

Affirm_{press}



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Introduction

Few experiences can compare to holding a human brain.

It was my first year of medical training. I was nineteen years old, and as I stood in the cold, sterile dissection room with a brain in my hands, I wondered how a lifetime of memory, feelings and thoughts could arise from this one-kilogram tofu-like substance. This fascination with the brain, coupled with my desire to help people live happy and meaningful lives, led me to a career in psychiatry.

As I moved deeper into my career I discovered that while psychiatry helped save people's lives, it often left the flourishing part of the equation to other health professionals. I also realised that this was the part of the journey I was most passionate about. I wanted to support people in thriving, not just surviving.

Truth be told, throughout my training, as I worked twenty-four-hour shifts on the wards, my own health and happiness were being affected. As a highly sensitive person who deeply cared about her fellow human beings, the work I was doing was taking its toll, at times leaving me stressed and overwhelmed.

I wasn't alone. As I spoke with my colleagues, I discovered a silent epidemic of doctors experiencing vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and existential crises of their own. One day I turned up to work to find that one colleague had admitted himself to a psychiatric clinic. The pressure had sent him spiralling into a severe depression.

I knew I wanted to be of service, to help others flourish and make a positive difference in the world, but I sensed I wasn't moving in the right direction. I valued the rigour of science and the solid foundation of knowledge my training gave me, but I was feeling unfulfilled and confused. I knew I wasn't on the right path, but I wasn't sure how to course correct.

The words of writer Rainer Maria Rilke were a great consolation at this time:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

And live into the answer I did.

If you've picked up this book, I'm guessing that you are also curious about how to experience greater happiness in your life. Perhaps you're

looking for ways to reduce stress and feel calmer, or maybe you're going through a transition that's causing suffering in your life: a relationship breakup, career dissatisfaction or a recent health issue. Or perhaps you're a seeker and lifelong learner who thrives on discovering the latest science to support you in living your best life.

You've come to the right place.

It was during my own search for clarity, happiness and resilience that I discovered mindfulness meditation.

It was the early 2000s, and mindfulness had not yet hit the mainstream medical world. I attended a conference and heard leading neuroscientists Dr Richard Davidson and Dr Michael Merzenich talk about the impact of mindfulness on the brain, and the new science of neuroplasticity – the brain's capacity to adapt and change throughout our lifetime in response to our experiences.

I was intrigued. Only a few years earlier, the accepted view in science was that the brain rapidly developed until about our mid-twenties, at which point brain-cell growth stopped and our capacity to create new neural pathways significantly reduced. It was a depressing picture of our brain's capacity, peaking early and then declining into old age. But by the time of the conference, Davidson and a few other leaders in the field of neuroscience were correcting this misconception. A new understanding of the brain was emerging, and it provided much more exciting possibilities.

Davidson shared research demonstrating that mental training such as meditation actually changed meditators' brains – both functionally *and* structurally – in ways that supported greater happiness and wellbeing. The changes were even seen in relatively short periods of meditation practice: one of Davidson's studies revealed that just seven hours of compassion meditation over a two-week period resulted in

measurable changes in the brain, and also had a positive impact on behaviour, leading to increased altruism. Meanwhile, in a study of rats, Merzenich and his team demonstrated that regular brain training not only allowed their brains to continue growing and maintain function into old age, but could actually *reverse* age-related functional decline. His later studies found the same outcomes for humans who participated in intense brain training. The lifelong potential of neuroplasticity was emerging as a crucial element of our collective scientific understanding, empowering us to reach optimal levels of wellbeing.

These scientists were suggesting that just as practising an instrument improves one's musical abilities, implementing regular mind and brain practices could improve our psychological and physical wellbeing. I realised this perspective on wellbeing could offer hope to my patients, many of whom believed that their potential for happiness was limited by their genetics. Many saw themselves destined to a fate of familial anxiety or depression, with no capacity to influence this trajectory.

Although genetics undeniably has an influence on our mental health, the new science offered a more empowering perspective, where we could, to some extent, become sculptors of our own brains.

I realised that I was witnessing a paradigm shift in the world of wellbeing. Old models were being shattered as new models emerged, revealing the undiscovered potential of our brains. Scientific research was supporting what Buddhist monks had known for well over two thousand years: that meditation was a powerful tool for enhancing wellbeing, clarity and happiness.

As I continued to explore this robust science, I was inspired to do my own investigation into mindfulness and the brain, so I dived head-first into meditation by signing up for a seven-day silent meditation retreat.

My psychiatry boss at the time warned me against it. 'I had a patient

who lost their mind on one of those things. I couldn't think of anything worse,' he casually remarked.

To be honest, I was a little scared too. Spending a week in silence with only my mind as company terrified me. As a high-energy person who likes to be productive and creative, I didn't consider myself the ideal candidate for meditation. However, despite my reservations, a few weeks later I found myself on a meditation cushion in a retreat centre in the Byron Bay Hinterland.

During the first few days I struggled. I was falling asleep from boredom and exhaustion in some moments, then experiencing the most profound levels of agitation at others. It felt like an army of ants was crawling under my skin.

Then, after three days of obsessively questioning what I was doing there and contemplating escape plans, an unfamiliar sense of calm emerged. It was as though I'd been living my whole life with a background of mental static, and suddenly it cleared. I felt strangely content being right where I was, even though what I was doing was objectively pretty boring.

On the afternoon of the fourth day I strolled around the retreat grounds, strangely captivated by the details of trees and plants. Colourful flowers seemed more vibrant, leaf patterns and shapes were as fascinating as works of art, the melodic bird song as thrilling as a live music concert. I was completely present, absorbed in the moment. The narrating, planning, judging, worrying voice in my head had disappeared. There was stillness, ease and a feeling of deep connection to everything.

I laughed at my clichéd transformation. I'd quickly gone from being a driven, ambitious, latte-sipping, list-making city dweller, to a bird-watching, contemplative, calm, nature-admiring meditator. After

only a few days of silent practice I had indeed ‘lost my mind’, but in the most positive way.

When I arrived home from the retreat, my partner noticed the difference too. He told me I seemed calmer and more present.

I didn’t realise it at the time, but this turning inwards was the beginning of a profound shift in the direction of my life.

As I continued training in mindfulness with some of the world’s leading teachers, I was inspired by the qualities they embodied: wisdom, happiness, humility, generosity, patience, and compassion. However, although I knew how powerful this training was, I felt confused about how to share it in the mainstream setting of a psychiatry ward. At the time it felt too far off the beaten track. At a training retreat I attended with Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the early pioneers of mindfulness in the West, I shared my confusion about how I could use what I was practising in the context of my psychiatry training.

‘I’ve been training in psychiatry, but I feel like something has been missing in its model of wellbeing. I’ve experienced the power of mindfulness in my own life and I know there’s solid science to back it, but I don’t know how to get past the cynicism and resistance to it in the medical world. How do I convince other doctors that it’s not too esoteric?’

Jon answered compassionately: ‘Do you know what aikido is?’

‘I know it’s a type of martial art,’ I replied.

‘It’s a martial art that works gracefully with the energy of another, rather than against it. You need to do aikido with the system.’

I must have looked puzzled, because he elaborated, suggesting that I gently bring mindfulness into the system, experimenting with different ways to integrate it into my work.

At that moment I realised it was my own limited beliefs about the medical world that were holding me back. The answer lay in finding

whatever small doorways would allow me to share what I had learned.

Not long after my training with Jon Kabat-Zinn, a groundbreaking study emerged supporting the impact mindfulness could have on mental health, specifically depression. A group of psychologists in England named Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal conducted a study of patients who had suffered multiple episodes of depression. Incredibly, they found that mindfulness practice was at least as effective in preventing depressive relapse as maintenance antidepressants – without any of the side effects. A later study building on this discovery found that mindfulness practice could nearly halve the risk of depressive relapse.

This research impressed even the most biologically minded psychiatrists. Following this research, one psychiatric clinic began running pilot mindfulness programs, which I co-facilitated, for people with anxiety, depression and addiction. I remember one woman in her sixties, a recovering alcoholic who had a volatile relationship with her daughter. She found that mindfulness opened her up to vital new ways of communicating. At the completion of the two-month program she shared that she'd had a powerful conversation with her daughter that led to tears of sadness and joy. They'd felt a mutual connection, something they hadn't experienced for decades.

Another participant, who had suffered chronic depression and who had tried multiple medications with no sustained improvement, reluctantly arrived at the group following his psychologist's referral. He was cynical, impatient and at times quite agitated that nothing was changing. He'd get lost in doubts and stuck with the hopeless, helpless lens that tinted his reality. I was surprised each week to see him return, sure that he was going to drop out. At some level, I started to wonder whether mindfulness really could help him. In those moments

I remembered some of Jon Kabat-Zinn's advice: 'You need to let go of any attachment to needing something to happen for your participants. Just be patient and trust the process.'

As we approached the end of the program, the man started to have more frequent insights, which slowly coalesced towards a deeper shift. He shared his learnings with the group, explaining that he'd discovered he could watch his thoughts rather than believe all of them: 'I've learned how to be kinder to myself rather than being such a critical bastard all the time.' He went on to describe how mindfulness was helping him catch himself when he began falling into depressive rumination and helped him redirect his attention away from the mental quicksand, and back to the breath or sounds around him. Most profoundly, mindfulness was helping him notice all the things he actually had in his life, including his wife and loving daughters, even in the midst of his depression.

A doorway to greater happiness and purpose

Many people in the West have been drawn to meditation or mindfulness with the hope of finding better ways to manage their stress. However, although these practices can be a powerful antidote to the stress in our lives, they have a much deeper capacity to transform us.

There are so many books that boast magical, quick fixes to life's challenges, and judging by the number that are hitting the bestseller lists, it seems that many of us are searching for that 'secret' to achieving lasting happiness. We are obsessed with trying to avoid the suffering that comes with being human.

In our relentless pursuit of happiness, we can easily get caught running on 'the hedonic treadmill', constantly seeking external sources

of pleasure. Whether it's earning more money, finding the 'perfect' relationship, or seeking approval, power, or success, we look for happiness in areas that are often transient and outside of our control. Our desires just keep bubbling up as we struggle to fill the gap between our current reality and some imagined better reality 'over there'.

But there is another form of wellbeing and happiness, called eudaimonic happiness, first explored by Aristotle several thousand years ago. Eudaimonia comes from two Greek words: *eu*, meaning 'good', and *Daimon*, which is translated as 'soul' or 'self'. This type of flourishing is not dependent on external circumstances, but rather emerges from an inner sense of wellbeing; it's created by what we bring to life rather than what we get out of it, and it is completely within our control. Mindfulness training connects us to our inner reservoir of wellbeing, and helps us see the causes of our happiness and suffering. With this growing wisdom and clarity, we make better decisions and start to experience a happiness that transcends our never-ending flow of wanting.

Don't get me wrong, I love life's pleasures – whether it's eating a delicious meal, hearing live music, dancing or travelling somewhere new. However, over time I've begun to recognise how fleeting these things are and how insatiable my appetite for pleasure can be.

The good news is that this book is a guide to experiencing more eudaimonia – or genuine happiness – in your life. And there's no bad news, other than it will take some time each day to master the skill.

I'm not going to teach you magical ways to 'manifest anything you want' or solutions to eliminating life's inevitable challenges (although I wish I could). This book won't help you find your 'perfect soulmate' or 'get rich quick'. However, you will discover a completely new way of understanding your thoughts and mind that, as far as I've found, is the real 'secret' to supporting your greatest happiness.

When I started learning mindfulness meditation I had no idea how deeply it would transform my life. One morning, when I had been meditating for several years and was almost at the end of my psychiatry training, I was sitting in meditation when a phrase appeared in my mind, flashing like a neon light: ‘Mindful in May’. The phrase grew into an idea to create an online global month of mindfulness each year during May, where people could be taught about mindfulness by leading experts from around the world and dedicate the month to making a positive difference by raising funds for global poverty.

This was the beginning of a new path that would answer the call of my longing to make a positive difference in a more far-reaching way than prescribing medication and facilitating small group meetings. It was an idea that integrated three of my passions: mindfulness, social impact and community building through technology.

Over the weeks that followed, I sat with the idea and let it simmer in my mind. Although I was passionate about it, I began to doubt whether I had the skills and capacity to make it happen, grappling with thoughts such as, ‘How am I going to run an online campaign with absolutely no tech knowledge?’ I had become so conditioned to the hierarchy of the medical world that it felt completely new to take a leap without a senior colleague giving me the go ahead. I had spent my whole life carefully studying before I took action, and now I was going to have to take action first and learn along the way.

At this time, I stumbled across a book called *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield, which explored the phenomenon of resistance. Pressfield wrote:

Resistance can show up in many forms and often it’s through self-criticism or self-doubt. Here’s the mistake we make when we listen

to the voice of self-doubt: We misperceive a force that is universal and impersonal and instead see it as individual and personal. That voice in our heads is not us. It is Resistance ... To yield to resistance deforms our spirit. It stunts us and makes us less than we are and were born to be.

His words, together with an impending deadline of May, pushed me into action. I took the plunge and started to bring the vision to life.

Since its creation, Mindful in May has taught thousands of people from more than thirty-five countries how to meditate, while at the same time bringing better health to those in the developing world. It has brought contentment, joy and connection to those in the developed world by teaching the skills of mindfulness, and at the same time has saved lives in the developing world by raising money to build clean water wells in Africa. Corporate organisations including Google, as well as schools, government, and high-profile Australian individuals, have become champions of Mindful in May. Participants who complete the program almost universally report an improvement in mental clarity, reduction in stress and an increased appreciation of daily life.

Much of the research in the field of mindfulness explores the impact of thirty to forty-five minutes of meditation a day on physical and psychological wellbeing. However, since the inception of the Mindful in May program I noticed that the participants were reporting the benefits of just ten minutes' daily practice. This led me to investigate through a research study whether ten minutes of meditation a day over one month had any tangible benefits. Excitingly, the study, which included over two hundred people from the program, suggested exactly what we'd suspected. Ten minutes of

mindfulness meditation a day over one month was enough to support more positive emotions, reduce stress, increase self-compassion and strengthen focus in daily life.

**HOW TEN MINUTES OF MEDITATION
FOR ONE MONTH DURING MINDFUL IN MAY
AFFECTED PARTICIPANTS:**

‘I am prone to shocking anxiety and meditation has really helped with that. I just passed my three-hundred-day mark since I started meditating regularly with Mindful in May.

That really kickstarted it for me – consistency has always been my problem. Being guided through Mindful in May to meditate for ten minutes is very doable in this busy life, and you still get the benefits.’

– Magda Szubanski, actor, comedian and writer

‘I confess I was a cynic about meditation and mindfulness. But after my husband died suddenly in 2014, and I was confronted with night after night of terrible insomnia, a friend suggested I give Mindful in May a go and I thought, “What have I got to lose in committing ten minutes a day to something?” My sleep improved, symptoms of a chronic physical health condition improved and I felt more alert and capable to deal with the craziness of everyday life. By bringing mindfulness into my daily routine, I have seen significant improvements in my overall wellbeing.’

– Fiona Grinwald, writer and founder of 2lookup

The benefits and applications of mindfulness

Although it may seem like mindfulness is a recent trend, it actually originated from Buddhist contemplative practices that are over 2500 years old. The original word for mindfulness in the Pali language of the ancient Buddhist texts is *sati*. This has a number of different meanings, including ‘to familiarise’ or ‘to remember’. Mindfulness training familiarises us with the nature of the mind, helping us to recognise more clearly what leads to suffering and what leads to happiness. The training sharpens our ability to ‘remember’ to return to the present moment, especially when we get lost in unhelpful thinking – the kind that unnecessarily amplifies our stress, entangling us in worries about things that usually don’t end up happening.

Many other definitions of mindfulness have emerged over time, but in essence, it is ...

... a clear, curious and present-moment awareness of what is happening within us and around us, from moment to moment.

In the 1970s Jon Kabat-Zinn was the first to explore the benefits of mindfulness in a mainstream context by bringing it into the hospital setting. He wanted to explore whether it could reduce the suffering of those with complex medical illnesses and pain. He discovered that mindfulness training had powerful, measurable effects not only on the minds but also on the bodies of people with various health conditions. Some of Kabat-Zinn’s earliest research in 1998, conducted through his program Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), found that patients suffering from psoriasis (a chronic skin condition) who participated in mindfulness programs healed more rapidly than the group that received conventional treatment alone. His research also

explored the benefits of mindfulness for those suffering chronic pain, revealing significant improvements in the quality of life for patients not only during the program, but also in the longer term. Impressively, these 225 patients were followed over a four-year period and a majority of them were still experiencing the benefits with a sustained mindfulness practice.

In her book *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky, one of the world's leading researchers in positive psychology, reveals that although up to fifty per cent of our potential happiness is determined by our genetic makeup and ten per cent by life circumstances that are out of our control, forty per cent of our potential happiness *is* within our control and determined by 'what we do in our daily lives and how we think'.

Moreover, studies in the field of epigenetics demonstrate that it's not simply the genes we inherit that determine our destinies. The way in which they are expressed also has a powerful impact on our wellbeing, ranging from our risk of getting cancer to whether we will be overweight or suffer from depression. We now know that our environment and lifestyle choices (including our diet, exercise and stress levels) can have a profound impact on which genes are turned on or off.

Excitingly, research also shows that mindfulness meditation can positively impact on the way certain genes are expressed. In one of the most groundbreaking studies to date, Richard Davidson demonstrated that just one day of mindfulness practice could reduce the expression of specific genes associated with inflammation in the body, a known risk factor for various chronic illnesses. This discovery has spiked the interest of even the most sceptical scientists.

During my training as a doctor, the mind and body were often

considered separate entities. Research like Davidson's has forced us to completely rethink this concept. The discovery that a form of mental training can influence the body right down to the level of our genetic expression is extraordinary, and highlights the intimate connection between our mind and body. It is helping dissolve the artificial boundaries that have been drawn between body and mind for centuries. We are finally understanding that it would be more accurate to consider ourselves a 'body-mind' – one integrated whole.

With the World Health Organisation (WHO) announcing that depression has become the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide, we must learn how to manage the increasing stress of life. Mindfulness is one skill that can strengthen our inner resources to better cope with the inevitable demands of being human. More than just 'nice to have', it's become an essential life skill that we need to help us navigate these increasingly complex times.

MINDFULNESS VS. MEDITATION: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

The words 'mindfulness' and 'meditation' are often used interchangeably, but there is a difference between them. In the simplest terms, mindfulness is a form of meditation. 'Meditation' can be used to describe any discipline that involves training your mind to reduce suffering. There are many different forms of meditation originating from different philosophies, including transcendental, tantric and creative visualisation meditation – and of course mindfulness meditation. In other words, meditation describes a collection of different forms of mental training that ultimately lead to the same place: greater clarity, wisdom and happiness in life.

With so many different options how do you know which one to choose? As a doctor trained in psychiatry, I was drawn to mindfulness meditation because it can be practised in a completely secular way, is not attached to any particular religion or culture, and has the greatest number of evidence-based benefits. But rather than trusting me blindly, I suggest that you practise mindfulness meditation every day this month and see what benefits you experience.

Understanding the mind and building resilience

As humans we have a unique evolutionary advantage, with minds that can project into the future, solve complex problems and generate creative ideas that transform what is possible. However, this unique talent comes at a cost. With minds that are free to time travel between past, present and future, we get excessively caught up in future thinking that creates unnecessary worry in our lives.

HOW MINDFUL ARE YOU?

You can do a quick test right now to see how mindful you are. Remember that you can't fail this experiment; it's a quick way for you to see that, just like everyone else, your mind gets easily distracted.

Allow yourself to sit or lie comfortably. Close your eyes and feel your breath moving in and out of your body. Then, at the end of each outbreath, begin to count. See how many breaths you can count silently to yourself without getting distracted and losing track of the number.

Try it out now and come back to this passage when you've given it a go.

Remember the number that you counted before getting distracted, write it down somewhere, and at the end of this month of mindfulness, do the test again and see what number you can get up to after a month of mental training!

If you tried this experiment, you may have noticed how easy it is to get distracted and lose track of the count. Most of the time there is a constant stream of thoughts running through our minds, though we are not always aware of it. It affects our capacity to be present, and unconsciously influences our behaviours and decisions.

Maybe you can relate to the experience of sitting down to work and catching yourself jumping between tasks, feeling like you're not really doing anything properly. Or perhaps you've noticed how easily you can get hijacked by your Facebook stream and waste hours numbing out when you could have spent that time doing something far more productive (like meditating!). Maybe you're finding it difficult to switch off and go to sleep at night because your mind is racing through all the things you need to do the next day.

The truth is, we often have very little control over our thoughts; in many ways, our mind has a mind of its own. The untrained mind jumps from thought to thought, like a monkey jumping from branch to branch. In mindfulness meditation training, this is referred to as 'the monkey mind'.

In a famous study, Daniel Gilbert, an American psychologist, aimed to investigate just how distracted our minds actually are, and what impact this has on our overall happiness. Participants were asked three questions at random times throughout the day: 'What are you doing?', 'Where is your attention?' and 'What's your mood like?' Gilbert found that people were distracted about forty-seven per cent of the time, but even more interestingly, he found a strong correlation between having a distracted mind and feeling stressed and unhappy. When people were not focused on what they were doing, regardless of the type of activity, they described feeling less happy. The conclusion of the study was that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.

One of the fascinating things about our mind is that thoughts can be voluntary or involuntary. While we can actively bring a thought to mind, many just arise of their own accord, and it's the unprompted negative thoughts that get us all tangled up and stressed out. When a negative thought comes to mind our natural tendency is to push it away. Paradoxically, this only amplifies the thought. In 1863, Russian novelist and philosopher Fyodor Dostoyevsky was considering the problem: 'Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute.' We can choose to bring a thought up, but we can't stop it from arising, and when we try to deliberately suppress a thought, it makes it more likely to appear.

Just like the breath, which continuously flows in and out without needing our awareness or control (luckily!), the thought stream is for the most part an involuntary flow. Although we can't completely control what thoughts will come to mind, we can choose how we relate to them, and this is life-changing. The capacity to better manage our minds and avoid getting lost in negative thought loops is a crucial skill that helps us become more resilient, better able to bounce back from challenges and not get stuck in negative thinking and emotions. Richard Davidson, who featured as one of the many experts in the Mindful in May campaign, shared his perspectives on the relationship between mindfulness and resilience:

Through regular mindfulness meditation we have discovered that there are certain changes in the brain that are associated with decreased stickiness. By stickiness, we're referring to a propensity to ruminate on or to stew in our negative emotions. When adversity happens it's appropriate and adaptive to

experience whatever negative emotions may arise, but then to let them go when they're no longer useful. Meditation can help to facilitate that.

Just as our immune system protects us from toxic bacteria and viruses, regular mindfulness practice protects us from unhelpful thinking and rumination by helping us develop awareness of what is happening in our minds. With this enhanced clarity and awareness we become masters, rather than the slaves of our minds.

Davidson's research also gave us insight into the connection between two crucial brain regions involved in regulating emotion, namely the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. The amygdala – or fear centre of the brain – is part of the 'old brain', designed to bypass the thinking brain so that our responses to danger are immediate and don't rely on the more time-consuming thinking process. Fortunately, our brains also evolved to house the prefrontal cortex, located behind the forehead and responsible for many of our uniquely human capacities such as using language, focusing attention, making decisions and managing our emotions. The prefrontal cortex can significantly reduce the intensity of the amygdala's activation, helping us calm ourselves down when we've been emotionally triggered. This works very much like a wise, compassionate mother (the prefrontal cortex) soothing an upset child (the amygdala).

Davidson's research in this area demonstrated that people who meditated for a minimum of thirty hours over two months had less active amygdalas, meaning less propensity to be stressed. Furthermore, in expert meditators the connection between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex increased, leading to an improved ability to calm down when under emotional stress, supporting resilience.

We are only just beginning to understand the potential impact that meditation can have on the brain, but what is clear is that mindfulness, when practiced regularly, can lead to long-lasting transformation. This form of mental training can not only support us in experiencing more positive short-lived ‘states’ of being, such as feeling increased calm or more focus, but more profoundly, it can transform our ‘traits’ – the enduring patterns of our personalities.

The evidence of this finding has largely come from neuroscientists who investigated the brains of expert meditators – those who have spent thousands of hours in meditation. Over the past decade, the scientists at Richard Davidson’s lab have been studying the brain of Mingyur Rinpoche, a Tibetan monk who has spent many years in intensive meditation retreats, and what they discovered was completely unprecedented.

You may have heard of the term ‘brain waves’: these are the electrical patterns created when a group of neurons (brain cells) communicate with each other. Our brains release different waves depending on what we are doing with them, and these waves are measured and recorded by a machine called an EEG.

There are four main types of EEG patterns that correspond to different activities in the brain. In simplified terms, the slower brain waves are associated with slower mental states, such as sleep or tiredness, while the faster brain waves are associated with alertness and concentration. While we are in deep sleep the brain shows mainly delta waves (the slowest waves), when we’re drowsy or in a daydreaming mode the brain shows mainly theta waves (the next slowest), while we’re not doing anything in particular the brain shows alpha waves, and while we’re concentrating on a task or thinking, the brain shows beta waves (which are fastest). There is another type of brain wave

that is the very fastest of all, and which happens when we have a moment of insight and our brain regions all activate together: gamma waves. Increased gamma waves are associated with heightened sensory perception, memory recall, focus, and even compassion and calm. They are signs of a brain functioning at its peak. In most people these gamma waves only ever happen in a flash lasting a few seconds at most, but Rinpoche's brain, and those of other expert meditators, showed a pattern of gamma waves lasting for minutes.

In *The Science of Meditation*, Daniel Goleman explains:

No brain lab had ever before seen gamma oscillations that persist for minutes rather than split seconds, are so strong, and are in synchrony across widespread regions of the brain. Astonishingly, this sustained, brain-entraining gamma pattern goes on even while seasoned meditators are asleep ... These gamma oscillations continuing during deep sleep are, again, something never seen before and seem to reflect a residual quality of awareness that persists day and night. For the first time, Davidson and fellow researcher Antoine Lutz were seeing a neural echo of the enduring transformations that years of meditation practice etch onto the brain.

Although most of us will not complete years of solo meditation like Mingyur Rinpoche, these findings provide us with a new perspective on what may be possible through a committed meditation practice. Just as we gain deep insight into the universe through the perspective of astronauts who return from outer space and share their discoveries, those who dedicate so many years to investigating the nature of the mind offer us deeper understandings of our own inner universe. And

just as Olympic athletes demonstrate the extraordinary potential of the human body when rigorously trained, we too can be inspired by the discoveries of these Olympic meditators, who reveal the potential of our own minds.

Experiencing our greatest potential for happiness involves a commitment to both our bodies and our minds. The importance of physical exercise in supporting our wellbeing is well understood within our society, but for too long we have failed to place the same emphasis on mental exercise.

Our mind is our most precious resource. It's the source of our deepest happiness or darkest depression, our creativity or self-destruction, our problem-solving or problem-making. In its most toxic form it has the potential to be the most potent weapon of mass destruction in the world. In its most cultivated form, it can be a resource for our deepest happiness, and for the flourishing of all humanity – and the planet.

Knowing that so much potential is locked in your mind, why wouldn't you take the time to train and nurture it?