



# The Headspace Guide to Meditation and Mindfulness

How Mindfulness Can Change Your  
Life in Ten Minutes a Day

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## Introduction

It was already well past midnight. I sat on top of the wall and looked down. The tall pine trees from inside the grounds gave me plenty of cover in the darkness, yet I couldn't resist the urge to look back one last time to see if I'd been followed. How had it come to this? I looked down again. It was just over twelve feet to the pavement. It may not sound that high but, crouching in a flimsy pair of sandals and my night clothes, the thought of jumping made me wince. What was I thinking wearing sandals? I'd tucked them into my trouser bottoms as I crept through the monastery, trying not to wake any of the other monks. I'd gone to the monastery to contemplate life, and yet here I was scaling its walls and contemplating my sandals as I prepared to jump back into the world.

It was never meant to be this way. I'd trained as a Buddhist monk before, and in much more challenging environments. But other monasteries had exuded a warmth, a kind and caring approach to what can only be described as a challenging, yet very fulfilling, way of life. This one had felt different though. It was a Buddhist monastery like no other. Locked in, day and night, surrounded by high stone walls and with no way of contacting anyone on the outside, at times it had felt more like a prison. I had no one to blame but myself of course, after all I'd gone there of my own free will. It's just that traditionally monasticism is a little different from the Mafia. It's not usually the case that once you become a monk, that's it, for life, with no way out. In fact on the contrary, Buddhist monasteries are known and respected for their tolerance and compassion. So how I'd ended up leaving over a twelve-foot wall to get away from one was a mystery really.

It had all started a few years earlier, when I made the decision to pack up and head off to Asia to become a monk. I was at university at the time, studying Sports Science. It may sound like a dramatic change in lifestyle, but it felt like one of the easiest decisions I'd ever made. Understandably,

my friends and family were slightly more apprehensive than I was, perhaps wondering if I'd finally lost my mind, but all of them were none the less supportive. It was a different story at university, however. On hearing the news, my head of year suggested that a trip to see the doctor for some Prozac might be a more sensible option. As well meaning as he might have been, I couldn't help thinking he was missing the point. Did he really think I was going to find the type of happiness and fulfillment I was after in a bottle of prescription medicine? As I walked out the door of his office he said, "Andy, you'll regret this decision for the rest of your life." As it turns out, it happens to be one of the best decisions I've ever made.

Now you may be wondering what kind of person suddenly decides one day to head off to Asia and become a Buddhist monk. Perhaps you're imagining a "self-medicating" student who'd lost his way, or a "creative type" with the desire to rebel against a consumerist society. But the reality was actually far more mundane. At the time I just really struggled with my mind. Not in a straightjacket kind of way you understand, but I struggled with the endless thinking. It felt as if my mind was permanently switched on, going round and round like a washing machine. Some of the thoughts I liked. A lot of the thoughts I didn't like. The same was true of the emotions. As if a "busy head" wasn't enough, I felt as though I was always drifting into unnecessary worry, frustration and sadness. They were quite ordinary levels of emotion, but they had a tendency to spin out of control every now and then. And when they did, there was nothing I could do about it. It felt as though I was at the mercy of these feelings and would get blown around by them. On a good day, everything was fine. But on a bad day, it felt like my head would explode.

Given the strength of feeling, the desire to train the mind was never far from my thoughts. I had no idea how to do it properly, but I'd come into contact with meditation at a very early age and knew that it offered a potential solution. Now I wouldn't want you to think that I was some kind of child prodigy, and spent my teenage years sitting cross-legged on the floor, because that's most definitely not the case. I didn't take up the full-time study of meditation until I was twenty-two, but my first moment of headspace that I experienced at the age of eleven most definitely became a marker for what was possible. I'd love to say that it was a yearning to understand the meaning of life that motivated me to sign up for that first

meditation class, but the truth is I went because I didn't want to feel left out. My parents had just separated and, looking for a way to cope, Mum had signed up for a six-week course. Seeing as my sister was going, I asked if I could go along too.

I guess I just got lucky the first time I tried it. I didn't have any expectations, so couldn't project any hopes or fears on the experience. Even at that age it's hard to ignore the change in the quality of mind that meditation can bring about. I'm not sure I'd ever experienced a quiet mind before then. I'd certainly never sat still in one place for such a long period of time. The problem of course was when I didn't get the same experience the next time I tried, or the time after that, I started to get very frustrated. In fact, it was as if the harder I tried to relax, the further I moved away from a place of relaxation. So this was how my meditation began, battling with my mind and getting increasingly frustrated.

When I look back now I'm not really all that surprised. The approach I was shown was a little "far out," if you know what I mean. The language used was more 1960s than 1980s, and there were so many foreign words that I used to switch off in class. And then there was the constant reminder to "just relax" and "just let go." Well, if I knew how to "just relax" and "just let go," then I wouldn't have been there in the first place. And as for sitting thirty or forty minutes at a time, forget it.

This experience could well have put me off meditation for life. Support for the cause was certainly limited. My sister found it boring and gave up and, what with all her other commitments, Mum struggled to find the time. And as for support from friends, I can't imagine what I was thinking telling a couple of mates from school about it. By the time I walked into the classroom the next morning I was met by thirty students sitting cross-legged on their desks, eyes closed, chanting "Om" through poorly stifled fits of laughter. Though I laugh about it now, at the time I was mortified. So from that point on I never mentioned it again to anyone, and eventually I gave it up. Besides, what with sports, girls and underage drinking arriving on the scene, it was difficult to imagine finding time for meditation.

You might think I was brought up in a way that somehow made meditation

easier to accept as a concept. Maybe you're imagining me as an alternative character at school, walking around with bell-bottom flares, a pony-tail and smelling of incense. Or perhaps you have visions of my parents picking me up from school in a hemp-powered VW camper van with flowers painted down the side. I say this because I think it's easy to jump to conclusions, to tap into those stereotypes of meditation, and to think that it's only meant for a certain kind of person. But in reality, I think I was about as normal as you can be when you're a teenager.

I continued to dabble in meditation, until at the age of eighteen a crisis occurred, a series of tragic events that I'll come back to later, which eventually gave meditation an importance and relevance it had never had before. It's hard to deal with grief at any age. We're not trained for it, there's no formula for it, and most of us get by as best we can. For me that meant doing the only thing I knew how—pushing everything down inside, and hoping I would never have to deal with the feelings of loss and sadness that had so inconveniently arrived on my doorstep.

But like anything else in life, the more you push against something, the more tension you create. And eventually that tension has to find a way out. Fast-forward a couple of years, and I found myself studying at university. The first year flew by, and it was hard to imagine what more life had to offer. But then that tension, those feelings that had been ignored, time and time again, started to find their way to the surface. At first it was just uncomfortable, but before long it felt as though they were touching every single aspect of my life. Meeting with my head of year to give him the news that I had decided to leave and become a monk had been the least of my worries.

I had been brought up as a Christian, but by the time I reached my teens I felt no real connection with any particular religion. I'd read a few books over the years though, and a good friend of mine often used to speak about the philosophy and psychology of Buddhism. I guess it appealed in so much as it didn't really feel like a religion. And the stories of the meditation and the monks and nuns who had somehow mastered the mind sounded very attractive—not so much as a way of life, but in terms of the result.

When people ask me how I became a monk, the question is usually phrased something like, “So, you just walk up the hill, knock on the door and ask to become a monk, do you?” and as ridiculous as that might sound, that’s exactly what you do. But before you enthusiastically pack your bags, I should add that there’s a little more to it than that, including a number of years of training as a lay-person, followed by full-time training as a novice monk and then, with your teacher’s permission, you can become a fully ordained monk or nun.

In my impatience to find the right teacher, I moved often at first, from one monastery to the next, and from one country to the next. During that time I lived in India, Nepal, Thailand, Burma, Russia, Poland, Australia and Scotland, traveling across many other countries in the process, learning new techniques, each time building on the foundations of what I’d already learned, and doing my best to integrate them into my life. With the exception of the walled fortress from which I was about to jump, I found everywhere I lived welcoming, friendly and thoroughly conducive to the training. And yes, thankfully, I eventually found the right teacher, or group of teachers as it turned out to be.

Living as a monk can be tricky—not everyone gets the whole “bald-headed man in a skirt thing,” and trying to demystify meditation for a secular audience while dressed as a monk, which is how I worked, can send out a very mixed message. It’s one thing if you’re living in a monastic community or retreat, where people around you understand the simplicity of a monk’s robes, but when you’re living in a city it’s a little different. The more I spoke to people about the benefits of meditation, the more I found that many desperately wanted to find a way to relax, but were uncomfortable with the religious element that robes automatically imply. They simply wanted to find a way to cope with life, to deal with stress—in their work, their personal life, and in their own minds. They wanted to regain the sense of openness they remembered from childhood, that sense of appreciation in actually being alive. They weren’t looking for spiritual enlightenment, nor were they needing therapy. They just wanted to know how to “switch off” when they got home from work, how to fall asleep at night, how to improve their relationships, how to feel less anxious, sad or angry. People wanted to know how to control their cravings, to give up their addictions, to get a bit more perspective on life.

But most of all they wanted to know how to deal with that nagging feeling that all was not quite as it should be, or could be—that feeling that there must be more to life than this. The integration of meditation into everyday life was key to my decision to stop being a monk and to live instead as a lay-person.

I became quite shy as a monk. Part of that was down to the introverted way of living, but an equally important factor was seeing more clearly the conditions of my own mind, which left me feeling a little exposed, a little naked, and this was something I was pretty keen to address. I was also keen to address the fact that I'd become very inactive. Prior to any monastic training I'd been incredibly physical and yet it was as though that had been put on hold for the best part of ten years. Talking to a friend one day, she mentioned that an old classmate of hers was training at the Moscow State Circus. As she knew I was a keen juggler and had done lots of gymnastics in the past, she thought this might be something worth checking out. Before long I was having private lessons and loving every bit of it. It was during one of these lessons that my teacher asked me if I knew anything about the degree in Circus Arts that was available in London. Yes, you read that right, a university degree in Circus Arts—seriously, you couldn't make it up! I began some tentative inquiries and, sure enough, it really did exist. The demand for places on the course is surprisingly high (let's be honest, who'd want to study atomic physics when you can swing around like a monkey on a trapeze all day long?), so on paper my chances didn't look good. But late one evening I received an e-mail to say that I'd been offered a conditional place—the condition being that I agreed to sign a disclaimer that, in no uncertain terms, said I was old, more likely to injure myself, and needed to take full responsibility for this fact. Old at thirty-two, who'd have thought it?

While the transition from monk to clown may not sound like the most obvious one, there are perhaps more similarities than first meet the eye. The application of moment-to-moment awareness into physical activity was to prove invaluable, in more ways than I could ever have imagined. Think of a circus act, whether it's juggling, tightrope, acrobatics or trapeze, all of them require the perfect balance of concentration and relaxation. Try too hard and you make a mistake. Don't try hard enough and you fall off or slip over.

One of the most challenging aspects of training at the circus was constantly being asked to step out of our comfort zones—for most of us on a daily basis. The ego takes quite a battering in that process and we were encouraged to take ourselves a little less seriously throughout. Funnily enough, this is very similar to the training in the monastery, where the ego is also being challenged. In clowning workshops (still difficult to say with a straight face) we were encouraged to make fools of ourselves, to take risks, to try things out, confident in our ability to fail. We would be sent up on to the stage, with no material whatsoever, and be instructed what to do. And in those moments there was nothing but silence, nowhere to run. If we took too long to think about it, the teacher would simply bang a drum to indicate we were finished and send us off the stage. There was no room to escape in thought or reply in clever witticisms. It required a presence, a brutal honesty to put something out there and see what happens. Sometimes it was inspired and the thrill was exhilarating, other times it was painful and the result was humiliating. But somehow it didn't matter. What mattered was going out there and doing it, not thinking about it, not worrying what others might think, not even being attached to a particular result, just doing it.

Often in life we get so caught up in the analysis, the dissection of every possible outcome, that we miss an opportunity altogether. Of course, some things require careful consideration, but the more we live mindfully, in the moment, the more we start to get a sense of what feels right. Whether you think of it as a gut feeling, intuition, being guided, or just knowing for yourself that it's the right thing to do, this can be an incredibly liberating discovery.

## **The founding of Headspace**

Teaching meditation was something I'd long felt passionately about, but I also felt a certain sense of duty to pass on the care and attention to detail that had been given to me by my own teachers. When I saw the way that meditation was sometimes being taught here in the UK, it amazed me that anyone could get any benefit from it at all. While the transition of meditation from East to West had been handled with great care and sensitivity by the monks and nuns of spiritual traditions, in the secular world it was done in the same way as we do everything else—in a hurry. It

was as if we simply couldn't wait a moment longer to experience a quiet mind. So the techniques were extracted in isolation and without any context. This made them almost impossible to learn. How many people do you know who've tried meditation but then given it up? Worse still, how many people do you know who would never even give it a try because they think they'd be no good at it? But without knowing what meditation really is, without being given the essential instructions and guidance on how best to approach the techniques, how could it ever possibly work?

As you'll soon discover, the practice of meditation is about much more than simply sitting down for a set period of time each day. Although it may be a key component, it is just one part of a broader system of mind training that incorporates three distinct aspects. Each aspect is equally important and, in order to get the most out of your meditation, the other two aspects also need to be learned. Traditionally, meditation students were taught first how to *approach* the technique, then how to *practice* it, before finally learning how to *integrate* the techniques into their everyday lives.

With the intention of presenting meditation as part of this broader system of mind training, Headspace officially launched in 2010. The idea was simple: to demystify meditation, to make it something accessible and relevant for modern-day living. Nothing kooky, nothing wacky, just straightforward tools that people could use to get some headspace. The idea was also to get as many people as possible to try meditation, not just to read about it, but to actually do it. There will undoubtedly come a time when sitting down to get some headspace for ten minutes a day is no more unusual than going out for a walk. Ten or fifteen years ago, it was hard to say the word Yoga without people sniggering, and yet going to the gym to take a yoga class is now no more strange than going there to do aerobics (in fact, arguably less so).

Although it took years of research, planning and development to make the project a reality, it is but a blink of the eye in terms of the history of the techniques. These are meditation exercises that have been passed down from teacher to student over thousands of years. That's more than enough time to refine and develop the techniques, not to mention iron out any creases. In a world of novelty, fads and fashions, there is something very

reassuring about that authenticity. It was that authenticity which allowed me to start working alongside doctors, assisting in the adaptation of the techniques for medical use. It was the same authenticity that allowed me to start up in private practice as a Clinical Mindfulness Consultant, where over the years I've seen clients suffering from insomnia, impotence, and everything in-between.

So, there I was, perched on top of that wall. I took one final look behind me and jumped. I was sorry to leave the monastery in this way, but, looking back, I have no regrets about being there in the first place. Every monastery, retreat and meditation center I have ever lived in or visited has taught me something. In fact, over the years I've had the privilege and good fortune to study with some incredible teachers, meditation masters in the truest sense of the word. If there's any wisdom to be found in these pages, then it's entirely down to them. The way I see it, my strongest qualification for writing this book is that along the way I've made just about every mistake possible in my meditation training, and so hopefully I can help you avoid making similar ones. This means giving you advice on how to best approach meditation, how best to practice meditation, and how best to integrate meditation into the rest of your life. Carrying a map is one thing, having someone to show you the way is quite another.

## **How to get the most from this book**

Meditation is a wonderful skill with life-changing potential, but how you choose to use that skill is up to you. With increasing coverage of meditation and mindfulness in the media, many people seem to be in a hurry to define its purpose. But the truth is, *you* define the purpose by deciding how you choose to use it. When you learned to ride a bike, I'm sure you were simply shown how to ride the bike, not how you should use that ability. Some use a bike to commute, for others it's to hang out with friends, and for a very few cycling may even become a career. But the skill of being able to remain in the saddle is the same for each. So while somebody else might have taught you how to ride, you define what cycling means to you, how you use it, and how it best suits your lifestyle. And so it is with the skill of meditation. It can be applied to any aspect of life and the value of it is equal only to the value you place upon it.

In order to get the best from this book, and consequently the many benefits of meditation, you don't need to choose just one area of your life that you'd like to focus on. At least not at first anyway. Meditation is much broader than that and the qualities that arise from it tend to inevitably impact those areas of life where it's needed most. However, it's useful to know how other people use meditation, to appreciate its full potential. For many it's the all-round stress buster, an aspirin for the mind. In short, a way of getting some headspace each day. For some, it's the foundation of a broader approach to mindfulness, an opportunity to touch base with what it means to be present and in the moment throughout the day. For others, it might be part of a personal development plan toward greater emotional stability, or integrated into a spiritual path of some kind. And then there are those who turn to meditation as a way of improving their relationships with partners, parents, children, friends, colleagues and associates.

Since 2004 the UK National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has recommended the use of an adapted program of meditation (or mindfulness as it's known in the medical world) for those at risk of a relapse of re-current depression. It has also been studied in a wide range of stress-related health disorders. These include, but are by no means limited to, anxiety, insomnia, chronic pain, compulsive eating, and heart health.

Away from the medical world, but still with the intention of targeting one specific aspect of life, many people use meditation to give them an extra edge in a particular discipline, job, hobby or sport (including many professional athletes). And finally, stretching the boundaries of your imagination, meditation has even been adopted by the US marines to make them more focused and efficient on the front line.

## **Meditation and the mind**

It may seem implausible that meditation could have such a broad range of benefits. But if you think about it, whatever you do that involves the mind is going to benefit from meditation. It's like fine-tuning the hard drive of a computer. And is there anything you do that *doesn't* involve the use of your mind? Given what a central role the mind plays in our lives, it's remarkable that this meditation revolution hasn't happened sooner. We don't think twice about exercising our bodies (well, most of the time