

Meditation 2.0: A New Way to Meditate

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This article may be of value to you if:

- You have tried or are interested in meditation
- You find meditation a difficult practice (as I do)

I am a physician and researcher. My life's work is committed to helping patients who are experiencing chronic stress and overwhelming life situations. I also try and help people find greater happiness and become more resilient and have better relationships with others and self.

I started this line of work about a decade ago with teaching traditional meditation. Patients loved it. But patient after patient – true seekers – wouldn't follow through. A common statement was, "I enjoyed my time with you, but somehow gave up the practice. It's too difficult." The universal problem was excessive mind wandering. One patient said it in the clearest words, "Can you help me some other way doctor? Meditation has become one more thing to feel bad about."

That was the final straw. I realized my folly. I was copying and pasting several-thousand-year-old practices and applying them to the modern minds. I had picked several cliches. I was talking about the 'now,' without knowing what it meant. I was evangelizing about being 'in-the-present-moment' without knowing how difficult it was.

I was born in India. I like meditation. What is not to like about meditation? It is known to be relaxing, health improving, brain enhancing, and free of side effects. The problem was – after decades of learning and practicing I must confess that I found meditation a very difficult practice. I had a few good days, but on most days I didn't even know what I was doing. If after years of practice, this was my state, I can only begin to imagine what others might be going through.

It occurred to me that the busy minds of the 21st century need a modified version of the practice to access its full benefits. I went back to the drawing board, immersed myself in neuroscience and evolutionary biology. I started developing a simpler way to access meditation, which was in many ways very different from what I had learned over the years. Applying those ideas helped my personal practice, but I was still unsure. In the midst of it all, I met the world's preeminent authority on meditation – His Holiness Dalai Lama.

On April 14th 2012, I hosted a 90-minute dialogue with His Holiness Dalai Lama in front of about 500 people, the virtual Who's Who of the meditation world. Near the end of the dialog, I asked the august audience, how many had tried meditation. A high proportion raised their hands. Next I asked how many found meditation an easy practice. At most two or three hands went up. At that point, His Holiness shared his own personal challenges with meditation and his inability to enter deep meditation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ca7faWkfmwc> (watch the clip from 1:05:49 to 1:13:40)

His humble explanations confirmed my long held belief. While meditation, as it is presently taught, is a wonderful practice, most if not the vast majority of us find meditation a difficult practice and can't access its full benefits. For each person claiming to see the light in its entire splendor, tens of thousands struggle with a wandering mind.

I now strongly believe that the way we practice and learn meditation needs to be tweaked to align it with how our minds work so the benefits are accessible not only to those who can afford a two-month retreat on a mountain, but to everyone. That is my basic quest in developing and offering Meditation 2.0.

Meditation is a useful but difficult practice. An innovative approach toward meditation is needed that is based on a deeper understanding of our current life's challenges and how our brain works.

The Two Ways:

For the sake of simplicity I will summarize two types of meditation practices: Standard Meditation Practices and Meditation 2.0.

Standard Meditation Practices: These practices were developed a few thousand years ago when we lived in a treacherous world. Directing attention inward, stabilizing it with breath, focus on the physical body, sound, words, or images – was the usual approach. An alternate, more difficult approach was to develop open awareness, letting any and all experience filter through and perceived nonjudgmentally. Most modern practices have adapted one or more of these ideas and reintroduced them with different names. Most of my patients and students find these practices difficult. These practices take years to master and need considerable time and effort. As a result, majority of people quit after variable periods of trying.

Meditation 2.0: Meditation 2.0 involves sprinkling 1-2 minute moments of intentional presence multiple times during the day with focus on perceiving novelty and integrating gratitude and compassion in attention. Many of the practices are placed at the most vulnerable times of the day to maximize cognitive and emotional benefit (such as waking up with gratitude in the morning, connecting with family at the end of the day with a commitment to not try to improve them for the first three minutes). The primary focus is on cultivating kindness, toward self and others, and to fully immerse in the sensory experiences and think thoughts that are more intentional and guided by timeless wisdom. The specific exercises are very relationship centric.

One way of looking at these practices is that we do not add more milk to the already full glass of milk, i.e. our busy minds; we add chocolate powder to the milk (that doesn't increase the volume but makes the milk much more palatable).

In meditation 2.0 you meditate on wisdom and love instead of breath and emptiness. This practice is developed after understanding that most of the threats in the present time are internal (hurts, regrets, fears, insecurities, extreme busi-ness). These inner threats lock us inside our head with a wandering attention. Meditation 2.0 also recognizes that it is extremely difficult to be consistently in the present moment. The practice integrates knowledge about our mind's predispositions, particularly our negativity bias (focus on and inflating the bad), addiction to short-term gratification and hedonic adaptation (discounting the good).

Seven Salient features of Meditation 2.0:

Meditation 2.0 is focused and relaxed attention with a grateful and compassionate intention. The following seven salient features summarize the essentials of the practice.

- Isn't about being in the present; it is about intentional presence.
- Isn't about going inward; it is about coming outward.
- Isn't about focusing on the now; it is about having a long-term perspective.
- Isn't about non-judgmental stance; it is about being grateful and compassionate.
- Isn't about sitting meditation practice; it is about being kind all day long.
- Isn't about emptying the mind; it is about filling the mind with principles-based thoughts.
- Is about becoming aware of what it is like to be human.

Intentional presence: Most animal brains are in the present moment yet not self-actualized; any species that is intelligent and has imagination and preferences can't stay in the present moment. An average person has 150 undone tasks at any point. We can't efficiently run our life while remaining in the present. Thus seeking the goal of being in the present moment may not work for everyone. A more achievable goal is developing intentionality – you choose where you wish to deploy your attention, instead of letting your mind wander. When past and future are experienced with intentionality (particularly looking at them with gratitude, compassion, acceptance, meaning and forgiveness), then they become as restful as being in the moment.

Attention coming outward: Older meditation practices were designed to internalize the attention. In the present times, with the majority of the threats being inside our mind, our attention is locked inside the head. So a more optimal approach will be to pull the attention outward. You can accomplish this by noticing greater novelty in the world and people around you, and cultivating greater gratitude and compassion. Instead of inner stillness you focus on predictable kindness.

Long-term perspective: A very short-term future-oriented perspective creates anxiety; minimizing mental projection to a very short time frame can give transient happiness but such happiness is vulnerable and non-sustainable. You were in this state when you were two or three year old. But you have escaped that now. You can't reclaim that innocence. As a grownup, a more pragmatic approach is to cultivate wisdom that anchors you in a real long-term perspective. Such a perspective helps you ask the question – will it matter five years from now? If not, it's not substantial enough to let you bother today, because you have finite time and finite energy.

Not non-judgmental but grateful and compassionate: Mind is a curious instrument that is constantly predicting, comparing and perceiving. Asking the mind to not judge is a very tall order. Instead, the mind could be directed to be grateful and compassionate – practices that are more natural to our mind. Non-judgmental stance entails acceptance, which is very difficult. Acceptance is easier to reach with the path of gratitude and compassion. Such an approach provides balanced optimism and appropriate caution rather than total and unrealistic fearlessness.

Sitting practice versus being kind all day long: Here is the straight fact – I don't care if you meditate, I do care if you are kind to me. The purpose of meditation isn't to see the mystical blue light, it is to become a kinder and happier person, be more creative and better focused, and

become a good citizen. Toward that goal, I have found sprinkling moments of intentional kind presence multiple times during the day as much more meaningful and practical than a single sitting practice.

Emptying the mind versus filling the mind: Our mind wasn't created to be emptied just as the heart wasn't created to be stopped. The key is to fill the mind with timeless values and positive emotions. Such a mind is grateful, compassionate and finds positive meaning. A mind so trained can better handle adversity and is more forgiving. Stones have no thoughts and most likely lizards don't have much thoughts either, they are however, not enlightened. So emptying the mind isn't the answer, the key is to align the mind's thoughts with wisdom and love.

Awareness of what it is like to be human: When science meets spirituality, it creates a fertile ground for transformation. The modern generation needs the answer to the question – why, before how or what. Integrating neurosciences and evolutionary biology provides an underpinning that is essential to understanding the human condition. From that understanding emerges wisdom that helps us find effective ways to train our brain-mind instrument with better attention and higher will power. A key element in Meditation 2.0 is to help the participants understand human neural predispositions to suffering and develop ideas from that understanding to transcend suffering.

Bottom line: You can meditate in two ways - by taking your attention inward and focusing on breath/emptiness/sound/images or directing your attention outward in small sprinkles, focusing on novelty/wisdom/love. The second approach might be easier for the 21st century minds.

Convergence:

The eventual goal of both the practices is the same – better attention, balanced optimism, clearer thinking, lower stress, greater resilience and happiness, better focus and creativity, and for many, spiritual growth.

After a few months of practice with the externally oriented approach, the standard meditation practices become much easier. Our goal is not to create more silos and divides, we intend to make meditation more accessible to people. Just as we do not farm the way we did 2000 years ago, I believe meditation practices also need to be tweaked and aligned with the way the human minds work now, not how they did several thousand years ago.

Does Meditation 2.0 work?

We teach this program now to about 50,000 people each year (called the SMART program – Stress Management and Resiliency Training) and have done about a dozen research studies, many of which are published in peer reviewed journals (<http://stressfree.org/research/>). The core practices are described in the books, *The Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living* and *The Mayo Clinic Handbook for Happiness*.

If you are able to get into a deep meditation practice with the standard programs, then no need for change. If, however, you struggle with those practices, join Broody and Gladys in the accompanying YouTube video and consider giving Meditation 2.0 a try. Happy meditating!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZ64ch2hLhI>

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