



## Abhijit Naskar: Demystifying meditation

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Abhijit Naskar is the author of several books that explore how a basic awareness of the brain can completely redefine our perception of life. He advocates meeting face to face with our inner selves, beyond our preconceived notions, to make our daily life much more cheerful and meaningful. Abhijit was born in Calcutta, India. He quit his computer engineering studies and embarked on an expedition of scientific research. A self-educated neuroscientist, he has been speaking about the mind and brain in the corporate, education and healthcare sectors. He also speaks on issues of mental wellness and global harmony.

This is part of the *Pausefully* podcast, edited by Serge Prengel.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

**Serge:** So, Abhijit, we all agree that meditation is very important, but it need not be done in what is traditionally considered meditation.

**Abhijit:** Traditionally we perceive meditation as a lot of complicated methods... As if you have to sit upright and breathe this way or that... And we have to chant a certain mantra or various other complicated methods. And although we are mentioning here the word complicated, we are, in no way denying the effectiveness of these approaches. What we are actually doing is trying to figure out whether that is the only way. What we are finding out is that meditation, the word, though it has been related to various technical methods and technicalities, coming from various cultures....It comes from back in the days, thousands of years basically in various cultures... So that is why we see them as something ancient. So it hurts our ego to alter from that traditional ancient path. But the point is, the good thing about human progress and human mind is that we can change. We can evolve. That way of evolving, makes us better in every single practice. I think if is a very good time to look at meditation from a completely new perspective, a fresh perspective.

**Serge:** Yeah, so we don't have to be beholden to something because it's a tradition, but actually look at it from a new perspective.

**Abhijit:** Yes, because often we see tradition as something that's kind of a holy grail that we cannot even touch... Or we cannot even make a little bit of alteration to it, or it becomes something not sacred, unholy. But that's where the problem is and that's where the problem begins. The point is, If the mind thinks of something to be unholy than the mind begins to relate... to create this kind of negative impact on the body itself. So just for those who actually think of their traditions and the traditional methods of practicing meditation to be more important than trying something

new.... For them, those traditional methods would be more effective because they truly believe that they hold on to that idea. But that holding on to that idea may be keeping them from truly accessing the true potential of what meditation really is.

Serge: So, we have... In some way, we have a feedback loop and a placebo effect. If you believe something, to some extent, it's gonna work, but at the same time you deprive yourself of that fresh contact with direct experience.

Abhijit: Yes, exactly. The placebo effect is significantly strong here. We are only beginning to learn about the placebo effect and of course the correlated nocebo effect, but what we are learning is that is actually much more effective than previously thought. So here, when it comes to a belief and a certain practice, whether that practice is a secular practice, or a religious practice... If it is connected to a strong belief, then that practice can bring about a lot of effects, it could be positive, or negative, depending on the person's beliefs.

Serge: Yeah. So, we're putting all of this within that context... of the placebo and nocebo effect that can happen. But now let's shift to having that fresh look. And so, what is it that a perspective that's more liberated from traditional thinking... how would it approach meditation?

Abhijit: Could you repeat that question?

Serge: How would a practice that's more liberated from traditional practices approach meditation in a fresh way?

Abhijit: OK. I believe I get your question. OK. So here we need to approach it in a different way. The answer is, it all depends. First, on the person practicing it. That is if a person has been raised in a culture and goes believing in the traditional way of living, including the meditation practices and all of that, then let him or her do whatever he or she wants to do. That is the best way for her. But it depends. If a person has this kind of unique urge to try new things, look beyond the barriers and conditioning, then perhaps those people with that urge to go beyond the norms, they can actually truly begin to see the real effectiveness of a new and real way of meditation. As we are saying "the real way", by no means we are actually saying that the traditional ones are unreal ones. But, if we say that the traditional ones are the only ones, then we are reducing the effectiveness of meditation itself.

Serge: So we get to a sense that meditation is a state, a way of being, a state of mind, a physiological state that has to do with what we do... But also, because we're human beings, with the way our mind puts it in context... and the meaning it has within this context.

Abhijit: Yes. So when we look at meditation... What is meditation? For example, a few people have commented that the term meditation simply means thinking over something. But there is just an innate defense mechanism. And people strongly hold onto the traditional idea or metaphysical ideas... That there is something wrong

about thought. They think of thought to be completely... something very horrible... and that we have to be empty of all our thoughts in our mind to really meditate. So that is why there are so many techniques... Vipassana... Raja Yoga... focusing on breathing or chanting... so that the mind can get rid of thoughts. But here is the trouble: If we try to. If a river is flowing and we try to understand that river, we cannot understand that by stopping it because we cannot stop that river from flowing.

New Speaker: We cannot. And to really understand that we have to get inside that river and just swim in it. Simple. And whenever there are waves, we will be in the waves. Basically, we will be the waves. And when the release comes, then we will be calm. So the same thing is with thoughts. The mind is not different from thoughts. We are the thoughts, emotions, ambitions, every single element that the mind is composed of. All those things together actually construct something we call mind. We don't even know. It is something that... Our mind has an urge to create patterns, to see things in a context because we have to find figures and patterns so that we can understand things. That's the way we have been as we evolved from our wild days. And if we do not find a pattern in something, we go crazy on this, and that makes us alert... So the mind is programmed to find a pattern... So it's more easy for a person to follow a certain set of rules and pre-ordained ideas, certain notions about certain method in a methodical manner than actually trying new things.

New Speaker: Because trying new things means accessing and using the mind in a way that has never been used before. So it is like the mind has to practice its creative abilities and create those neural connections to actually be able to understand what that is. So what mindfulness or meditation... There are two words... We often focus too much on the words and that's where the trouble begins. The Word is not the thing. The menu is not the meal. We think that the menu is the meal. Meditation, or mindfulness, it simply means being aware or thinking over something. Anything, any practice that makes us be who we really are and makes us access more potential of our brain than we usually ask us in our daily life, that is meditation.

Serge: Let me stop a little bit just because you said a lot. So one thing is that a way to think about mindfulness is as an activity that allows us to use our mind fully, more fully than we do in regular everyday life. Actually, something that is bringing us toward mindfulness could be considered a meditative practice. You also mentioned something about the way the mind functions. It is that, basically we look for patterns in things, in order to make sense of the world. We have an ability to seek patterns and once we find a patterns that makes sense... You know, pattern recognition, just like in videos of, a missile locking in on a target... Something that says, Ah... Find the right pattern... Identify it... This is it! Then you've got a solution and you're happy because you found a pre-existing pattern. But when you actually disrupt this process, and it's not easy to find a pattern, that's where actually creativity comes in. And creativity is defined as the possibility of making new neural connections,

Abhijit: Correct. Yes. That's where creativity comes in and perhaps that's what... That is the domain that is the territory that defines our future and that has been defining our

future since we started to evolve from lesser animals to higher primates. And we go up and up and up because there were some people who were ready enough to try new things. Some hominids tried for the first time to jump into fire and try to tackle that fire, so we had fire. But the rest of the hominids were afraid because that was something no other species could have done until that moment. But that one hominid, or a few hominids, did it for the first time and that became, later on, a stepping-stone for evolutionary progress, and it goes on like that.

Serge: So that's a big point. We're going into something that's about a contemplative approach... But not "contemplation" that means "doing nothing"... Contemplation as the ability to stay with something that's new and potentially disturbing until you find a way to deal with it. Whereas our normal temptation, the way our mind is structured, our nervous system is structured... If fire means danger, it means "go away". And so this is the ability to stay despite the signal that says, "danger", knee jerk reaction, "go away"... Stay long enough to say: "Oh, what does this have to teach me? What can I learn from this? What's... How can I find a different way to think of it?"

Abhijit: Right. So, what I believe is that some people are basically... it could be a huge statement... but it is, of course, a hypothesis... some people are born with this kind of genetic urge to try out new things. Maybe not all, but in most cases, many of them, those genetic traits get suppressed. They don't come out, they don't get.... Those genes don't get fully activated. So that gets suppressed by sociological conditioning. They have to follow what society tells you to follow. But even out of that bunch, some people still remain who would still follow their abilities, their inner mental faculties more than what society has to say. Because that person wants to learn new things and wants to learn it even from their mistakes. "That's OK, if something goes wrong, so what I learned something from this".

So the same is with meditation, and mindfulness. Most people would go along with the conditioned thinking, traditional methods, and there is nothing wrong with that. It is positive, it does bring health benefits. But there are many other ways to look at meditation and perhaps those are the ways that will determine the future of the practice of meditation itself. Because, more and more, we're getting into a world where we have less time and we are getting more engaged in our work and everything... So we will have less time... Which means... Less time means more activity, work and stress and anxiety. And so in the midst of that anxiety, it would be very hard for people to just sit, even for five minutes, like that. So it is right now... Now is the time that we had to look at the most effective way to tackle anxiety, tackle stress, that is meditation. It is still the most effective method, natural method. I'm calling it method, not the traditional methods, just a practice. That is, meditation is still the most effective method to deal with anxiety and stress and depression and many of those negative things that people suffer from in life.

Serge: Yeah, so, so while you give full credit to the traditional methods for their benefits, with meditation, you're talking about paying attention to other ways to get there.

Abhijit: Yes, yes. The other ways that you mentioned... The first thing we need to know about the other ways... Nobody knows all those other ways. Because we're just saying: Let's look at it. If you don't know, I don't know. Buddha didn't know. He tried to find out himself. That's why today we have an entire tradition, Buddhist tradition... But somebody does that first thing himself or herself and finds out. If Buddha could do it, you can do it. Anybody can do it. So we have to look at the things in a new way. But that's it: We forgot to look at things in a completely innovative manner. So what could be the other things? For example, with meditation or mindfulness, the brain becomes more effective in dealing with emotional instabilities, so the mind becomes more effective and more stable, especially in times of distress or utter anxiety. So there are some ways, basically the things you love to do, what you love to do. You may love to go jogging... You may love to play guitar... You may love to paint... You may love to write... Any single activity that makes you totally absorbed in that activity. That is the time when you fully accessing much more of your brain potential than you are usually accessing in your daily activities. And that is the moment when you're actually creating new neural connections. And the more neural connections we have, the healthier our brain is, and the more effective we are in that specific practice. So when we have a healthy brain, it means we have a healthy mind, because the mind is not separate from the brain. The mind is simply the expression, the functional expression of the brain. If even a certain region of the brain turns off, then certain parts of the mind will turn off, because the mind is a collective functional expression off the network that we today call the brain.

Serge: Yeah. So, what you're talking about is that we develop our brain, and therefore our mind, in activities in which there is a certain kind of state, which is kind of a state of flow, of being so engaged with the activity that it is a special state.

Abhijit: It is a special state and it can even often lead to the state we so gloriously call Kundalini awakening, or Nirvana, and all that. There are various terms we somehow have related. We relate to those terms with more mystical elements than naturally ones. We think of those terms to be something that can only be achieved by some kind of higher primate, even higher than us. And that is why, if Buddha can do it, we cannot do it. Some great teacher can do it. Probably some great sage can do it property. They are ordinary human beings just like us, except they knew how to access... or at least try to walk on a path that nobody, in their times, did.

Serge: Let's just go back to the simple examples you were giving... That as an ordinary human being, you like jogging and as you get involved in your jogging, there is a kind of a rhythm and a kind of state that you see happening... If you like playing an instrument, without being a master or a special artist, if you just really enjoy playing an instrument and practicing it, then you get to a stage when you play, when you're in that kind of state of flow.

Abhijit: Yes, that's what you mentioned, the state of flow. Which means there is no force involved. There is no pressure involved. We are not pressuring ourselves. If somebody learns a new skill, that is when there is all the pressuring and forcing for somebody to learn something. But here we're talking about something that

somebody loves to do. It is a natural response of the mind. Something that the mind takes pleasure in. That is the state where, once we engaged... That is the time when the brain can access various parts of self. And when those regions are activated in various different ways, we can even reach the state of oneness with that playing instrument, which means that we can even feel as if the instrument and us is not different. That is what, in the Nirvana and Kundalini and all those, they are called the non dual philosophy, the state of non-dualism. You can do that by playing guitar, just play guitar for some time if you love that really, and you would get one with that music, one with that guitar and simply a state of being where it is no difference between the guitar and you.

Serge: Yes. We were talking about several things that you mentioned. Taking the example of guitar. It's something that is not certainly happening the first time you touch the guitar. So there is a sense of... There's a long practice, and it's not just a grim practice, "I'm going to do it because it's good". But no, there's an enjoyment... So the state of personal engagement comes from the pleasure of doing it. It's something that's consistent with who you are, that gives you a sense of pleasure. There's also the ongoing practice that gives you a sense of familiarity with it so that when you're playing, you're not bogged down with trying to figure out where the notes are,... But you have reached the place where there is a mastery of the technique so that you can be fully involved with what's happening.

Abhijit: Yes. And that being fully involved is called mindfulness. And the practice that makes you fully involved is called meditation. There is no other thing involved here. And some other methods are the traditional methods, but they're not the only ones.

Serge: Yeah. So I just want to repeat what you just said. That state that we're talking about, that state of flow, that state of being fully present in what you're doing because you're so engaged is what could be called mindfulness. And that which brings you to that state can be called meditation. And so, then we have a definition that goes beyond the traditional techniques because you get to a functional definition of what mindfulness is and what the means to it, meditation, is,

Abhijit: Yes, because the person... If somebody hears about mindfulness and meditation for the first time, and his friend is saying: Oh, I practice this kind of stuff and it gives me great feelings and benefits. And the other person says, OK, I need to practice it. Can I go? He goes home. He started googling it and he started researching it and studying it and all that. So he's learning a lot about it. He's even learning the methods of it. But that's the point. We are focusing on the terms, we are focusing on, the methods, not on the involvement itself. And it is the involvement that makes the difference.

Serge: So it would be a little bit the same way as if you have a friend who plays guitar and gets all the benefits from guitar and tells you: Hey, you know, you should learn guitar... And you're not especially interested in guitar, but you're doing it because of the mindfulness benefits... And you might get some of it, but it will probably not work as well for you as if you were doing something where you have more of a capacity for personal engagement.

Abhijit: Beautiful, beautiful connection you made there, Serge. Exactly. Some methods work for some people and others with others. So, if some method of meditation brings benefits to one person, it is not necessarily going to give benefits to you.

Serge: Right. And so we're, we're coming here is a sense of the personal inquiry. As a human being, we're aware that it's possible to have a state of consciousness, a state of being that's more pleasant, more productive, more harmonious, than everyday functioning. That state of flow, that state of mindfulness. And then the question becomes: If you have a little bit of an idea of it, you say: Well, what is it that actually fosters it in me? And, that is not a cookie cutter approach, but a very personal quest to say: What is it that does it for me?

Abhijit: Yes. So here we are trying to understand... For example, somebody starts practicing a certain kind of meditation... any kind of method including traditional... After they actually start getting the benefit, then after that they start to see. They start to enquire: What is it that brings us the benefits? Is it something really mystical? But there is something very natural about it. There's this urge in the human mind, if we don't understand something or if someone phenomenon requires a bit of a reasoning, a little bit of effort on our part to research for it, then we just try to send it upwards, up to some higher domain, and give all the credit to that domain. And that is the urge that also keeps us from truly understanding the various natural phenomena in the world. And that is keeping us from incorporating the benefits of those natural phenomena.

Serge: Yeah. So that is actually focusing on what really happens as opposed to our ideas, or preconceived notions, of why it's happening.

Abhijit: Yes. Because often our ideas and preconceived notions are not truly ours. They have been passed onto us. Most of the things that we call "we" or "I" are actually a mirror image of our ancestors. So one of my great, great grandfathers taught something to his son and he taught his son and it goes on like that. And this way we call it... we have this ancient knowledge and it is something divine. And this is... this represents who we are. Here, I'm not definitely going against the culture on all of that... But there is... in most cases we do not try to understand who we are, in our true core, the true essence of who we are. We just relate ourselves to our own culture, to our history, instead of actually figuring out our own capacities, our own faculties,

Serge: Yeah. So we're talking about this as a journey of really understanding better who we are as a person.

Abhijit: Yes, because by really understanding who we are as a person, we can understand ourselves as well as others better. And, in that very understanding, we can we truly create a harmonious world. We talk about harmony and peace because we don't want to understand ourselves. We just think of our history as ourselves and we keep on seeing "my culture is right, yours is wrong". Somehow we keep this kind of implicit bias towards our own culture. It is often the case that, in an effort to defend those preconceived ideas, preconceived conditions...in an attempt to defend them...

we just create more and more walls between each other. And, this way, harmony just remains an idea, not a practice.

Serge: So that sounds like a great place to end... But would you want to add something else, or is this a. is this a good ending place?

Abhijit: So I would just add a few more things here. I mentioned a lot of things which may appear as if against cultural heritage and all that, against our ancestral ideas... But here I think all the discussion had been... it has been not about going against any kind of traditional ideas or preconceived notions. It has been really about understanding those ideas or even questioning those ideas and trying to figure out: Is there something really more effective than them? Can there be anything more progressive and something that brings more effect in our lives? Because every single human being is different from the other, so every single human being has his or her own unique characteristics, knacks and desires and uniqueness. So by understanding those uniqueness, we can really realize our own inner potential. And, once we do understand that, we can be ourselves better than we were ten years ago, than we were before. So every day is a day of self discovery.

Serge: Thank you, Abhijit.

Abhijit: You're welcome Serge.

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