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Real Happiness


The Power of Meditation

A 28-DAY PROGRAM

By Sharon Salzberg

author of LOVINGKINDNESS

Book Includes
a CD with Four
Guided Meditations



Real Happiness



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A 28-Day Program

By Sharon Salzberg

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PLACES TO LEARN INSIGHT MEDITATION AND
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Introduction



BEN STARTED MEDITATING when he was an army reservist on active duty in Iraq. I became his teacher via e-mail. He told me that he felt meditation would help him deal with the stress and trauma that he faced every day and stay true to his deepest values.

Sarah wanted to be a good stepmother. She thought learning to meditate would help her listen more patiently and better negotiate the complex relationships in her newly blended family.

Diane took a meditation class I taught at the large media company where she's a division manager. She was seeking more balance between her work life and her home life, she said, and a way to communicate with colleagues clearly and calmly no matter how crazy things got at the office.

Jerry is a firefighter dealing with the aftermath of being a first responder at the World Trade Center on 9/11. Elena needed to concentrate on studying for her real estate licensing exam. Rosie hoped to cope better with chronic back pain. Lisa, the owner of a small catering company, told me that she wanted to stop feeling as if she were sleepwalking most of the time. “I’m on automatic pilot, disconnected from myself,” she said. “I’m so worried about the things on my to-do list, or about the future, that I’m totally missing my present. I feel as if I’m living my life behind my own back.”

I’ve changed the names of some of my students and some identifying details, but their motivations are real, and so are the many ways that the practice of meditation has improved their lives.

For thirty-six years, I’ve taught meditation to thousands of people, at the Insight Meditation Society retreat center in Barre, Massachusetts, which I cofounded in 1975, and at schools, corporations, government agencies, and community centers all over the world. I’ve introduced the techniques you’re about to encounter to groups of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, schoolteachers, police officers, athletes, teenagers, army chaplains and medics, doctors, nurses, burn patients, prisoners, frontline workers in domestic violence shelters, new moms and dads. My students come from every walk of life, ethnic background, and belief tradition.

And they’re part of a national trend: A 2007 survey (the most recent data available) by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that more than twenty million Americans had

practiced meditation in the previous twelve months. They did so, they told researchers, to improve their overall wellness; for help with stress, anxiety, pain, depression, or insomnia; and to deal with the symptoms and emotional strain of chronic illness such as heart disease and cancer.

People also turn to meditation, I've found, because they want to make good decisions, break bad habits, and bounce back better from disappointments. They want to feel closer to their families and friends; more at home and at ease in their own bodies and minds; or part of something larger than themselves. They turn to meditation because human lives are full of real, potential, and imagined hazards, and they want to feel safer, more confident, calmer, wiser. Beneath these varied motivations lie the essential truths that we're all alike in wanting to be happy and in our vulnerability to pain and unpredictable, continual change.

Again and again I've seen novice meditators begin to transform their lives—even if they were initially resistant or skeptical. As I've learned through my own experience, meditation helps us to find greater tranquility, connect to our feelings, find a sense of wholeness, strengthen our relationships, and face our fears. That's what happened to me.

I started meditating in 1971, as an eighteen-year-old college student spending my junior year studying in India. I was looking for practical tools to ease the misery and confusion that I felt every day, the residue of a painful and chaotic childhood. My father left when I was four; my mother died when I was nine, and I went to live with my grandparents. When I was

eleven, my grandfather died and my father briefly returned, until a suicide attempt spun him away into the mental health system, from which he never emerged.

By the time I left for college, I'd lived in five different household configurations, each change precipitated by loss. I felt abandoned over and over again. The people who raised me were caring, but they were unable to speak openly about the things that had happened to me. I came to feel that I didn't deserve much in life. I held my immense grief, anger, and confusion inside, fortifying my deep conviction that I was unworthy of love. I wanted with all my heart to find a sense of belonging, a steady source of love and comfort.

At sixteen, I entered the State University of New York at Buffalo. During my second year I learned about Buddhism in a course on Asian philosophy. I was attracted to its unashamed, unafraid acknowledgment of the suffering in life. That eased my sense of isolation: I wasn't the only one in pain! The Buddha, a prince turned spiritual teacher born in India about 563 B.C., wrote: "You could search the whole world over and never find anyone as deserving of your love as yourself." Not only did the Buddha say that love for oneself is possible, but he also described this capacity as something we *must* nurture, since it's the foundation for being able to love and care for others. This philosophy offered me a way to ease the suffering caused by my feelings of confusion and despair. Despite some doubts, the chance of a move from self-hatred to self-love drew me like a magnet. I wasn't interested in acquiring a new religion; I just wanted relief from so much unhappiness.

And so I went to India for an independent study program. When I got there, I heard about a respected teacher who was leading a meditation retreat for beginners and others. I was a bit disappointed to discover that meditation wasn't as exotic as I'd expected—there were no mystical instructions delivered in a darkened chamber with a supernatural aura. Instead that first instructor launched my practice with the words, “Sit comfortably, and feel your breath.” *Feel my breath?* I thought in protest. *I could have stayed in Buffalo to feel my breath!* But I soon found out just how life-changing it would be simply to focus my attention on inhaling and exhaling in order to connect fully with my experience in a whole new way, one that allowed me to be kinder to myself and more open to others.

Once I learned how to look deep within, I found the bright vein of goodness that exists in everyone, including me—the goodness that may be hidden and hard to trust but is never entirely destroyed. I came to believe wholeheartedly that I deserve to be happy, and so does everyone else. Now when I meet a stranger, I feel more connected, knowing how much we share. And when I meet myself in meditation, I no longer feel I'm encountering a stranger.

Because of meditation, I've undergone profound and subtle shifts in the way I think and how I see myself in the world. I've learned that I don't have to be limited to who I thought I was when I was a child or what I thought I was capable of yesterday, or even an hour ago. My meditation practice has freed me from the old, conditioned definition of myself as someone unworthy of love. Despite my initial fantasies when

I began meditating as a college student, I haven't entered a steady state of glorious bliss. Meditation has made me happy, loving, and peaceful—but not every single moment of the day. I still have good times and bad, joy and sorrow. Now I can accept setbacks more easily, with less sense of disappointment and personal failure, because meditation has taught me how to cope with the profound truth that everything changes all the time.

What Is Meditation?

(OR, IF YOU CAN BREATHE,
YOU CAN MEDITATE)



STRAIGHTFORWARD AND SIMPLE (but not easy), meditation is essentially training our attention so that we can be more aware—not only of our own inner workings but also of what’s happening around us in the here and now. Once we see clearly what’s going on in the moment, we can then choose whether and how to act on what we’re seeing.

For the next four weeks, we’ll be exploring the principles of insight meditation, the simple and direct practice of moment-to-moment awareness. We first train our attention by focusing on a single chosen object (most often our breath) and repeatedly letting go of distractions in order to return our attention to that object. Later we broaden the focus to

include whatever thoughts, feelings, or sensations arise in the moment.

People have been transforming their minds through meditation for thousands of years. Every major world religion includes some form of contemplative exercise, though today meditation is often practiced apart from any belief system. Depending on the type, meditation may be done in silence and stillness, by using voice and sound, or by engaging the body in movement. All forms emphasize the training of attention.

ATTENTION, ATTENTION, ATTENTION!



“My experience is what I agree to attend to,” the pioneering psychologist William James wrote at the turn of the twentieth century. “Only those items I notice shape my mind.” At its most basic level, attention—what we allow ourselves to notice—literally determines how we experience and navigate the world. The ability to summon and sustain attention is what allows us to job hunt, juggle, learn math, make pancakes, aim a cue and pocket the eight ball, protect our kids, and perform surgery. It lets us be discerning in our dealings with the world, responsive in our intimate relationships, and honest when we examine our own feelings and motives. Attention determines our degree of intimacy with our ordinary experiences and contours our entire sense of connection to life.

The content and quality of our lives depend on our level of awareness—a fact we are often not aware of. You may have heard the old story, usually attributed to a Native American elder, meant to illuminate the power of attention. A grandfather (occasionally it's a grandmother) imparting a life lesson to his grandson tells him, "I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is vengeful, fearful, envious, resentful, deceitful. The other wolf is loving, compassionate, generous, truthful, and serene." The grandson asks which wolf will win the fight. The grandfather answers, "The one I feed."

But that's only part of the picture. True, whatever gets our attention flourishes, so if we lavish attention on the negative and inconsequential, they can overwhelm the positive and the meaningful. But if we do the opposite, refusing to deal with or acknowledge what's difficult and painful, pretending it doesn't exist, then our world is out of whack. Whatever doesn't get our attention withers—or retreats below conscious awareness, where it may still affect our lives. In a perverse way, ignoring the painful and the difficult is just another way of feeding the wolf. Meditation teaches us to open our attention to all of human experience and all parts of ourselves.

I'm sure you know the feeling of having your attention fractured by job and family, the enticement of electronic diversions, or the chatter of your mind—that morning's spat with your mate replaying in your head, a litany of worries about the future or regrets about the past, a nervous endless-loop recitation of the day's to-do list. Parts of that mental

soundtrack may be old tapes that were instilled in childhood and have been playing so long we've nearly tuned them out of conscious awareness. These might be unkind pronouncements about the kind of person we are or preconceptions and assumptions about how the world works (for example: *Good girls don't act like that, men/women can't be trusted, you've got to look out for number one*).

We may no longer even notice the messages we're sending ourselves, just the anxiety that lingers in their wake. These habitual responses are often the result of a lifetime's conditioning—the earliest lessons from our parents and our culture, both explicit teaching and nonverbal cues.

This diffusion of attention can be mildly discomfiting, creating a vague sense of being uncentered or never quite there. It can be disheartening, leaving you exhausted from being dragged around by your jumpy, scattered thoughts; it can be downright dangerous (think of what can happen to distracted drivers). We can be lethally asleep at the wheel in other ways, too, neglecting relationships or failing to notice and act on what's really important to us. We miss a great deal because our attention is distracted or because we're so sure that we already know what's going on that we don't even look for new, important information.

Meditation teaches us to focus and to pay clear attention to our experiences and responses as they arise, and to observe them without judging them. That allows us to detect harmful habits of mind that were previously invisible to us. For example, we may sometimes base our actions on unexamined ideas (*I*

don't deserve love, you just can't reason with people, I'm not capable of dealing with tough situations) that keep us stuck in unproductive patterns. Once we notice these reflexive responses and how they undermine our ability to pay attention to the present moment, then we can make better, more informed choices. And we can respond to others more compassionately and authentically, in a more creative way.

HOW MEDITATION TRAINS ATTENTION: THE THREE KEY SKILLS



All forms of meditation strengthen and direct our attention through the cultivation of three key skills—concentration, mindfulness, and compassion or lovingkindness.

Concentration steadies and focuses our attention so that we can let go of distractions. Distractions waste our energy; concentration restores it to us. The introductory meditation technique you'll learn is uncomplicated and yet powerful: You'll improve your concentration by focusing on something you've known how to do all your life—breathing. The practice entails paying attention to each in-and-out breath, and when your mind wanders (it will, that's natural), noticing whatever has captured your attention, then letting go of the thought or feeling without berating yourself for it. You then return to focusing on your breathing. In this way meditation trains us to stay in the moment before us instead of reliving the past or

worrying about the future. And it teaches us how to be gentle with ourselves and others, to forgive our lapses and move on. You'll learn more about concentration in Week One.

Mindfulness refines our attention so that we can connect fully and directly with whatever life brings. Mindfulness meditation moves our focus from a single object, the breath, to anything that's happening inside or outside of us at a given moment. We practice observing thoughts, feelings, sights, smells, sounds, without clinging to what's pleasant, pushing away what's painful, or ignoring what's neutral. And we become adept at catching ourselves in the act of substituting our habitual knee-jerk responses for a more accurate assessment of what's really going on in the present.

What might such a knee-jerk response look and feel like? Suppose, for instance, that someone says something that really riles us, and we feel a surge of anger. Maybe our automatic reaction to anger is to lash out before thinking at all. Or we might have a habit of judging (*if I feel anger, it means I'm a bad person*) that makes us deny the emotion churning inside; unexamined, it festers or grows in power. Or perhaps we're in the habit of projecting every emotion into an eternally unchanging future: *I'm an angry person, and I'll always be an angry person; I'm doomed!* None of these responses is likely to yield a happy outcome.

But if we apply mindfulness to the experience of anger, we can safely draw close to the emotion instead of fleeing, and investigate it instead of stonewalling. We notice it without judging it. We can gather more information about what happens when we

get mad—what sets off the anger, where it lodges in the body, and what else it also contains, like sadness, fear, or regret.

This pause for nonjudgmental acknowledgment creates a bit of peaceful space within which we can make new, different choices about how to respond to something like anger. In this way we break old habits. We might decide to have a calm conversation with the person who's annoyed us instead of stewing or spewing; we might choose to leave the room until we cool down; or we might spend a few moments focusing on our breath in order to restore balance and perspective. Later, after our meditation session, we can think about the situations that tend to trigger our anger.

Mindfulness helps us get better at seeing the difference between what's happening and the stories we tell ourselves about what's happening, stories that get in the way of direct experience. Often such stories treat a fleeting state of mind as if it were our entire and permanent self. One of my favorite examples of this kind of globalizing came from a student who'd had an intensely stressful day. When she went to the gym later and was changing in the locker room, she tore a hole in her panty hose. Frustrated, she said to a stranger standing nearby, "I need a new life!"

"No you don't," the other woman replied. "You need a new pair of panty hose."

You'll learn more about mindfulness in Weeks Two and Three. In Week Two, we'll look at mindfulness and the body, and in Week Three, we'll work on dealing mindfully with our emotions.

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WHAT MEDITATION ISN'T

Many people have misconceptions about what meditation means. Before we begin, let me clear up a few of them.

It isn't a religion. You don't have to be a Buddhist or Hindu; you can meditate and still practice your own religion or no religion at all. Ben, the soldier who meditated while he was serving in Iraq, told me he thought the practice would help him stay in touch with his Christian values. The techniques you'll learn in this book can be done within any faith tradition. They can also be done in an entirely secular way.

It doesn't require special skills or background. Meditation isn't only for certain talented or already serene people. You don't have to be an ace at sitting still; you don't have to wait until you're uncrazed and decaffeinated. You don't need to study anything before you begin. You can start right now. If you can breathe, you can meditate.

It doesn't demand a huge chunk of your time every day. We're going to aim for twenty-minute sessions. If you like, you can start with five minutes and work your way up. (You'll find a more detailed discussion of the number and timing of meditation sessions on page 40 and in the "Nuts and Bolts" section of each chapter.) You'll probably want to lengthen your practice sessions, because you're going to like the sense of well-being they generate. But you don't have to. Establishing a *regular* practice, whatever the length of the session, is more important than striving to devote hours to it each day.

It doesn't eliminate sadness or rough patches from your life. You're still going to have ups and downs, happiness and sadness. But you'll be able to roll with the punches more and feel less defeated, because meditation teaches us new ways of coping with difficulties.

It isn't an attempt to stop thinking or insist on only positive thoughts. That's not humanly possible. Meditation is a way to recognize our thoughts, to observe and understand them, and to relate to them more skillfully. (I like the Buddhist tradition of replacing the modifiers "good" and "bad" to describe human behavior with "skillful" and "unskillful." Unskillful actions are those that lead to pain and suffering; skillful actions are those that lead to insight and balance.)

You don't have to renounce your opinions, goals, or passions; you don't have to shun fun. "If I start meditating," a woman once asked me, "do I have to give up wanting things?" "No," I told her. "You just have to relate differently to the wanting—pay attention to it, investigate it, understand what's behind it." Adding meditation to our lives doesn't mean withdrawing from the real world of relationships, responsibilities, careers, politics, hobbies, celebrations. In fact, it frees us to be more engaged with the things that interest us, often in a healthier way.

It's not navel gazing. Meditation isn't self-indulgent or self-centered. Yes, you'll learn about yourself—but it's knowledge that will help you better understand and connect with people in your life. Tuning in to yourself is the first step toward tuning in to others.

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Lovingkindness is compassionate awareness that opens our attention and makes it more inclusive. It transforms the way we treat ourselves, our family, and our friends. Spending time paying careful attention to our thoughts, feelings, and actions (positive and negative) and understanding them opens our hearts to loving ourselves genuinely for who we are, with all our imperfections. And that's the gateway to loving others. We're better able to see people clearly and to appreciate them in all their complexity if we've learned to care for and appreciate ourselves. We might then be more inclined to wish them well instead of becoming irritated, to let go of past hurts and deepen a connection to a relative—to offer a friendly gesture to someone we might previously have ignored, or find a better way to deal with a difficult person. In Week Four you'll learn specific techniques for increasing your compassion toward yourself and others.

During the 28-day program you're about to embark upon, you'll be systematically honing these skills. Each week's instruction will be divided into sections: The Practice Preview, which lets you know what to expect; the Meditations themselves; FAQs (real questions I hear again and again from my students); Reflections on the deeper lessons of the week; and The Takeaway, suggestions for incorporating the practice into everyday life.

Never have I seen a greater need for the gifts of meditation. Traveling the country, I constantly hear from the people I meet that they feel more and more fragmented by the

demands and distractions of a complicated world, and anxious about its potential terrors. Meditation can give us a sense of wholeness and the security of a deep, confident calm that's self-generated.

People tell me they're saddened by the ugly, uncivil polarization they see in public life, and the isolation and loneliness they feel in private. They hunger for cooperation, connection, and community. Meditation, which teaches kindness, compassion, and patience, is a clear, straightforward method for improving relationships with family, friends, and everyone else we meet.

They tell me they're disheartened to discover that their accomplishments haven't increased their peace of mind and their possessions have brought only temporary satisfaction. Glory and gadgets have their place, but the only real app for happiness is a practice that creates a sense of ease within and can help us withstand sorrow and loss.

Why Meditate?

THE BENEFITS AND SCIENCE OF MEDITATION



IF YOU'D LIKE TO GET STARTED ON your meditation program right away, you can turn to Week One (page 35). Or you can take a moment and learn more about the benefits of meditation in everyday life, and what scientists are discovering in the lab about the power of meditation, which is, in a nutshell, that meditation may be as important to your well-being as physical exercise.

Meditation is pragmatic, the psychological and emotional equivalent of a physical training program: If you exercise regularly, you get certain results—stronger muscles, denser bones, increased stamina. If you meditate regularly, you also get certain results. I've already mentioned some of them, including greater calm, and improved concentration and more connection to others. But there are other rewards. I'll discuss each of them at greater length in later chapters, and I'll explain how we get from here to there—from beginning

to train our attention to living a transformed life.

You'll begin to spot the unexamined assumptions that get in the way of happiness. These assumptions we make about who we are and the way the world works—what we deserve, how much we can handle, where happiness is to be found, whether or not positive change is possible—all greatly influence how and to what we pay attention.

I was reminded of how assumptions can get in our way when I visited the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., to view a work of art by a sculptor friend. Eagerly I checked every room, peered at every display case and pedestal—no sculpture. Finally I gave up. As I headed for the exit, I glanced up—and there was her beautiful piece. It was a bas-relief hanging on the wall, not the free-standing statue I'd expected; my assumptions had put blinders on me and almost robbed me of the experience of seeing what was really there—her amazing work. In the same way, our assumptions keep us from appreciating what's right in front of us—a stranger who's a potential friend, a perceived adversary who might actually be a source of help. Assumptions block direct experience and prevent us from gathering information that could bring us comfort and relief, or information that, though saddening and painful, will allow us to make better decisions.

Here are some familiar assumptions you might recognize: *We have nothing in common. I won't be able to do it. You can't reason with a person like that. Tomorrow will be exactly like today. If I just try hard enough, I'll manage to control him/her/it/them. Only big risks can make me feel alive. I've blown it; I should just*

give up. I know just what she's going to say, so I don't really need to listen to her. Happiness is for other people, not me. Statements like these are motivated by fear, desire, boredom, or ignorance. Assumptions bind us to the past, obscure the present, limit our sense of what's possible, and elbow out joy. Until we detect and examine our assumptions, they short-circuit our ability to observe objectively; we think we already know what's what.

You'll stop limiting yourself. When we practice meditation, we often begin to recognize a specific sort of conditioned response—previously undetected restrictions we've imposed on our lives. We spot the ways we sabotage our own growth and success because we've been conditioned to be content with meager results. Meditation allows us to see that these limits aren't inherent or immutable; they were learned and they can be unlearned—but not until we recognize them. (Some common limiting ideas: *She's the smart one, you're the pretty one. People like us don't stand a chance. Kids from this neighborhood don't become doctors.*) Training attention through meditation opens our eyes. Then we can assess these conditioned responses—and if parts of them contain some truth, we can see it clearly and put it to good use; if parts of them just don't hold up under scrutiny, we can let them go.

You'll weather hard times better. Meditation teaches us safe ways to open ourselves to the full range of experience—painful, pleasurable, and neutral—so we can learn how to be a friend to ourselves in good times and bad. During meditation sessions we practice being with difficult emotions and

thoughts, even frightening or intense ones, in an open and accepting way, without adding self-criticism to something that already hurts. Especially in times of uncertainty or pain, meditation broadens our perspective and deepens our sense of courage and capacity for adventure. Here's how you get braver: little by little. In small, manageable, bearable increments, we make friends with the feelings that once terrified us. Then we can say to ourselves, *I've managed to sit down, face some of my most despairing thoughts and my most exuberantly hopeful ones without judging them. That took strength; what else can I tackle with that same strength?* Meditation lets us see that we can accomplish things we didn't think ourselves capable of.

You'll rediscover a deeper sense of what's really important to you. Once you look beneath distractions and conditioned reactions, you'll have a clearer view of your deepest, most enduring dreams, goals, and values.

You'll have a portable emergency resource. Meditation is the ultimate mobile device; you can use it anywhere, anytime, unobtrusively. You're likely to find yourself in situations—having a heated argument at work, say, or chaffering a crowd of rambunctious kids to a soccer game—when you can't blow off steam by walking around the block, hitting the gym, or taking a time-out in the tub. But you can always follow your breath. In Week One, you'll learn ways of practicing meditation wherever you are.

You'll be in closer touch with the best parts of yourself. Meditation practice cultivates qualities such as kindness, trust, and wisdom that you may think are missing from your makeup

but are actually just undeveloped or obscured by stress and distractions. You'll have the chance to access these qualities more easily and frequently.

You'll recapture the energy you've been wasting trying to control the uncontrollable. I once led a retreat in California during a monsoonlike rainstorm. *It's so soggy and unpleasant that people aren't going to have a good retreat*, I thought. I felt badly for the participants; in fact, I felt responsible. For a few days I wanted to apologize to everybody for the rain until a thought flickered: *Wait a minute. I'm not even from California; I'm from Massachusetts. This isn't my weather. This is their weather. Maybe they should apologize to me!* And then the voice of deeper wisdom arose: *Weather is weather. This is what happens.*

We've all had weather moments—times when we've felt responsible for everyone's good time or well-being. It's our job, we think, to fix the temperature and humidity, or the people around us (if we could only get our partner to quit smoking, consult a map, stick to a diet!). We even think we're capable of totally controlling our own emotions—*I shouldn't ever feel envious, or resentful, or spiteful! That's awful! I'm going to stop.* You might as well say, "I'm never going to catch a cold again!" Though we can affect our physical and emotional experiences, we can't ultimately determine them; we can't decree what emotions will arise within us. But we can learn through meditation to change our responses to them. That way we're spared a trip down a path of suffering we've traveled many times before. Recognizing what we can't control (the feelings that arise within us; other people; the weather)

helps us have healthier boundaries at work and at home—no more trying to reform everyone all the time. It helps us to stop beating up on ourselves for having perfectly human emotions. It frees energy we expend on trying to control the uncontrollable.

You'll understand how to relate to change better—to accept that it's inevitable and believe that it's possible. Most of us have a mixed, often paradoxical attitude toward change. Some of us don't think change is possible at all; we believe we're stuck forever doing things the way we've always done them. Some of us simultaneously hope for change and fear it. We want to believe that change is possible, because that means that our lives can get better. But we also have trouble accepting change, because we want to hold on permanently to what's pleasurable and positive. We'd like difficulties to be fleeting and comfort to stick around.

Trying to avoid change is exhausting and stressful. Everything is impermanent: happiness, sorrow, a great meal, a powerful empire, what we're feeling, the people around us, ourselves. Meditation helps us comprehend this fact—perhaps *the* basic truth of human existence, and the one we humans are most likely to balk at or be oblivious to, especially when it comes to the biggest change of all: Mortality happens, whether we like it or not. We grow old and die. (In the ancient Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, a wise king is asked to name the most wondrous thing in the universe. “The most wondrous thing in the entire universe,” he says, “is that all around us people are dying and we don't believe it will happen to us.”) Meditation is

a tool for helping us accept the profound fact that everything changes all the time.

You'll soon discover that meditating offers a chance to see change in microcosm. Following our breath while observing how thoughts continually ebb and flow can help us realize that all elements of our experience are in constant flux. During a meditation session, you'll find it's natural to go through many ups and downs, to encounter both new delights and newly awakened conflicts that have bubbled up from the unconscious mind. Sometimes you'll tap into a wellspring of peace. Other times you might feel waves of sleepiness, boredom, anxiety, anger, or sadness. Snatches of old songs may play in your head; long-buried memories can surface. You may feel wonderful or awful. Daily meditation will remind us that if we look closely at a painful emotion or difficult situation, it's bound to change; it's not as solid and unmanageable as it might have seemed. The fear we feel in the morning may be gone by the afternoon. Hopelessness may be replaced by a glimmer of optimism. Even while a challenging situation is unfolding, it is shifting from moment to moment, varied, alive. What happens during meditation shows us that we're not trapped, that we have options. Then, even if we're afraid, we can find a way to go on, to keep trying.

This is not a Pollyanna-ish sentiment that everything will be just fine, according to our wishes or our timetable. Rather it is an awakened understanding that gives us the courage to go into the unknown and the wisdom to remember that as long as we are alive, possibility is alive. We can't control what thoughts and emotions arise within us, nor can we control the

universal truth that everything changes. But we can learn to step back and rest in the awareness of what's happening. That awareness can be our refuge.

And science has now proven that change is possible on a cellular level as well.

THE SCIENCE OF MEDITATION

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When I was in high school, we were taught as irrefutable truth that the size and circuitry of the brain are fixed before adulthood. But in the last decade and a half, neuroscientists and psychologists have demonstrated again and again that the adult brain is capable of neuroplasticity—that is, forming new cells and pathways. Throughout life, the brain rewires and reshapes itself in response to environment, experience, and training. And meditation is one of those brain-changing experiences. A number of recent studies confirm that meditation can bring about significant physiological changes in the brain that create welcome changes in health, mood, and behavior.

Advances in brain monitoring and imaging, such as functional MRI, have made it possible to watch the brain in action during meditation. The amazing news coming from researchers all over the world is that the practice of meditation seems to prime brain cells to fire together in patterns that strengthen key brain structures—those, for example, important in tasks such as decision-making, memory, and emotional

flexibility. And it may also improve communication among different parts of the brain in ways that further improve physical and emotional health.

In 2005, a pioneering study led by neuroscientist Sara Lazar of Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital showed that practitioners of insight meditation had measurably thicker tissue in the left prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain important for cognitive and emotional processing and well-being. And the subjects of her study weren't Tibetan monks who'd spent years contemplating in caves, but ordinary Boston-area professionals, most of whom meditated about 40 minutes a day. Brain scans of the older participants suggest that meditation may also counteract the thinning of the cortex that occurs naturally with aging, and thus may protect against memory loss and cognitive deficits.

Several other brain-scan studies have extended Lazar's work, showing that meditation strengthens areas of the brain involved in memory, learning, and emotional flexibility. In 2009, for example, neuroscientist Eileen Luders of the UCLA Laboratory of Neuro Imaging reported that when she and her team compared the brains of experienced practitioners of insight meditation with those of a control group of non-meditators, they found that the brains of the meditators contained more gray matter—the brain tissue responsible for high-level information processing—than did those of the non-meditators, especially in the areas of the brain associated with attention, body awareness, and the ability to modulate emotional responses. “We know that people

who consistently meditate have a singular ability to cultivate positive emotions, retain emotional stability, and engage in mindful behavior,” says Luders. “The observed differences in brain anatomy might give us a clue why meditators have these exceptional abilities.”

And in a study published in 2010, Lazar and her team scanned the brains of volunteers before and after they received eight weeks of training in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a popular combination of meditation and yoga designed to alleviate stress in patients with health problems. The new meditators showed measurable changes in two important brain areas—growth in the hippocampus, a part of the brain involved in memory and learning, and shrinkage in the amygdala, a portion of the brain that initiates the body’s response to stress. The decrease in the size of the amygdala correlated with lowered stress levels reported by the group that learned meditation—and the more they reduced their stress through meditation, the smaller the amygdala got. A control group that received no MBSR training showed no such brain changes on scans done eight weeks apart.

More and more studies like these are finding measurable evidence of what meditators have known empirically for centuries: Meditation strengthens the brain circuits associated not only with concentration and problem solving, but with our feelings of well-being. In other words, science has shown that meditation just plain makes people happier.

“We now know that the brain is the one organ in our body built to change in response to experience and training,”

says Richard Davidson, Ph.D., an expert in the study of neuroplasticity. “It’s a learning machine.” A professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, Davidson is the founding director of the school’s Center for Investigating Healthy Minds (CIHM), launched in 2010 to further the new discipline of contemplative neuroscience, the study of how meditative practices affect brain function and structure, and how those changes affect physical and emotional health.

What’s most heartening about the new research, says Davidson, is the way meditation can remodel the brain to strengthen the qualities that psychologists say are crucial components of happiness: resilience, equanimity, calm, and a sense of compassionate connection to others. “We don’t take this revolutionary idea as seriously as we should,” says Davidson. “Emotions—and happiness in particular—should be thought of in the same way as a motor skill. They can be *trained*.” In one of Davidson’s own experiments, which we include in Week Four, he found that lovingkindness meditation actually changes the way the brain works so that we become more compassionate (see page 176). “One thing all these studies show,” says Harvard’s Sara Lazar, “is that, as with physical exercise, the more you practice meditation, the greater the benefit. It’s really clear that the more you do, the more you get.”

Scientists have also looked at the way meditation improves attention. An fMRI study at Emory University showed that experienced meditators were much more efficient than a non-meditating control group at dropping extraneous

thoughts and focusing on the matter at hand when they were bombarded by stimuli while performing a computer task. The researchers conjecture that the simple practice of focusing attention through meditation may help patients suffering from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other conditions characterized by excessive rumination.

In 2007, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania trained a group of non-meditators in MBSR, then compared this group with longtime meditators taking part in a month-long meditation retreat, and with a control group who had no experience with meditation. After eight weeks of training, the new meditators improved their scores for orienting, or turning one's attention to a specific thing, and for sustaining attention. The veteran meditators showed greater skill at conflict-monitoring—choosing what to focus on among competing stimuli—than did either of the other two groups, and they were better able to filter distracting stimuli in order to remain focused. These findings suggest that meditation may be useful in treating people suffering from ADHD, and for improving cognition and other attention-based functions that slow as we age.

Training attention through meditation also improves our capacity to process rapidly arriving incoming information. When we're presented with two new pieces of visual information in very quick succession, we have trouble detecting the second stimulus because the brain's limited attentional resources are still busy processing the first one, a phenomenon called the "attentional blink." But the fact that we can detect

the second stimulus at least some of the time shows that the attentional blink is subject to training. Curious about our ability to improve cognitive functioning, neurobiologist Heleen Slagter and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin recruited participants in a three-month meditation retreat and evaluated their attentional blink rates before and after. They found that newly trained meditators were able to reduce the attentional blink substantially by the end of the retreat. The study offers compelling proof that attention can be trained and improved.

Perhaps this is one reason meditation works so well for athletes. Famed basketball coach Phil Jackson, a meditator himself, arranged to have his players—first the Chicago Bulls, and then the L.A. Lakers—learn meditation as a way to improve their focus and teamwork. Jackson finds that mindfulness assists players in paying attention to what’s happening on the court moment by moment. Such precise training in attention has paid off during tense playoffs; Jackson has led more teams to championships than any coach in NBA history.

Meditation seems to improve not just our cognitive abilities, but also our immune system. In one study, for example, Davidson and colleagues teamed with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center and the developer of MBSR. The scientists studied the brains of participants before and after they received eight weeks of MBSR training and compared them with those of a group of nonmeditators. At the end of the training, the subjects received flu shots and their antibody activity was tested. Not only did the meditators show elevated

activity in the area of the brain associated with lowered anxiety, a decrease in negative emotions, and an increase in positive ones, but their immune systems produced more antibodies in response to the vaccine than did the nonmeditators'. In other words, there may be a strong link among meditation, positive emotions, and a healthier immune system.

Because of these studies, some doctors are recommending meditation to patients with chronic pain, insomnia, and immune deficiencies. Public and private schools in at least twelve states offer mindfulness training to students. And a pilot study at UCLA has shown that mindfulness meditation helps both adults and adolescents with ADHD. Finally, according to a *New York Times* article, psychiatrists are using mindfulness meditation as part of therapy, especially with clients who have anxiety, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorders. Therapists have come to realize that meditation can alter reactions to daily experience at a level that words cannot reach. "It's a shift from having our mental health defined by the content of our thoughts," says psychologist Steven Hayes of the University of Nevada, "to having it defined by our relationship to that content—and changing that relationship by sitting with, noticing, and becoming disentangled from our definition of ourselves."

Among the institutions that have embraced meditation as a legitimate area of scientific study is the U.S. government. In the last ten years the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) increased the number of meditation studies it

sponsored from seven in 2000 to forty-seven in 2010. Its current projects include investigations of how well meditation lowers stress in caregivers for elderly patients with dementia, reduces chronic back pain, alleviates asthma symptoms, and lowers blood pressure.

And in 2008, the Department of Defense conducted rigorous clinical studies on using alternative approaches, including meditation, to treat the estimated 17 percent of U.S. troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as well as the more than 3,300 who have sustained traumatic brain injuries.

For many people science provides a way of understanding the world that allows them to approach subjects they might otherwise have dismissed. One of the most wonderful things about these findings, beyond the personal improvements they promise, is that a large, new group of people may now feel more comfortable about taking advantage of meditation's many benefits.

These benefits accrue not simply from reading about and admiring the effects of meditation, but from actually practicing it.

## KICKING OPEN THE DOOR



At Bob Dylan's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988, Bruce Springsteen described hearing Dylan's music for the very first time. Springsteen was fifteen,

he said, riding in the car with his mother, idly listening to the radio, when “Like a Rolling Stone” came on. It was as though, Springsteen recalled, “somebody took his boot and kicked open the door to your mind.” His mother’s verdict: “That man can’t sing.” Mrs. Springsteen’s response reminds us that we don’t all react the same way to the same experience—and her son’s reminds us that life holds moments when our perspective dramatically shifts, when our assumptions are deeply challenged, when we see new possibilities or sense for the first time that whatever has been holding us back from freedom or creativity or new ventures might actually be overcome.

There are moments when we sense that tomorrow doesn’t have to look like today—that the feeling of defeat that’s been flattening us for what seems like forever can lift, that our anxiety needn’t define us, that the delight we’ve been postponing and the love we long for could be nearer at hand than we’d thought.

Sometimes a flash of inspiration kicks open that door: We hear a piece of music, see a work of art, read just the right poem. Or we meet someone who has a big vision of life, someone we admire who embodies values we cherish. Life seems to hold more possibilities.

Sometimes pain kicks open that door: We lose our job, or lose a friend; feel betrayed or deeply misunderstood. In our distress, we suddenly feel an urgent need to look more deeply for understanding and an abiding sense of well-being.

If you’re reading these words, perhaps it’s because something has kicked open the door for you, and you’re ready to

embrace change. It isn't enough to appreciate change from afar, or only in the abstract, or as something that can happen to other people but not to you. We need to create change for ourselves, in a workable way, as part of our everyday lives. That's what the next four weeks of learning to meditate will do.

The door of possibility has been opened—the door to authentic and accessible happiness. Welcome. Come in and sit.