PART TWO: UNDERSTANDING WHAT'S HAPPENING

When meditation increases your distress instead of easing it, the experience can feel bewildering. You followed the instructions. You tried to be present. And yet your body responded as if you had walked into danger rather than sat down to find peace.

To understand why this happens, we need to understand something about how your nervous system works, not as an academic exercise, but as a way of befriending yourself. When you know what your body is actually doing, you can stop fighting it and start working with it. Understanding replaces self-blame with curiosity.

The Body's Ancient Wisdom

Long before humans developed language, philosophy, or meditation traditions, we had nervous systems. These intricate networks evolved over millions of years with one primary purpose: to keep us alive.

Your nervous system is constantly scanning your environment and your inner state, asking one essential question: Am I safe? This scanning happens below the level of conscious thought, faster than you can think. Your body is already responding to what it perceives.

When your nervous system detects safety, it allows you to rest, digest, connect with others, and be present. Your breath deepens naturally. Your muscles soften. Your heart beats at a steady pace. This is the state in which healing, growth, and genuine stillness become possible. This is what we mean by a regulated nervous system.

But when your nervous system detects a threat, or what it believes to be one, everything changes. The survival response kicks in. Your body prepares to fight, flee, or freeze. Stress hormones flood your system. Your heart races, your breathing becomes shallow, and your muscles tense. Your attention narrows to the perceived danger, and the calm, reflective part of your mind goes offline.

This is not a malfunction. This is your body doing exactly what it evolved to do. The problem arises when this protective system becomes stuck, continues to detect danger even in safe situations, and sounds the alarm long after the original threat has passed.

When the Alarm Keeps Sounding

Traumatic experiences can reshape how the nervous system responds to the world. When something overwhelming happens, especially early in life, repeatedly, or without adequate support, the body learns to stay on high alert. The threshold for triggering the survival response keeps dropping. What once required a genuine threat now gets activated by a raised voice, a certain smell, a closed room, or even the simple act of sitting still with your eyes closed.

Dr. Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist who has studied the mind and brain for decades, uses a helpful image: the *window of tolerance*. Think of this as the zone in which you can experience life's ups and downs without becoming overwhelmed. Within this window, you can feel emotions without being swept away by them. You can notice sensations without panicking. You can think clearly and respond thoughtfully.

When you move outside this window, pushed there by stress, triggers, or accumulated tension, you lose access to that balanced state. You might tip into what we call hyperarousal: anxiety, panic, racing thoughts, and the urgent need to move or escape. Or you might fall into hypoarousal: numbness, heaviness, disconnection, and the sense of being frozen or far from your own life.

For people who carry unprocessed trauma, this window can become very narrow. What would be a minor stress for someone else can push them into dysregulation. Here is the crucial point: this is not a character flaw or a lack of discipline. It is simply what happens when the nervous system has learned, through painful experience, that the world is not safe.

Why Stillness Can Feel Like Danger

Now we can begin to understand why traditional meditation can be so challenging for those with trauma histories.

Most meditation instructions ask you to do several things at once: sit still, close your eyes, turn your attention inward, and observe whatever arises. For a regulated nervous system, this is a recipe for peace. But for a nervous system on high alert, each instruction can feel like a threat.

Sitting still removes your ability to flee. If your body learned that being trapped or immobilized meant danger, stillness itself can trigger panic, the ancient memory of being unable to escape.

Closing your eyes prevents you from scanning for threats. Your survival brain may resist this intensely, keeping you vigilant even when you consciously know you are safe.

Turning attention inward brings you face to face with the very sensations your body has been trying to avoid, the racing heart, the tight chest, the knot in the belly. Instead of calming you, this focused attention can amplify the distress signals.

Observing whatever arises sounds peaceful in theory. But if what arises is terror, fragmentation, or overwhelming memory, the instruction to "just notice" can feel impossible, even cruel.

Your body is not being difficult. It is responding to genuine signals of danger, even if those signals are echoes from the past rather than from the present reality. The survival brain does not clearly distinguish between then and now. If stillness once meant danger, it still feels dangerous, regardless of what your thinking mind knows to be true.

The Musician's Teaching

The Buddha understood that practice could go wrong when too much force was used. There is a story about a monk named Sona, who had been a musician before he ordained. Sona was intensely dedicated to his practice, so dedicated that he was driving himself to exhaustion without making progress. Frustrated and discouraged, he considered giving up.

The Buddha came to visit him and asked a simple question: "Sona, when you were a musician, what happened when the strings on your instrument were too tight?"

"They would break, or the sound would be harsh and unpleasant," Sona replied.

"And what happened when the strings were too loose?"

"The instrument would not sound at all. The notes would be dull and lifeless. And when were the strings just right?"

"When they were neither too tight nor too loose, then the instrument would produce a beautiful sound."

The Buddha smiled. "It is the same with practice. The string that produces a beautiful sound is neither too tight nor too loose. Find that balance, and you will find your way."

This teaching has stayed with me throughout my decades of practice, and I return to it again and again with students. When someone forces themselves to sit through terror, gritting their teeth against panic, determined to meditate correctly no matter what, the string is too tight. It will break. The practice will not produce beautiful sound but only suffering. And when someone abandons practice entirely, avoiding any contact with their inner life, numbing out or staying perpetually distracted, the string is too loose. No music can emerge.

The art is finding the middle way. Engaged enough to grow, but not so forcefully that you shatter. Present enough to heal, but not so overwhelmed that you retraumatize yourself.

Not Too Tight, Not Too Loose

What does this middle way look like in practice?

It means recognizing that you have a choice. You are not obligated to follow any instruction that pushes you outside your window of tolerance. If closing your eyes triggers panic, keep them gently open. If sitting still makes you want to crawl out of your skin, stand up or walk. If focusing on your breath constricts your chest, let your attention rest on the sounds in the room or the feeling of your feet on the floor.

These are not failures. They are intelligent adaptations. They are you, tuning your own instrument. They are signs that awareness is already present.

It also means developing sensitivity to your own signals. You can learn to recognize early signs of dysregulation, the slight tightening, the shift in breath, the first whisper of anxiety, and respond before you are overwhelmed. With practice, you become skilled at adjusting the string's tension moment by moment, staying in the zone where growth is possible.

And it means holding yourself with tremendous kindness throughout this process. Your nervous system developed its patterns for good reason. It was trying to protect you. The path forward is not to override this protection with brute force but to gently teach your body that safety is possible, that stillness can exist without danger, and that presence does not have to mean pain.

This is what the ancient practitioners understood, and what modern science now confirms: the nervous system can change. The window of tolerance can widen. What feels unbearable today may become manageable tomorrow, and easeful the day after.

The body is always learning.

Our task is to teach it something new.