offer them "service with a smile," even though smiling felt inauthentic.

Even if no one explicitly said you had to be this way, you felt the pressure nonetheless. Somehow, you got the message that you were supposed to cut yourself off from your inner experience while at work, and "deal with it on your own time."

But there's a weirder side to the conventional wisdom. We aren't just expected to repress our so-called "negative" emotions and thoughts—we're supposed to hold back our *passion* for what we do as well. In our culture, the excitement and joy we experience in our work are often considered too "impolite," "personal" or "childish" to share with others.

For example, I once worked with a client, Debbie, who genuinely enjoyed her job at a nonprofit organization. You'd think people would see Debbie's enthusiasm for her work as ideal.

But when Debbie told her coworkers how much she liked her job, and how wonderful it felt to help people, they gave her funny looks. "Yeah, I like my job too, but I don't wear it on my sleeve," one of them said with a nervous chuckle, as if Debbie had done something socially inappropriate. Although gossiping about coworkers and celebrities was considered okay and even encouraged in her workplace, revealing her passion for what she did was seen as a breach of etiquette.

It's considered unusual today to really like what you do for work, and if you're strange enough to get excited about it, you're expected to at least keep it to yourself so that nobody else gets uncomfortable. This mentality is reflected in phrases like "work/life balance," "it's called work because it isn't fun," and "I work to live—I don't live to work," as if work, being the opposite of "life," is by definition miserable, and we have to be less than fully alive while we're doing it.

We can also see this common mode of thinking in the way we tend to distinguish between "business" literature, on one hand, and "psychological" and "spiritual" writing on the other. Psychological and spiritual authors work in the realm of our inner experience, teaching us how to clear up or change the lens through which we view the world in a way that brings us peace or happiness. Business, management and sales "gurus," by contrast, usually offer us techniques for rearranging our outer circumstances—doing the most important project first each day, holding shorter meetings, building brand equity, and so on.

Business writers don't usually look at the impact our inner experience of working can have on what we achieve in, and how much we enjoy, our work. Either that, or they assume the only way to transform our inner experience is to "change from the outside in"—that altering your external environment, perhaps by reorganizing your desk or making a different kind of to-do list, is the only way to find focus and contentment in your work.

Many popular writers make reference to spiritual traditions like Zen Buddhism, but they tend to associate Zen with *outer* simplicity—having a decluttered closet, for instance—without addressing its focus on simplifying your *inner* life.

Occasionally, you may even find yourself making the same kinds of assumptions about this book. For example, perhaps you'll read a passage where I talk about how your breathing, or your level of comfort with yourself, has an impact on your productivity, and find yourself instinctively rejecting what I say. "What touchy-feely, New Age nonsense," you may find your mind scoffing. "I want results in my business—my 'feelings' are irrelevant."

If you find yourself having this kind of reaction, take a moment and inquire into the way of thinking that's creating it. You may become aware of a deep-seated, unexamined assumption that your inner experience "obviously" has no place in a book about business or productivity. And perhaps noticing this belief will also prompt you to question whether it's really so obvious. Is how inspired you feel about your work, for example,

really "irrelevant" to how well you perform in it?

In fact, although we don't often hear about it in business literature, there is plenty of concrete evidence that doing "inner work," or transforming your patterns of thinking and feeling around your work, can make a difference in your productivity. For instance, there have been many academic studies on the effects of meditation on our ability to pay attention, our motivation, and our creativity. Here are some examples:

- *Attention.* A 2005 Massachusetts General Hospital study reported that meditation thickens parts of the brain's cerebral cortex responsible for decisionmaking, attention and memory.
- *Motivation.* A 2006 study at the University of Wisconsin showed that regular meditation leads to significantly increased levels of activity in the left prefrontal cortex of the brain, which is associated with "positive emotions and goal-seeking behaviors."
- *Efficiency.* Three years after it implemented a meditation program for its employees, a Detroit chemical plant reported that productivity at the facility had increased by 120%, and absenteeism had decreased by 80%.
- *Freedom From Distractions.* A 2008 Emory University study reported that meditation enhances the brain's capacity to limit the influence of distracting thoughts.
- *Stress Reduction.* A 2006 Cedars-Sinai Medical Center study suggested that meditation reduces blood pressure levels, reducing worker absenteeism due to stress-related medical problems.

Despite this evidence, most of us continue to unconsciously buy into the conventional wisdom that our inner experience is irrelevant to our work performance, and that spiritual practices are only for achieving "intangible" goals like becoming enlightened or seeking the ultimate truth.

Why does our culture generally consider our inner experience irrelevant or dangerous to our working lives? I suspect that, at a deeper level, it stems from conventional thinking about the differences between children and adults.

Young children are naturally emotionally expressive—if they're joyful, angry, sad, or something else, they make no bones about telling you. The same is true of children's thoughts— whatever they're thinking, even if it happens to be unflattering toward someone, they don't hesitate to let you know. In other words, children's inner experience is basically on loudspeaker.

Adults usually tolerate this kind of expression by very young children. As children mature, however, they gradually learn they're supposed to keep what they're thinking and feeling to themselves. They come to associate voicing their thoughts and emotions with embarrassing or angering their parents, and with behaving "childishly."

As psychologist Robert Bolton puts it in *People Skills*, "from an early age, children are taught to distort or repress their feelings. 'Be nice to your sister,' 'stop crying,' 'how many times have I told you not to get angry,'" and so on. Thus, they learn to be quiet and compliant, and to see their inner experience of working, and of other aspects of their lives, as unimportant.

I think this is a key reason so few of us are doing something that inspires us in our careers. We've been conditioned to believe that our passion, and sense of what's meaningful in life, are basically irrelevant, at least in the work context. Work is a means of surviving and gaining social status, not a way to fulfill our purpose in life.

In fact, to many of us, the idea of "following our bliss" in our work and elsewhere seems weak, selfish or childish—and "acting like a child" is considered one of the worst, most embarrassing things you can do in our society. If we want to act like adults, we must chin up, grit our teeth and accept that work needs to be a dismal chore.

Given this mindset, it's no surprise that we tend to see the ideal worker as emotionless, and to experience work as boring. And when thoughts and emotions unrelated to our work creep into our consciousness while we're doing our tasks, it's also unsurprising that we do our best to ignore them or push them away.

I've gone into all this detail about the conventional wisdom on our relationship to our work in order to plant the seeds of a new way of thinking. We tend to assume, without even realizing it, that our inner experience is irrelevant or a threat to our work performance. It's as if we're wearing blue-tinted contact lenses, but we've forgotten we put them in, so we've started to assume that the whole world is blue.

But when we become conscious that we're making these assumptions, we become able to start seriously examining them and considering other possibilities. It's as if we can remove our blue contacts and begin seeing the world in all its color and vibrance.

Moving Beyond the "Fight-or-Flight Reaction"

As I said, in our culture, we're generally expected to push away or refuse to acknowledge our inner experience of working. So, instead of accepting the thoughts and emotions that come up for us when we're doing our tasks—whether they're feelings of boredom or anxiety, painful memories from the past, wishes that we could go home early today, or something else—we usually react to them by doing what I call *fighting* or *fleeing*.

We *fight* against our inner experience when we punish or shame ourselves for thinking and feeling the way we do, or we try to convince ourselves we "should" feel differently. If we start feeling resentful and resistant when we're working, for example, perhaps we tell ourselves "come on, get back to work, there's nothing to be angry about," or "you don't get to play video games tonight if you don't get this project done today."

Going to war with ourselves like this takes energy, and

causes us to tire quickly and lose our ability to focus. As Kay Gilley writes in *The Alchemy of Fear*, "denying and ignoring emotions will not make them go away—it simply establishes a conflictual relationship within ourselves."

Unfortunately, much productivity advice urges us to fight against our inner experience, giving us pointers like "force yourself to do the toughest task first," "tell that lazy part of you to shut up," "kick your fear in the rear," and so on. We need to be our own strict parents or drill sergeants, coming down like a ton of bricks on internal dissent.

This attitude encourages us to hate and ridicule parts of ourselves, rather than treating them with compassion or trying to understand where they're coming from. I suspect one reason you're reading this book is that you're tired of beating yourself into submission in order to be productive, and you have the intuition that there's a better way.

We *flee* from our experience when we turn our attention to something else to take our minds off what we're feeling. Some of us do this with activities we normally think of as frivolous—when we start feeling bored, perhaps we turn to playing Solitaire on the computer, pacing around the room, calling our friends, and so on. Or maybe we try to keep working, but with some source of distraction in the background—the radio, TV, iPod or something similar—to drown out the mental and emotional noise we're experiencing.

Others turn to a less important task—going, perhaps, from drafting tomorrow's board presentation to tidying their shelves. Still other people I know *literally* flee from their work—their feelings of loneliness, or some other kind of discomfort, get so intense when they're alone at their desks that they feel the need to leave the room for a while to talk to somebody and regain their composure.

Fighting or fleeing may offer temporary relief from whatever emotion or thought is troubling us, but it also, of course, makes it hard to stay on task. Devoting all this energy to keeping our experience at bay is distracting and draining. In fact, I think

it's even fair to say that fighting and fleeing from our inner experience are essentially what procrastination *is*. We procrastinate when we aren't willing to be with what's arising inside us, and we turn to some diversion—whether it's e-mail, Minesweeper, the iPod, or something else—to take our attention off what's really going on.

We tend to assume that we're "saving time" when we push away our inner experience as we work—that letting ourselves feel the anger, sadness or whatever else is coming up for us would draw our attention away from the task we're trying to do. But in fact—and this is an important paradox to understand—the very things we do to escape from our inner experience also prevent us from getting our work done. Thus, fighting or fleeing our thoughts and emotions actually *wastes* time instead of saving it.

What's more, when we deny ourselves permission to feel intense sensation, we also cut off our access to the joy, compassion and drive that could otherwise empower us in our work. Forcing ourselves to stay "on an even keel" all the time gives working a dull, lifeless quality. Our posture begins to slouch, we start speaking in a monotone, and the muffled, deadened feeling that pervades many corporate environments sets in.

And there's another, more serious, potential consequence of fighting or fleeing from our inner experience of working. As Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone put it in *Embracing Our Selves*, the patterns of thinking and feeling we push away, if we keep them at bay long enough, become "demonic" and start sabotaging our efforts to accomplish our goals. For example, you've probably known someone who refused to admit or experience their anger for a long time, until one day they lost control and screamed at someone or acted violently—with consequences for their careers and other parts of their lives.

So it seems that, if we want to get the most out of the time we spend working, we need to take a different approach to our mental and emotional "clutter." What we usually don't consider is that we can simply sit, breathe, relax our bodies, and allow whatever thoughts and sensations are arising to *be*, just as they are.

If you start feeling resentful as you're working and your shoulders begin to feel hot and uncomfortable, for example, keep breathing and just let that heat and discomfort persist until they pass away. If you find yourself mentally replaying an argument you had with an intimate partner ten years ago while you're trying to get a project done, simply allow the mental movie of the argument to play and then fade to black.

When I make this suggestion, some people object "but the problem for me isn't what I'm feeling—I just don't want to do my work." However, the desire to be somewhere else or to stop doing what you're doing is also a form of inner experience, and you can actually breathe through that sensation and allow it to fade away, as in the other examples I've discussed.

The very idea that the kinds of thoughts and feelings that assault us in our work will fade away in time, if we let them, is novel to many of us. Consciously or otherwise, we tend to assume, when we're confronted by fear, anger or some other intense emotion while we're working, that the feeling could potentially stay with us forever unless we "do something about it." In other words, if we don't fight or flee from our inner experience, we'll be stuck in the same mental rut for eternity.

For example, we usually assume that, if we let ourselves fully experience our anxiety, we'll be plunged into an eternal abyss of fear, and the rest of our lives will be a nonstop nightmare. As Judith Bemis and Amr Barrada sagely write in *Embracing the Fear*, "we're afraid that if we allow ourselves to be anxious, the anxiety will become unmanageable; we'll panic, and the panic might last forever."

In fact, however, most thoughts and emotions we experience ultimately pass away, and they often do so quickly—within minutes or seconds—when we allow them to flow through us without running away from them or shutting them off.

For example, if you notice yourself feeling angry and you allow yourself to fully experience that emotion, without turning your mind to something else, you usually don't remain angry for the rest of your life. The feeling eventually subsides, and you return to a calm, focused place. In fact, you don't have to "do something about it" at all, and often trying to do something about it is actually counterproductive, for the reasons we've talked about.

When the thoughts and sensations we were feeling have passed, we can gently return our attention to our work, without the need to punish, convince or coax ourselves into getting back on task. This way of relating to our inner experience at work—which I call *acceptance*—consumes far less time and energy than fighting or fleeing, and can do much to increase our productivity. Many exercises in this book are based on this theme of accepting, rather than avoiding, our inner experience.

The more we practice accepting what's coming up inside as we go through our routine, the more comfortable and familiar our inner experience starts to seem, and the more we find ourselves able to stay on task in the face of thoughts, memories, and bodily sensations that used to occur as dangerous or threatening.

Another advantage of learning to be with our thoughts and sensations, as opposed to running from them, is that it helps us assume more and more control over how we live our lives. If we're constantly fighting or fleeing our inner experience, there's a sense in which we aren't really in control of our behavior—instead, our stray thoughts and feelings are.

For example, if I habitually put off my work and start instant messaging with friends every time I start feeling a tightness in my lower back, I'm not really in charge of creating my work schedule. In fact, that tight sensation in my back is

calling the shots, because every time it comes up I automatically flee from my work. *My back pain* is deciding what and how much I get done, not me. If I learn to accept and breathe through that tight sensation, relax my back muscles, and continue with my work when that sensation arises, I expand my capacity to choose what I do with my time.

Some spiritual teachers talk about the difference between *reacting* and *responding* to the experiences we have in life, and my distinction between escaping your experience and accepting it parallels that concept.

We can live our lives in *reaction* to our thoughts and emotions, pushing away whatever experiences feel too uncomfortable for us or that we think we "shouldn't be having." Or, we can *respond* to our inner experience, by choosing how we will act, even in the face of intense sensation. An important theme of this book is that, the more we develop the ability to respond rather than react to our inner experience, the more productivity and enjoyment we'll get out of what we do.

We might also see accepting our inner experience as a way to show ourselves genuine compassion. True compassion for ourselves means accepting all of our experience—all of the physical sensations, ideas, emotions and so on coming up for us in any given moment—without calling them inappropriate and trying to escape from them. Otherwise, our love for ourselves is only conditional—we'll only accept ourselves if we're happy, or excited about what we're doing, or in some state we label as "positive."

ACCEPTANCE DOESN'T MEAN RESIGNATION

Accepting or allowing what you're experiencing doesn't mean grudgingly resigning yourself to it. Sometimes, although we dislike the sensations we're experiencing and wish they weren't arising, we resolve to grit our teeth and "put up with them" as best we can. Maybe, for example, we find our job repetitive and tiresome, but we tell ourselves "this is as good as it

gets," and resolve that life isn't fair and we'll just have to suffer.

However, this is just a subtler form of fighting against our experience because, even if we don't try to "do anything about it," we hate and internally resist it just the same. It's like when we were children and we didn't want to do some chore—we may have gone and done what we were told, but we did it sulkily and half-heartedly. This sort of passive-aggressive resistance leaves us with the same drained, irritable feeling that aggressively pushing away our experience creates.

Nor do we need to pretend to be happy about what we're experiencing to accept it—we don't need to force ourselves to smile when we're feeling down. Accepting our inner experience is more of a matter of removing the labels we usually put on it. Rather than treating the thoughts and sensations you have as "bad" or problems to be fixed, or trying to convince yourself they feel wonderful when they don't, see if you can let them be, just as they are, without mentally judging or categorizing them.

For instance, I imagine you've had the experience of being bored with your work from time to time. Most of us perceive boredom as a "bad thing"—when we feel bored with something we're doing, we complain about it, both inside and to others. We tell ourselves we're lazy for feeling bored, or gripe that the work we're doing isn't stimulating enough. We also tell ourselves it would be "better" to experience something else— perhaps joy, love, excitement, or some other sensation.

The next time you find yourself getting bored, I invite you to try this experiment. Take a look at the thoughts and sensations that come up for you when you're bored. In other words, what events in your mind and body let you know you're experiencing boredom?

Perhaps you feel a sinking in your stomach, tightness in your jaw, heat in your forehead, or something else. For the moment, take your attention away from the thought "I'm feeling bored and that's bad," and focus it directly on what's actually going on inside you. Let go of your resistance to the sensations you're noticing and simply allow them to be.

What I think you'll find is that, without the mental labels "boring," "bad," "awful," and however else you usually judge those sensations, they no longer seem so intense and difficult to tolerate. In other words, the judgments and labels we put on our thoughts and feelings can be a significant source of suffering in themselves, and you can lessen that suffering by looking directly at your experience as opposed to putting it in a mental category.

LISTENING TO THE INNER GURU

At a deeper level, we can do even more to achieve a sense of ease and inspiration in our work by not only allowing the thoughts and feelings that come up to be there, but also seeing them as a source of valuable inner wisdom. Whatever enters our consciousness as we work—whether it's fear, despair, fretting about our relationship with our parents, or something else—it likely has something to teach us about where we have room to grow as human beings.

This perpective is in keeping with the idea in some Eastern spiritual traditions of the inner guru, or *gurudev*. The inner guru is a wise part of us that guides us, in ways we may not immediately understand, toward love, peace and abundance in our lives.

What I'm recommending is that, instead of seeing the mental and emotional "clutter" that arises as we work as a problem to be fixed or run away from, we try perceiving it as a message from our inner teacher designed to help us achieve our full potential. As Muktanand Meannjin observes in *Yoga: The Essence of Life*, "our own inner guru doesn't always prompt us to do things that will be pleasant or easy, but if we ignore that inner prompting we miss out on something valuable."

Let's look at a few practical examples. Earlier I mentioned Gail, a client I worked with, who was persistently tormented by a gnawing feeling of loneliness when she was working alone in her office. Her normal response to this sensation was to distract herself by checking e-mail or instant

messaging with her friends, but this gave her only temporary relief.

When she resolved to just breathe, relax her body, and accept the feeling of loneliness rather than pushing it away, she had a remarkable intuition. Some memories from when she was very young emerged, prompting the realization that what she really wanted in those lonely moments was to reconnect with a few of her childhood friends.

With this in mind, she got in touch with several people from her past, and today she greatly values those renewed friendships. The feeling of aloneness, as it turned out, contained a valuable lesson about how she could improve the quality of her life.

I've also noticed that this perspective offers a wonderful new way to look at what we usually call "writer's block." Before I started seeing my inner experience of working as potentially valuable, I used to shame myself in moments when my mind felt empty of ideas. "Come on, you need to finish this," I'd say to myself. "Think something up already."

I gradually learned, however, that if I simply sat there with that blank feeling, without fighting or running from it, the blankness gradually dissolved, and the best ideas I'd had all day, or even all week, would reveal themselves. When I treated that blankness as if it had a gift to offer me, rather than seeing it as an enemy, its value spontaneously emerged. I'll talk a little later about some exercises for learning to accept and even appreciate that feeling of creative emptiness, and how that can help stimulate your imagination.

Rumi's poem "The Guest House" lyrically describes the attitude I'm inviting you to bring to your relationship with your inner experience. As Rumi puts it, although we may not understand why at first blush, even "the dark thought, the shame, and the malice" that come up for us can serve "as a guide from beyond":

This being human is a guest house
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

— Rumi, "The Guest House"

The first part of this book contains exercises and perspectives to help you become aware of your inner experience of working, and to accept and value it—being a welcoming "guest house" for it— instead of fleeing from it or shoving it away.

CULTIVATING "INNER PRODUCTIVITY"

As I mentioned earlier, once you have an accepting relationship with your inner experience of your work, the next step is to *transform* the way you experience working so you can find the most efficiency and enjoyment in what you do—in other words, to develop what I call "inner productivity."

Many aspects of the mental and emotional state we bring to our work could be included in the category of inner productivity—such as how excited we feel about what we're doing, how distracted we are by other events in our lives, how

tense or relaxed our bodies feel, and so on. In this book, I boil these down into three basic elements of inner productivity, which I call *Attention*, *Intention*, and *Foundation*.

When these elements are fully present while we're working, we're at our most efficient, and we produce our highest-quality work. In these moments, we don't even feel like we're "working," as that word is usually used—we aren't bored, stressed, or expending a lot of energy.

Instead, our work starts to feel like the activities we do for fun—we aren't strongly attached to the outcomes we achieve, we don't feel like we're making much effort, and we experience genuine passion for what we do. We actually enjoy the *process* of working—the in-the-moment act of doing our tasks, rather than just the *product*—the money, prestige and so on we may accumulate through what we do.

Of course, as you probably know firsthand, it's still possible to do our work even if we haven't cultivated all these elements. For example, even if we feel totally uninspired in our jobs—if we lack what I call an inspiring *intention*—we can still grudgingly do what we're told when we're in the office, because our fear of losing our jobs is stronger than our dislike for our work. However, we can't be nearly as productive, or enjoy our work as much, as we can if these factors are present.

I'll give you an overview of each aspect of inner productivity, and the exercises I offer in this book to help you develop them.

Attention. It seems clear that we're most efficient, and produce our best work, when our work has our full attention. If our awareness keeps drifting away from what we're doing, or we're replaying a song in our heads as we do our task, we're unlikely to be at our most productive.

As I noted earlier, most productivity advice for helping us pay attention focuses on how we can remove distracting influences from the external environment. For instance, some writers advise us to turn off our phones and close our e-mail applications when we're working on an important task.

No matter how many distractions we eliminate from our environment, however, we're always stuck with the biggest source of distraction—the *mind*. If we don't know how to calm our minds, they will constantly wander into the past or future, recycling painful memories and conjuring up anxiety-provoking future scenarios. Often, our minds are at their most disruptive when we have to fix our attention on a single task, which we frequently need to do in our careers.

Most of us have, at least briefly, experienced moments where we're "in the flow" or "in the zone" as we're working. In these moments, only the task we're doing matters—not what others may think of our work, how big the bonus will be this year, what we'll have for dinner tonight, or any of the other concerns that typically occupy our attention as we're trying to get work done.

This is similar to the state some athletes report experiencing when they're playing at the top of their game—it's as if everything but the game fades out of their attention, and their performance feels effortless and intuitive.

This book provides exercises for helping you enter that state of flow, and letting your other worries and priorities fade from your awareness, as you're working. The exercises focus on bringing your awareness into the present moment and away from the past and future, quieting thoughts that pull your attention away from your tasks, and maintaining your focus even when you're confronted with intense emotions and sensations.

As I'll explain, among other things, training your attention on what you're feeling in your body, and what's going on in your immediate surroundings, is a great way to keep your awareness rooted in the present.

Intention. We're at our most productive when we have a clear, inspiring intention regarding what we want to achieve in our work. For example, if it's a dream for you to deeply move many people with your fiction writing, you'll feel more focused and creative while writing if you hold that dream in mind. But when we're working just to survive, or simply because we feel

we've "got to do *something*," we can't maintain the same efficiency, even if we're really skilled at what we do. If you mop floors for a living, for instance, the fact that you do a really immaculate job of it won't sustain your motivation in the long run if you don't enjoy mopping.

To many people, establishing a clear intention is about writing out an organized list of goals to guide your progress in your work. I think this is helpful, but it's not the full picture. What many of us don't see is that it's equally essential to really *feel* the intention behind your work on a physical level—for example, to actually feel your desire to contribute to others with your work as a warmth and openness in your heart. If this sounds strange or mystical to you, try the exercises in the *Intention* section and your perspective may shift.

One reason many of us have trouble achieving the goals we set is that we don't experience our desire to reach those goals in our bodies, or at least not as fully and richly as we could. Many of us are disconnected from the emotions and sensations we experience in our bodies, or disregard them and set our goals out of a perceived need to please others or conform to social expectations. When we're working toward what we think we "should" want, rather than what we actually want, we aren't fueled by that same inner fire.

The exercises for developing a clear intention in this book will help restore your ability to feel, and be empowered by, your vision and desires on a deep, visceral level.

Foundation. We have what I call a solid inner *Foundation* when we recognize we are complete and worthwhile beings, no matter what happens in our work situation. Even if the boss yells at us about our project, we don't meet the sales target for this quarter, we feel like we've alienated a colleague, or something else, we don't lose our composure or our regard for ourselves.

This attitude is foreign to many of us. Instead, for most of us, our sense of adequacy and self-worth depends on our career success. In other words, if we don't make a certain amount of

money, receive a certain amount of praise, or achieve whatever else we define as success, we don't feel good about ourselves. This is what I call a feeling of *lack*—a feeling that we aren't whole or worthwhile unless we achieve certain things in the world.

In fact, many of us believe we wouldn't be motivated to do anything at all if we saw ourselves as okay no matter what happened in our careers—that we need this feeling of lack or we can't succeed. We fear that, if we loved ourselves regardless of what happened, we'd plop down on the couch, switch on the TV and never get back up except to go buy more chips. In fact, in my experience, the opposite is true—the more we recognize our basic wholeness regardless of what happens in our lives, the more focused and inspired we become in our work.

When our self-worth is riding on what we accomplish, we endlessly second-guess our work, make compromises in the hope of gaining others' approval, and dread working so strongly that we put it off. In other words, the fear that naturally results from basing our opinions of ourselves on our career success actually harms our productivity.

As psychologist Joseph R. Ferrari writes in *Procrastination and Task Avoidance*, in describing research on college students' test-taking habits, "students who have extreme anxiety are most likely to procrastinate, because it is more reinforcing to avoid the anxiety associated with studying than it is to study."

One interesting aspect of these elements of inner productivity is that they tend to reinforce each other. For instance, if you have a clear *intention*—if you're inspired by what you're doing—you're likely to be more motivated to hold your *attention* on your work. A solid *foundation*—a sense of unconditional self-love—will also help you pay *attention* to what you're doing, because you won't find your mind constantly drifting off into anxiety scenarios about others disliking or ridiculing what you're doing. So even if, at the moment, you don't feel very grounded in any of these elements, when you

work to develop one of them the others may naturally fall into place.

Another important aspect of these elements is that the degree to which they're present varies from moment to moment. As a simple example, you've probably had the experience of approaching your work with clarity and focus for an hour, and being barely able to keep your eyes on the computer screen, or whatever you're trying to focus on, in the next.

This is why regularly using the exercises I'll talk about to cultivate inner productivity—and doing it in *real time*, in the course of working—is critical if you want to get the most done and the most fulfillment out of your work.

I offer many different exercises for developing inner productivity in this book, and there are a few ways you can approach them to make them work for you. One possibility is to experiment with all the exercises in the book, and notice which ones influence your peace and focus at work most significantly.

As with meditation, yoga and the other practices that inspired much of this book, different exercises will resonate more deeply with different people, as everyone's mind and body is unique. Thus, exploring to find out what works for you and developing your own routine will likely be helpful.

Another possible approach is to look over the table of contents and the introduction, watching for areas where you'd like to see the most growth in your working life.

Perhaps, for instance, you tend to find your attention getting scattered as you're trying to work, in which case you may benefit most from the *Attention* section. If your main concern is with feeling uninspired and tired of your work, *Intention* is likely the most helpful section for you. *Foundation* would be the area to emphasize if you feel nagged by a constant anxiety or doubt about your capabilities that holds back your progress.

To be sure, many people who have read my materials or worked with me personally have discovered that their real area of concern is radically different from what they thought at the outset. A few people who came to me saying they were feeling

distractable in their work, for example, ended up discovering that, in reality, their issue is that they start to feel paralyzingly afraid when they work alone. So, my suggestion would be to give the book a full read, and then focus on regularly doing the exercises that fit best with your specific concerns.

MY OWN JOURNEY

To give you an idea of how I came to this work, and to illustrate how it can practically apply to your own working life, I'll tell you a little about how my own journey brought me to this point. It started several years ago when I was working as a litigation attorney at a large law firm. I doubt you'll be surprised to hear that, in doing that job, I had to contend with some stress, anxiety and long hours in the office.

I had a pretty high tolerance for stress, at least when I experienced it in the workplace. Unfortunately, the tension and anxiety didn't dissipate when I left the office at night—I tended to carry them home with me.

I would make an effort to relax in the usual way when I got home—by exercising, surfing the Web, calling a friend, or something else. However, no matter what I did, it seemed I always managed to spend at least some of my time at home worrying.

Even as I was trying to relax, I'd find myself mentally running through all the things that could potentially go wrong with the projects I was working on. Maybe I'd miscalculated some deadline, made a grammatical error in a document, said something a colleague found offensive, or something else. Sometimes, my worrying habit even made it hard to go to sleep.

I didn't want to take sleeping pills or put some other drug with potentially harmful side effects in my body, so I started looking for a technique or practice to help me get a good night's rest. In the course of my search, I explored meditation, yoga, qi gong, tai chi and a number of other spiritual or mindfulness practices. I got into a regular routine of meditating for fifteen

minutes in the morning and evening, and doing a half-hour of yoga before I went to bed. I immediately noticed how strong and warm my body felt during my yoga routine, and how easy it seemed to get to sleep after I finished.

After several months of these practices, I started noticing something interesting. My new routine wasn't just helping me sleep—it was affecting the way I experienced other areas of my life, including my work. At first, I suspected that the higher-ups at my firm were giving me less challenging work and people to deal with, and I wondered if they might be trying to send me the message that my services were no longer needed. But eventually, it dawned on me that the way I *experienced* my work was changing—not the amount or difficulty of the work.

This shift in how I experienced working manifested in many different ways. I started becoming able to work for longer periods of time without stopping to check e-mail or indulge in some other distraction. I found myself getting less rattled by the conflict and time pressure that were part of my job. Most importantly, I found myself actually starting to *enjoy* what I was doing—not just the money and prestige the legal profession offered, but the moment-to-moment process of drafting papers, reviewing documents, and doing my other tasks.

A few years later, once I'd deeply immersed myself in my practices, I had another important realization. When I'd started out doing meditation and yoga, I assumed I could only do those practices at home, and that it wouldn't be practical to bring them into the workplace. After all, I couldn't exactly bring my yoga mat into my office and run through a couple of asanas whenever I felt my stress level peaking, could I? If I wanted to bring inner peace and focus into my work through my spiritual practices, that was something I'd just have to do "on my own time."

However, I began to recognize that this wasn't necessarily true. After all, I'd learned about meditations, visualizations, forms of breathing, and so on that didn't require a yoga mat, a DVD, or any other special equipment. In fact, I didn't even need to get out of my chair to use some of these techniques.

For instance, if I was feeling sluggish and uninspired, and I wanted to reconnect with my desire to serve my colleagues and clients, I could use a yogic technique called "breathing into the heart," even as I sat at my desk. Without getting up, I could clasp my hands behind my back, stretch out my arms, stick my chest out, and take deep breaths, relaxing any tightness in my heart area. Just taking a few of these breaths could help me get back in touch, on a physical level, with my compassion for others and sense of mission.

In other words, I could adapt the exercises I normally did at home so that I could do them *in real time*, as I sat in my office. With these techniques, I realized, I didn't have to wait to access the state of "flow" my disciplines helped me enter, feel more open-hearted in my work, or deepen my sense of peace. I could give myself all of those gifts right now, in this moment. And in fact, I wasn't the only one receiving the gifts—when I felt more peaceful, alert and inspired, everyone around me benefited from my efficiency and my calm, positive attitude.

As time went on, I began feeling more and more interested in how I could adapt spiritual practices to transform my experience of my work, and of other areas of my life. I started taking transformational workshops, going to retreats, and interacting more with others who were on a "spiritual path."

Gradually, I started to realize I was becoming more interested in the process than the content of my work. That is, the process of how I entered "the zone" as I worked, stayed calm in the face of pressure and conflict, and so on were starting to interest me more than the drafting and reviewing of documents that were the mainstays of my job. (Shockingly enough, right?)

One morning, I woke up and realized it was time for me to make a change. I'd become so interested in the techniques I was using to cultivate what I call "inner productivity," and so convinced that they could also be a great gift to others, that I resolved to teach those techniques to the world.

Ever since, I've been doing just that, in several ways— I've been offering workshops on using mindfulness practice to

find satisfaction and productivity in your work; doing one-on-one work as a personal coach with people interested in getting more out of what they do; and writing books and articles on the subject.

A few years before, I would never even have considered making such a radical change in my life. But the practices I'd adopted had given me a sense of inner peace and stability—what I now call *Foundation*—that made it possible to pursue a goal I was genuinely interested in, rather than one I thought would impress or placate others.

As it turned out, developing a deep-seated conviction that, no matter what I did with my life, I was basically safe and adequate as a human being, helped me not just with my productivity, but with going after what I really wanted in my career.

Now, let's talk about how you can use mindfulness practices to get the same kind of peace, focus and enjoyment in your work that I found for myself.

Message from the Author
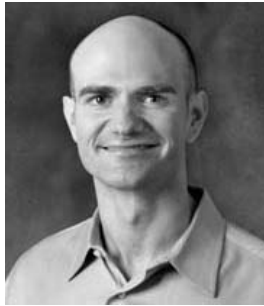
Thanks for checking out the introduction to *Inner Productivity: A Mindful Path to Efficiency and Enjoyment in Your Work*—I hope you found it helpful. If you're interested in achieving a deep state of focus and peace in your work, the full version of the book is packed with insights and techniques to help you get there.

The book is available on Amazon.com in both paperback and Kindle formats, at the links below:

 Paperback Version

 Kindle Version

If you'd like more information about the book, visit www.InnerProductivity.com, where you'll find videos, radio interviews and articles describing the book's ideas.

Wishing you the best in your work and elsewhere,

Chris Edgar