Meditation for Women supporting women by Esther de Burgh-Thomas 10th July

INTRODUCTION

I have pinned an MP4 file of what you all requested: a slice of my own experience when I meditate, onto the end of this document following last night’s talk. I particularly wanted to talk about meditation because, if this talk and my recording can make meditation any easier for even one of you, it will be a great privilege for me to have freed you from whatever has been holding you back from something that is perhaps the single most beneficial way of regularly spending time. Last night, we all did a guided meditation from Jayasura on my app called Waking Up which, if you download, you will find is free of charge for the first month. The app, something that brings me a great deal of joy and knowledge and a sense of belonging to the world of meditators, is the creation of Sam Harris, neuroscientist and philanthropist. It is full of meditations, interviews and information on everything from stoicism to sleep hygiene. That app has revolutionised my life in many ways. I never use it for meditations but I do like to listen to the interviews before I get out of bed in the morning and it has caused me to buy books and even inspired me to travel to Edinburgh for “Any time, anywhere” conference on meditation led by the Buddhist lama, Mingyur Rinpochet whose photo is on my desk and who you can find on line if you type in Tergar or Tergar Joy of Living. He wants people to understand that you can meditate for one minute or five minutes wherever you are. Every minute is valid, as I hope to explain.

THE TALK

I was taught to meditate in a Buddhist monastery 33 years ago. I wanted to take meditation up to help me give up smoking and it worked. What the Buddhists taught me that has helped so much with the visualising meditation I do is not just to focus on my breathing in order to exclude thought but to make the impact greater by visualising myself breathing in white air and then breathing out black air throughout. It might seem difficult to believe that focusing on your own breath can stop you thinking but it’s true and Eckhart Tolle, the meditation teacher who wrote The Power of Now, explains it as follows:

“Being aware of your breath forces you into the present moment, the key to all inner transformation. Whenever you are conscious of the breath you are absolutely present. You may also notice that you cannot think and be aware of your breathing at the same time. Conscious breathing stops the mind.”

We humans all spend far more time thinking than is good for us. We even think in our sleep and, in the end, our head becomes like an echo chamber with the same thoughts returning so often that we are reduced to a thought about a thought about a thought. At times like this we lose the ability to sense the interconnectedness of all that exists, which lowers the mood. This is consistent with Sam Harris’s statement, in his book Waking Up, that everyday thought over-stimulates the mid-brain. Meditation raises brain activation levels and the result is a more positive mood.

Most of us believe that we are, in essence, our thoughts. Meditation will show you that we are, in fact, a great deal more than out thoughts. There are a number of solutions to the question, how to stop yourself thinking, for example transcendental meditation, where the focus is on repeating an inner sound. Dyslexic people thrive on transcendental meditation because, unlike non-dyslexics, they can only integrate sound and meaning when they speak. This means that, if they have chosen to create an ongoing inner sound, no thought can penetrate. Other ways to shut off thought (and by this I mean automatically going from one thought to the next) are chanting or even watching your own thoughts. Humming can make us happier for an additional different reason: it stimulates the production of nitrous oxide. If I was dyslexic, I would also try visualisation because that is less effort and the less effort a meditator needs to make, the better in my opinion.

Sara Lazar, another neuroscientist, confirms, in a TED talk, that thousands of studies confirm that meditation makes people happier and increases competence with decision-making. In fact, she and her team discovered quite a dizzying variety of benefits to the brain from meditation: for example, meditation euthanises the brain in the most basic way by thickening the cortex. In the normal course of evets, our cortex gets thinner with age. But even more interesting, to me, is what meditation can do for PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder. Trauma increases the size of the amygdala, the brain’s alarm bells so the sufferer can be jumpy and upset (traumatised) for years. Time does not necessarily shrink the amygdala back but meditation does, as Lazar’s TED talk shows us in detail This is why I see meditation is a vital component in the treatment of PTSD, along with normalising the breath rate and the sufferer writing out the trauma in detail, though not necessarily for an audience.

People make the mistake of feeling discouraged if they can’t focus on their breath for more than a second or so without thoughts coming through but that is completely normal whether you have been meditating for one minute or ten years. I have read, on good authority, that even the Dalai Lama has thoughts when he meditates. I have also listened to a talk by an English buddhist monk who said he had a nervous breakdown during his first year as a monk because he believed he was thinking too much during meditations. It turned out he didn’t realise that to have thoughts is normal for meditation and what the meditator should resist doing is chasing his thoughts. Thought is an accepted component of meditation, then: it’s your relationship with thought needs to change. It’s a good idea to always have a notepad and pen handy as your most creative and insightful thoughts are likely to come during a meditation. What all the best meditators aim to do is simply return to the breath as quickly as possible. Basically, what you are doing is training your mind to re-focus. The mind should behave like a trained sheep dog, herding erring sheep without getting distracted by any of them. A similar metaphor is staring up into a sky, with the clouds being a metaphor for your thoughts. It’s only when you realise your thoughts have been diverted by a cloud that you know it’s time to return your attention to the sky.

How long should people meditate for? The brain only physically restructures itself when the meditator stops the meditation and resumes everyday thought. This is an argument for longer meditations the older we get. An hour is a standard length for meditation by very serious meditators while some Japanese Buddhists meditate for two hours a day. At the same time, another neuroscientist, Andrew Huberman on YouTube, says thirteen minutes can make a significant positive difference while the Nepalese monk, Mingyur Rinpochet, says one minute twenty times a day is as beneficial as twenty minutes in one go. For me, sometimes it’s been an hour but currently it’s twenty minutes.

Something I never understood, but I do now is how a guided meditation can be a real meditation if the guide keeps interrupting. Sam Harris has explained that meditation was never supposed to be a trance, it is awareness. As such, your brain knows it is meditating the second you replace thought with your visualisation. Words in guided meditations will only detract from the experience if you allow them to trigger thoughts. As Eckhart Tolle writes in his book, The Power of Now, being aware of whatever is in the present moment (rather than letting thoughts drift to the past or future) constitutes awareness. If you were to whisper something in the ear of a top meditator while they were meditating, they would not need you to repeat your words. They would be at-the-ready, their mind uncluttered by thoughts. Meditation reminds us that what is beneath our thoughts is awareness. We are already far more than any system of thought could ever make us.

I hope you like my recording: it’s just there to give you a taste of what meditation is to me, a very fidgety person, at present. At any time I might switch back to pondering the uniqueness of any leaf and the divine design of each tree and the patterns the sunlight makes when it shines through the tree – that can take away thought as well but not if I’m sitting in my London garden in the evening (I only have a front garden): too many passersby interrupt my meditations! Instead I’ll be lighting a candle in my bathroom with all the lights out and juggling the attentions of my brother and sister cats for some time to come.

