

MindfulLiving™ Module 2
Brain Power & Mindset Reset
Chapter 8 - Readings

Mastering Your Own Mind

by Katherine Ellison

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Quote by Katherine Ellison: Empathy frequently informs our earliest days with our infants as we try to figure out what they need and how to comfort and satisfy them.

Distracted? Angry? Envious? There's growing evidence that attention, emotion regulation—and even love—are skills that can be trained through the practice of meditation. Perhaps it's time for you to become a high-performance user of your own brain.

When my son was eight, he called 911 after I took away his Game Boy. I wish I'd been studying Buddhism back then; I probably could have handled it better. I wouldn't have yelled at him while the dispatcher was still listening. And I bet I wouldn't have been quite so wracked by dread when the police were questioning us in separate rooms of the house—at least until I overheard the other officer ask, "She took away your what?"

Most importantly, I know I would have forgiven my son much more quickly, and the whole thing wouldn't have felt so traumatic. I might even have gazed upon him with compassion. Looking back, I realise I was utterly underutilising my brain. Our attention flickers, our patience ebbs, and—propelled by fear, malice, craving, and other deeply inscribed passions—we lurch from impulse to action.

In contrast, practised Buddhist meditators deploy their brains with exceptional skill. Drawing on 2,500 years of mental technology—techniques for paying careful attention to the workings of their minds—they develop expertise in controlling the flow of their mental life. They avoid the emotional storms that often compel us to take personal feelings and apparent new channels for awareness, calm, compassion, and joy. Their example holds the possibility that we can all choose to modulate our moods, regulate our emotions, and increase cognitive capacity—that we can all become high-performance users of our brains.

"What we're talking about is a long-term strategy for cultivating the heart and mind to draw forth the beneficial capacities of the human mind fully," says B. Alan Wallace, founder and president of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies. He believes that much of human suffering is our own doing. Our feelings contract around threats to our sense of self and cloud our perceptions. We end up reacting as if we had no other choice.

Meditation alters what we tend to think of as stable mental traits—anxiety, for example, or anger. Practitioners discover that feelings rise in the psyche like bubbles off the bottom of a pot of boiling water. "They learn to de-identify with their emotions, making it easier to let them go," says neuroscientist Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the pioneering Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, "Buddhist meditation is leading to an expansion of the science of what it means to be human." This results from an extraordinary convergence of scientific research into interior states and a new understanding of an ancient spiritual tradition.

Ten Million Americans Can't All Be Wrong

Some 10 million Americans say they practice some form of meditation. Buddhism is unique among spiritual traditions in its emphasis on psychology. Its core teachings encourage practitioners to shake off suffering and discover happiness. The concept of self-improvement informs bhavana, the Sanskrit word commonly translated as "meditation," though it means "cultivation." "It has the same connotation as when we say we 'cultivate a garden,' " says Wallace.

The Buddha framed things differently. He taught that our default mode may be to suffer, but only because of ignorance. We can transcend our lot by learning to quiet the mind in meditation—not merely to relax and cope with stress, as the popular notion of Buddhism holds, but to train oneself to relinquish bad mental habits rigorously. Rather than being an end in itself, meditation becomes a tool to investigate your mind and change your worldview. You're not tuning out so much as tuning up your brain, improving your self-monitoring skills.

"You stop being always projected outside. You start looking in and seeing how your mind works, and you change your mind, thought by thought," explains Matthieu Ricard, a Buddhist monk, scientist, and French interpreter for the Dalai Lama. "The French intellectuals don't like this. They say, 'Let's be spontaneous; passions are the beauty of life.' They think that making an effort is not nice—a silly old discipline—and that's why we're such a mess. But many modern people understand getting fit with physical training." So, the idea of developing mental skills through meditation is gaining ground.

The Nod From Neuroscience

Encouragement for this new way of thinking comes from an unusual ally. Neuroscience furnishes hard evidence that the brain is plastic, endowed with a lifelong capacity to reorganise itself with each new experience. "We now know that neural firing can lead to changes in neural connections, and experience leads to changes in neural firing," explains UCLA psychiatrist Daniel Siegel. Violinists' brains change as they refine their skills. So do the brains of London cabbies, whose livelihood depends on the sharpness of their memory.

Likewise, meditators may strengthen the neural circuitry involved in voluntary attention control through repeated practice in focusing attention.

One Tibetan lama told Wallace that before training, his mind was like a stag with great antlers trying to make its way through a thick forest; the animal got snagged on branches time after time. But after many years of practice, his mind was more like a monkey in a jungle, swinging freely from vine to vine.

Such adepts are the Lance Armstrongs of meditation, says Davidson, whose pioneering brain scans of monks provide compelling evidence that emotions like love and compassion are, in fact, skills—and can be trained to a dramatic degree. Studies also suggest that monastic life is unnecessary; even brief, regular meditation sessions can yield substantial benefits. Nor is a belief in Buddhism necessary.

"I'm convinced you can make a huge difference in your life if you start with even 30 minutes a day," Ricard says. "By maintaining the practice, there is a trickle of insights. Drop by drop, you fill a jar."

One recent study at Massachusetts General Hospital found that 40 minutes of daily meditation appears to thicken parts of the cerebral cortex involved in attention and sensory processing. In a pilot study at the University of California at San Francisco, researchers found that schoolteachers who had been briefly trained in Buddhist techniques and meditated less than 30 minutes a day improved their moods as much as if they had taken antidepressants.

Many types of meditation can be used to develop several mental skills. This attitude focuses on practices that address everyday emotional struggles. Through basic meditation techniques, it's possible to cultivate a longer attention span, develop emotional stability, understand the feelings of others, and release yourself from the constraints you place on your happiness.

Attention: Stabilize the Mind

Computers, pagers, video games, telemarketing calls, nonstop e-mail—all blast our attention span to smithereens. Modern life does a swell job of distracting us. But perhaps the problem lies not in our cell phones but in ourselves. After all, we're constantly making choices about what to attend to and what to ignore.

The trouble is, most of us make these choices semiconsciously at best. We don't even attempt to control our attention, perhaps because we don't know how. Buddhists maintain that the capacity can be refined through consistent meditation: The mind is, by nature, unstable and inherently distractible, and meditation is a means of stabilising it.

"Meditation is about paying attention," says Kabat-Zinn. Cultivating concentration doesn't just stabilise and clarify the mind; it can also improve creativity and productivity while enhancing relationships. Imagine if you paid 100 per cent attention to your spouse!

Mindfulness is the strategy that starts you on this road, which means cultivating non-judgmental awareness of a specific object and deeply seeing things. A common approach is to focus on an object or the sensations of your breathing, noting every inhale and exhale and patiently returning your attention to your breathing each time it wanders. "You practice focusing on one object," says Clifford Saron, a neuroscientist at the Centre for Mind and Brain at the University of California at Davis. "You begin to observe the flux of moment-to-moment perception. With practice, you can detect patterns in those fluctuations."

It's like you're flexing a muscle in the brain. University of Wisconsin's Davidson contends that the mental exercise of meditation strengthens and stabilises neural networks in the medial prefrontal cortex—the brain's executive control centre, involved in regulating attention. "People don't recognise that there is lots of plasticity in the circuitry," he adds. "More than previously thought."

The effort in the exercise is to balance awareness between dullness and distraction. To do so, you use the self-monitoring process that psychologists call metacognition: awareness of awareness. It's what lets you know when, on the one hand, you're starting to drift off and need to muster fresh interest, and on the other, you're getting distracted and need to bring your attention back. As you gradually fine-tune your concentration, you notice the chronic chaos of your thoughts and the calm behind them. "Awareness trumps thoughts," says Kabat-Zinn, "because you can be aware of your thoughts."

In his book *The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the Power of the Focused Mind*, Wallace describes a nine-stage program to achieve idleness, which the Buddhists call shamata (pronounced sha-ma-ta). As one Buddhist scholar said, attention becomes "an oil lamp unmoved by the air; wherever the awareness is directed, it is steady and sharply pointed."

Even among novices, studies show that a brief meditation session can be more effective than a nap at improving alertness. After a 10-day training program that included a mere 10 minutes of daily practice, University of Kentucky researchers found that novices could stay on task longer, sustain their attention, and avoid distraction more effectively than a control group. Wallace claims that even the squirmiest can learn to concentrate for hours with practice.

Emotion: It's Not What You Think The ability to observe your thoughts inevitably leads to emotional insight. As Buddhists see it, emotions are transitory. They can also be deceptive. Just because you feel something doesn't mean it's real. The radical notion here is that emotions aren't necessarily facts. "Emotions are not what they appear to be. They may seem purely reactive, but that's only because you haven't seen through them," says Davidson. Meditation teaches us to see them as mental events rather than a reflection of reality.

This view of emotions is clearly at odds with the romanticised view of passion that sees jealousy and anger as essential parts of our personalities. The Buddhists insist that the more freedom we gain from these feelings, the more excellent our opportunity to feel joy and love. As for bad feelings, "you know them to be like clouds in the sky," Ricard says. "They are not the sky, which is the background for them."

"Emotions arise in the context of thoughts," Siegel explains. "If you see that a thought is just a thought, not 'me' or 'reality,' you can release it before it takes over and hijacks your mind." Through meditation, says Ricard, "you train the mind to recognise thoughts, so you are not so easily carried away by them."

Psychologists are intrigued by meditation's potential to bolster emotional regulation. In one study, Davidson wired up the brains of some highly adept Buddhist monks and found that in meditation, the area of the brain involved in happiness lights up consistently. Other studies show that mindfulness training can help overcome depression, even as effectively as medication. In another study, schoolteachers trained in mindfulness had significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression than the control group.

One of meditation's most profound emotional benefits is the cultivation of equanimity—an ability to feel a sense of peace and acceptance regardless of circumstances. This state is the antithesis of emotional reactivity. Equanimity is about being present with whatever emotions arise without being overwhelmed. This acceptance doesn't mean passivity but fosters a stable foundation from which we can respond to life's challenges with greater clarity and wisdom.

In conclusion, meditation offers a promising avenue for enhancing mental well-being and cultivating emotional resilience. By learning to focus our attention, observe our thoughts, and regulate our emotions, we can transform our relationship with our minds. This practice can enrich our lives, deepen our understanding of ourselves, and improve our interactions with others. Meditation provides a valuable tool for personal growth and well-being, whether seeking greater calm, improved concentration, or emotional balance.

Shery Klein, Personal Coach: We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your valuable participation and appreciate your dedication and commitment. Our goal is to help you navigate uncomfortable issues and any other obstacles. The main thing is to enjoy, chill out, and have fun! Remember, you can contact us with any questions or if you need any assistance.

Blessings ❤️ Stay Healthy & Safe

