

Mindfulness and Meditation for the Uncertain Mind

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(he/him)

Alright! Hello everyone. <something about lunch>

We're going to start off today with a little bit of an exercise.

mental exercise

It's just a mental exercise, don't worry. For about... 30 seconds, I'd like you to focus on some sensation you currently have. I'd like you to try and not to think; I'd just like you to try and experience how it feels as much as possible. This could be an itch, or your tired feet, or... possibly a hangover from the Weedmaps party last night :) If you don't have anything else, just focus on your breath.



ready?

I'll kind of talk through it a little bit. Pick what you're going to focus on now. Ready?

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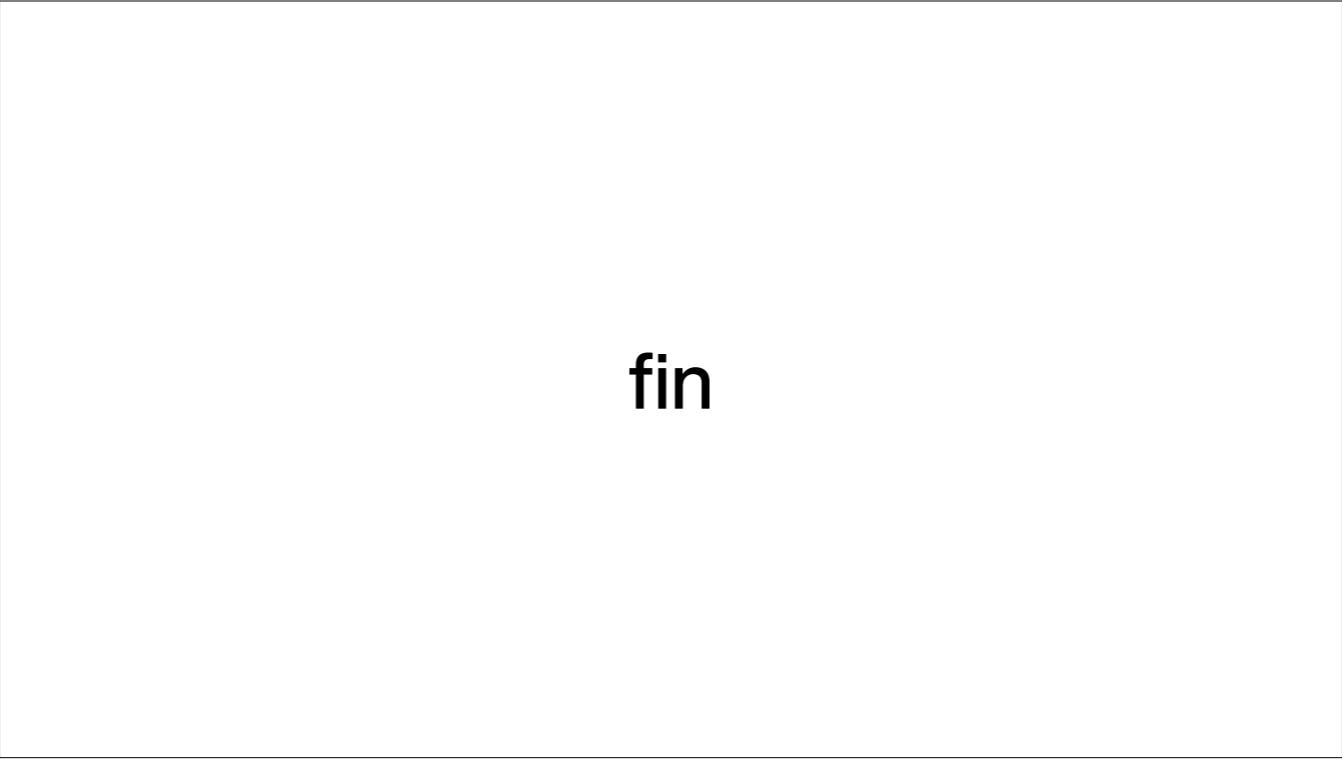
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fin

All right, time's up. Everyone feeling okay? I.

Okay, so.

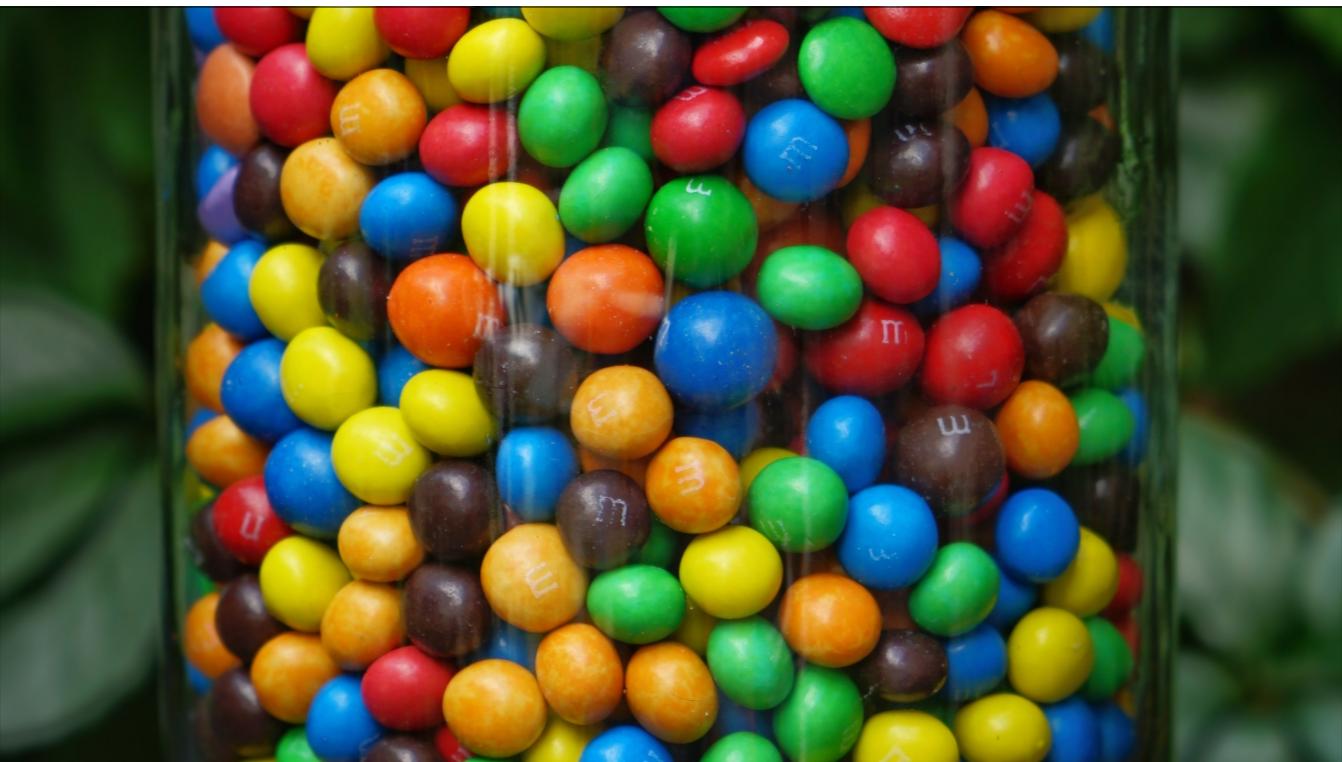


Hi everyone. As you might have guessed from the title my name is Rufo Sanchez, and

Mindfulness and Meditation

this is a talk on mindfulness and meditation.

You could potentially call this the



M&M talk, but that might be kind of confusing.

Actually, that might be kind of fun, you can tell folks you went to the M&M talk and they'd be like, oh, I don't remember seeing that on the schedule.

a few things before we get started

Anyway a few things before we get started. First, since a lot of people ask,



my first name is from my grandfather, and it's European Spanish - it's actually the translation of Rufus. Both of my mom's parents were born in the US from Spanish immigrants, so it's all her side of the family. Second,

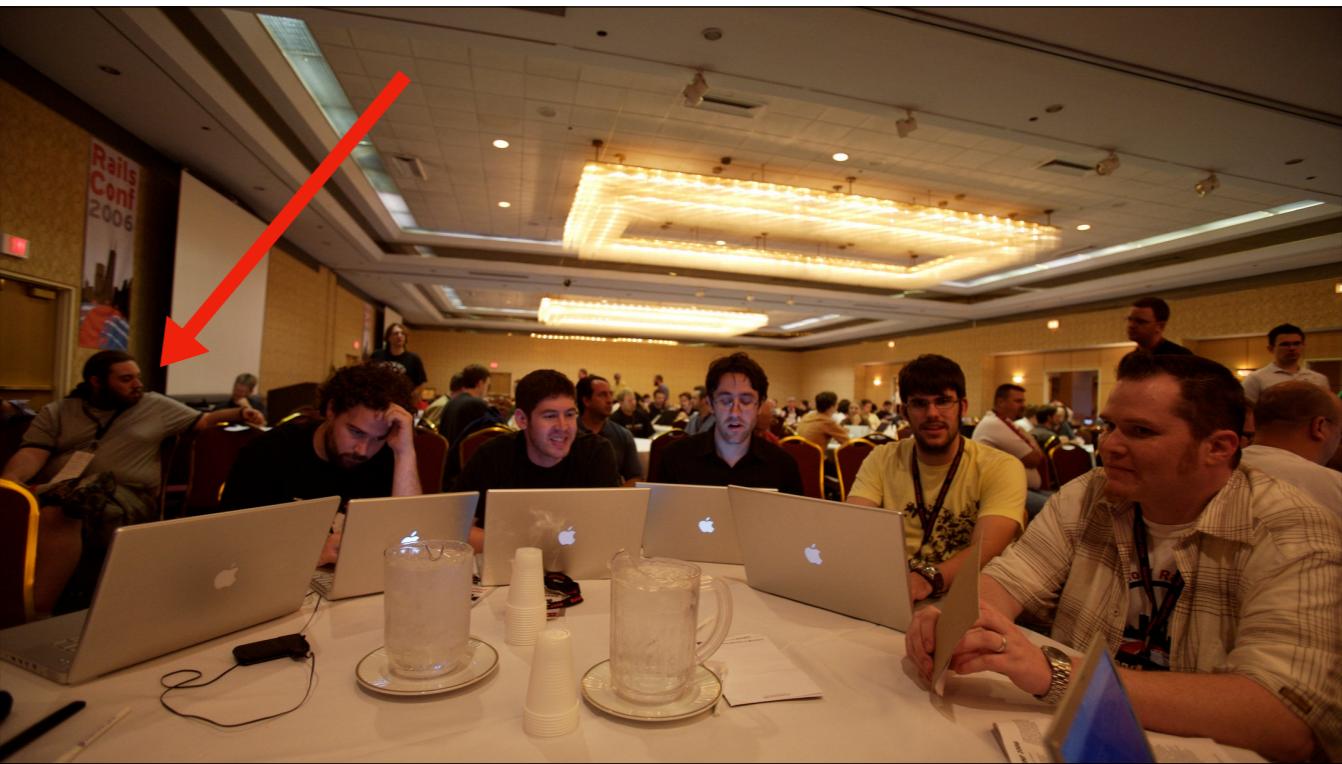
Rails since 2010

I've been a full-time Rails programmer, either as a consultant or for a company since around 2010, but my interest in Rails actually goes back further; I was actually at the first RailsConf in 2006 outside of Chicago. I actually went scouring Flickr for a photo thinking "it wasn't that big" and I actually managed to find the perfect proof of life.



In case you can't find me... <build> That's me over there.

I mention this primarily to say that



In case you can't find me... <build> That's me over there.

I mention this primarily to say that

I am not a  

I am not a mental health expert; my background is primarily IT and programming, and not mental health. I'll be talking about things that are widely written about, discussed and studied, and generally regarded as safe; but if you have any doubts or misgivings, or you have particularly difficult emotions come up while practicing mindfulness or meditation, by all means see a mental health professional.

I am not an expert

And finally, I am not an expert in these subjects :) I think these techniques are meaningful and add values to our lives, but my practice is fairly easygoing. My approach here is to present these techniques as someone who's found them useful and valuable, and thinks we should be more open in talking about mental health and self care. And as such, we're going to talk about our two main topics, mindfulness and meditation, on a fairly broad level.

goals

My goals here are to explain what these concepts are and how they relate to each other, why I think they're important, and give you some resources to hopefully start your exploration of these concepts, should you be so interested :)

using common “modern” definitions

I'm going to discuss these techniques in fairly modern language, using definitions you'll find in most books in the subject, and am going to go through them fairly removed from any particular ideology or religion. You certainly can connect meditation to religions like Buddhism and, honestly, there's a lot there that can pretty fascinating to dig into. It's a practice that we've only recently started to appropriate in the West that people in other cultures have been practicing for thousands of years. But what we'll be talking about today is simple, evidence-based, and can be pretty easily observed.

Alright, so. With all of that out of the way, let's get started.

mindfulness

Mindfulness. Let's start with mindfulness.

mindfulness?

What is mindfulness?

mindfulness

is awareness of your present moment



without monologue

...without a monlogue...

without inner critic

...an inner critic...

without judgement

...and without judgement. It's awareness of what's happening without being caught up in what's happening.

meta-cognition

It's meta-cognition, if you will. It's observing the state of your mind, and the world around you.



One analogy I like that might help is that your thoughts are a little bit like a waterfall, with your mind in the middle of the stream. Normally, without effort, your head is just in the middle of this torrential stream of water, of your thoughts, your emotions. What you ate for lunch, the next talk you're going to, the conversation you're going to have with your boss next week. We're constantly wrapped up in this narrative of things that are happening to us, things we want to do, things we feel should or shouldn't have happened to us, and most of the time we aren't even aware that we're engulfed in these thoughts. Mindfulness is trying to take your head out of the stream, even if just for a moment, to see what the water and the world around you are actually like.



why?

And this is important, because when you start trying to do this on a regular basis, you start realize that your mind isn't quite the place you thought it was. What can seem like an endless stream of thoughts constantly tugging and churning in your mind you can realize are just passing through, and you can start to see how easily emotions can come and go.

insight

You start to gain a lot of insight into exactly what's going on in your brain, and even the ability to intervene a little bit. The ability to step back and take stock of what is actually happening in your mind and respond thoughtfully instead of reacting mindlessly is very powerful. You can know yourself, your emotional reactions, and your thought patterns a little better, and in so doing, present yourself better to the world.

While this can be extremely powerful,



superpower

I do want to make clear that this isn't exactly a superpower. And it doesn't fundamentally change who you are. You're still you, and you're not about to turn into some sort of



emotionless robot, or an uber-zen monk. The goal is just to give you a little more clarity, a little more insight into what your thoughts and your emotional state really are, and give you that additional input when it matters.

example

And that insight, while small, can help a lot. Let's say that you are someone that is prone to anxiety, and your boss sends you a message saying "hey, got a minute?" If you're like me, that sets off an immediate chain of thoughts about "is everything okay? did I screw something up? am I fired? is somebody else fired? is the company going under and we're all doomed?" when, really, turns out it's just about rescheduling your 1:1 because a last-minute personal matter came up. Mindfulness doesn't _fix_ this. It doesn't suddenly make you _not_ anxious. But being able to step back does let you step in and think "okay, maybe this is something bad, but it doesn't have to be", and you're not finding yourself several minutes into a state of racing thoughts and panic.

It has other benefits, too.

appreciating moments

I also find it great for appreciating moments, both the mundane every day things you go through and the special ones. It's one thing to be walking down the street on a sunny day with a warm breeze. But most of the time we're wrapped up in thought thinking about what you're going to do when you get to the coffee shop or listening to a podcast, and it can be good to lift our head out and just experience what's happening around us.

getting through tough moments

It also can give be... surprisingly helpful at getting through tough moments, or moments of suffering. I know Amy touched on that in her talk before lunch, and y'all should definitely check it out if you haven't. Sometimes things suck, and you can't do anything about things itself... but you can change how you respond to and approach these moments.

**“this is what it feels like to be in
the middle of #{thing}”.**

The baseline statement for thinking about these things I go to is “This is what it feels like to be a human that’s _blank_.” That could be observing the warm feeling of grabbing a beverage with a friend you haven’t seen in a long time, or sitting in an economy seat with your knees dug into the front. It could be worrying about an upcoming interview or a difficult conversation with a colleague. Regardless of what they are, these experiences are _human_, and while this don’t make the problems go away, just interrupting the train of thought and sitting with the feeling for a moment, then giving yourself a chance to react can be a huge help. And for the good things, it helps you appreciate them that much more.



Okay. So. We'll get back to mindfulness more in a bit, but I hope that gives you an idea of what it is. Now let's talk a bit more about the other M-word of our talk, and how it relates to mindfulness.

meditation

Meditation. This is a bit reductive, and we'll talk about why in a moment, but if mindfulness is the feeling we're trying to cultivate, meditation is the

exercise

...exercise that builds the muscle. We'll mostly be talking about concentration and mindfulness meditation here, but there are many other kinds to explore once you've started a basic practice.

meditation 101

So. What is meditation, actually? Let's start by talking about what you actually do, it's pretty simple.

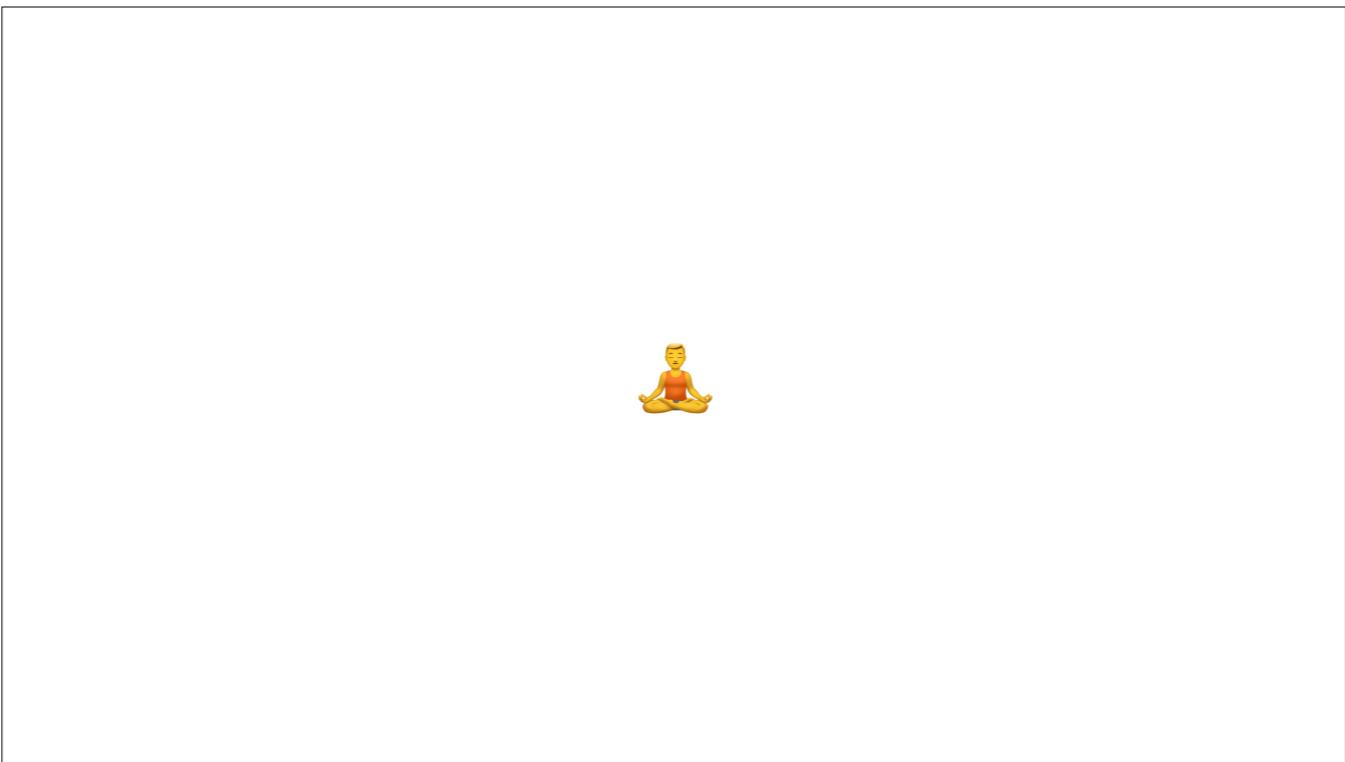
1. sit down.

1. Sit down somewhere. Ideally somewhere you'll be



comfortably

comfortable enough to sit for a while, but not so comfy that you're lured into taking a nap. I often meditate in my desk chair or an easy chair, but a couch is fine, or a cushion on the floor. A lot of folks probably have



something like this in their heads as some sort of ideal, but for our purposes this isn't really necessary.

2. focus on something

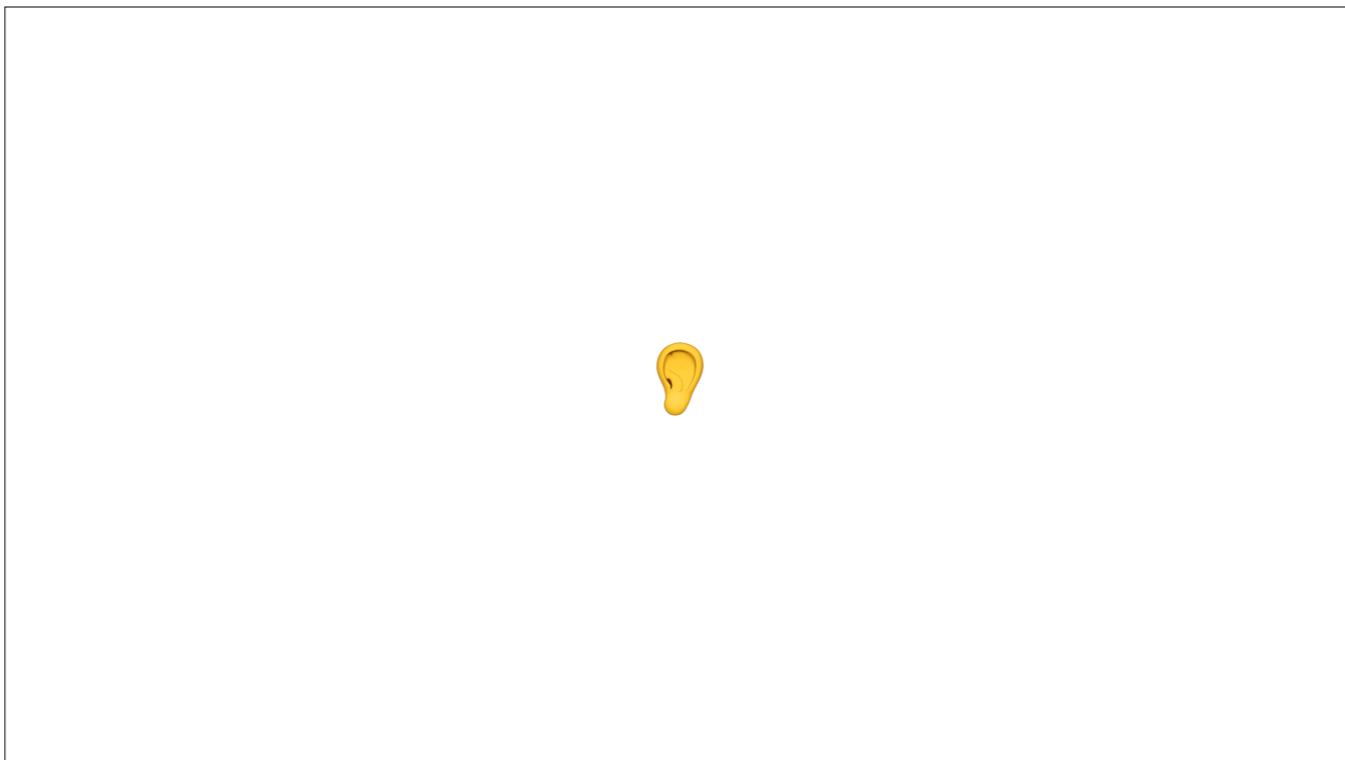
2. You'll start by focusing on something. The go-to is typically



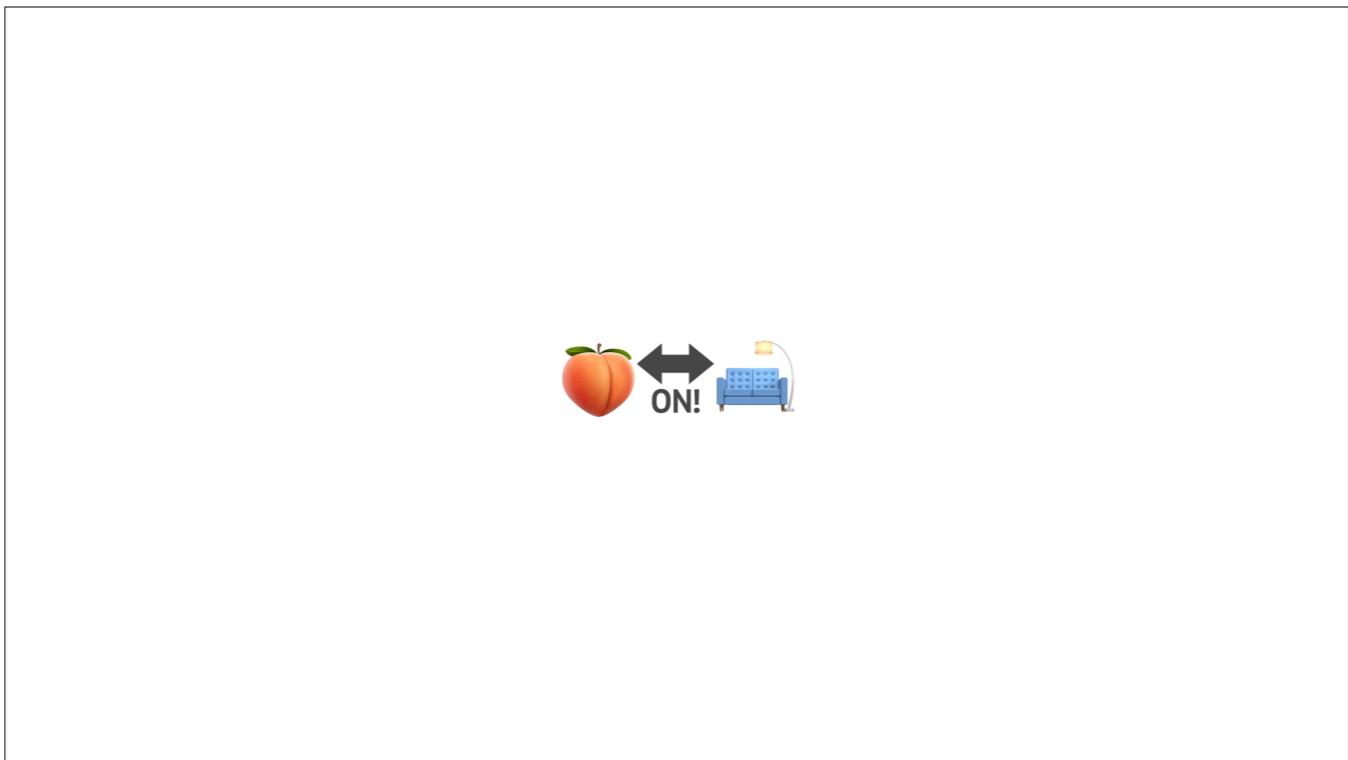
the breath, specifically, some feeling about it that is particularly noticeable. It could be the feeling of your chest rising and falling, it could be



the feeling of air going through your nostrils,



the sound of your breath. The breath is a classic for a reason - it's always there, so you don't need anything else, and it's typically the best choice. However, it doesn't necessarily have to be breathing; it could be



The feeling of your butt on the couch, or a sensation you're experiencing. The point is that

it's something you can observe,
quietly,
without thought.

it's something you can pay attention to, that is fairly constant, but also not shouting at your head. Hence the focus on the breath.

Third, and this is the most important thing,

**3. any time you realize you're
distracted from the breath**

gently note what it is

and return to the breath.

every time.

again. and again. and again.

noting

You might be wondering what exactly I mean by “noting”, and it’s worth going over as it’ll come up a lot in meditation. By “note” we simply mean a quick, light touch thought that identifies what the distraction is. If it’s a thought, just note “thought”, then go back to the breath; if it’s a sound, note what it was, or just “sound”, then come back to the breath, if it’s an itch, think “itch”. Just an acknowledgement of where our mind was before we return to the object of focus.

you're going to have a lot of notes

you're going to have a lot of notes, and... that's okay. the point



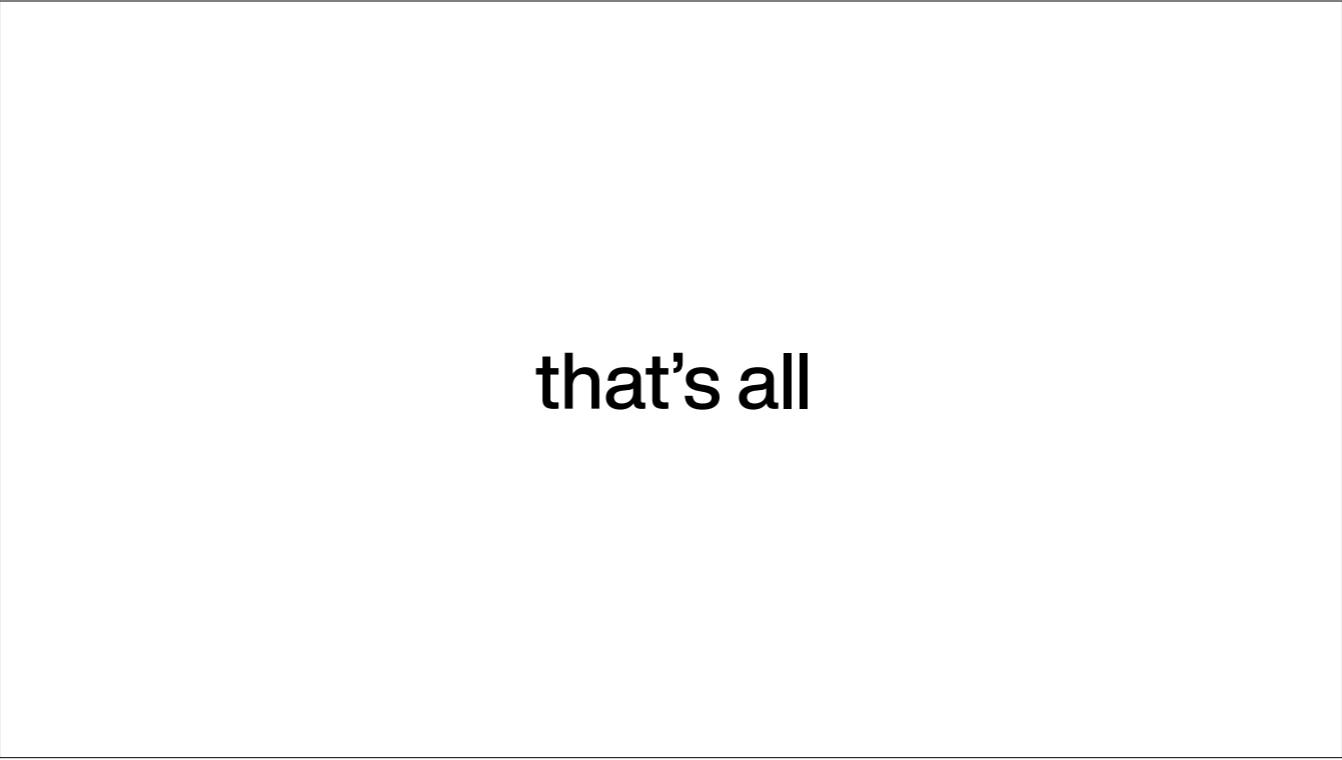
and, this is really important - the point of meditation is not the concentrated focus on the breath; that's just a convenient focus to return to. The observation of the interruption is the exercise itself. So getting lost in a thought is perfectly all right, it's the radical act of not getting caught up in it but, instead returning to the focus that's the point.

A lot of people get caught up and think that getting distracted is "doing it wrong" - when, no no, the whole thing is about observing the distraction.



And because getting lost is all right, we also don't want to have too intense of a grip in our minds. You want to observe the state, not change it. So trying to focus harder on the breath or judging yourself harshly if you get lost in a thought is not what we want.

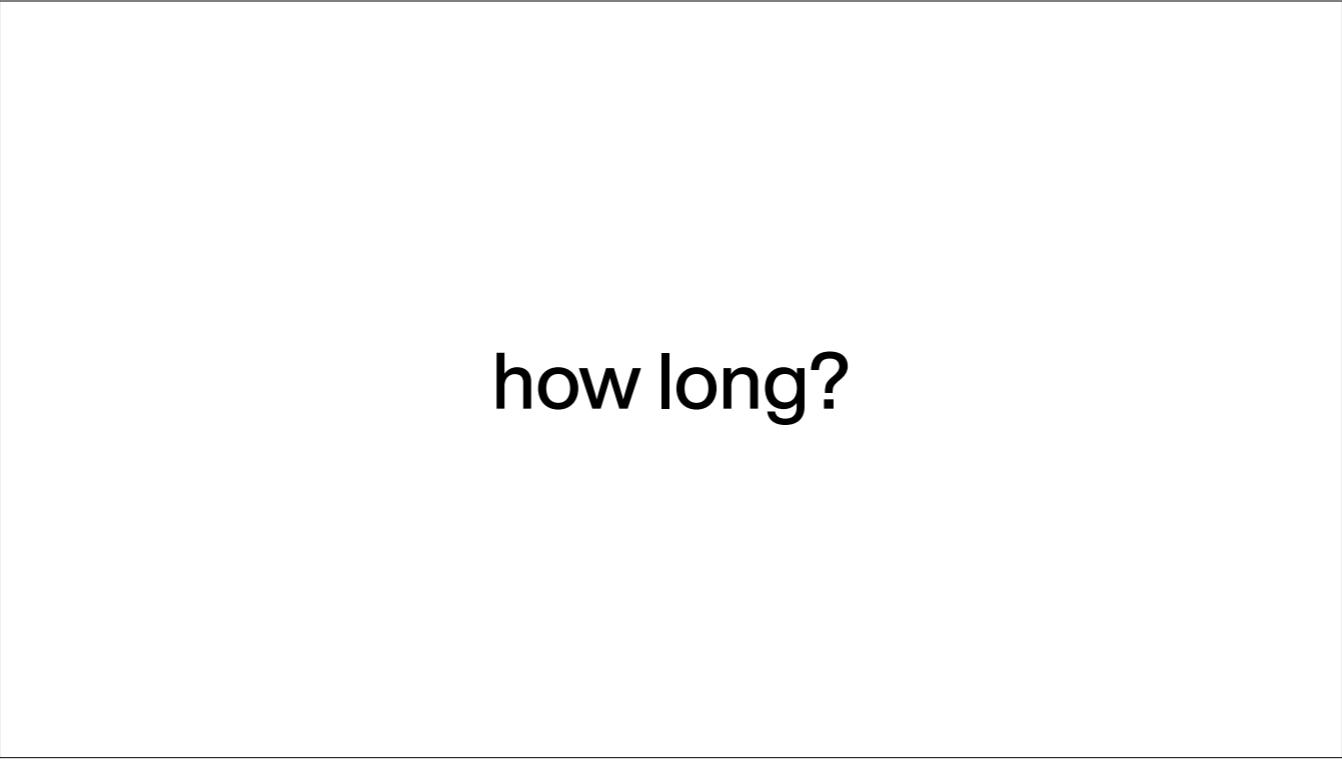
And...



that's all

That's basically it. That's all meditation really boils down to.

1. sit down.
2. focus.
3. any time you're distracted,
note, then refocus.



how long?

How long do you do this for? Ideally,

20 minutes

20 minutes. you can do less - even a quick minute can be centering - but 10 minutes is where the benefits tend to kick in more fully, and 20 minutes even more so. You can vary this a bit based on how you're feeling. But you'll definitely want to set a timer on your phone or use some other method to let you know when you're done.

whenever works

And you should do this whenever you can fit in in the schedule. For me, I find that earlier in the day works better, since it sort of adds a lasting benefit to the rest of the day, and I'm not tired/about to fall asleep. So sometime between getting up, often before or after breakfast, but around lunch at the latest for me. But if you have a specific time you can carve out where you're not going to be bothered too much, that's perfect.

So at this point you might be wondering

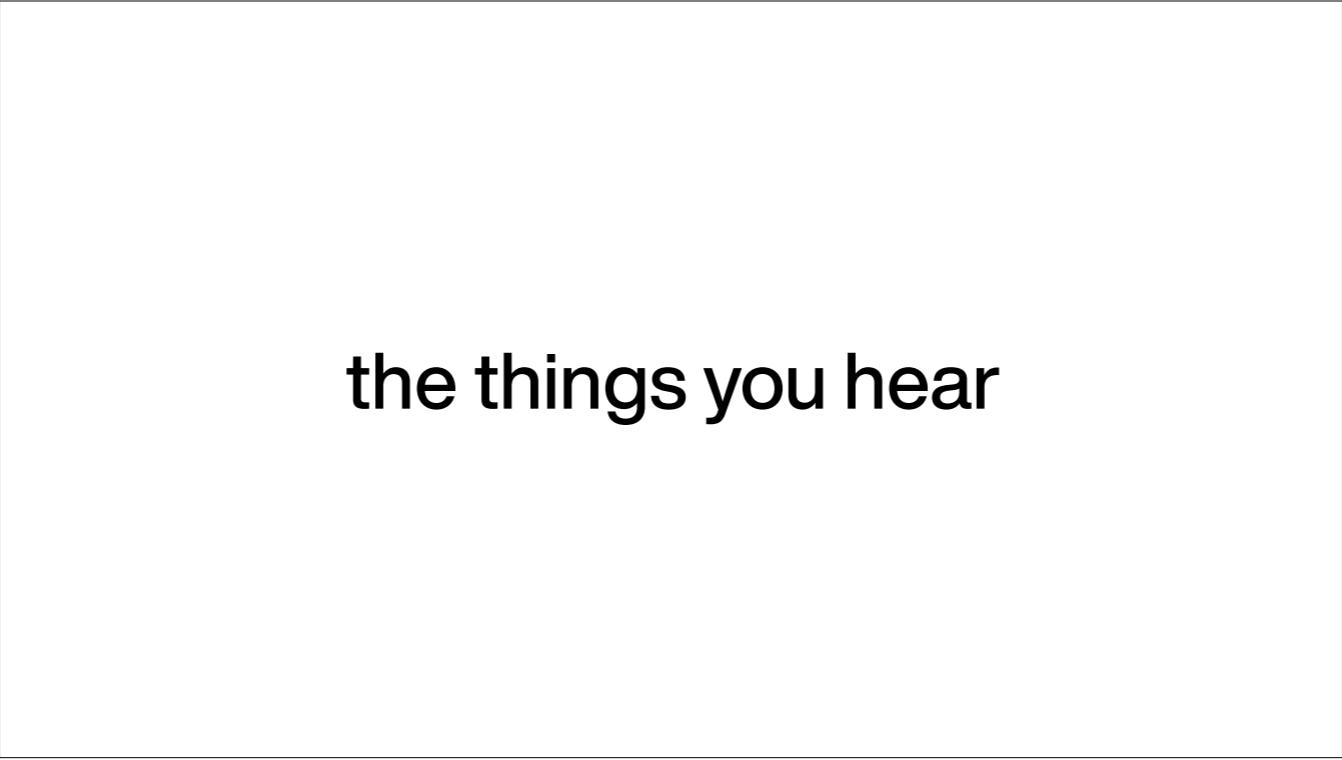


what's in it for me?

what's in this for me? A few things. One is that



it's sort of a good systems check. You're concentrating and observing the state of your mind and body, without distraction, and that's almost useful in and of itself. Several times I've sat down to meditate on a day where I was feeling shaky and not sure why, and a few minutes in realized, "oh, I'm tired." or "oh, I'm overcaffeinated." or "oh, I'm worried about an email I need to reply to." or "oh, I'm really worried about a talk I'm giving on Thursday." And that alone is a useful piece of information you might not have been fully aware of, and you can take that and do something with it.

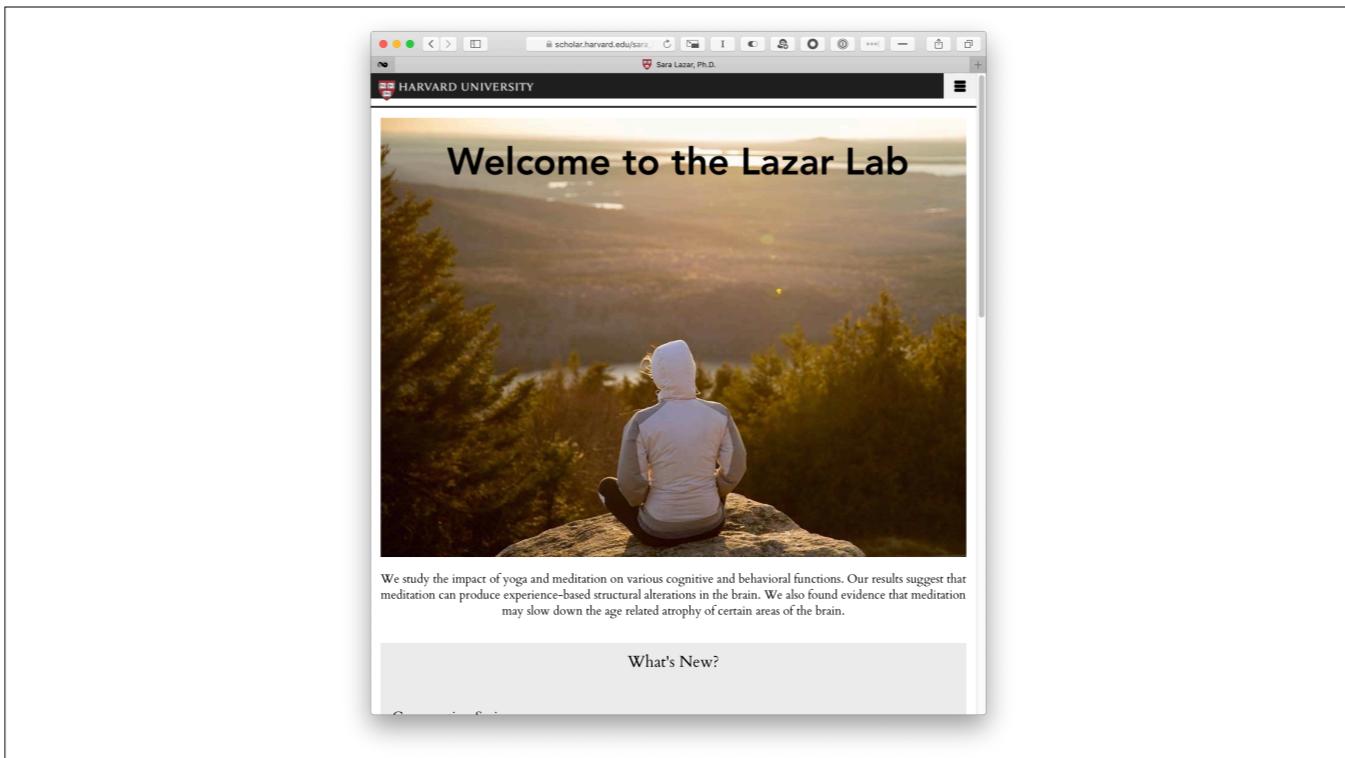


the things you hear

And then there's all the surface benefits you hear: reduces stress and anxiety, improves focus, etc.



These benefits aren't purely anecdotal; there's an increasing amount of science that's starting to back up meditation as helpful as well. Multiple studies from neuroscientists and neurobiologists show increased cognitive function, decision-making, attention, and well-being after just several weeks of meditating, and the effects might be useful for anxiety and depression, ADHD, and other mental conditions.



One such study, from Sara Lazar, a neuroscientist at Harvard studying the effects of yoga and meditation in the brain, showed that participants spending just eight weeks performing mindfulness-based stress reduction had significantly thicker volumes in areas of the brain relating to attention and mind-wandering, cognition, empathy, and decreased volume in the parts of the brain relating to fear and anxiety. And this is just one study among a growing body of evidence.

So it's starting to be clear that meditation has real benefits. But how these benefits manifest is, I think, particularly interesting.

meditating builds mindfulness

They happen because meditating helps reinforce mindfulness. The practice of sitting down and observing what's really happening in your mind helps build resilience and mindfulness into your day in ways you don't fully realize until it's happening. The space between you and your thoughts starts increasing, and you start being able to notice your thought patterns as they're happening. After a couple of weeks of practice, you'll really start to notice this kick in.

everyday mindfulness

And that everyday mindfulness is where the power comes in I think. Remember back to when I was talking about dealing with moments... meditation helps build that awareness, so it becomes more of an automatic thing.



And all of this combines to wind up making you feel... happier. Or more accepting. It's difficult to describe, but there is a noticeable difference in how you approach things. Dan Harris, whose books I'll talk about in a bit, specifically named his book 10% Happier because he needed a short snappy catchphrase, but the reality (as even Dan himself admits) is more complicated. It's easier to see why you're making the decisions you're making, and make different ones when you need to. It doesn't make going through something painful *easier*, but it does tend help you accept what's happening and maybe see alternate ways out of it. And these become immensely powerful tools.

where to go from here

Okay, so. We've talked a bit about mindfulness and what that is, and what meditation actually is, and how they work together. And some of the benefits. Let's talk a bit about where to go from here.

you don't need anything else

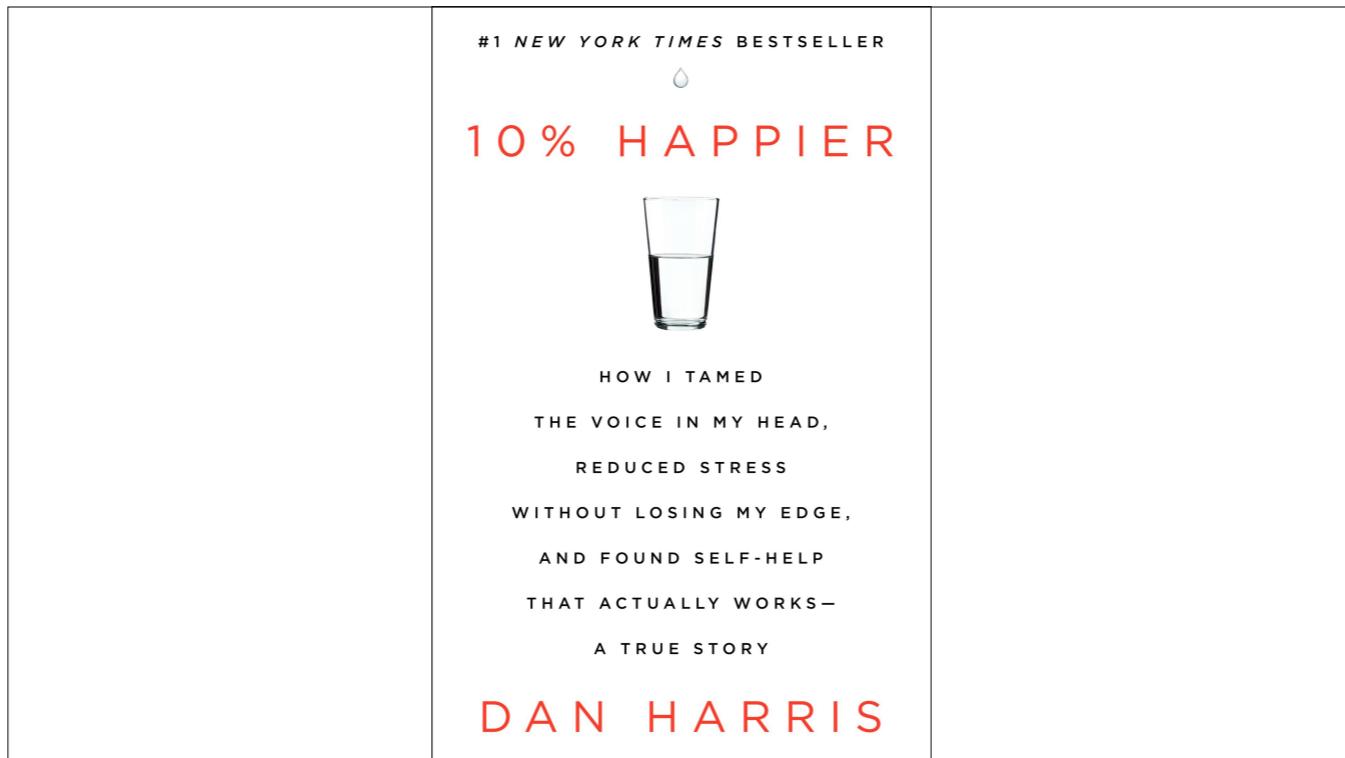
First, it's worth noting that we've essentially discussed the basics; the first time I started meditating, it was just with setting a timer and looking inward, the same as I laid out, and in some ways the commercialization of what is ultimately a very simple practice can feel a little weird. That being said, it's good to have some additional guidance.

types of meditation

For one thing, there are lots of different types of meditation. The type of meditation I outlined is a form of mindfulness meditation, sometimes called concentration meditation, because we're concentrating on a focus. But there are a variety of different ways to practice this. One is pure mindfulness meditation, where you're sort of focusing on whatever comes up as it comes up. There's also types like the RAIN meditation Amy talked about earlier. There's loving-kindness meditation, which increases feelings of empathy, self-worth and gratitude. I'll also call out walking meditation as being a particularly effective type for me. There are a multitude of different guides and ways, so it's worth exploring and seeing what resonates with you.

books

There are plenty of books out there that you can take a look at with a variety of approaches, but the ones that I'll plug as being most effective for me getting started with a bit of a skeptical attitude are Dan Harris' books. Dan Harris, if you haven't heard the name, is actually an ABC news anchor that had a panic attack live on air on Good Morning America, and his first book

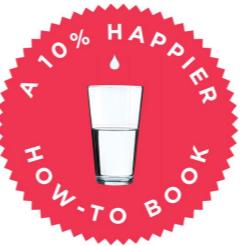


10% Happier sort of details what got him there, and the long sort of strange journey that wound up getting him into meditation and enthused enough about it to start writing. It's a pretty fascinating story, though it's light on how-to, and his second book is Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics, which he co-wrote with this amazing guy Jeff Warren and Carlye Adler

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DAN HARRIS

AND JEFF WARREN WITH CARLYE ADLER

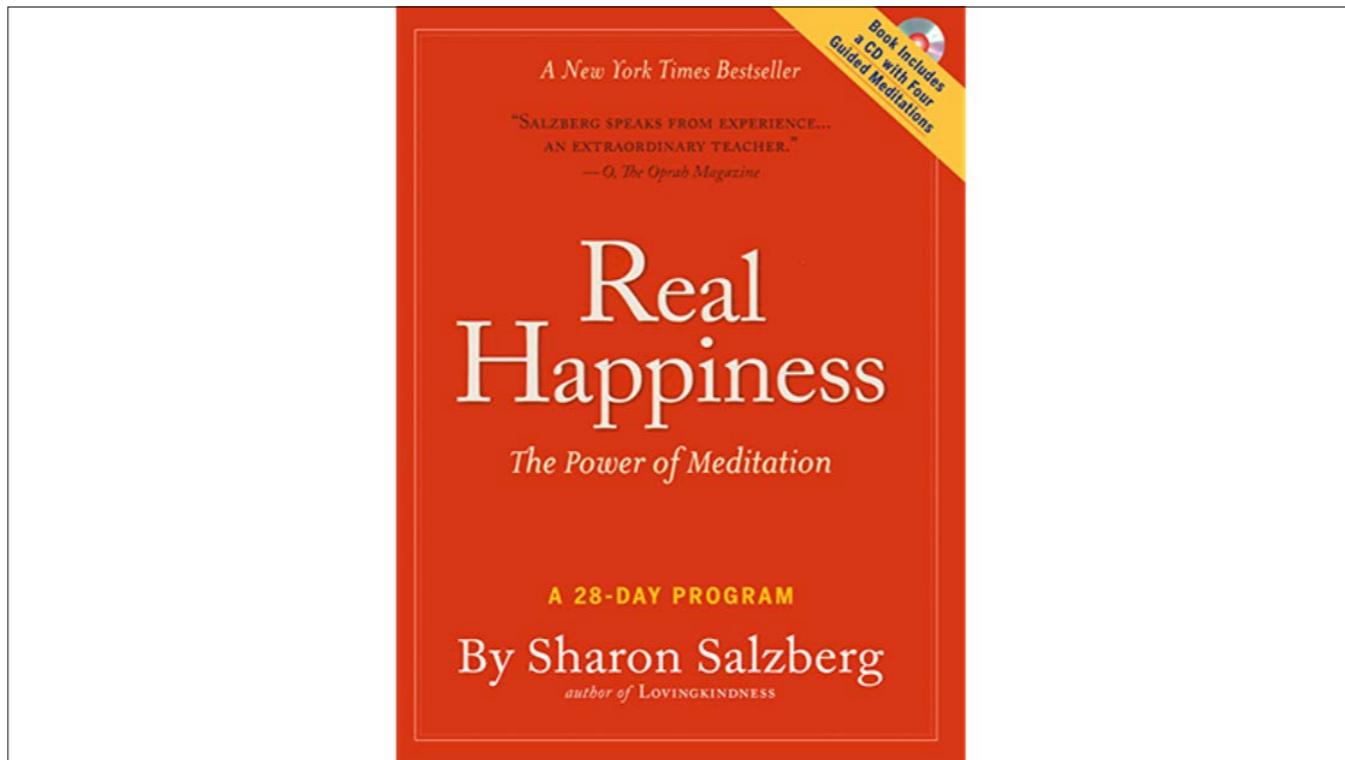


MEDITATION
FOR FIDGETY
SKEPTICS

"If your mind has a mind of its own, this is the book for you! With humor, generosity, and devastating candor, Dan Harris makes meditation make sense."
—MARK EPSTEIN, M.D., author of *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*

Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics, which he co-wrote with this amazing meditative guru of sorts Jeff Warren and Carlye Adler gets more into the how-to. I will warn you, his writing style I would describe as corny but endearing, but I think it works well for how he's presenting it. If you're still skeptical, but also curious, I'd really suggest 10% Happier first; if you're more interested in diving right in, I'd give Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics.

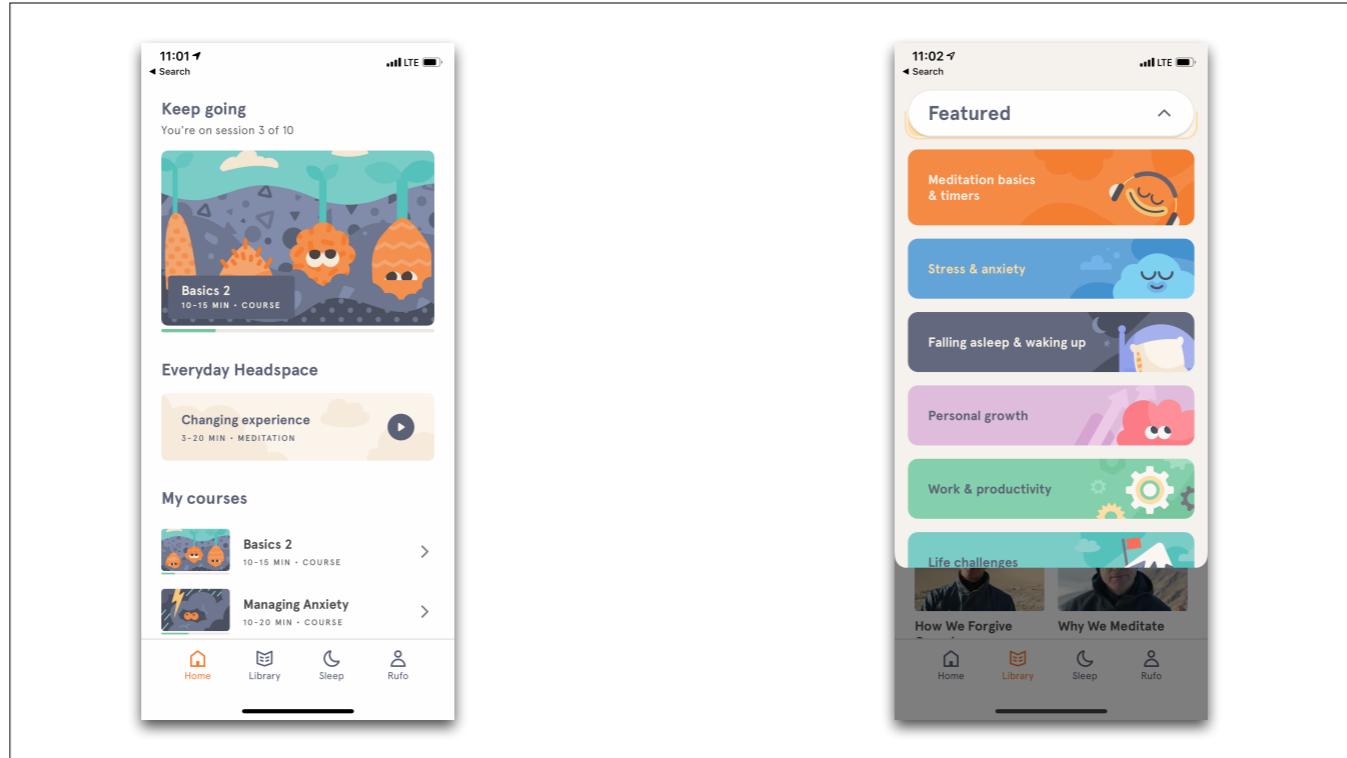
Dan Harris' style is that of an outsider that is coming into the fold and talking to all these experts; if you'd prefer something from someone more experienced, I'd suggest



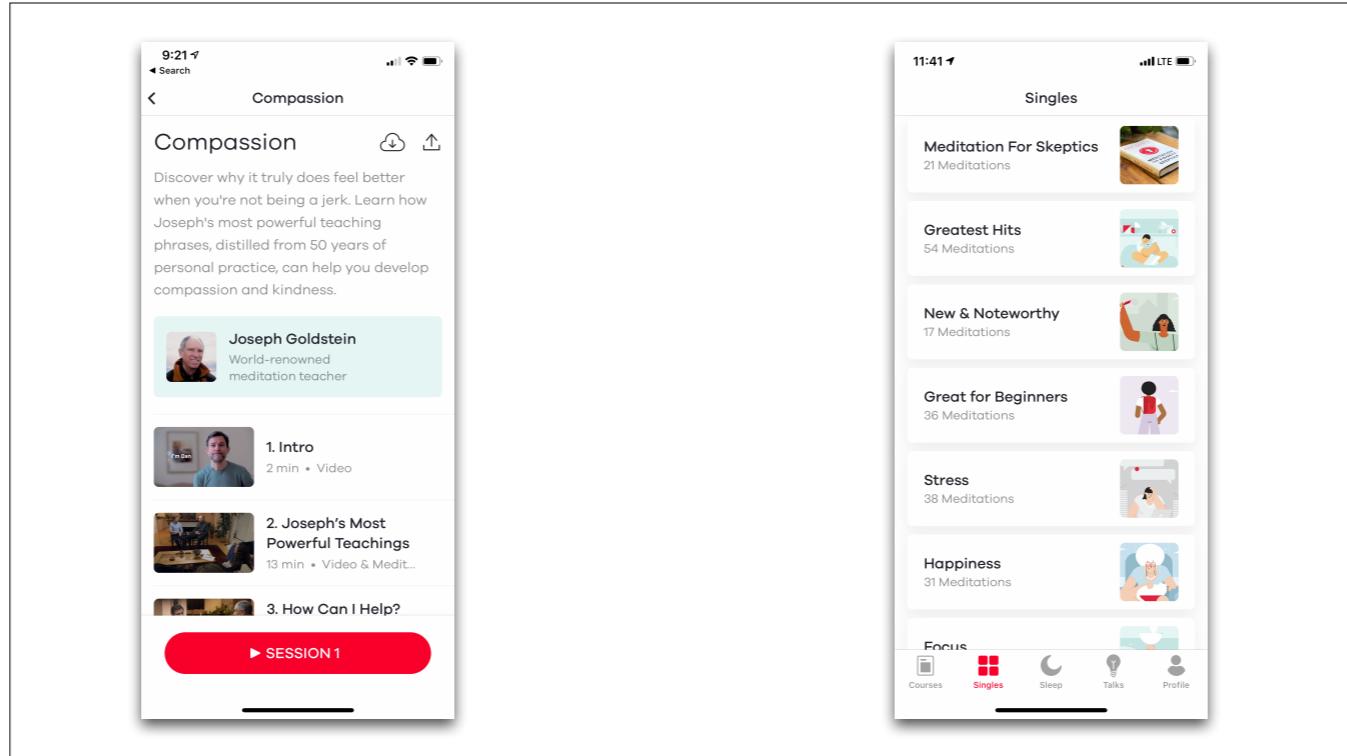
One of Sharon Salzberg's books. She actually works a lot with Dan Harris and is quoted in his book and has some courses in their app, and she really has a warm and genuine style. Dan Harris' approach is to come at meditation from an outsider perspective and explain how he was won over; Sharon's perspective is from someone who's been practicing for years and wants you to come aboard. I think both are great, so pick the approach you'd want. She has a bunch of other books that I haven't yet read through, and there are lots of people with so feel free to poke around and figure out what works for you.

there are apps for this

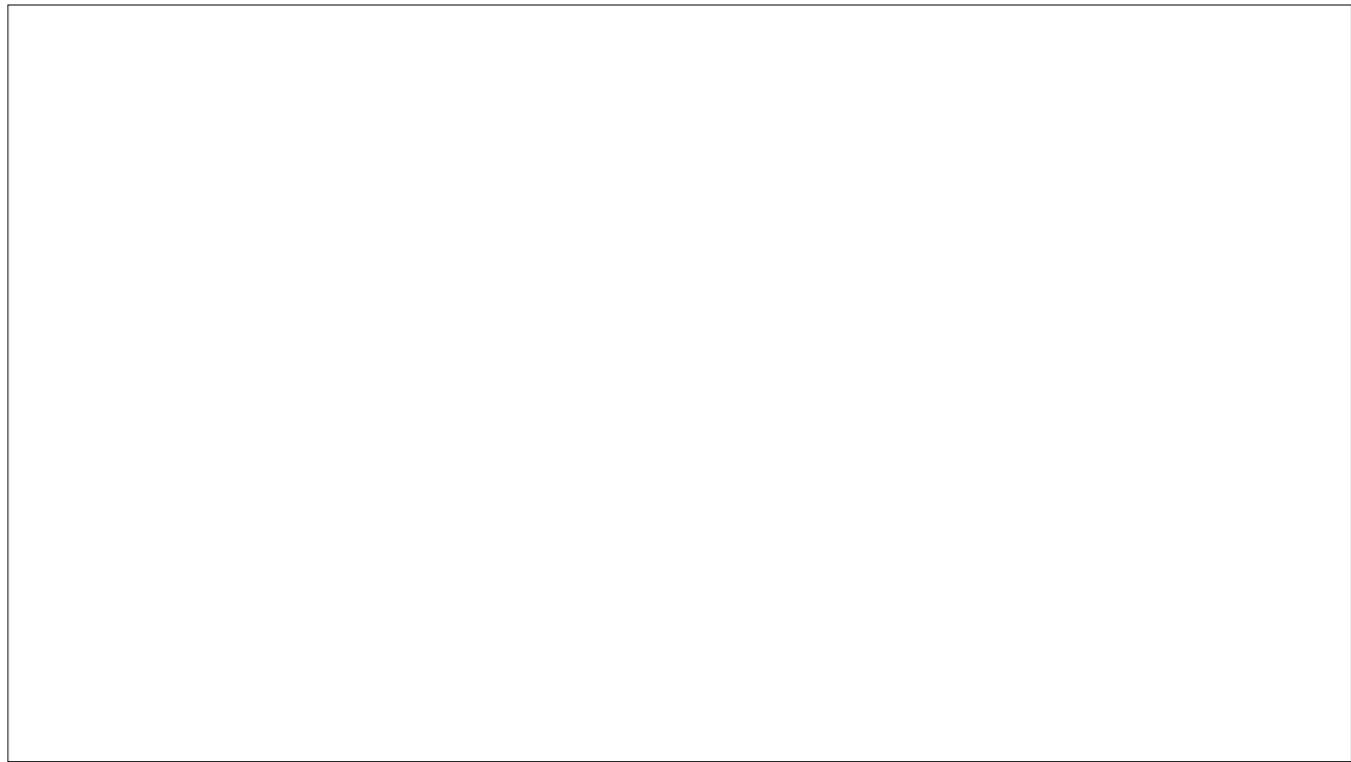
Apps. Of course meditation has turned into a fairly competitive tech trend, with all sorts of folks getting into it, but in some ways it makes sense; having a guided meditation is a great way to try out different types of meditations and keep you on track. Headspace is one of the biggest and oldest, and for beginners I think they have a really good introductory set of meditations; it's a good way to go if you just want to dive in immediately.



Headspace is one of the biggest and oldest, and for beginners I think they have a really good introductory set of meditations; it's a good way to go if you just want to dive in immediately. Almost all of the meditations are read by one of Headspace's cofounders Andy Puddicombe, so they're fairly consistent and generally high quality.



I also do quite like the 10% Happier app, specifically because there are a ton of meditations from well known teachers, many of which have a short interview before each lesson discussing a topic about mindfulness or meditation practice. There are a couple others too, Calm is the other large one I've heard of but haven't tried, I know Kevin Rose has one called Oak that I also haven't yet tried, and there's a great (or it was the last time I tried it) timer app called Insight Timer that is a bit more community driven. I actually used it quite a while ago before most of the guided meditations were added, so I can't speak to those. It's worth noting a lot of the bigger apps are subscription based, so just know that going into it.



And, finally, a quick personal note.

I came to meditation because I have always been a person that worries, that gets stressed out easily, and fairly constantly feels overwhelmed. I came to it because somebody who I would've never would've guessed in a million years that was a meditator talked about it (actually, someone on a gaming podcast I listen to). And meditation and mindfulness, while they are no silver bullet, have been an important tool in my quest to further myself, towards (to DHH and Maslow's point) self-actualization. And I hope that by talking about them here that they can be for you as well.

thanks! ❤️

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And that's it. Thank you.

So I'll have links to the apps and books I talked about, some links to some interesting articles and blogs about science and mindfulness, and the slides and attributions in the github repo; easiest way to get there is at talks.ru.fo (yep, I got it).