

Mind Science: Meditation Training for Practical People

Professor Charles T. Tart, Palo Alto, California

Meditation training? "What," you might wonder, "is a scientist, an experimental psychologist like Tart doing writing a book teaching meditation practice? Isn't that just for gurus?"

I've always been interested in meditation and mindfulness techniques. My professional and scientific interest comes from seeing these as ways of better understanding the mind. My personal interest comes from wanting to understand and use my own mind more effectively, so I can live up to my ideals of, hopefully, becoming a little wiser, more compassionate, and able to be of help to others.

My scholarly and scientific understanding was, for a long, long time, the only understanding I had of meditation: I had tried various classical meditation techniques off and on for years - with very poor results. My mind was just too busy and jumpy. Someone could instruct me, "First, quiet your mind and then....." but I never got past that first part. I can particularly remember taking a meditation class several times from a respected Tibetan lama in Berkeley, Tarthang Tulku. He frequently referred to finding the "space between thoughts" as a key to meditation and spiritual growth. I found the *concept* of the space between thoughts fascinating in a theoretical way, but, in my experience, there was no space between my thoughts!

After years of repeated failure at meditation, I discovered G. I. Gurdjieff's ideas of developing mindfulness in the midst of everyday life, instead of walking around in the waking daydream we usually live in. This didn't require the achievement of great mental quiet in order to work, and I've fruitfully practised Gurdjieff's self-observation and self-remembering techniques for years.

In 1986 I met a meditation teacher, Shinzen Young, at a scientific conference in New Mexico, and something about the way he spoke told me he really knew what he was talking about from his own, deep experience. I started going to his six o'clock in the morning meditation training sessions (something of a "paranormal" phenomena for me to do that, for I was not someone who functioned at that hour back then!), and found I could learn much about meditation from the way he taught. Shinzen gave me an introduction to and a boost in meditation that has lasted since then, and I now practice the concentrative (shamatha) and insight (vipassana) forms of classical Buddhist meditation, as he has adapted them to work better for Westerners, regularly, as well as meditation of a dzogchen flavour that I've learned from Sogyal Rinpoche and Tsoknyi Rinpoche. And I do it mainly because I enjoy it and get something from it, rather than because I "should" meditate.

For years I continued my practice on Gurdjieffian mindfulness in life and regular meditation together, finding they synergised one another, but I didn't teach these techniques because, being dedicated to honesty, I knew I was just a beginner compared to where I thought these techniques could take one. Genuine and realistic humility, I suppose, but.....

I was also a student of Aikido, a Japanese martial art that, in many ways, is another form of mindfulness training - maintaining mindfulness, peacefulness, and compassion for your partner under the stress of being attacked. One day I was asking my teacher if he could find a Black Belt level teacher who would come up to the University of California at Davis where I taught and teach Aikido to students. "Why don't you teach them?" he asked me.

I responded that there was so much I didn't know about Aikido, I was only a Brown Belt in rank, etc., etc. But, he pointed out, while there was indeed much I didn't know, compared to rank beginners like my UCD students would be, I was extremely knowledgeable! It was hard to argue with that, so I had a very pleasant and productive experience teaching Aikido, and

my students learned a lot. I've been through the same process with teaching Gurdjieffian mindfulness and classic meditation. My teachers would suggest I teach, I would talk about how little I knew compared to what there was to know, they would remind me that I knew more than enough to help people get started on these paths, and so I occasionally teach. And it works - I turn out to be good at teaching beginners (and even some people beyond beginners). With the wisdom of hindsight in teaching Aikido, meditation, and mindfulness, I remember how sometimes you can learn more from another student who is only a few steps ahead of you, because they remember the difficulties, than you can from a master who is so far ahead of you that the practices are all "obvious" to them, like "First, quiet your mind....." And yes, now I sometimes can find and briefly rest in the "space between thoughts....." My new book, "Mind Science: Meditation Training for Practical People" is based on a very successful workshop in which I introduced people to classical concentrative and insight meditation and moved from that into Gurdjieffian mindfulness practices for daily life. The occasion was the third University of Arizona "Toward A Science of Consciousness" conference, and the students were mostly scientists and scholars - sceptical and practical people. Judging from my own experience of the way my practical, sceptical and scientific mind keeps my thoughts so busy, and had made it so hard for me to learn meditation for so long, I think of this kind of group as having lots of obstacles to learning meditation. Yet the way the group responded reminded me that I do teach meditation and mindfulness in a way that gets across to modern, practical people, and so the book. "Mind Science" contains both conceptual material to place meditation and mindfulness practice within the context of modern science and experiential exercises and instructions to start people learning these skills to a high enough degree to be both personally and professionally (understanding the mind) useful.

If you're interested in learning to make your mind quieter, and/or to have greater insight into your thoughts, feelings, perceptions and bodily functioning, and/or to be more centred and mindful in your daily life - or just interested in these topics from a scientific perspective - I think you'll find *Mind Science: Meditation Training for Practical People* of value.

The book has just been published and can be ordered over the web now at either my www.paradigm-sys.com/cttart/ site or The Archives of Scientists' Transcendent Experiences (TASTE) www.issc-taste.org site. If you order via either site, I am donating the referral fees from these orders to support my (TASTE) project. If you don't like giving out your credit card number on the web, you can phone in a credit card order at 888-267- 4446.