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## How to be "10% Happier"

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At the end of many classes and events, there is an opportunity to complete an evaluation. The questions are usually standard and unremarkable: what you liked, what might've been better, etc. One exception to standard evaluation fare has stuck with me more than two decades later. My favorite undergraduate philosophy professor always included an unusual question on his course evaluations: **"How might this course be improved in the future other than making the professor 20% smarter?"**

When we asked him what inspired that question, he responded that, "I've often thought that twenty percent might be the difference between *what I am able to do* (which is spend a considerable amount of time and effort writing original scholarship about philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein—that perhaps 50 people in the world read) and *what I might do* if I were twenty percent smarter (which is to be a philosopher on the level of a Wittgenstein that generations of students and scholars would read).

**Is there merely a twenty percent difference between *writing about a world-renowned philosopher*—and *being the next paradigm-shifting philosopher*?**

Maybe there is, mixed in with some combination of luck, resolve, and grit. I don't want to underestimate how much of a difference twenty percent can make.

I was reminded of that unusual evaluation question when I encountered the bestselling book [10% Happier](#) by Dan Harris, the co-anchor of ABC's *Nightline* and the weekend editions of *Good Morning America*. Some of you may be thinking ten percent happier? Is that all? Call me when we you are ready to discuss *thirty* percent happier,

*fifty* percent happier, or a *hundred* percent happier. Perhaps others of you are thinking: ten percent happier, sign me up! After all, if I could guarantee you a ten percent annual financial increase, that would be a significant return on investment.

Part of what inspired Dan Harris to title his book *10% Happier* is that he is a skeptic. Indeed, he has a sequel titled *Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics*. He's not sure about anyone purporting that they can make you 'all happy, all the time,' but he does feel confident in his own experience that meditation has made him at least ten percent happier.

Harris would even go so far as to say that his experience with meditation compounds annually—so that each year he feels like he's getting at least ten percent more benefit on top of what he had cumulatively achieved the previous years (2014: xix). Specifically, he feels **calmer, more focused, and more mindful** of what he is experiencing in any given moment (11-12). And his reports of his firsthand experience line up with the increasing number of scientific studies showing that meditation can:

- Reduce blood pressure
- Boost recovery after the release of the stress hormone cortisol
- Improve immune system function and response
- Slow age-related atrophy of the brain, and
- Mitigate the symptoms of depression and anxiety (2017: 4)

All that is to say: ten percent happier seems like a reasonable shorthand for those sorts of results.

As background, let me tell you a little bit of the story of what led a secular, scientific-minded skeptic such as Harris to experiment with a spiritual practice such as a meditation. He writes that:

In 2004, I had a panic attack while delivering the news, live, on ABC's *Good Morning America*. Being a masochist, I asked our research department to tell me exactly how many people were watching. They came back with the vastly reassuring number of 5.019 million. (If you are in the mood for a nice dose of *schadenfreude*, you can readily find the whole clip on YouTube. Just search for "panic attack on live TV," and it will pop right up. Which is awesome for me. (3)

That experience launched his journey for various strategies to better live with his anxiety.

In the fifteen years since that episode, Harris has spent a significant amount of time meditating (combined with therapy, medication and other modalities)—and received significant benefit—but I appreciate that his book-related podcast and smart phone app are still called Ten Percent Happier—not twenty percent happier or 100 percent happier. Indeed he confesses that if his wife were to write a rejoinder to his book *10% Happier*, it would be titled something like “90% Still A Moron.” Likewise, his brother has suggested that his book about Dan might be titled “From Deeply Flawed to Merely Flawed” (15). Jokes aside, **if I have to choose between “deeply flawed” and “merely flawed,” I’ll take merely flawed every day of the week!**

I appreciate as well that Harris is honest and transparent not only about his own experience, but also about his observations of meditation teachers that he has interviewed over the years. Consider, for instance, his interview with the spiritual teacher Deepak Chopra. Harris writes that:

Chopra claimed to be perennially present, and yet we filmed him pounding down the street while furiously typing on his Blackberry, and then voraciously devouring articles on his Kindle while ostensibly working out on an elliptical machine. He claimed to live in a state of “flow” and “effortless spontaneity,” but he seemed pretty focused on mundane self-promotion to me. While publicizing his latest book, he lobbied a reporter to follow him on Twitter, and when shooting a promotional video, he told them “Make sure I don’t look fat.” These didn’t strike me as the actions of a man living in perfect harmony with himself. (2014: 76)

I don’t mean to unduly single out Chopra; rather, I am using him as one of many examples of spiritual teachers who arguably make inflated claims about their attainments. Harris, in turn, is arguably erring on the side of caution with his tagline that meditation has made him ten percent happier. That relatively low percentage also reflects his ongoing interest in interrogating what is and isn’t possible for we imperfect human beings to achieve.

One of the greatest myths in some spiritual circles is that perfection is possible. I’ll let you in on an open secret: it’s not. As you’ve heard me quote before, “[We are](#)

[already saved from perfection.](#)” Anyone who tells you they are perfect or that they can save you from all pain and suffering is either lying or psychotically deluded. By all means, **we can get happier, calmer, kinder—but we remain within the limits of the human condition.**

I’ll give you one other recent example. I was saddened to learn this summer that Dr. John Yates, a neuroscientist, also known by the name Culadasa in meditation circles, was credibly accused of [sexual misconduct](#), some of which he had admitted to. And he has been removed as the spiritual director of the organization he was leading. In this case, the misconduct was not with his students, but he is neither the first nor the last authentic spiritual teacher to become embroiled in an ethical scandal.

I have never met Culadasa, but I have read his book *The Mind Illuminated*, and it remains one of the clearest, most accessible, and helpful meditation manuals I have found. I’ve also listened to numerous interviews with him over the years, and it seems evident to me and many others that he has had authentic, high level spiritual experiences and that he is a gifted teacher. At the same time, clearly he has some work to do in the arena of ethics. I bring this up because it is vitally important to be honest about the real benefits and the real limitations of any spiritual practices.

So while I can’t promise you perfection, I can promise you the potential for improvement. So if you have ever found yourself even a little bit meditation-curious, let me tell you a little bit of what I’ve learned over the years.

Part of what I did this past summer on sabbatical was attend my third 8-day meditation retreat. On that retreat I had a handful of remarkable experiences of incredibly focused concentration—in addition to many more hours of much less remarkable time on my meditation cushion. And although those sorts of “peak experiences” are part of what drew me to meditation in the first place, I’ve come to be much more interested in the more mundane ways that meditation can positively impact my everyday life.

While on that retreat, I happened to stumble upon a poem by Anne Hillman that helps point toward the fruit of the meditative journey. The end of that path is not perfection, but perhaps something more along the lines of the following. Hillman writes:

We look with uncertainty

Beyond the old choices for  
Clear-cut answers  
To a softer, more permeable aliveness  
Which is every moment  
At the brink of death;  
For something new is being born in us  
If we but let it.  
We stand at a new doorway,  
Awaiting that which comes...  
Daring to be human creatures.  
Vulnerable to the beauty of existence.  
Learning to love.

In the final lines of that poem, Hillman speaks powerfully of how we can cultivate that “softer, more permeable aliveness”: not by striving for an impossible perfection, but by “daring to be human creature.” a human creature? human creature? We open ourselves to new possibility by *practicing vulnerability* to the beauty of existence. We learn to love by *practicing love* toward others and ourselves.

What we choose to practice is key. One of the best analogies I’ve found for practicing meditation is that it is in some ways surprisingly similar to many other *practices*: whether music or sports or going to the gym. No one plays like Yo-Yo Ma at their first cello lesson. No one plays soccer like Megan Rapinoe their first time off the bench. No one can bench press their own body weight on their first day of working out. And even if most of us won’t achieve such heights, we can improve with practice.

And depending on the practices you choose, what are trying to do with meditation is strengthening your concentration or your mindfulness or your compassion, etc. You may start out with a breathing meditation in which you get distracted what feels like a thousand times, but each time you gently bring your attention back to your breath you are strengthening your concentration muscle. Over time, whatever you are practicing becomes more second nature.

Two of the most helpful guidelines I’ve learned from [my primary meditation teachers](#) are that, “**Breathing is home base**” and “**Noting is the go-to move.**” If you

are freaking out or not sure what to do, breathing and noting are often solid choices. Take a step back from what is happening—either physically or psychologically—and just breathe: in and out, in and out. *Breathing is home base*: where you can rest, relax, and recuperate.

And when you are ready: noting is the go-to move. Simply note—with a word or two—what is actually happening on the simplest, sensate level of your experience. Not meanings that we layer or project on top of our experience, but the base level sensations: warmth, coolness, tingling, breathing in, breathing out, thinking, etc.

In the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn, “**Meditation is not about feeling a certain way. It’s about feeling the way you feel**” (232). And what we find from meditation is that however we feel—whether pleasant or unpleasant—is ultimately impermanent. Everything arises and passes away. And experiencing that impermanence can be profoundly liberating: *this too shall pass*.

Dan Harris said that before he came up with the title *10% Happier*, his working title for his book was *The Voice in My Head is a [Bleep]* (xxi). So when that voice in your head is being unhelpful, remember *breathing is home base* and *noting is your go-to move*. So take a deep breath and note, “thinking” or “anticipating thought” or “anxiety.” Making a mental note of whatever is coming up for you from your subconscious can give you a little distance from what that voice is saying.

Along these lines, the meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein recommends imagining that the voices in your head are coming from another person. How would that shift your relationship to your thoughts ([Wright 110-111](#))? Most of us know that we don’t have to believe something just because someone says it to us. The same is also true that, “**You don’t have to believe everything you think.**”

If you’ve ever been meditation-curious, I encourage you to give it try. Keep you eye on your Order of Service or our E-newsletter for various opportunities to meditate with groups—or I’m glad to recommend other options from books to apps. And if you are clear that mediation is not your jam, there are lots of other options from yoga, to spending time in nature, to singing in the choir, to cooking or art that can have similar contemplative benefits.

I would also add that you don't have to start with sitting on a meditation cushion for twenty minutes: one, intentional deep breathe counts. One minute of deep breathing is even better. Likewise, if you can't get to a yoga class, can you spend a few minutes stretching. If you can't get to choir practice, crank up the music and sing along in your car. Give yourself the gift of doing the practices that you know make you at least ten percent happier.