

happen right away, but overtime I eventually started to see that there was a lot of science that strongly suggests that meditation is really good for you, and I had never really thought about meditation before. To the extent that I ever considered it, I thought it was hippie nonsense, but the science was very compelling, and so that's really how I got started.

Jen: Yeah, and you kind of call yourself a reluctant meditator. So, why is that? Because I think a lot of people have that experience or perhaps that same sentiment, especially when first starting out because we just don't feel like we're doing it right. So, can you talk about what doing it right and doing it wrong perhaps looks like.

Dan: Yeah, I mean this is a big issue that people have myself included, of wondering whether you're meditating correctly. So, it probably makes sense for me to describe the initial instructions for meditation. The thing to say first is that the word meditation is a little bit like the word sports. It describes a whole range of activities. When I talk about meditation, I'm talking about mindfulness meditation, which is the kind of meditation that has been studied the most in the labs and it is derived from Buddhism, but really is secularized, stripped of any religious lingo or metaphysical claims, and that's what has allowed it to be studied so extensively by scientists and the results seem to show that it can lower your blood pressure, boost your immune system, rewire key parts of the brain that have to do with the attention regulation and stress and compassion and self-awareness and so it's pretty exciting. Beginning mindfulness meditations are really only three steps. The first is to get into a comfortable position. You can sit cross legged if you want, but I'm nearly 50 and not limber, so I just sit in a chair, but you can also stand up, you can lie down, there's any number of ways you can do it. But it's nice to have a sort of a dignified posture. You don't have to be uptight about it. And the second step is to close your eyes and bring your full attention to the feeling of your breath coming in and going out. So, like pick one spot like the feeling of your rising and falling of your belly or the rising and falling of your chest, or the air coming in and out of your nose. And then the third step is the most important, which is as soon as you try to do this, as soon as you try to just pick one neutral thing and pay attention to it, your mind will go nuts. All sorts of random thoughts and urges and emotions and distractions and expletive filled speeches you're going to deliver to your boss and a blaze of glory blah blah blah. All of this stuff will come up and that is the moment when most people tell themselves a story about how they are failed meditator. They can never do this. They're uniquely messed up. They have this sort of bespoke lunacy. The good news and the bad news is you're not special. This is the way the mind works and the fact that you've noticed you've become distracted is proof that you're meditating correctly, because the whole game in meditation is to sit, to try to focus on one thing, usually the feeling of your breath, although there are other objects of meditation we can pick. Just try to focus on one thing and then every time you get distracted you notice it blow it a kiss and start again and again and again and you have to do this a million times. This is like a golf game with a million mulligans. The whole game is just to notice you've become distracted and start again and again and again. It's like a bicep curl for your brain and this is what shows up on the brain scans of people who meditate and so that is I think the heart of the misunderstanding that people think getting distracted means they're doing it incorrectly. But in fact, noticing the distraction is proof that you are success.

Jen: Yeah, I think for me I had always believed that meditation was turning off my brain or somehow quieting my brain, like quieting those thoughts until I learned differently. So, I think that's kind of another string of that myth, right? Is that we somehow have the power to turn off our brain, which just isn't possible.

Dan: I've got a whole rap about that, like...Well, it's not that long, it's just that I often tell this same joke over and over, which is that clearing your mind, which is the most pernicious misconception around meditation, that it requires clearing your mind. Clearing your mind is impossible unless you're enlightened or you've died and just knowing that is really useful. The goal here is not to clear your mind, the goal is to focus your mind for just a few nanoseconds at a time, and then every time you get distracted, you start again and again and again and you just need to hear this over and over and over again, even I do. I meditate every day. Often for long periods of time, I go on meditation retreats and constantly I'm having to be reminded I'm not a failure, so it's just the way it is. That is the sort of ground truth of meditation.

Jen: So, let's kind of back up and talk a little bit more about the science and what it actually does to your brain and your body. And what does that mean? How does that show up in our life? You talk about it kind of as 10% happier, but what does meditation kind of allow us to do better or do differently.

Dan: Yeah, so before I get to the science, I think just picking up on that description of the practice. What the benefit is. Well, there are a few benefits. Two most prominent ones, at least for beginners, are focus. So, this repeated exercise of trying to focus on one thing at a time, and then when you get distracted, you start again and again. This shows up again on the brain scans you can see in the area of the prefrontal cortex. The area that regulates our ability to pay attention or to focus that changes on among meditators. Because you're doing this activity where you try to just feel your breath coming and going or there are other things you can focus on in meditation. The term of art there is your meditation object. So, it could be your breath, it could be sounds in the environment, it can be a mantra. Whatever you're doing in meditation, the common denominator generally is you're trying to focus on something in the present moment right now, and then you bake into the cake that you're going to get distracted a million times and start again a million times and that works on your ability to focus. So, that's a huge benefit in a time when we're just pulled in a million directions all the time. Multitasking, which is a computer term multitasking. We don't have several processors, we have one brain. We can only pay attention to one thing at a time, and so multitasking is really bad for the brain.

Jen: So, everybody should take that off of their resume if it's on their resume (laugh).

Dan: Yes, you should, you definitely should. So that's one big benefit. The other is mindfulness. So, I said this is mindfulness meditation. What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is the ability to know what's happening in your head at any given moment without getting carried away by it. So, what we're doing in meditation is engineering a deliberate collision between you and the voice in your head, or your ego, or the inner narrator, whatever you want to call it. But a lot of us don't even realize this is happening. For me this was a huge aha moment on my path to meditation, which was. When it was pointed out to me that I

have this voice in my head was usually complete jerk and criticizing me and I'm comparing myself to other people, judging other people, wanting stuff, not wanting stuff, thinking about the past, thinking about the future instead of paying attention what's happening right now. And when you're unaware of this nonstop conversation, it owns you, and this is why we do things that we don't know why we did later. Why did I just eat a whole sleeve of Oreos? Or why did I say something that ruined the next 48 hours of my marriage or whatever? It's all because you're just being yanked around by this voice in your head by this conversation, which if we broadcast aloud, you would be blocked up. But this constant nattering, this cacophony is playing out in our heads all the time, mostly below the level of consciousness. We're not really aware that this is happening. And in meditation you just drink from the firehose. This is why people think they're failures. They sit and they try to focus on their breath and then all this stuff comes up. But that's good what you want to do in meditation is to see that this is what your life is actually all about. And then when you see it, it doesn't own you as much.

Jen: Is that painful for some people. Some of the stuff that comes up, I would imagine.

Dan: Yeah, I mean I would say if it's not painful then you're probably doing it wrong. People go into meditation expecting to either clear their minds or they're going to have the beatific look on the face of the Buddha statue which sits outside the spa at the airport or whatever, that's not how it's going to go. The point what the Buddha was doing in meditation was sitting there and just saying let it rip all of the horror of the mind and all of the beauty of the mind. I can sit with it and be cool. That is an incredible skill, that's mindfulness. That is, we live in a universe and this is non-negotiable, we live in a universe that is characterized by impermanence. Everything is changing all the time, we and everybody we know will die, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news that is just the way it is. Most things are out of our control, so can we navigate life with some equanimity in a subtle way instead of just being constantly buffeted by the things that we think are good or the things we think are bad, we're just yanked around all the time between these two poles, if I want it or I don't want it or there's a third pole which is I don't care, but can you step out of the traffic and view the contents of your consciousness, your powerful emotions, your urges, your thoughts with some nonjudgmental remove. That's the big skill in meditation, and it allows you to respond wisely to the things in your life, instead of reacting blindly and that again it's not a passivity, just to take the Buddha example here. If you know anything about the life of the Buddha, he was very ambitious. He hung out with kings and merchants and built a huge following of meditation practitioners. Being a meditator doesn't mean that you're just sitting in loincloth on the outcropping of rock in the Himalayas all day long. It really is a way to allow you to engage in the world in a more effective way so that you're less emotionally reactive, more focused, and again back to the science which shows is that people who meditate, as I said before, tend to have lower blood pressure boosted immune system, the area of the brain associated with stress has been shown to get smaller. The area of the brain associated with self-awareness and also compassion tends to get bigger. So, it's really interesting results. It's not a panacea, hence my whole 10% happier shooting, but it is a science based simple secular exercise for your brain that can make a real difference over time.

Jen: Yeah, and I know you get asked this all the time, but you just brought it up, 10% happier, why 10%. Let's just go there.

Dan: It was kind of a joke. The actual real story is that I was, this was a while ago in like 2010, I went on a meditation retreat, the year prior in 2009 I had gotten interested in meditation. And I had very quickly decided I wanted to write a book about it because I realized that there weren't a lot of books. There are a lot of really good books, but they're all pretty annoying to me in the tone, and so I wanted to write a book that had like the F word in it and told embarrassing stories. Yeah, I wanted it to be relatable to skeptics and because I wanted to, but I also wanted to know what I was talking about, so I decided to go on a meditation retreat, which is not something everybody, if you want to be a meditator you don't have to go in a meditation retreat, but I thought it would be a good copy for the book and it was. Yes, it definitely was. It was quite an experience, but anyway, I'll set that aside. When I came home I was talking to one of my colleagues at work. she's a very long time close friend and mentor and she asked me, sort of like derisively, why did you go on a meditation retreat? What's up with you? You used to be somewhat cool. And I had been searching for a while like about how to talk about this without it being embarrassing and I said Oh, you know it makes me like 10% happier and I could see there. The look on her face change from scorn to mild interest and I thought, okay, okay, that's my schtick and I like it because it's counter programming against the over promising that you find in the darker precincts of the self-help world. And I also like it because it's, again it's a joke, but it's largely true in that...it's not going to solve all of your problems meditation, but it does boost your ability to deal with whatever life throws you way, it also sort of puts, in my experience, going to put my basic baseline level of happiness a notch or two higher, and then the other thing about it and this will, I think, makes sense of folks you know with a business background here that it's an investment that really does compound annually. You know the 10% just grows in quite dramatic ways and that speaks to really the most exciting part of this, which is that happiness which a lot of us kind of think of consciously or subconsciously as something that happens to us. But actually happiness is a skill and that you can take responsibility for. And this is what the brain science is showing us that you can do this thing and change your brain in salutary ways. Again, it doesn't mean you're going to win the lottery. It doesn't mean that you're not going to get sick. It just means that whatever you're going to bring more enjoyment out of life, probably, and in the down parts of life that were things that are difficult, I think you'll find that you're more resilient.

Jen: I know you say 10% happier, but you know this practice of mindful meditation and your curiosity and commitment to it, it has changed your life and so what ways has it changed your life and can you speak a little bit about that?

Dan: And so I'm like 12 years into it. I mean on a superficial level, it changed my life because, I wrote this book came out in 2014. It took me like 5 years to get it done because I'd never written a book before. And I didn't say I thought it would kind of be mildly embarrassing and then go away, but it came out at the exact right time in the meditation hype-cycle. Meditation was starting to get cool at that time. Also, I had the backing of probably the largest media company in the world and I got a lot of promotion. And I had this video of me having a panic attack, so lots of other shows wanted to have me on to talk about it and it just kind of took off in ways that I honestly was not expecting this. It was really cool. It was like the coolest professional thing that ever happened to me, but it kind of swallowed my life and in that it became, now I have a podcast now and I have a venture backed startup that is a meditation. We make a meditation app. I give speeches to

companies. I'm writing more books on this subject, so that has that has been a huge change. But in terms of my happiness level and the impact of meditation and sort of I've also become quite interested in the Buddhist philosophy and practices that under guarded, it's had a massive impact. It's just taking all of the benefits that we've talked about thus far, a greater sense of focus and really more importantly, a greater sense of mindfulness, which allows you to sort of watch your mind with some non-judgmental remove and you're just developing it further all the time. That's what will happen if you do the practice and you just get better and better at just the way you would with golf or playing an instrument, although here there are no physical limitations, so I can't catch up with LeBron, but conceivably given enough time I could catch up with a great meditator, etc.. It's a very meaningful part of my life I do. I try to go on a meditation retreat once or twice a year and I try to practice for a significant amount every day.

Jen: What about your family? Do you meditate together or do you teaching your kids to meditate? What does that look like as a family unit?

Dan: It doesn't look like anything. I have learned the hard way to not be, I am definitely a meditation evangelist, right? So, that is my role on the planet, I think. That's the most valuable thing I can do with my time here for the greater community, but my rule is that I don't talk about meditation unless somebody asks me to talk about meditation. And so you ask me to come on the podcast and I'll talk about this all day. I love talking about it, really I love talking about it. When I first started meditating I kind of bullied my wife about it and it was very annoying. She's had a bit of a long term bad attitude about it. I mean not so much. I mean, she's a scientist, so she sees the data. She appreciates the fact that I'm less of a jerk for sure. Because I definitely was and still am. I'm a network news anchor, so there's a bit of the Prima donna in me, the hard worker in me, I'm a journalist, so I can ask hard questions at inappropriate times. And so yeah, there are lots of things about my sharp edges in my personality that have been shaved off, I think in ways that have made her life easier. So, she's not a meditation skeptic. She's just doesn't do it every day and I don't mention it to her. My son is 6. I don't know if this is laziness, but my instinct with him is like, he knows that I just came back from a meditation retreat and sometimes find me meditating, so he knows that it's happening, but I don't push it on him and I've heard during COVID, when they were doing remote school, I could hear that occasionally the teacher would have the kids do it, but I really tried not to push it on him because I don't want him to reject it because daddy was annoying about it. Actually, I'm thinking about writing a children's book called daddy is annoying, where a kid is dealing with an annoying daddy and then the mommy comes in and teaches the kids how to meditate as a way to put up with the daddy making stupid jokes all the time. So, I mean it's setting that aside. My thing with kids, but I often say to parents who want to introduce this practice to their kids is, if you want to have a mindful kid, the most important variable is are you a mindful parent and I just think I interpolate back to my experience with my parents who were great parents. I had great parents and I don't do anything, they told me to do explicitly. In other words, I wasn't allowed to watch TV and now I work on television and they were really strict about sweets and I'm definitely a daily dessert eater. All of the rules they had, I fly out on the regular, but all the things they did, actually did in their own life, I do. They were very serious about their marriage, I am too. They were both physicians, they're very serious about their work and their patients, and that's a huge issue for me. I mean, I'm not a

physician, but I'm very serious about my work. They were really dedicated to their kids, I try to be very dedicated to my son. They're very dedicated to exercise, I too do that. I feel like kids do what they see, not what they're told to do. And so with my son, I just try to be cool about it, even though there are times when I want to lecture him but keep my mouth shut and just do my thing and hopefully he'll just pick it up by osmosis.

Jen: Yeah, so a couple of things that you talked about you mentioned, LeBron, let's talk about meditation and high performance, because I think that's another myth that perhaps we didn't cover as deeply. I hear is if I meditate is it going to calm me down so much that I'm not able to perform in a high stakes, high stress, high performance environment.

Dan: Yeah, I love this question and it's I wrestled with this mightily in my early days, and I still do sometimes, but it's a huge theme in the first book I wrote. So, I mean it really, it really goes to a cultural misunderstanding about the term happiness. People are worried if I get too happy, I'll be ineffective, and that's interesting because our ambivalence about the term happiness is reflected in the roots of the word, the linguistic roots of the word, Hap, that's the same root of words like haphazard or hapless. So, it suggests luck. We have mixed feelings I think about happiness and don't fully understand it. And I actually think I've even trouble finding a good definition of it or we can talk about that in a second, but I think when people worry that they're going to become ineffective because they're happier, I think they're replacing happiness with complacency. And happiness, real happiness as I understand it has nothing to do with resting on your laurels or being lazy. It just means that you're dealing with what life throws at you in a more successful way, so it's not passive. I think you can be a very happy warrior, whether that means you're in the armed services or if you're a somebody who's trying to make change in a workplace or if you're in into activism. I think there are lots of ways you can do all of that and be happy. It doesn't mean that you're a Unicorn barfing rainbows all the time. That's not real happiness or sustainable happiness. It means that your life has a sense of meaning, it means that you have good relationships, and that you have work that you feel that you're effective at and what do you think is going to contribute to that? Do you think having greater focus, greater calm, and less emotional reactivity is going to make you better at those things? I think most likely yes, and if you look around at the people who are meditating in the C suites in the corporate world, at the highest echelons of the tech world, all throughout the sports world, in the entertainment world, In the journalism world, These are not ineffective, lazy, passive people. They're highly, highly functioning people, high performance people. Particularly in the sports world there's this view, the Seattle Seahawks have a meditation guy, who comes in and works with the head coach there and the players on the team. And it's really about like making you, I've heard it called zone ready like it gives you greater access to getting into the zone,. I think you can put a spike through the heart of this misconception.

Jen: I like it, a spike through the heart. So, if you could go back and give yourself one piece of advice before your panic attack on air, what would you tell yourself?

Dan: I asked my brother once, my younger brother, and I remember one time asking him what advice would you give to yourself years before and he said don't worry so much and it's an easier said than done because I still am a warrior. But yeah, I mean the old version of me was so, so uptight and so worried about so many things that it made me unhappy

and that made me unpleasant to be around. And it was to the detriment of my relationships, which then made me more unhappy and that's a very easily accessible downward spiral. A friend of mine calls it the toilet vortex. And what I know now is that there's an opposite spiral that's available to you and I call it the cheesy upward spiral where you know your inner weather gets balmy through meditation and other modalities like therapy or having access to nature, getting enough sleep and exercise.

Jen: Is this embrace the cheese, because Arianna Huffington told me to ask you about that.

Dan: Yes, so this is related to this, related to that, so I'll get to that next. Yeah, I've been thinking about that as a title for my next book. This cheesy upward spiral or upwards spiral or whatever we call is like your inner weather gets better, your relationships get better as inexorable consequence because you're easier to be around, given that relationships are the most important variable and human flourishing. You will then get happier and then your relationships will get better and then you'll get happier. And that cycle is available to you. I mean, that doesn't mean you know that the toilet vortex goes away as an option, I go into both of these spirals not infrequently, but I am much more prone to going into the upwards one.

Jen: Alright, so tell us embrace the cheese.

Dan: We've been talking about mindfulness meditation, but there's alongside mindfulness meditation, a kind of meditation or set of meditation practices that are traditionally have been taught, over the past millennia. There was a whole set of meditation practices that were taught alongside, that were designed to boost your ability to be compassionate, friendly, kind etc. And when I first heard about these practices, a lot of people love them, so I don't want to denigrate these practices. But when I first heard about them, I thought they were just impossibly cheesy, they involved kind of envisioning people or animals and then sending them phrases like may you be happy, may be healthy. Yes, loving kindness is that's one of the flavors of these sort of set of practices. But I have had a very negative reaction to it. Thought it was really, really cheesy, but I started to do it in part because I think there's a lot of science to back up these practices a lot. Even though they don't get a lot of airtime in the culture as much as mindfulness meditation, which is much easier and kind of less embarrassing to talk about these are practices, there's a lot of evidence to suggest that they have all sorts of physiological, psychological, and behavioral impacts. And so I started to get more interested in them in recent years and doing whole retreats where I would do just lovingkindness meditation for 10 days. There was still some reluctance to accept it, in particular to accept it as it applies to myself. Because my own inner dialogue is quite toxic often, and to embrace these practices where you're kinder to yourself, it's often called self-compassion, that's the psychological term of art and so what I have found is just kind of getting over myself and embracing the cheese is really what allows me to get on the upward spiral that I've been talking about with more regularity. Because my inner dialogue once you start to meditate and you become more self-aware or mindful, you see just how nasty you are to yourself and that's reprogrammable through meditation practices and other sort of cognitive practices that you can do and therapy, etc. And I'm very interested in that. And again, for people like me, particularly in males, in a culture that has a lot of sexism threading through it, there can be a negative reaction to it. It can seem treacherous or earnest

or whatever, but I'm all about embracing the cheese these days and just kind of like, whatever maybe it's a little embarrassing, but it makes me way happier.

Jen: I don't think it's embarrassing at all, I love it. So, tell us about your new book. I think I heard you say on one of your podcasts that it's about love. Did I make that up?

Dan: You didn't make it up, and it's just like speaking of embarrassing like I never ever thought I would write a book about love. I mean, this is like I am the least likely sort of love guru. I mean, I'm not a guru but or whatever love proponent whatever it is that you can imagine, it's not like. My meditation Jag was like you know Thanos to care bears. I mean it's just not an obvious fit. By nature, I am a little bit of a sort of frosty New Englander, I'm skeptical, I'm very ambitious. I have warm relationships in my life with my parents, my wife, and my children. But you wouldn't call me warm and fuzzy generally and that's changing. And I can see how my life is getting way better as a result. You know I was first interested in this book in writing, trying to give a little bit more airtime to the practices that I've been talking about, like loving kindness, meditation, and my initial goal was let's look at this and teaching people how to be friendlier internally and more compassionate and then I started getting interested in things like civility in the workplace, politeness, reducing your biases sort of as a way to get at issues of prejudice and at some point several years into the project and I was looking at this kind of set of skills I was trying to promote, I realize like get it cut all fall under the concept of love and I remember the first time I heard myself say that aloud I was like Oh my God, this is what I'm writing. Love is such a culturally fraught term, we use it generally to talk about romantic love, which is a very narrow band of human activity, but it gets a lot of airtime in the movies and maybe we talk about love for family or I love chocolate or whatever, we use it in narrow selective ways, but in other languages and in other cultures there are many words for love because there are lots of ways to think about this and I think us having one word and having a media in the movies and pop songs or particularly talk about it in this exalted way and rarely accessed by any of us, and we may have a moment of string music love early on in our relationship, but generally speaking it falls back into sort of more mundane rhythm that takes more work. I like to think of love and there's a view in the scientific community that seems to support this more as anything north of neutral, just our human mammalian capacity to care, and that is omni directional. So, it's not just for other people, but it's also for ourselves. Self-love is often sold to us in kind of oily or unctuous ways. Is not about complacency. It's about like treating yourself the way a good coach would treat you. Good coach cares about your well-being, but might have you run sprints and that's the way I understand self-love or self-compassion and so just thinking about all of this as a broad set in the human repertoire, and then that there are all of these exercises you can do to boost this ability and so that in the end you can view love as a big category and a skill. It's not like you're born with factory settings that limit how loving you can be to yourself and others. These are skills that you can develop and there's enormous amounts of evidence that suggests that it will change your life on many, many levels that I've seen that in my own life and so that's what I'm writing about.

Jen: And when is it due out? Is there a timeline on this?

Dan: I've put it off now by two years because I've learned that if I want to write something that has a shot at being.

Jen: Well, I want to read it now, so I need to know when I can expect it.

Dan: It's supposed to come out in 18 months. We'll see if that happens, but I write very slowly and you know these books are very...I'm writing it as a memoir, and so it's very painful and embarrassing. So, sometimes while I'm writing it the self-love move is to walk away and lie down on the ground.

Jen: Having just written a book myself, if somebody had told me what it took to write a book, I might have said no. So, I get it's hard. Well Dan, thank you so much for your time today. This was this was a fun conversation. It was enlightening so much wisdom. I really appreciate it. I know that the listeners are going to get a lot out of it too, so thank you for your time.

Dan: Thank you for having me.

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