

## Mainstreaming Mindfulness

### THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF YOUR BRAIN

by Richard Davidson

Hudson Street Press 2012; 304 pp., \$25.95 (cloth)

### A MINDFUL NATION

by Tim Ryan

Hay House 2012; 203 pp., \$19.95 (cloth)

### SEARCH INSIDE YOURSELF

by Chade-Meng Tan

HarperOne 2012; \$26.99 (cloth)

REVIEWED BY ED HALLIWELL

A STORY TOLD BY MARK WILLIAMS, director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, illustrates the dim view of contemplative practice that was once common in health care circles. During the early days of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), the course he developed with John Teasdale and Zindel Segal to help people prone to depression, Williams recalls being accosted by a colleague at a psychology conference. “Is it really true what I hear?” the colleague spluttered. “That John Teasdale is *meditating* with his patients?” “It is true,” replied Mark, “and so am I.” The man, he says, was “clearly appalled.”

These days, such a reaction would be highly unlikely in the medical mainstream. Programs that teach mindfulness, like MBCT, have the weight of scientific evidence on their side, and people who would once have scoffed are eulogizing the health-giving effects of meditation.

The change arguably began when Jon Kabat-Zinn started teaching a stress reduction course at the University of Massachusetts in 1979, bringing his Buddhist training to a context where it seemed more skilful to teach meditation in a distinctly secular way. Out went religious robes, gurus, and shrines, and in came raisin-eating and randomized controlled trials. As the approach spread, meditative practice shed some of its hippie, New Age associations, and flourished, perhaps in its essence, as a practical, testable method for the relief of suffering.

Scientific studies of the courses, showing many benefits to well-being, started to bring an impressive credibility to what had previously been seen by many people as weird or flaky. Peer-reviewed literature on mindfulness has been growing in volume

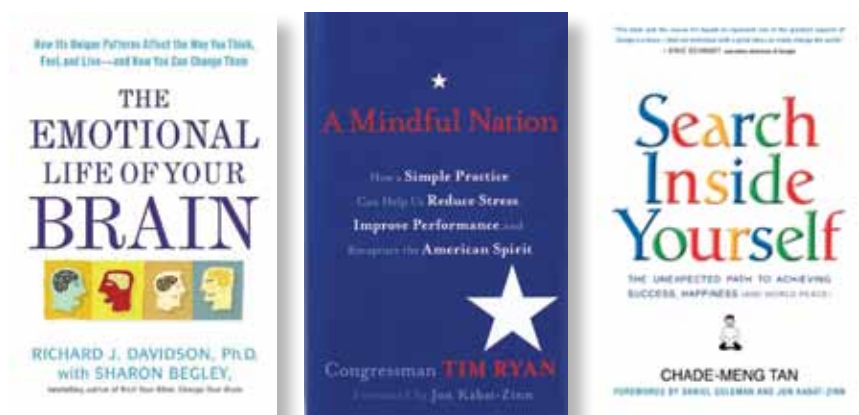


for years, and this is now being matched by mainstream publications. The pedigree of some book authors is interesting, too. It's not just meditation teachers, therapists, or even celebrities like Goldie Hawn who are urging us to be mindful nowadays, but politicians, corporate whiz kids, and professors of neuroscience.

*The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect The Way You Think, Feel, and Live—And How You Can Change Them* is a career autobiography of Richard Davidson, the world's preeminent neuroscientist of meditation. His unfolding story offers a fascinating marker of how times have changed over a working life. In one of the many enchanting anecdotes that bring life to the book, Davidson recalls the disapproving reaction of one professor to his first published study, which revealed that experience in meditation was associated with less anxiety and improved attention. “Richie,” he was informed sternly “if you wish to have a successful career in science, this is not a very good way to begin.”

Faced with such resistance, Davidson parked his curiosity about the mechanisms of meditation and turned to examining

the brain signatures of well-being and distress, hoping to find clues to a healthier, happier existence. This quest formed the core of his early work, and he was able to establish that people with an upbeat, engaged approach to life also tend to show more activity in the left prefrontal cortex of the brain, as measured by EEG readings. Meanwhile, those who are less sunny in their manner, tending more toward anxiety, depression, and an avoidant style, have less activity in the left prefrontal cortex and more on the right side of the brain.



Contrary to prevailing scientific orthodoxy, Davidson also found that these markers of well-being were not set in stone. Whereas it had been thought that mental disposition was basically fixed, and that people were more or less stuck with the outlook they're born with, Davidson's research suggested that emotional style is far more malleable, sometimes changing greatly over the course of a lifetime. This was significant, because it heralded the possibility that we can take conscious action to change our temperament, a hypothesis that would have seemed barely credible to scientists when Davidson began his work.

These discoveries formed a platform from which he could return to the study of meditation. By this time a respected professor at the University of Wisconsin, and inspired by a growing wealth of research that showed remarkable plasticity in the human brain (with functional and even structural changes occurring in response to events), Davidson started applying himself to the question of what *kind* of activity might promote neural well-being. More specifically, as even mental events—thoughts and emotions—had been found to change the brain and its workings, could it be that mental exercise might help the mind be happy? This, of course, is a claim traditionally made for meditation, and since the early 1990s, Davidson has rigorously tested the assertion.

The results have helped transform meditation from scientific pariah to darling of the day, simultaneously giving birth to the field of contemplative neuroscience. From the study of expert meditators (those happy yogis who have clocked more than 10,000 hours of practice) as well as novices, Davidson's lab has produced paper after paper suggesting that training in mindfulness and compassion leads the brain toward greater well-being, just as physical

exercise trains the body to fitness. Stressed workers who took an eight-week mindfulness course showed a tripling in left-side brain activation, Tibetan monks in the lab produced more gamma activity (a sign of neural synchrony) than ever before reported in the literature, and compassion practice reduced distress and increased meditators' desire to help others.

Written with journalist Sharon Begley, *The Emotional Life of Your Brain* presents sometimes dense material with verve, and the interweaving of Davidson's personal narrative lends a welcome structure to proceedings. If it sometimes feels that the identification of six distinct emotional styles is a distraction from the main story (albeit an empirically demonstrable one), then the short self-help section at the end brings things neatly into harmony (the advice, in summary, is: "Meditate, it's good for you"). We're still near the beginning of a scientific journey to understand what's going on in the brain when we train in these practices, but whatever happens next, Davidson's shoulders will be ones that future researchers stand on.

Without scientific work like Davidson's, it's difficult to imagine Congressman Tim Ryan's *A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit* getting written. It's quite the remarkable document: a sitting member of the United States Congress comes out as a meditator, and puts a passionate case for placing mindfulness at the heart of public life. *A Mindful Nation* begins with a personal account of Ryan's own journey into meditation, and expands to advocate ardently for its adoption into fields as widespread as health care, education, the military, economics, and the environment.

Ryan's argument is strongly grounded in research, and that's what may make it persuasive in a culture where this could be dismissed as off-the-wall, soft, or even un-American. Ryan doesn't mince his words, stating that if mindfulness brings the benefits that science suggests, it would be a dereliction of his duty not to shout about it from the political rooftops, using his position to enlist the support of government. "Although it may seem like an unusual way to approach serious practical problems," he writes, "I am convinced that our capacity to be mindful is the natural pathway to addressing so many of the difficulties we face."

Taking a tour of some of the settings where the "heroes" and "pioneers" of mindfulness are at work, Ryan describes how their efforts are transforming lives. He visits research laboratories to learn how stress affects the brain and body, and finds that meditation can bring our nervous systems into balance. He explores its impact on health, by reducing inflammation and a range of stress-related illness, and sees huge possibilities for easing the strain on the American health care system. He attends schools where the practice and brain science of mindfulness is taught to first-graders (as well as their teachers), and reveals how "mind-fitness" is being introduced to the Marines to help them cope

better with the intense stress of being deployed in hellish war zones. He makes a strong and earnest plea for mindfulness as a way to bring more compassion and community into economic and social life, and to slow the rampant and unwitting destruction of our environment.

Ryan identifies mindfulness as a key for letting go of unskillful habit patterns, and rediscovering the wisdom and bravery that could help us build a kinder, more resilient world. At its heart, his message is that mindfulness is a simple and effective trainable skill, and there's no good reason for not realizing its potential to foster the values of connectedness, caring, and courage that ought to define America. These are values that Ryan himself models in risking such a stand from the vulnerable position of public office. That this now seems possible for an elected politician to do, without it being an act of career harakiri, signals another milestone on meditation's journey to respectability.

It's less surprising, perhaps, to find search engine giant Google ahead of the game, having already planted mindfulness at the center of the company's people development scheme. The spur for this comes from engineer-turned-executive (and now meditation teacher) Chade-Meng Tan, whose official job title as Google's "Jolly Good Fellow" seems only a half-joke. Google is famous for its "20 percent time," in which staff are encouraged to spend up to a day a week on projects outside their usual remit, as a way of enabling out-of-the-box creativity. Meng used some of his 20 percent time to work up Search Inside Yourself, a mindfulness-based emotional intelligence course.

Inspired by the power of meditation, Meng's not-so-small intention is to "create the conditions for world peace," first by developing and refining the SIY curriculum internally at Google, and then offering it out to the wider world with the Google stamp of approval. He's reached readiness for phase two, so here comes the training manual, *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Profits, Happiness (and World Peace)*.

With Meng's self-deprecating humor, a peppering of off-the-wall cartoons, practices with names like "The Siberian North Railroad," and tips on topics such as "Being Effective and Loved At the Same Time," "How Not To Strangle Your Mother-In Law," and "Mindful Emailing," *Search Inside Yourself* makes for a ripping read.

But don't be fooled—the occasionally slapstick tone shouldn't detract from what is actually a first-rate (as well as fun) meditation training. The practice sections are

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innovative, easy to navigate, and clear, and they're backed up by plenty of crunchy data for the rationally minded. And whereas the "B word" doesn't get mentioned in *A Mindful Nation*, Meng has no issue with combining traditional Buddhist presentations and practices (such as *tonglen*) with twenty-first-century understandings of the brain, all served up with the kind of irreverence, dynamism, and freshness you might expect from one of Google's early pioneers. It might be tempting to raise an eyebrow at his unrepressed enthusiasm for changing the world, but given that Meng has already played a role in engineering major habit shifts among a large percentage of the planet's population, who's to say he (and Google) can't do it again?

Meng's model for the widespread adoption of meditation is physical exercise, the health-inducing benefits of which were firmly established in the twentieth century and now lie unquestioned. "I want to create a world where meditation is widely treated like exercise for the mind," concludes Meng. In the company of eminent scientists such as Richard Davidson, daring politicians like Tim Ryan, plus a little Google gold dust, the fulfillment of that goal may not be so far away. ♦