

Why I Meditate...

For much of my 60 plus years I've been ruled by an unruly mind. It, in turn, seemed governed by a disorderly and unreliable world. I often deemed myself a victim of circumstances, what I now call a "situational neurotic." If things were "good," was happy; if things were not so good (or worse), I was sad and anxious. It's taken a long time, but I now see that my mind need not be ruled by this definition of good and bad. I need not always look outside myself – and to others - to find my happiness; there is, in fact, another way.

From the outside, I appeared to be more than okay. I am known to be a successful non-fiction TV producer with two Emmys and a long resume that encompasses all manner of hits and high-end shows, including show running 7 seasons of the hit series, National Geographic's *Border Wars*.

I was seen as "high functioning" by most, married to a great woman and hailing from a big and interesting family. I have lots of friends and a lifetime of great stories to share. But that persona was a two - dimensional cardboard cutout of the real me. Inside, I was, too often, a hot mess; driven my by career and terrified to be idle. I was tempted by pleasure, repulsed by discomfort, distracted by shiny objects and made anxious by perceived threats. So lost in my head that I didn't know I was lost in my head.

If neuropsychologist and author Rick Hanson is right, and "What fires together" really does "Wire together," my life long cultivation of *mindlessness* had shrunk my comfort zone to a place so small that good times were short, and bad times lingered; positive thoughts slid away like Teflon and negative ones stuck like Velcro. I imagined that temporary conditions were permanent and permanent conditions were real. Overreacting had become my default mode, while hyper-reactivity was my go-to defense against a perceived crisis. Looking back, it seems I was always putting out birthday candles with a fire hose. It was exhausting.

In a heartbeat, triggered by a minor domestic dispute, an important email *not* returned, evidence of a personal mistake (no matter how minor), or even a snarky text *without* a smiley face (god forbid), I would start to worry, project and even catastrophize. In response to these cascading thoughts, I would contract, freeze, fight or flee, all the while over-thinking (and overcompensating) in an attempt to try to “fix” the problem.

What I would rarely do was to find a middle way; an appropriate response to the problem, and so, inevitably, when the “crisis” passed (as it *always* did) and the worst-case scenario never materialized (as it *never* does), I would recognize, once again, that I had misspent a mountain of energy, upsetting myself and those closest to me.

Desperate to get off this merry-go-round as I was, once again, caught by yet a new “career crises”, I was gently guided by a wise counselor towards Jon Kabat-Zinn’s remarkable first book, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress*, and thus a mindfulness practice. As I read, learned and studied more, startling insights arose, resulting in a measure of peace and control over my unruly mind. By committing to a daily practice, and turning down the noise, it began to feel like I’d finally been handed the owner’s manual to the super computer inside my head.

The instructions seemed easy enough: sit, breathe and pay attention to the present moment, and yet (as any mediator will tell you), it was shockingly difficult at first. It was like learning to read braille; you literally had to *feel* it to understand it. But as the *concepts* of mindfulness began to merge with my *experience* of meditation; my practice began to profoundly change how I thought... about my thoughts.

By allowing the normal traffic of ideas, opinions, plans and worries to simply come and go, by having a genuine intention to drop my “story” and be present; by using the anchor of breath (and other concentration techniques) to come back to the now, I learned how to induce my mental processes, to slow down to a point where I could actually hang out in the gaps *between* my thoughts - and there it was, even if just for a moment - a wakeful peace for my unruly mind.

Is it easy? Of course not. Is it possible? Absolutely. The more I practiced, the more I could see the impermanence, non-importance, and even fecklessness of so many of my thoughts. As I began to see that, almost magically, I started to suffer less and shine more. By learning to meditate, one can learn to re-think what it really means to think (!) and this then changes one's responses to the tumult of life.

Think about it; in reaction to the world around you, your thoughts and emotions rush at you, at every waking moment, from all directions, in rapid succession, and a part of you believes that they are all (mostly) true and/or helpful; after all, you are coping and processing, right?

On the contrary, according to the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging at USC, the average person has about 70,000 thoughts in a day. Only about 5% (or 3,500 of them!) prove to be of any real value and considered to be important, insightful or new! The rest is a rehashing of repeated ideas and could as well be generated by an overly caffeinated hamster on a wheel! Through mindfulness and meditation we begin to see all that, and we learn to smile at it, as we also begin to discover self-compassion.

With all this comes the Big Questions that need to be asked if we are to peer into the nature of consciousness, beginning with, Who Am I - and - what is this incessant voice in my head, the one with all the opinions, desires and dislikes. Who is, in fact, talking to me... and who listening to all this inner drama?

If I can learn to gain more control over my mind, am I the controller or the controlled? If I can find a way to see how my thoughts are triggering my emotions, then who is the *me* who is watching? Is there another me I've ignored for decades?

The answer is rather mind-blowing, because suddenly you *know* you are not your thoughts and you can begin to see that you're also not the emotions triggered by them! *You* are something else, and you begin to want to find *that* person!

For instance, you might say, "I am angry", but *you* are not angry, you are the one who now can see the anger arising in you. You might say, "I am depressed", but *you* are not depressed.

You are no more one thing (sad, angry, anxious) than the weather is one thing! Like a storm front, these emotions are just passing through you, and even the worst of them *always* moves on. When you start to see that, you will begin to identify more and more with what remains.

This is the moment you discover the New Self - a heretofore unknown, unseen, internal intelligence. It sounds a bit disjointed, but it's not. In fact, it's a unifying and healthy discovery. Through mindfulness and meditation, when you learn to recognize this New Self - the part of you who *can* listen to the thoughts in your head, and who *can* observe the emotions and behavior – you get a glimpse of freedom!

When it happened to me, I knew right away that *this* was an older, wiser me, and, (thank god) a) quieter version of me than the me I thought I was.! And here's the great irony; it turns out that this New Me wasn't new at all! It had been there all along, patiently waiting for me to be quiet enough, for long enough, to notice him! It was totally up to me; I could wake up, or not. Learn to be present to the present moment, or not. Learn how to appreciate being awake, alive and conscious... or not.

So, now, let's go back to the beginning: why *do* I meditate? For me, to meditate, every day, is to make an appointment to sit and seek this new calmer entity; to journey to the place where he dwells. To me, no matter where I am in the world, to meditate is to return to home; home to sanity and safety in, what can often seem like an unsafe and insane world. Since meditating, since finding my true home, I suffer far less from... homesickness.

To be sure, some days I make the effort and I come back rather empty handed, but with practice I can re-find and re-discover this place of perspective and peace. When I slow down my mind enough to get there – finding once again the gaps between my thoughts - I am delighted to simply relax into them; happy just to hang out in the awareness of my awareness; in the miracle of consciousness.

For me, meditation is a daily discipline but it is not a destination. It's called a practice because that's what it is; practicing being mindful to be mindful; practicing being peaceful to be peaceful.

The truth is, I still get upset, but a lot less often; I still worry, but not for nearly as long; I still get anxious, but I now see the anxiety as a temporary and unwanted guest, who's come, *but who will go* - and I now know not to make any important decisions while he's around!

The bottom line is this; I have *not* eliminated, but I have greatly diminished, nearly all of my day-to-day suffering, and that's nothing less than a small miracle! What would *you* give to be even 10% happier, 15% less reactive or 20% kinder? A lot, I'd suspect, and that's what will happen, inside of the first few months of sitting and meditating every day.

Science may call it neuroplasticity; I call it peace. Gurus may call it higher consciousness; I call it simply this: appreciating what is real by inviting my mind to be in same place as my body, and by being more and more in the here and now.

The bottom line is this...

Every day that my Old Self takes twenty minutes to sit and meditate, my New Self appears to offers it a hardy high five!

Why?

Because, as it turns out, my New Self, he's the only one who knows how to read the Owner's Manual!

Peace...

Nick