

# Stay calm in a crazed world

Now that we can connect with anyone at any time, do we risk being out of touch with ourselves?

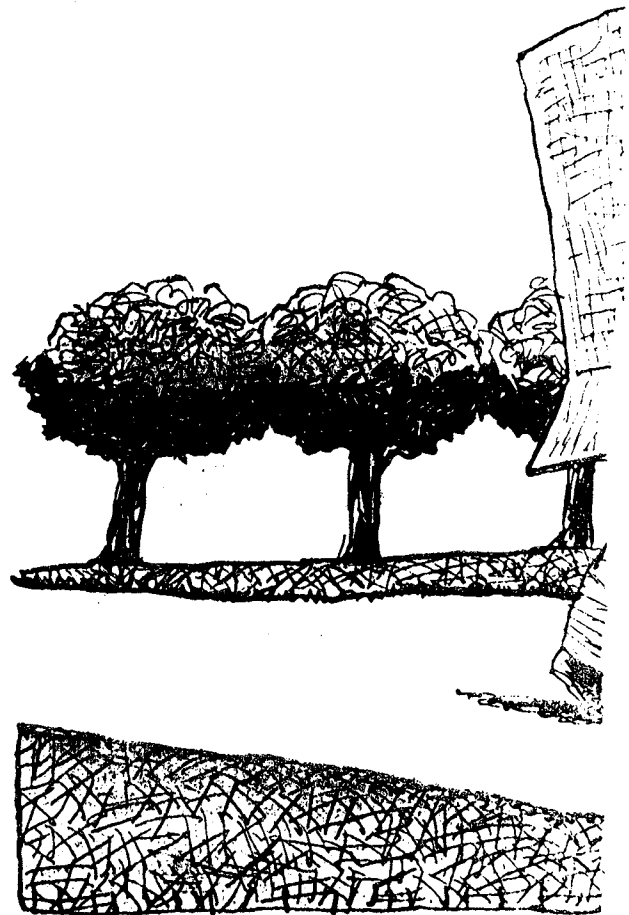
BY JON KABAT-ZINN

Our world is changing radically right under our noses in ways that have never before been experienced by the human nervous system. In light of the enormity of these changes, it might be a good idea to reflect on just how they may be affecting our lives.

My guess is we notice what's going on. We have been too caught up in adapting to the new possibilities and challenges, learning to use the new technologies to get more done and get it done faster, and in the process becoming completely dependent on them, even addicted. Whether we realize it or not, we are being swept along in a current of time acceleration that shows no signs of abating. The new technologies, touted as producing gains in efficiency and leisure, threaten to rob us of both, if they haven't already done so. Do you know anyone who says he has more free time than he did 10 years ago?

It is said that the pace of our lives now is being driven by an inexorable exponential acceleration known as Moore's Law (after Intel co-founder Gordon Moore, who first stated it), which governs the size and speed of integrated circuits. Every 18 months, the computing power and speed of the next generation of microprocessors doubles while their sizes are cut in half and their cost remains about the same. This combination increases the seduction of computer systems (for work and home), consumer products, games, and portable electronic devices, which easily leads to the loss of all sense of measure and direction as we respond willy-nilly to the increasing volumes of email, voicemail, faxes, pages and

Illustration: Jack Prince



cell phone calls coming in from all corners of the planet. True, much of what comes to us is from people we care about and with whom we want to stay connected. But where is there a sense of balance? How do we regulate the pace of ubiquitous connectivity, and the expectation of instantaneous responses?

With our mobile phones and wireless Palm devices, it's now possible to be so connected that we can be in touch with anyone and everyone at any time, and do business anywhere. But have you noticed that in the process, we are running the risk of being out of touch with ourselves? We easily forget that our primary connection to life is through our own interior realms—the experiencing of our own bodies and all our senses, including the mind, which allow us to touch and be touched by the world, and to act appropriately in response to it. To take advantage of that gift, we need moments that are not filled with anything, in which we do not jump to get in one more phone call or send one more email, or plan one more event, or add to our To-Do lists. Moments of reflection, of mulling, of thinking things over, of thoughtfulness.

With all this talk about connectivity, what about connectivity to ourselves? Are we becoming so connected to everybody else that we are never where we actually are? When we are at the beach we are on the cell phone, so are we really there? When we are walking down the street we are on the cell phone, so are we really there? Have we given up the



possibility of being present in the face of the accelerating pace of life and the infinite possibilities for instant connection?

What about calling ourselves up for a change, checking in and seeing what we are up to? What about just being in touch with how we are feeling, even in those moments when we may be feeling numb, or overwhelmed, or bored, or disjointed, or anxious, or depressed, or needing to get one more thing done?

What about being more connected to our bodies, and to the universe of sensations through which we experience the outer landscape? What about lingering for more than an automatic moment and becoming aware of whatever is arising in our minds: our emotions and moods, our feelings, our thoughts, our beliefs?

Much of the time, our newfound technological connectivity serves no real purpose; it's just habit, and pushes the bounds of absurdity as with the joke about commuters all exclaiming into their mobile phones at the same time, informing family and friends, "I'm getting on the train now."

What is wrong with just getting on the train without that piece of information being communicated?

If we were simply telling ourselves that we were boarding the train, it might be an experience of mindfulness, and therefore useful in cultivating awareness of the present moment unfolding. I am getting on the train (and knowing

it). I am getting off the train (and knowing it). That is true wakefulness. But tell someone else all about it? What's the point? It can annihilate the magic of the moment through distraction and diversion. Somehow, being alone in and with our experience is no longer deemed sufficient, even though it is our life in that moment.

This is not to say that much of the technology we are developing is not extremely useful. Cell phones allow parents to stay in touch with their children, and everyone to co-ordinate the day's activities in useful ways. Computers and printers and their powerful software capabilities, coupled with the capacity to exchange documents instantly by email anywhere and access information instantly, allow us to get more work done in a day than we might have gotten done in a week 15 years ago. I am not by any stretch of the imagination advocating a Luddite-like condemnation of technological development, or romantically wishing to turn the clock back to a simpler age. But I do think it is important for us to be mindful of all the new and increasingly powerful ways available to us today to lose ourselves in the outer and forget about the inner so that we become even more out of touch with ourselves.

The more we are yanked into the outer world with all these new technology-driven habits that our nervous

systems have never before encountered, the more important it may be for us to develop a robust counterbalance in the inner world: one that calms and tunes the nervous system and puts it into the service of living wisely, both for ourselves and for others. This counterbalance can be cultivated by bringing greater mindfulness to our bodies, to our minds, and to our experiences—including the very moments in which we are using the technology to stay connected. Otherwise, we may wind up at a very high risk of living robotic lives, no longer even having time to contemplate who is doing all this doing, who is getting somewhere that looks more desirable, and is it really a better place to be?

**Do you know anyone who has more free time than he did 10 years ago?**

Excerpted from *Resurgence* magazine (March/April 2007), an English journal of spirituality and social change. Jon Kabat-Zinn is an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, well known for his teachings about mindfulness and meditation as a way to help people overcome stress and disease. This originally appeared in this book *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness* (Hyperion).