

Intro to Buddhism in the US
Week 6: Methods of meditation
[draft: session was cancelled due to snow]

The Center at Belvedere
Charlottesville, VA

Link to extended readings and slides:<https://parusanalytics.com/introbud2025/week-six.html>

11 February 2025

Outline of presentation

- Usual groveling caveats

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS
MAGAZINE | FEATURE

Always Lie When Someone Asks If You Meditate

Outline of presentation

- Usual groveling caveats
- How we [Boomers+] got here in the US
- Monkey and elephant approach with numerous elaborations
- Some known benefits and cautions
- Things I hope will be studied more
- Discussion

Many paths

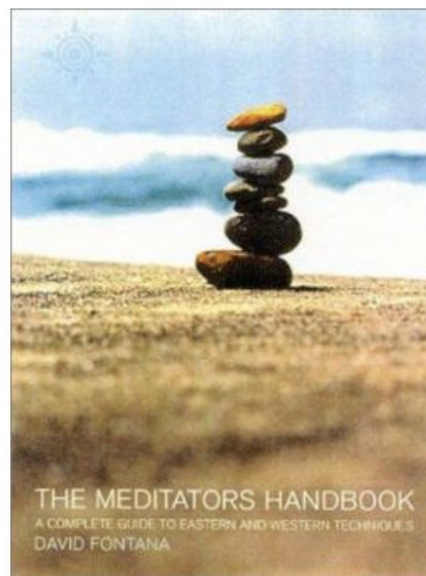
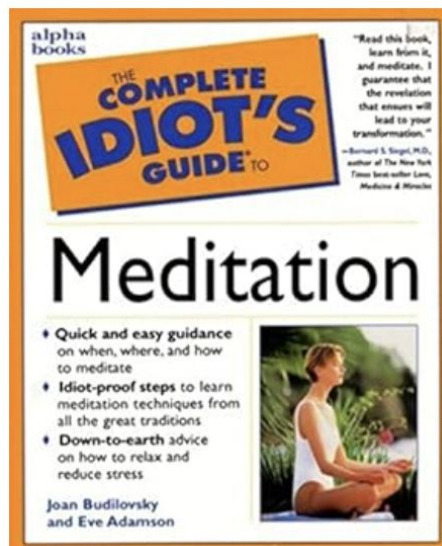
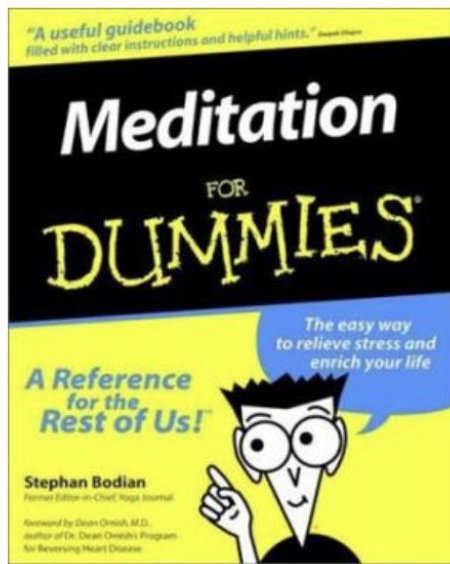


Table 2. Types of meditation practices reported.

Type of practice	Dominant (% of sample)	Lifetime (% of sample)	At onset (% of sample)
concentration (<i>śamatha</i> , mindfulness of breathing, breath counting)	30 (50%)	57 (95%)	20 (33%)
insight (<i>vipassanā</i> , noting, open monitoring)	27 (45%)	48 (80%)	20 (33%)
body scan (including Goenka <i>vipassanā</i>)	4 (7%)	33 (55%)	5 (8%)
other insight practice (analytical meditation)	2 (3%)	25 (42%)	1 (2%)
<i>zazen</i> : breath counting	9 (15%)	28 (47%)	9 (15%)
<i>zazen</i> : "just sitting" (<i>shikantaza</i>)	12 (20%)	30 (50%)	8 (13%)
<i>kōan</i>	6 (10%)	15 (25%)	3 (5%)
loving kindness (<i>mettā</i>) or compassion	6 (10%)	49 (82%)	2 (3%)
<i>tonglen</i>	1 (2%)	28 (47%)	0 (0%)
nature of mind practice (<i>dzogchen</i> , <i>mahāmudrā</i>)	6 (10%)	28 (47%)	4 (7%)
Vajrayāna preliminary practices (<i>ngondro</i>)	5 (8%)	19 (32%)	8 (13%)
visualization practices	5 (8%)	20 (33%)	7 (12%)
mantra recitation	1 (2%)	25 (42%)	1 (2%)
other	3 (5%)	9 (15%)	8 (13%)

"Dominant" refers to the top two most frequently practiced types of meditation in the practitioner's lifetime. "Lifetime" refers to the types of meditation reported as being practiced during the practitioner's lifetime. Because most practitioners engaged in multiple types of meditation during the lifetime, the total percentage exceeds 100%. "At onset" refers to the top two most frequently practiced types of meditation around the onset of meditation-related challenges or difficulties. See [S3 File](#) for dataset.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239.t002>

Three Christian reflections

“This magnificent refuge is inside you. Enter. Shatter the darkness that shrouds the doorway. Be bold. Be humble. Put away the incense and forget the incantations they taught you. Ask no permission from the authorities. Close your eyes and follow your breath to the still place that leads to the invisible path that leads you home.”

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), *The Interior Castle*

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou will feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord.

George Fox, founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

(1624-1691)



[WHAT IS IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY?](#) ▾

[IGNATIAN PRAYER](#) ▾

[MAKING GOOD DECISIONS](#) ▾

[IGNATIAN VOICES](#) ▾

[DOTMAGIS BLOG](#) ▾



[Home](#) > [Ignatian Prayer](#) > [The Spiritual Exercises](#)

The Spiritual Exercises

The Spiritual Exercises are a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices developed by St. Ignatius Loyola to help people deepen their relationship with God. For centuries the Exercises were most commonly given as a “long retreat” of about 30 days in solitude and silence. In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on the Spiritual Exercises as a program for laypeople. The most common way of going through the Exercises now is a “retreat in daily life,” which involves a monthslong program of daily prayer and meetings with a spiritual director. The Exercises have also been adapted in many other ways to meet the needs of modern people.

Sign up for the E-Magis Newsletter

Enjoy monthly highlights from *IgnatianSpirituality.com*, brief articles on Ignatian spirituality themes, and more.

E-mail*

Mother Teresa was once asked about her prayer life.

The interviewer asked, “When you pray, what do you say to God?”

Mother Teresa replied, “I don’t talk, I simply listen.”

Believing he understood what she had just said, the interviewer next asked, “Ah, then what is it that God says to you when you pray?”

Mother Teresa replied, “He also doesn’t talk. He also simply listens.”

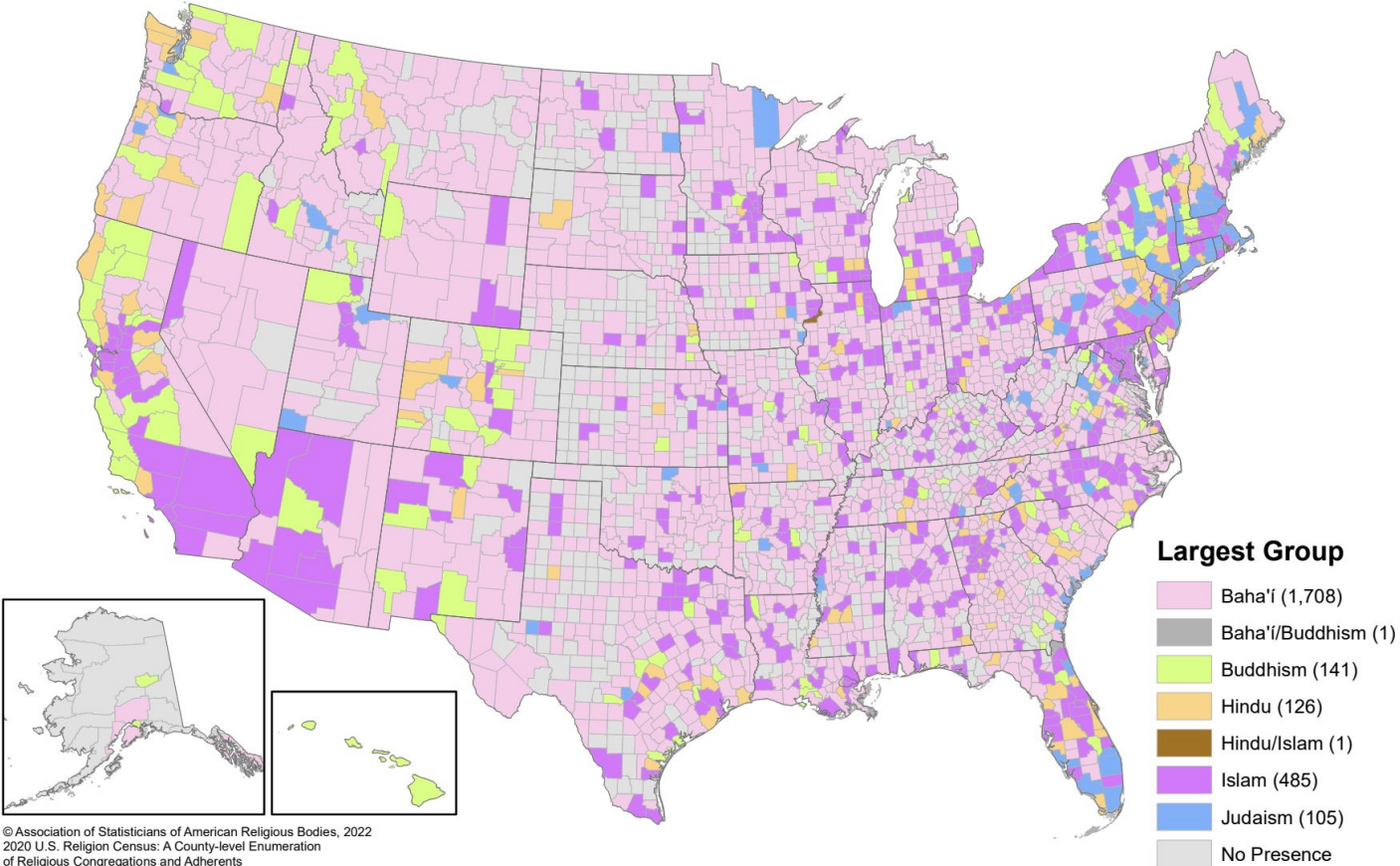
There was a long silence, with the interviewer seeming a bit confused and not knowing what to ask next.

Finally Mother Teresa breaks the silence by saying, “If you can’t understand the meaning of what I’ve just said, I’m sorry but there’s no way I can explain it any better.”

<http://praylikeagourmet.com/thoughts/mother-theresa-and-prayer/>

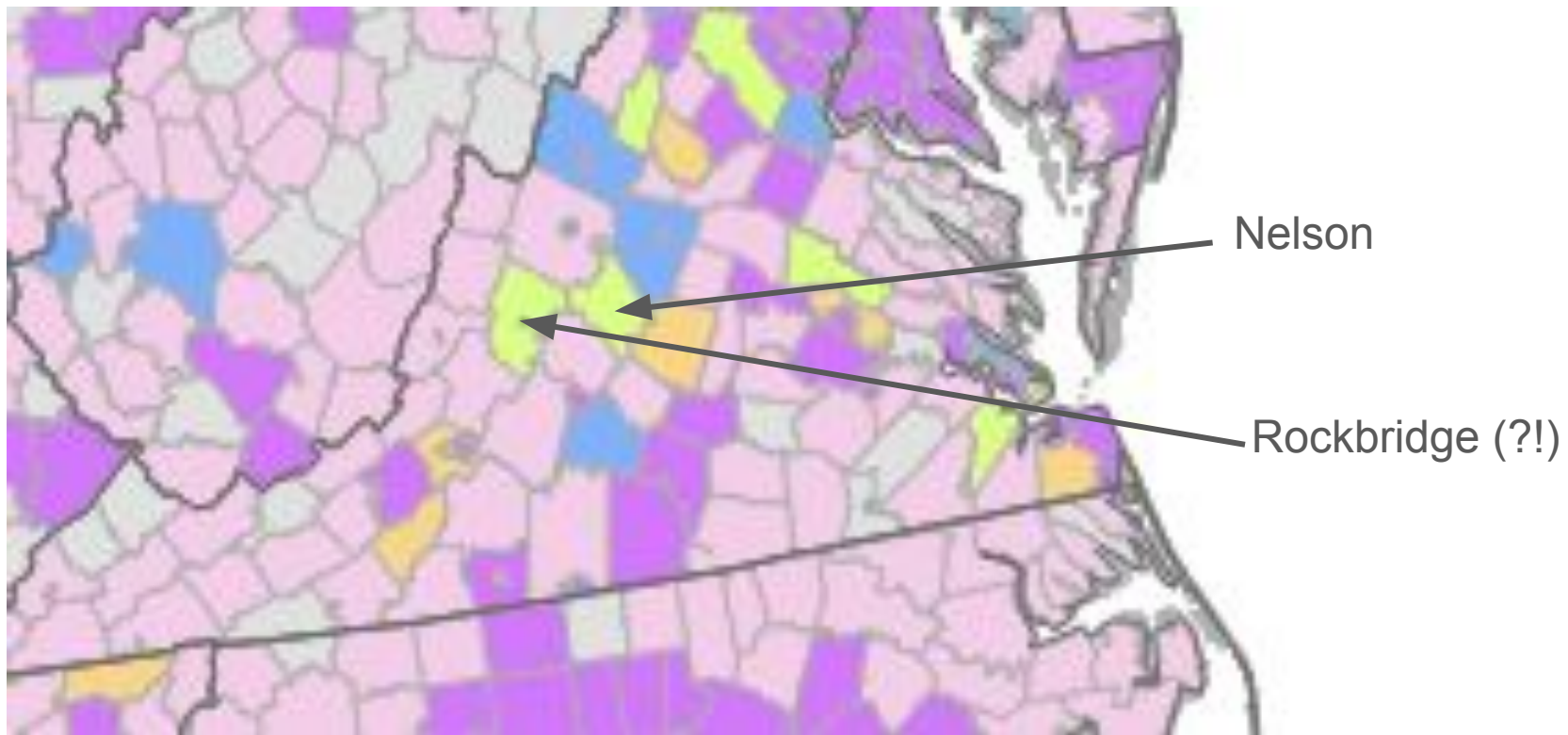
How we got here
[USA 1960-2010 version]

Largest Non-Christian Religion by County:
Based on Number of Adherents Reported in U.S. Religion Census 2020

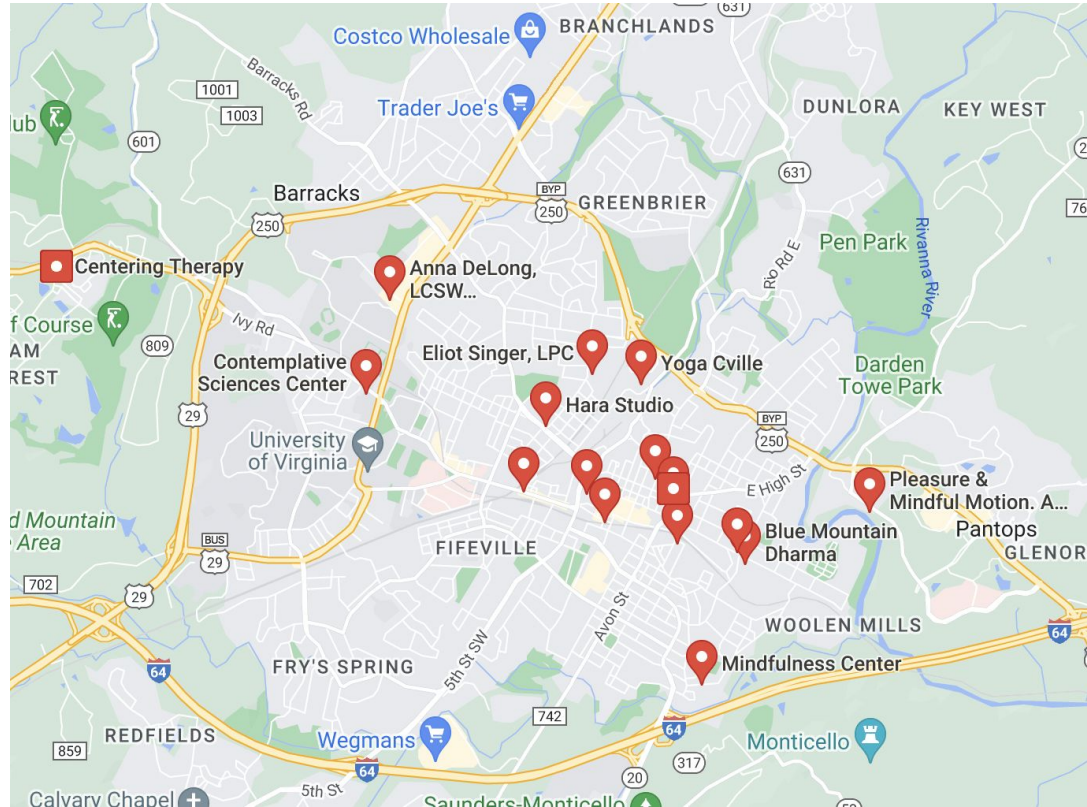


© Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2022
2020 U.S. Religion Census: A County-level Enumeration
of Religious Congregations and Adherents
Created by Dale E. Jones using ESRI ArcMap

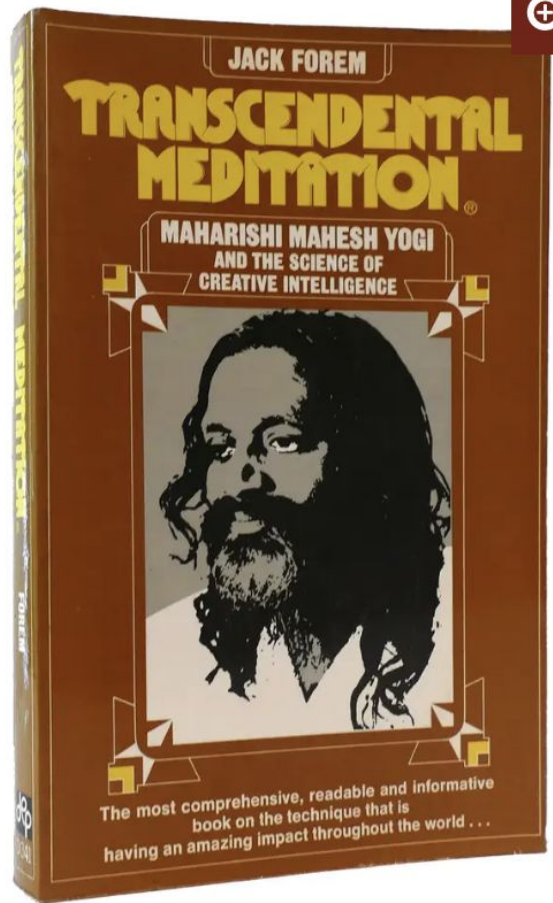
Zeroing in...



Google map results for "mindfulness Charlottesville"



Psychology Today lists about 250 (!) therapists in Cville who incorporate "mindfulness" in their work.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/va/charlottesville?category=mindfulness-based-mbct>



JACK FOREM

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AND THE SCIENCE OF
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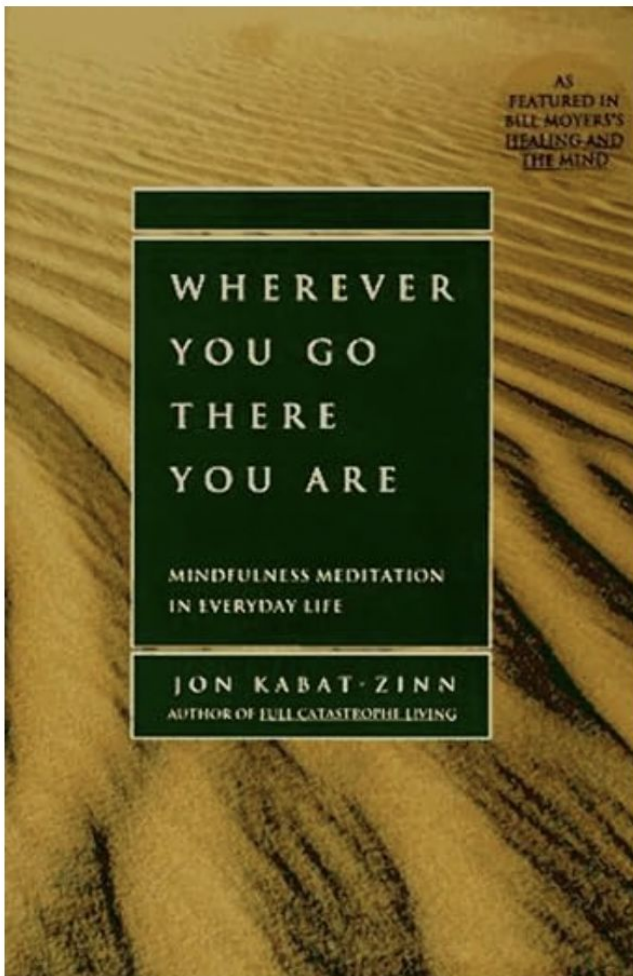




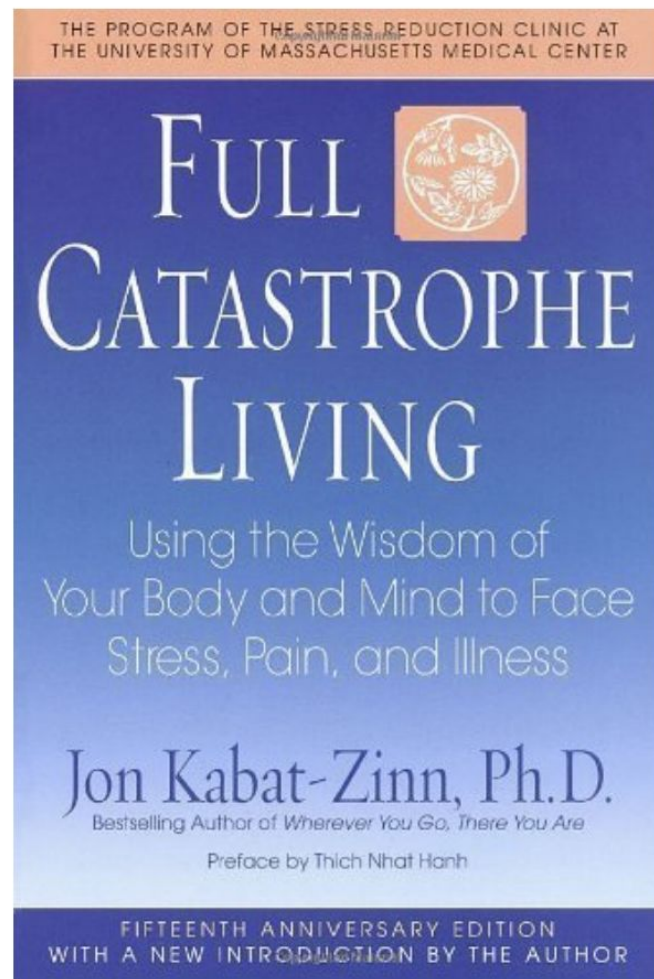


teaching authorization ceremony at Insight Meditation Society with Mahashi Sayadaw (back row center). Fr (left to right): Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Jacqueline Schwartz.





1991



1994

One fairly common approach...

"Offers a potential cure for the chronic distractibility
that has become the norm in modern life."

—FROM THE FOREWORD BY DANIEL GOLEMAN

The
**Attention
Revolution**



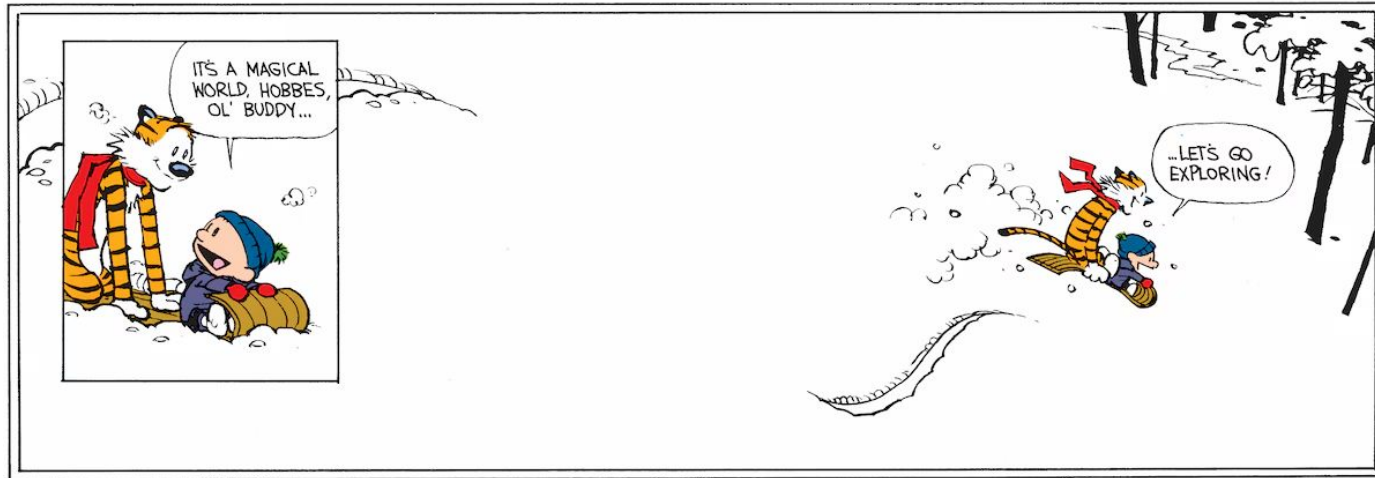
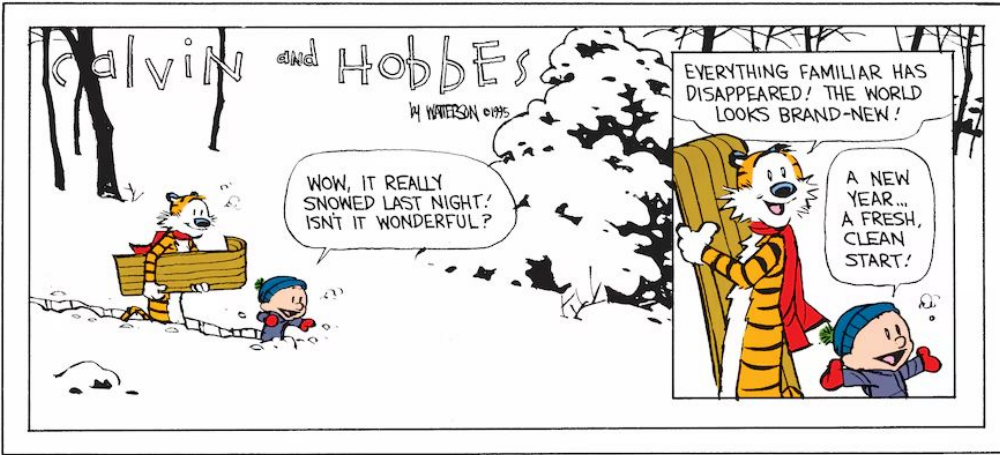
UNLOCKING
THE POWER OF
THE FOCUSED MIND

B. ALAN WALLACE, PH.D.

2006

A simpler framework

- Quiet the mind, balancing attention and flow
- Focus awareness
- Let's go exploring!



Final comic strip in *Calvin and Hobbes*, 31-Dec-1995

A simpler framework

- Quiet the mind, balancing attention and flow
- Focus awareness
- Let's go exploring!

- Wise effort
- Wise attention (samadhi)
- Wise mindfulness (vipassana)

[three elements of the Eight Fold Path, the fourth of the "Four Noble Truths", ca.500 BCE]

Quieting the mind: Susie Harrington (Spirit Rock teacher)

Your thoughts are like watching a train go past. There are boxcars full of exciting objects—look, circus animals! Then there are boxcars just full of "stuff". Albeit sometimes stuff you'd rather not see. And then empty boxcars. And finally, with the flatcars, no boxcars at all, though the train is still there.

Quieting the mind: Satipatthana* Sutta

- You exist in a physical body that interacts via the senses with a physical world (rupa), though the mind is also one of the senses
- You almost unavoidable classify sensations and emotions
- as positive, negative, or neutral (vedana). The challenge is to stop here, otherwise...
- You begin to processing these (sanna)
- Then you bring in associated memories and more complex emotional states (sankhara)
- Then you are fully into the experience and you've completely lost the meditation (experiential consciousness or vinanna), though this is okay if it is just in the present moment

These are the *khandas*, typically translated as "aggregates", another less-than-helpful convention IMHO

*Google spell-checks "Satipatthana". Also that sutta is a whole lot more complicated than just this: Bikkhu Analayo has written several books on it.

Emptiness

"To have nothing in mind is noble. To have no skill and no knowledge is supreme.
No abiding, no hermitage, comes next"

Basho [Zen poet, 1644-1694]

Highly influential exposition was by the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna, ca. 200 CE
note per last meeting, this characterizes some NDEs

Awareness and no-self (annata)

Core idea: when you say "I hate myself", who is the "I" and who is the "self"?

"I was in the midst of meditating and something was out there watching.

I said "Who are you?" It replied, "Who is asking?"

I think this was in the *Last Whole Earth Catalog* [1971] and the original reference was probably to a psychedelic experience rather than meditation, which was still quite undeveloped at that point

This concept has been brought forward to contemporary popular culture by Eckhart Tolle and Deepak Chopra among others



Substrate consciousness

This is a common concept in Indian philosophy, not just Buddhist, and is the ground state when all distracting mental activity—specifically the default mode network and sensory inputs—have been [largely] removed. Various descriptions:

- radiant clear consciousness;
- clarity, vividly aware
- empty, clear/clarity
- bliss, luminosity and non-conceptuality
- your mind in its natural state
- very stable

This is distinct from "primordial /universal consciousness", which is far harder to attain but is probably what is accessed through peak experience and may or not be similar to Jungian "collective consciousness"

Simplified version

"When confusion ceases, tranquility comes; when tranquility comes, wisdom appears; and when wisdom appears, reality is seen"

"Buddhist saying" in *Little Zen Calendar*

Alan Wallace

Substrate consciousness is what you carry forward in the seconds after your final breath and final heartbeat: it is the carrier of karma.

This is the objective of "awareness of awareness", which is reasonably accessible with systematic effort. Other more or less similar terms—caveated by the gazillion discourses over 1800 years arguing they aren't similar—are dzogchen, Mahamudra, choiceless awareness, open awareness, shikantaza (Zen)

[to my knowledge, no meditative practice systematically results in the "tunnel of light" NDE. Which is interesting on multiple dimensions...]

Hey, how do we know this "substrate" continues after death???

The Zen teacher Hakuin (1685-1768) was visited by a samurai. Bowing respectfully, the warrior asked "Tell me, master, what happens after death"

"I have no idea," replied Hakuin.

"You have no idea," said the samurai, surprised. "But you are the greatest Zen master in all of Japan!"

"I may be a Zen master," answered Hakuin, "but I'm not a dead one."

"The universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine."

Variously attributed to J.B.S. Haldane, Arthur Eddington, Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg

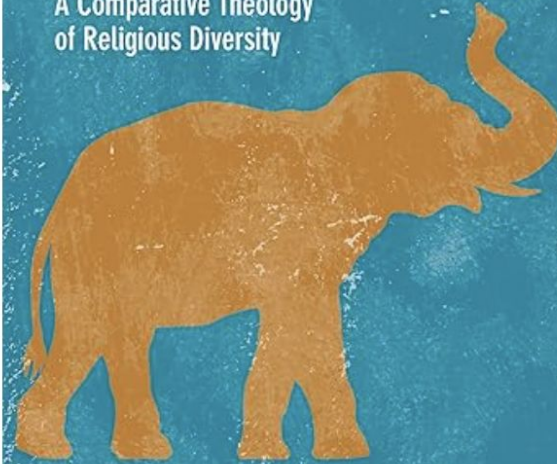
Theological equivalent:

"The divine mystery is inexhaustible"

John Thatamanil (contemporary Christian theologian)

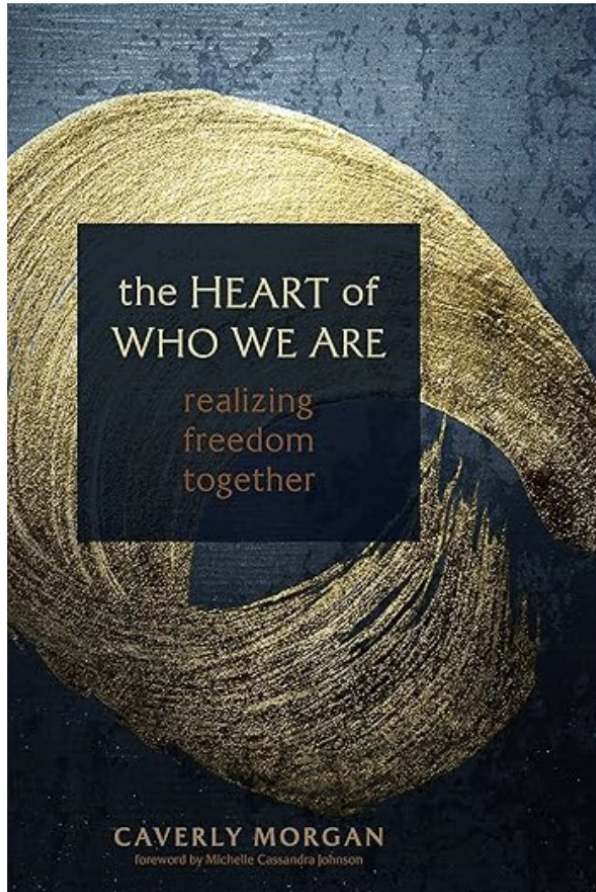
CIRCLING THE ELEPHANT

A Comparative Theology
of Religious Diversity



John J. Thatamanil

2020



the HEART of
WHO WE ARE

realizing
freedom
together

CAVERLY MORGAN
foreword by Michelle Cassandra Johnson

"The most important thing teenagers say they learn from meditation practice is 'I am not my thoughts'"

Caverly Morgan, founder, *Peace in Schools*, and hometown CVille girl-made-good

2022

Two approaches to meditation

Sustaining: find a workable and stable practice and just get the benefits—discussed below—from this. Take the occasional break from the racoons-in-a-dumpster of your default mode network.

Progressive: systematically develop a series of practices over time...likely a very long time

Characteristics of an advanced samadhi—"relaxed abiding"—state

- Lucid (i.e. not spaced out)

[For spaced out, try a 20 oz. double IPA or a 10 mg THC gummy...inadequate sleep also pretty reliably produces this...]

- Stable

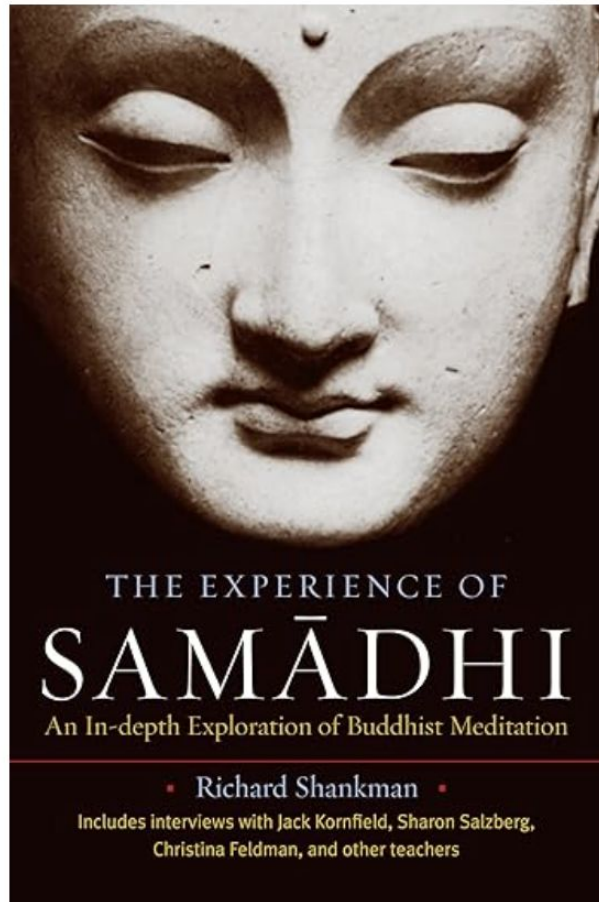
- Empty

- Non-conceptual

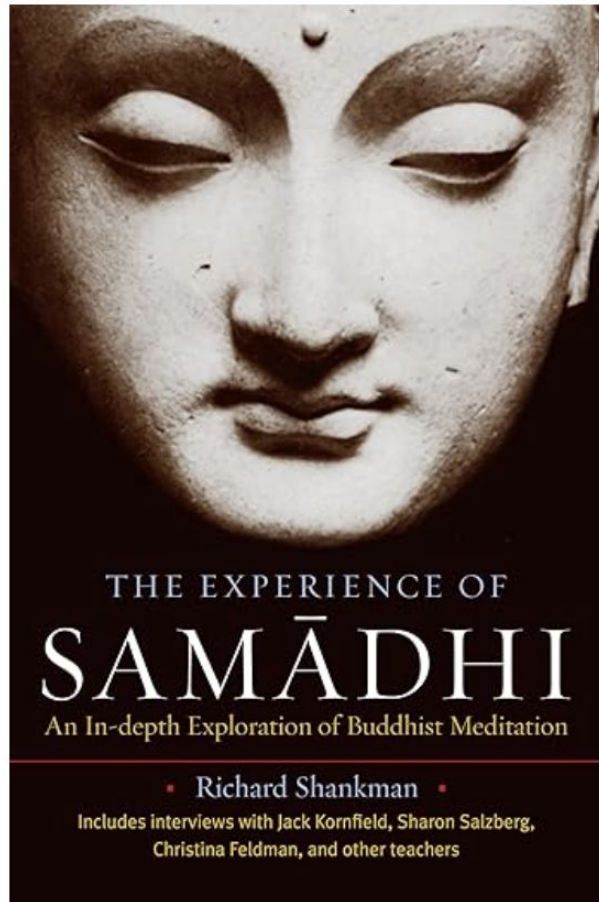
consequently teachings can only point, if that, in the general direction. This has not prevented tens of thousands of texts being produced over thousands of years. Including in Zen. Particularly in Zen.

- Pleasant

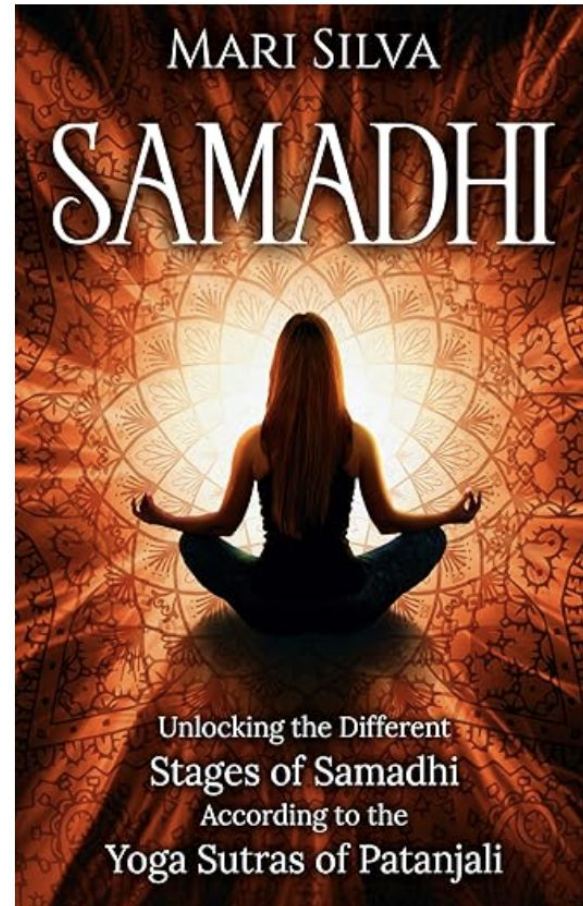
Curiously, these are quite similar to states typically reported in a near-death experience without the inconvenience of, well, near death



2008



2008



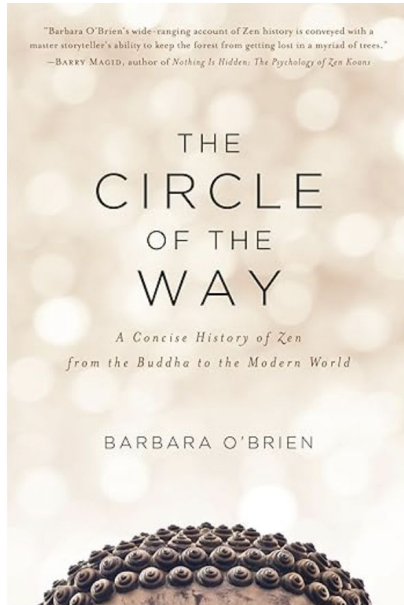
2020

Hindrances/distractions as described in the suttas

1. Sensual Desire: attractive thoughts generally (yes, sex, but could also be a new car, restaurant, NetFlix comedy, shiny objects etc.)
2. Ill-will: aversion and unattractive thoughts generally
3. Sloth and Torpor:
Unlike the Rule of Benedict of Nursia (ca. 600 CE), mindfulness meditation is not intended as a 1,500 year experiment in elite sleep deprivation!
4. Restlessness and Remorse/regret
Default mode network is really good at generating these. Instead, "abandon all hopes for a better past"
5. Doubt [!!!!]

Fundamental paradox of progressive approaches

Exerting effort to attain progressive states makes them harder to achieve

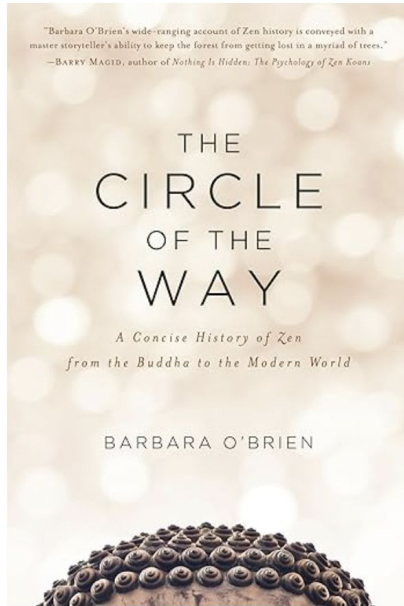


"The paradox going through the entire history of Zen is the fact that exerting effort towards enlightenment makes enlightenment more difficult"
Barbara O'Brien

2019

Fundamental paradox of progressive approaches

Exerting effort to attain progressive states makes them harder to achieve



"The paradox going through the entire history of Zen is the fact that exerting effort towards enlightenment makes enlightenment more difficult"
Barbara O'Brien

"The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers"
Princess Leia Organa, *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*

2019

Two of the many, many other reflections on this point

So long as one does not become simple like a child, one does not get divine illumination. Forget all the worldly knowledge you have acquired, and become as a child, and then you will get the divine wisdom.

Ramakrishna (1836-1886)

Ramakrishna was originally from a Vedic (Hindu) tradition but developed interests in Sufi and Christian mysticism, He is best known as the guru to Swami Vivekananda (1869-1902) who would become hugely important/influential thanks to the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, for many in the West the first introduction to South Asian approaches, and in 1894 founding the Vedanta Society in NYC which then spread more generally in the US

As British scholar Peter Harvey puts it in *An Introduction to Buddhism*:

"Learning meditation is a skill akin to learning to play a musical instrument: it is learning how to "tune" and "play" the mind, and regular, patient practice is the means to this. Progress will not occur if one is lax, but it cannot be forced. For this reason, meditation practice is also like gardening: one cannot force plants to grow, but one can assiduously provide them with the right conditions, so that they develop naturally. For meditation, the "right conditions" are the appropriate application of mind and of the specific technique being used."

<https://www.lionsroar.com/10-steps-to-tame-the-elephant/>

A whole lot more reflections on practice (tl;dr)

Huy Lye, Urban Dharma, Asheville, NC

"Go into the forest, sit beneath a tree" is Pali for "turn off your devices."

(Pali is the language of the Theravadan Buddhist scriptures)

"We have too much knowledge, not enough first-hand experience. And plenty of distractions, and not enough patience."

"Meditation is very boring until it isn't."

Urban Dharma...sigh...



Make your body and mind pure and peaceful, without any discriminative thinking at all. Sit properly with the body erect. Regulate the breath and concentrate the mind so it is not with you, not outside of you, and not in any intermediate locations. Do this carefully and naturally. View your own consciousness tranquilly and attentively, so that you can see how it is always moving, like flowing water or a fluttering mirage. After you have perceived this consciousness, simply continue to view it gently and naturally, without it assuming any fixed positions inside or outside of yourself. Do this tranquilly and attentively, until its fluctuations dissolve into peaceful stability. This flowing consciousness will disappear like a gust of wind. When this consciousness disappears, all one's illusions will disappear with it, even the [extremely subtle] illusions of bodhisattvas of the tenth stage.

Daman Hongren, 5th patriarch of Zen, 601-674 CE

Don't be a hitchhiker, catching a ride with whatever thoughts come along. Be like a kestrel, hovering motionlessly as it faces the wind, slightly adjusting its wings and tail feathers to respond to changes in the currents of the air. Be a gracious host amid unruly guests.

Alan Wallace, *The Attentiveness Revolution*

"In the beginning my guru was my teacher. Then the suttas were my teacher. Now my mind is my teacher."

Observation: this, plus competition for attention and resources, accounts for much of the opposition by conservative Christian groups to meditation: most Christian theology assumes that humans are fundamentally flawed and hence letting your mind lead you will only result in bad outcomes. Buddhism, in contrast, assumes that humans have a 'Buddha nature' that is positive and meditation can reveal this, just as the sun is revealed when clouds go away. Arguably this disagreement on human nature, not theism, is the greatest difference between Christianity and Buddhism.

"Progress in meditation occurs by accident; make yourself accident-prone."

Tricycle's
"Daily Dharma"
email 24-Jul-2024



DAILY DHARMA

Support Tricycle with a donation »

No Such Thing as Perfect Practice

“

Sometimes we get the idea that there's a best practice, a right practice, a most powerful practice. But different practices and different qualities or nuances of practice might be most appropriate for us at different times as our practice, understanding, and recognition of what's helpful, needed, or skillful evolves.

Martin Aylward, "Give Your Practice Permission to Change"

[CLICK HERE TO READ THE FULL ARTICLE](#)

Three more common approaches in contemporary Western Buddhist practice

which I'm guessing I'm not going to have time to talk about...

"Lovingkindness is a profound exploration of the deepest meanings of love, empathy, and caring.
It offers psychological insights of real spiritual value and practical utility."
—DANIEL GOLEMAN, author of *Emotional Intelligence*

LOVINGKINDNESS

The Revolutionary Art of Happiness

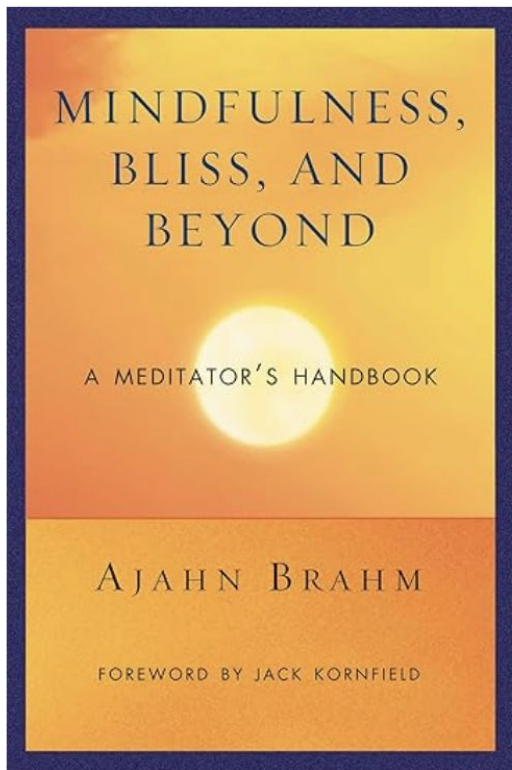


SHARON SALZBERG

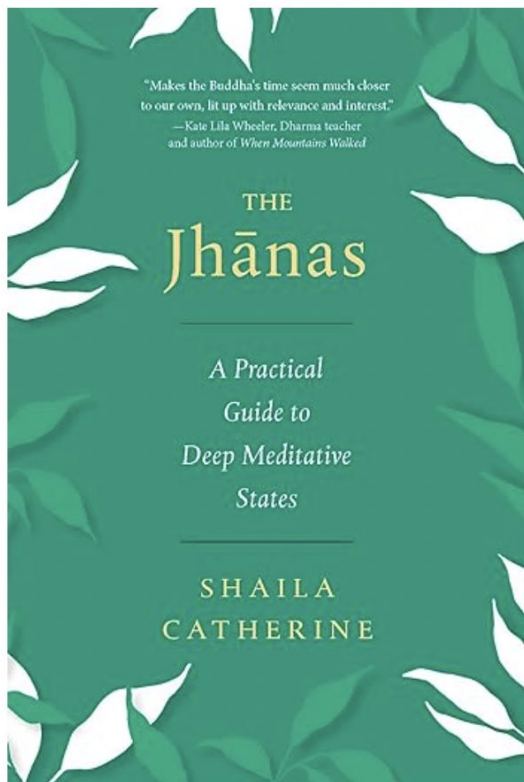
Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

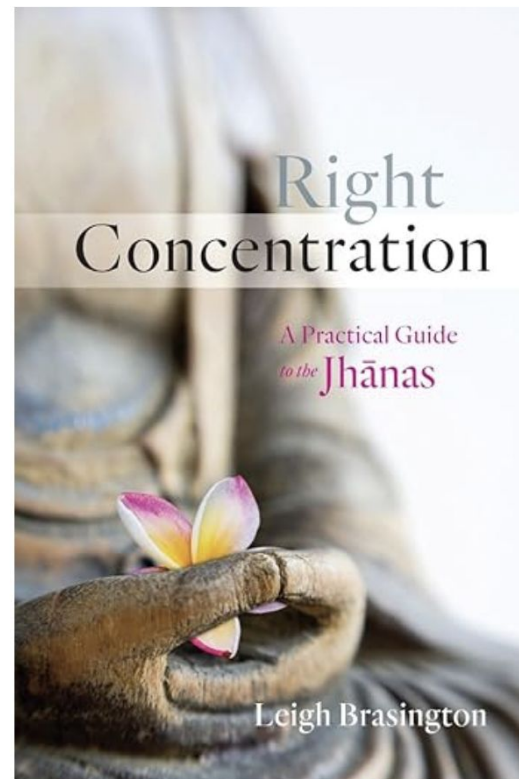
Sharon's seminal
book, originally
released in 1995
and re-released
in 2020, with a
Foreword by Jon
Kabat-Zinn



2006



2008, 2024



2015

Lucidity Without Limit

Dream yoga, says Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, is a practice of changing our waking life.
He shares the four foundational practices of this powerful mind training.

By Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche



Serenity Ridge Retreat Center, Nelson County

Positive effects of practice

The Brahmaviharas

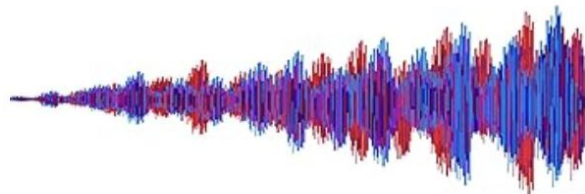
- Compassion (karuna)
- Lovingkindness (metta; New Testament *agape*)
- Empathetic joy (mudita)
- Equanimity (upeka)

You know you have a solid meditation practice when your significant other says "Dear, have you been forgetting to meditate?"

"Meditation is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, beautiful as it continues."

Gil Fronsdal, Insight Meditation Center of Redwood City, CA,
paraphrasing Pali suttas

Altered Traits



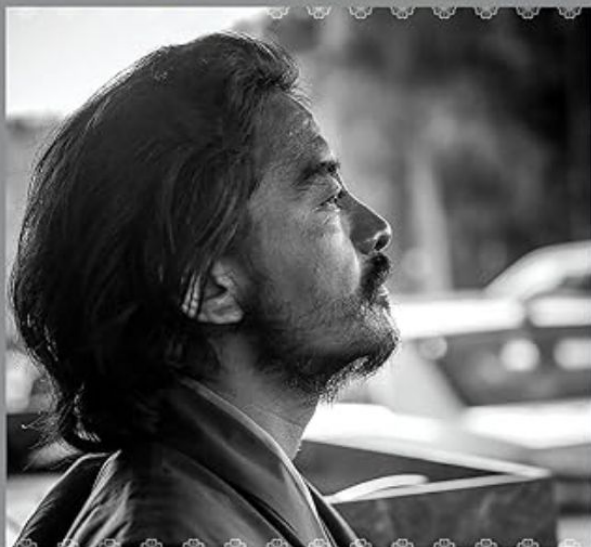
Science Reveals How
Meditation Changes Your
Mind, Brain, and Body

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

Daniel Goleman & Richard J. Davidson

2017

"This book has the potential to change the reader's life forever."
—George Saunders, author of *Lincoln in the Bardo*



"One of the most inspiring books I have ever read." —Pema Chödrön

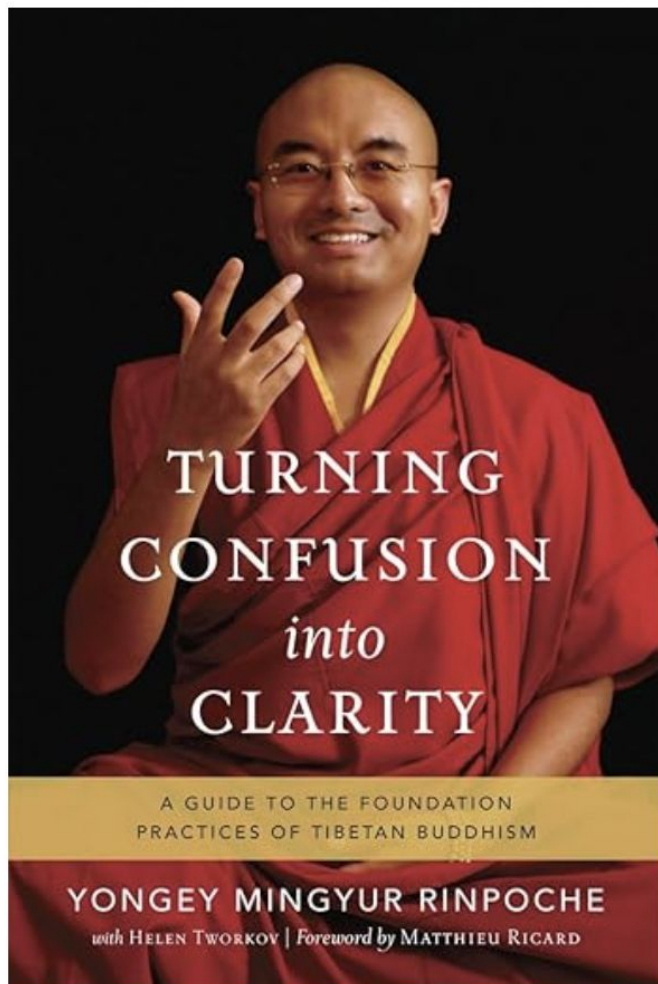
IN LOVE WITH THE WORLD

A Monk's Journey Through the Bardos
of Living and Dying

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Joy of Living*

with Helen Tworok



TURNING
CONFUSION
into
CLARITY

A GUIDE TO THE FOUNDATION
PRACTICES OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE

with HELEN TWORKOV | Foreword by MATTHIEU RICARD

Cautions

- McM mindfulness (critique ca. 2013): methods that have been popularized and secularized to the point where they are no longer effective. But...250 therapists in Cville think mindfulness can be useful...
- Industrial mindfulness: "We want our employees to meditate so they become passive sheep who won't unionize even when we are literally killing them with unhealthy workplaces". See: most of Silicon Valley, and Amazon in particular

Theory



Q Search

Who We Are ▾

What We Do ▾

Our Workplace ▾

Our Impact ▾

Our Planet ▾

Fo

PRESS CENTER

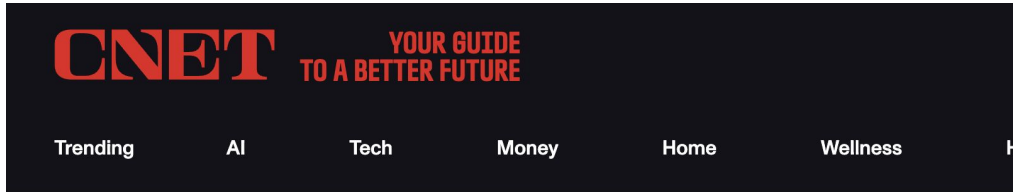
Press Release Archive

Images &

May 17, 2021

From Body Mechanics to Mindfulness, Amazon Launches Employee-Designed Health and Safety Program called WorkingWell Across U.S. Operations

Practice



Tech > Services & Software


Amazon Deaths Under Investigation As Warehouse Conditions Draw Scrutiny

The string of warehouse deaths are worrying in light of complaints over heat and pace of work, advocates and workers say.



[Laura Hautala](#) 

Sept. 2, 2022 6:34 a.m. PT

5 min read 

Cautions

- McM mindfulness: methods that have been popularized to the point where they are no longer effective. But...250 therapists in Cville alone think they can be useful...
- Industrial mindfulness: "We want our employees to meditate so they become passive sheep who won't unionize even when we are literally killing them with unhealthy workplaces". See: most of Silicon Valley, and Amazon in particular
- In advanced practice, weird stuff can start happening...come for the peace of mind, stay for the paranormal...orthodox advice is not to pursue this



1940



More seriously, it seems, some pretty difficult stuff: "Kundalini psychosis" is a thing

- Generally this occurs when people have preconditions such as psychotic episodes and/or substance use: retreats try to screen for this but, well, people lie.
- But it can occur in some intensive practices *without* drugs or other preconditions!
- A friend who is a clinical therapist recommended I Google "kundalini psychosis" and well, OMG...
 - Kundalini is a very intensive practice: problems seem to arise when people try to do it without a teacher
 - As noted last week, this is a reason some teachings are kept secret and a reason for concern about proliferation of meditation apps and videos
 - UVA DOPS yet again: one of the first articles (1994) in my Feb-2025 Google search was by DOPS's NDE researcher Bruce Greyson, also citing Kenneth Ring's pioneering NDE work: apparently these are linked in the Kundalini theories
- This has generally not been cited as a concern for the classical progressive approaches going beyond mindfulness, which proceeds very slowly, though there are some concerns

Cautions

- McM mindfulness: methods that have been popularized and secularized to the point where they are no longer effective. But...250 therapists in Cville alone think they can be useful...
- Industrial mindfulness: "We want our employees to meditate so they become passive sheep who won't unionize even when we are literally killing them with unhealthy workplaces". See: most of Silicon Valley, and Amazon in particular
- In advanced practice, weird stuff can start happening...come for the peace of mind, stay for the paranormal...orthodox advice is not to pursue this
- Reducing social anxiety also reduces inhibition on unskillful behavior: "total jerk who claims to be enlightened". Buddhist texts *constantly* emphasize the need to ground practice to a very solid ethical foundation (*sila*). This is another serious risk of purely secular practice.

Wrapping up
[really...]

Where I wish we had more research

- A much more complete map of systematically accessible altered states of consciousness

Altered states of consciousness

- Dreamless sleep
- Dreams
 - Freud, Jung
 - lucid dreaming
- Flow: [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) (muh·hay·lee chik·sent·mee·hai·ee)
- Peak experience: Maslow
 - "...a highly valued experience which is characterized by such intensity of perception, depth of feeling, or sense of profound significance as to cause it to stand out, in the subject's mind, in more or less permanent contrast to the experiences that surround it in time and space."⁴
- Psychedelics, shamanistic states
- Near death experiences

ASC's apparently accessible through systematic meditation practice not focusing on a deity

- access concentration/one-pointedness (turning off the DMN?)
- the jhanic sequence
- the samatha sequence (monkey-elephant) and emptiness
- countless variations—see *Visuddhimagga* (ca. 450 CE)—on visualization practices, from the simple (nimitta) to the fabulously complex (Tibetan mandala and deity visualization)
- probably as many variations on mantra and chanting practice
- meditative flow induced by dance, music, etc. This probably overlaps with some shamanistic practice
- lucid dreaming
- peak experience, though no indications anyone has figured out a reliable way to get this

Where I wish we had more research

- A much more complete map of systematically accessible altered states of consciousness
- Effects of various forms of meditation in the range of 500 to 2000 hours
- Effects on practice of depending on remote teachers, sanghas (communities), and learning materials (notably video)
- Relationship between altered states of consciousness induced by psychedelic drugs and those obtained with meditation done without drugs

In regard to the many books referenced here...

In regard to the many books referenced here...

Don't Read, Meditate!

A Dutch Theravadin on the Abhidhamma and the paramount importance of practice in developing insight.

By Herman Schreuder | JAN 15, 2024

Final word[s]...really...

"All things are impermanent. Practice with diligence."

Last words of the Buddha

[one of several zillion renditions of the same two thoughts]

Oh, wow!

Slides: <https://parusanalytics.com/vse/VSE-Schrodt-Meditation.pdf>

Email: schrodt735@gmail.com

McMindfulness Debate

Tricycle Fall-2021: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/mcmindfulness-debate/>

Origin in 2013: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289

Ronald E. Purser. McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality

Some comments on retreats based on my experience - 1

- These can have a really dramatic effect on your practice, and this is sustained for a while. If you can afford it, one or two week-long retreats a year work well
- There is quite a bit of variation depending on the lineage, and the retreat description should give a lot of background. Retreats with popular teachers tend to be over-subscribed.
- Ease yourself in: a ten-day retreat is very long for a beginner, so try some two or three day retreats first. Please be honest in answering the questions on the screening questionnaire. In particular, retreats can seriously mess with therapy
- Even silent retreats are not absolutely silent (unless they are): there is time for questions and for individual and group interviews, and dharma teachings
- Most retreats provide time and space for structured movement—yoga, qi qong—and require some light work

Some comments on retreats based on my experience - 2

- Food is almost always vegetarian and the evening meal is probably quite light. Most places are pretty flexible about snacking
- Most retreats simplify sensory input: located in the middle of nowhere, no devices, intoxicants, sex, talking, meat, interactions (but some). Renunciation is a form of liberation. This cold turkey on devices can be a huge thing now.
- Two types of people you don't want on retreats
 - Those who have been told it will be good for them
 - Those who are only there because it is a requirement for their mindfulness training certification
- You end up in an altered state—schrooms—but it fades. Be really, really careful if you are driving.

Advice on meditation (not included in interests of time)

1. Find out what works, and keep in mind this will almost certainly change over time: you change your practice as a snake sheds its skin. More generally, if things aren't working, or stop working, experiment
2. Expect change...unexpectedly. Progress occurs by accident and to a degree all you can do is make yourself accident prone
3. Daily, or something reasonably approximating it, is good. Most people, it seems, set aside a specific time (often first thing in the morning), though I don't.
4. Retreats are really good—more on this below—assuming you can get a good match with the teacher and the style of retreat (IMS retreats are quite standard in format)
5. Sangha is good until it isn't

Advice

1. Look for long-term maps but not necessarily a guru
2. Speaking of which, if things start feeling creepy and cult-like, they probably are. Though if your Christian fundamentalist friends say things are a cult, that carries little weight
3. Most of the styles of meditation seen in popular culture are just preparatory: you'll get past that pretty quickly
4. Most teachers I know have practiced in multiple lineages, and this is usually true in Asia (albeit this tended to be multiple teachers since the number of available lineages was limited unless one was willing to travel a long way)
5. All things are impermanent; practice with diligence