

Meditation in the iGeneration

HOW TO MEDITATE IN A WORLD OF
SPEED AND STRESS

Andrew Holecek

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Meditation in the iGeneration—*How to Meditate in a World of Speed and Stress*
Andrew Holecek

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What's the Problem?

Meditation is a magnificent tool practiced for thousands of years, across dozens of cultures, by millions of people. But a tool for what? What's the problem? Why should I meditate? If you wake up in the middle of the night in total contentment, survey your life with complete satisfaction, and find yourself stress free, then maybe you don't need meditation. If you don't have a question there's no need for an answer. The first step in solving a problem is realizing there is one.

But if you're young and stressed about school, getting a job, or being successful, then meditation can help. If you're older and worry about your kids, your retirement, your relationships, or the economy, meditation can help. If you're anywhere in between and trying to find more meaning in life, to live it more fully, to be more focused, or to discover real happiness, then meditation can help.

People today are hurting. The litany of personal, social, and global problems is obvious. While this book can help with these larger issues, it's meant to help us with our personal ones. When you get down to it, global problems are by-products of personal issues. People, not the physical world itself, cause most of the

world's difficulties. The Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal said; "All of man's difficulties are caused by his inability to sit, quietly, in a room by himself." Our journey will take us to the root of our difficulties, and show us how to sit quietly by ourselves to remedy them.

On an individual level, there are many sources of discontent. You've probably heard them all. One of the most noticeable, and unsettling, is the epidemic of distraction, busyness, and speed. Emails are popping up constantly on our iPhones, droids, and laptops. They often spawn a sense of urgency—I need to read it and respond *now*. Text messages ping into our awareness endlessly, commanding an instant reply. Facebook and Twitter are conquering the world, and our attention. Information is hurled at us from every conceivable direction, and at speeds that are reaching escape velocity from reality.

The result of this relentless barrage is people like you and me. Innocent folks who are being drawn and quartered by the dark side of this information age. Our minds are being torn apart and scattered in all directions as we struggle to keep up with a world that is running out of control. We're losing touch—with ourselves, with others, and with reality. Tools that are designed to connect us (the social network, the world wide web) pull us away from human contact. How many times have you seen people at a dinner table relating more to their devices than to each other? How often have you been distracted while reading this chapter? Gadgets made to simplify our life are making it more complex. Smart phones are dumbing us down. Every new upgrade serves to downgrade our attention span. Convenience has turned into a bill of rights, and instant gratification is virtually law.

A recent study at Carnegie Mellon showed that the distraction of an interruption made test takers 20 percent dumber. That's enough to turn a B- student (80 percent) into a failure (62

percent).³ Even the names given to the contraptions of this information age, which is also the age of interruption or distraction technology, hint at the problem. “Droid” (the smart phones that aren’t iPhones) is short for “android,” which means “an automaton in the form of a human being.” “Twitter” means “to talk lightly and rapidly, especially of trivial matters” and often instills a “state of tremulous excitement.” “Facebook” mostly delivers face value, and struggles with conveying depth. “Surfing” the web denotes skimming across the surface of things; the internet and world wide web imply getting caught up; something going “viral” suggests a rapidly spreading infection; iPhones, iPads, iPods, iTunes, iMovie, iChat, and iCal are all about “I,” not you. And all these flat screens depict a superficial life with the ultimate depth of a pixel. It’s a perfect symbol of how the information age is screening us from life—and making everything flat.

Our speedy and splintered lives are like a stone tossed across the surface of a pond. We skip from one bit of information to the next, as fast as possible, with no ultimate goal in sight. We’re glancing on top of life, going nowhere fast. And we’re outsourcing our mental capacities to slippery silicon chips, then wondering why our personal lives don’t compute any more. One of the biggest problems is that we confuse information for experience, and end up existing in a virtual world. We live in our head and not in reality.

The clinical result of this speed is what professionals call continuous partial attention, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or any number of infections of attention. We’re neither fully here nor there. Below this surface diagnosis lurk depression, anxiety disorders, and a host of deeper problems.⁴ The opposite of evolution is *devolution*,

3 See *Brain, Interrupted* by Bob Sullivan and Hugh Thompson, in *The New York Times*, May 5th, 2013.

4 For example, studies have shown that those with ADHD have much higher rates of criminality and drug abuse. See Paul Lichtenstein of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, quoted in *The Denver Post*, November 22, 2012.

and distraction is at the heart of that treacherous regression. (See Figure 1 below.)

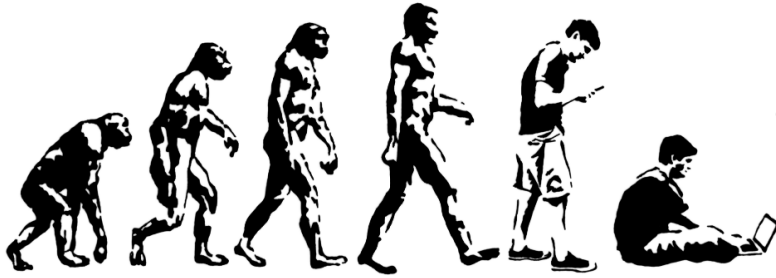


Figure 1
Evolution and Devolution

We’re choosing information overload, divided attention, and multi-tasking, and losing our ability to concentrate, contemplate, or introspect. Thoreau referred to the technological marvels of his day as “improved means to an unimproved end.” How much more “marvelous” are these modern gadgets, and how dramatically unimproved is the end today? These technological marvels are often nothing more than weapons of mass distraction, and just as destructive as their military counterparts.

The personal result of distraction and speed is a gnawing feeling of dissatisfaction, anxiety, and loss of meaning and purpose. There’s a sense that something is missing. Life feels incomplete. As we will see, something *is* missing. But it’s not out there. What’s missing is in here. Our attention is missing. We’ve gone AWOL on reality. We’re all MIA—missing in attention. As the song says: we’re looking for love—and happiness—in all the wrong places. It’s such an irony: our inability to be fully present (in here) is what generates the sense of absence (out there)—a topic we will return to in detail.

There's no shortage of bad news. We all know it. While there's no need to harp about it, there is a need to identify it. Without a proper diagnosis we'll never find a cure. We'll continue to speed along with everybody else, feeling the pressure to keep up, and find ourselves more and more dissatisfied. I rented a U-Haul truck the other day and right above the speedometer was this safety message, a lesson that applies to all of life: "Speed kills. Slow down and live longer." Mental speediness—the zoom zone of the modern mind—kills the deeper experience of life. Slow down and live more fully. Reboot your soul into silence and stillness.

Studies have shown that many people are turning to drugs or alcohol to manage their stress.⁵ Others are turning to entertainment, or infinite forms of addicting distraction (addiction itself is a form of distraction). Perhaps one solution is some digital detox. Perhaps the best solution is to temporarily drop out. Not out of life, like a hippie, but out of our busyness and speed. Take a few minutes to drop out of each day and into a peaceful state called meditation. Take a break. Stop skipping across the surface of life and you may find the depth that you seek. You may find what's missing. Stop and drop—into the magic of meditation.

Without taking an honest look at our lives, and the suffering of others, we tend to grow numb and complacent. So many people are insensitive—literally and figuratively out of touch—with themselves and with others. Because they spend so much time in their distracted heads they're losing the ability to feel, and to empathize. Perhaps it's because things in the real world are so bad that we take refuge in a virtual one. It's so easy and tempting to check out of reality and into a flat screen—either a literal one, or the screen of our distracting thoughts and fantasies. But if we

⁵ See *Managing Stress: Principles and Strategies for Health and Wellbeing* by Brian Luke Seaward, Jones and Bartlett Learning, Burlington, MA, 2012.

continue to check out, the world will continue to go viral. And we will all merrily skip our way into personal and collective hell.

Distraction doesn't just kill the full experience of the present moment—it literally kills. How many times have we heard about some tragic accident because a driver or pedestrian was inattentive? How many times a day do we bump into things, physically or psychologically, because we are mindless? All these small accidents are ominous warnings of the impending larger ones.

Distracted people don't notice things. They don't perceive the clear and present danger because they're not present for it.⁶ As the poet Rumi said, "Sit down and be quiet. You are drunk and this is the edge of the roof."

The frog

It's akin to what happened to that poor distracted frog. If you take a frog and place it in room temperature water, it will bathe in comfort. Life is good for the frog, if not a bit sleepy. If you slowly raise the temperature of the water, the frog will never take notice. The heat is on but he doesn't feel it. The frog has acclimatized to a climate that is almost literally going to hell. Before he has time to jump out he will be boiled alive. Because the temperature changes were so gradual, and because he adapted to them, he never knew what hit him. He adapted his way out of existence.

Adaptation has its place, but it's not humane to adapt to mass shootings to the point where the next one seems par for the course. It's not healthy to acclimatize to increasingly deadly hurricanes, super storms, or raging wildfires as if they were normal. It's not in our evolutionary interest to adapt to rising instances of corruption, animal cruelty, or corporate greed. It's not safe to

⁶ In 2011, 23% of auto accidents involved cell phones, which equals 1.3 million crashes. Texting while driving makes a crash up to twenty-three times more likely. See www.textinganddrivingsafety.com/texting-and-driving-stats/

adapt to air pollution so bad you can't see the top of skyscrapers. This kind of adaptation is born from growing numb. Anesthesia is good for surgery. It's not good for life. Growing numb means growing dumb.

Despite what Darwin says, adaptation is not always the best way to survive and evolve. Sometimes we need to wake up and revolt. The meditation revolution, because it's a revolution in awareness, is a sane and gentle way to do that.

Whether it's the unsettling climate of our lives, or that of the world, things are heating up. As Al Gore put it, the world has a fever—and so do we. Physical, mental, and environmental inflammation is epidemic. Global warming—at every level—is real. The good news is that unlike that doomed frog, sensitive people are starting to squirm. They're looking for ways to cool off.

As we will see, meditation is a form of internal climate control. It's a mental and behavioral anti-inflammatory that quells the emotional fires within. It allows us to chill out personally and to start to calm the world down collectively. Unlike its physical counterparts (like ibuprofen), this mental anti-inflammatory is totally organic and natural. Meditation simply returns us to our natural, balanced, and cool state of being.

Studies have shown how harmful physical inflammation is, which is why the anti-inflammatory business is a multi-billion dollar industry. Left unchecked, inflammation leads to a host of diseases, from simple rashes and acne, to the epidemic of allergies, autoimmune disorders like arthritis, even heart disease and cancer. It can lead to wrinkles and pre-mature aging. Inflammation is like a smoldering fire that ignites all sorts of disease. The scary thing about inflammation is that it can be going on inside us like a coal fire and we'll never know it—*because we can't feel it*. We're out of touch with our inner physical selves and can't feel the burn.

Unlike the overheated frog, the “hot water” is not only outside of us (global warming), but also within (inflammation).

These inflammatory processes are also happening within us at mental and psychological levels. We’re equally out of touch with our mental and emotional selves, and the “heat” that is generated at those levels. One consequence of mental speed is mental heat. There’s so much internal friction with our racing thoughts that people worldwide are at the boiling point. Can you sense it? From road rage, to political spats, to celebrity duels, to workplace shootings, to domestic violence—hot heads abound. Because the baseline emotional temperature is so high, a single inflammatory comment or event can tip a person, or an entire country, into exploding.

Research has shown that as temperatures rise, tempers flare. One report states, “Many global climate models project global temperature increases of at least 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit over the next half century. Our results imply that if nothing changes, this rise in temperature could amplify the rate of group conflicts like civil wars by an astonishing 50 percent in many parts of the world—a frightening possibility for a planet already awash in conflict.”⁷ This is a startling indicator of the relationship between outer and inner inflammatory processes.

We’ll have more to say about inflammation later.⁸ The point here is that we’re in serious hot water. Until we’re forced to take note of it, which usually happens when it boils over into physical disease, social dis-ease, or emotional unrest, we remain unaware of the simmering heat within. Meditation douses behavioral inflammation at its root. By slowing the mind it reduces the rub—and prevents all manner of overheating.

⁷ See *Weather and Violence*, by Marshall Burke, Solomon Hsiang, and Edward Miguel, in *The New York Times*, Sept. 1st, 2013.

⁸ *Fire and Ice; On the Benefits of Meditation* devotes entire chapters to this hot topic.

The good news

There is a silver lining in this cloud of personal and global unease. If we acknowledge the bad news, and relate to it intelligently, it leads to good news. Diagnosis leads to cure. When something isn't working we start to ask questions. Is there an alternative? Is there something that can help me? Is there a way out? The way out, in this case, is to find our way in. The revolution is internal. It's an attention revolution.

If we can find our way in, we will return to our center. We will recapture the cool balance that is our birthright and that balance will spread to the world. So if you're feeling off center, dissatisfied, and out of touch, that's good news. You're getting in touch with the scratchy truth. This awareness can spur you to find something that will help you feel centered again.

I often teach meditation in religious and spiritual centers, and they humorously tell me that business is good. Not in a greedy way, of course, but because it means people are searching. Whether it's for answers, meaning, happiness, or relief. Something is off and people know it.

For many people meditation may be an answer. But we have to be careful. While it's possible for meditation to be the solution, we need to be realistic. To view meditation as a panacea is to guarantee disappointment. There are two extreme ways people relate to meditation, both of which lead to failure. Some skeptics are so doubtful about meditation that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They try it half-heartedly and it doesn't work. Others are so enthusiastic about it that it also doesn't work. They drop it when expectations aren't met. While meditation is a remarkable tool, don't burden it with excessive doubt or hope.

A common theme in this book is that of the "middle way." Here that means not getting stuck in the extremes of doubt or

hope. A little skepticism is healthy, but don't close your mind. A little enthusiasm is also healthy, but don't get manic. The best approach is to keep an open but questioning attitude. Try it and see if it works.

You may feel so busy that you're leery about adding anything new to your life. You just don't have time to meditate. Meditation is to help you slow down and relax, not to add further speed and stress. While it does take some time and effort, meditation is really about subtracting things from your life. It adds to your life by taking needless things away from it.

As meditation takes you below the surface of life and into more meaningful depths, you begin to let go of those things that don't really matter. It simplifies your life. This is where it is a kind of panacea. Your meditative mind will reach deep into you, curing the ailments associated with frivolity and speed. It's frequently referred to as medicine for the soul, a restorative balm. Meditation as medication gets a lot of humorous press.

Meditation can increase your happiness and heighten your awareness. It can instill strength of mind, openness of heart, and inner peace. Sogyal Rinpoche, a modern meditation master, says, "Learning to meditate is the greatest gift you can give yourself in this life. For it is only through meditation that you can undertake the journey to discover your true nature, and so find the stability and confidence you will need to live, and die, well."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's define it first.

Resources

www.meditationintheigeneration.com

This interactive website is designed to provide resources to build on what you learn in this book. It offers supplemental material not published in the book, along with suggestions on how to take your meditation to the next level. I'll share the latest research, articles on meditation, where to interact with other meditators, and help you find retreats to keep you engaged. As I prepare the forthcoming companion book on the benefits of meditation, you will be the first to receive excerpts from it, along with insights into how this journey will continue.

Guided Audio Instruction

Tara Brach, *Mindfulness Meditation* (Sounds True 2012)

Elisha Goldstein, *Mindfulness Solutions for Stress, Anxiety, and Depression* (Mindful Solutions, 2007)

Andrew Holecek, *Shamatha Meditation Instruction*
(andrewholecek.com)