

## Why Meditate:

### *An Action of Compassion*

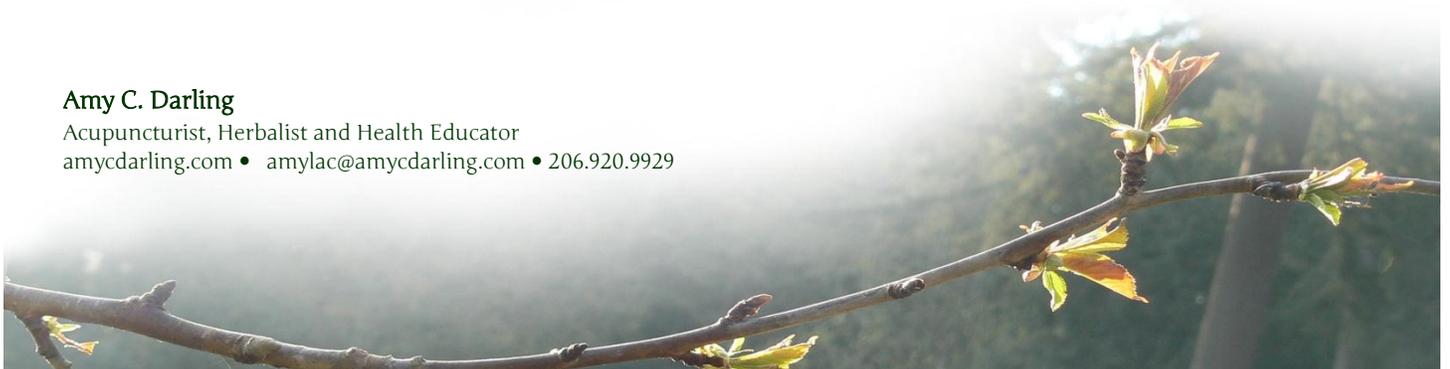
In “Why Meditate: The Science of Slowing Down,” I outlined some demonstrable effects of meditation on physical and mental health. I included a list of research studies that document these positive effects. In this article, “Why Meditate: An Action of Compassion,” we’ll look beyond the bounds of your individual body and mind at how your choice to meditate can influence your way of interacting with those around you to influence your community and the world. Toward the end of this article, I suggest a variety of ways you might include meditation in your workplace, your school, and your life to foster greater understanding, compassion and interpersonal awareness in your community.

In this hurried world of ours, some people consider meditation a ‘*non-action*,’ asking or thinking incredulously “Why are you just sitting there?!” It actually takes a lot of discipline, even courage in this frenzied, busy world of ours, to be still and witness the roller coaster of the heart and mind. It’s often humbling, even frightening to observe the hamster cage of thoughts that we just repeat over and over, so often critical of ourselves and critical of others. When I talk about meditation, in clinic or in casual conversation, people frequently comment that they have tried meditation, but they just can’t do it, that their mind never stops. This busy quality is the nature, the *default position* of the mind. With recent advances in functional MRI (fMRI) studies, psychologists have been able to observe this “*default position*” of the brain<sup>i,iii,iii</sup> to actually observe what spiritual teachers in many traditions have understood for thousands of years. Left to its own devices, the brain engages in thought about the past or the future, **and** it provides commentary on them. This is called self-referential processing; me, me, me, in the past and the future and how I relate to you, you, you.

Most of the time, we wander around oblivious that this mental chatter is happening all the time! Why does that matter? Well, when we are aware that these thoughts are happening all the time, we have greater choice. By engaging with this relentless stream of disparaging thoughts, our mental dialogue can look like this. “Oh, there is that critical voice about how I’m incompetent. Again! Maybe I can set that aside and just complete this report I’m working on.” Or, “Gosh there’s that angry mental story about how my husband didn’t dump the recycling bin and how that means he just doesn’t care. I know he cares. It’s just a full recycling bin.” Or “Wow! That was a startlingly judgmental thought about that student of mine. I wonder if that’s impacting my tone of voice when I address her in class and in my evaluation of her performance. I need to pay attention.” I have no intention to diminish the complexity or difficulty of changing the patterns of our own thoughts. However, when we begin to notice this continual stream of mental chatter, it allows us to expand our awareness beyond just the me, me, me. We can more easily consider our speech and actions in relationship to those around us.

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In a fascinating study done by Harvard psychologists in 2010<sup>iv</sup>, this continual mental chatter was studied through a very creative use of the iPhone. For those who downloaded the app, they were contacted at random moments during the day, presented with questions and directed to record their answers on [trackyourhappiness.com](http://trackyourhappiness.com). Participants were asked to record the following points:

- How are you feeling right now? On a scale 0 = very bad 100 = very good
- What are you doing right now? Participants selected from 22 activities
- Are you thinking about something other than what you're doing?  
(Respondents chose from 4 options: No; Yes, something pleasant; Yes, something neutral; or yes, something unpleasant)

The psychologists documented that our minds are wandering often; close to 50% of the time our minds are not actually focused on what we're doing. More importantly, they found that *mind wandering*, even about that dream vacation in Hawaii, was correlated with less happiness than to people who were actually focused on what they were doing, even if it was cleaning the toilet.

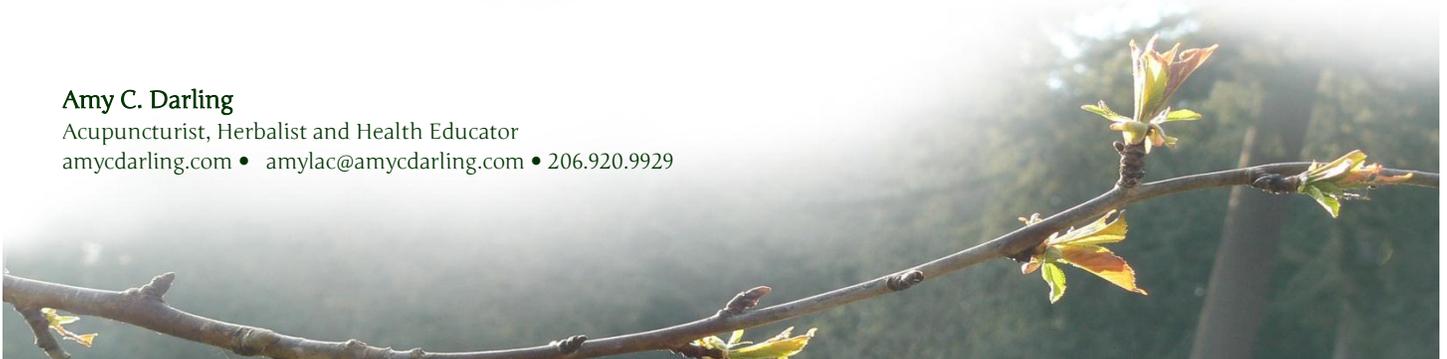
So we've established that the 'default gear' of the brain is to be thinking about something other than what we're doing. And the stream of mental chatter is often accompanied by critical commentary. Second, as documented in the "Mind Wandering" study, we are actually less happy when our minds are wandering. So how might we influence this mental hamster cage of thoughts? How might we influence this unconscious inventory of everything that is wrong with us and others so as to give us greater choice in our interaction with ourselves, our co-workers, our loved ones, our children and our communities?

With recent fMRI technology, psychologists have been able to demonstrate that the minds of those who meditate on a regular basis actually change<sup>v,vi,vii,viii</sup>. Some studies have demonstrated change begins in as little as 6-8 weeks. The areas of the brain that attend to and process direct physical and emotional experience light up, while those that provide the unrelenting commentary are less active. This doesn't mean that meditation shuts off one's ability to think critically. Those analytical skills are fully intact and available on cue, but they are more subject to conscious engagement. When that continual chatter slows down, it allows us to be less reactive and more present to the reality of whatever is happening in our lives, in the moment. That means being more present to the sadness we feel in response to a friend's death, feeling more joy in response to the first steps of a child, having more patience with the high pitched voice of someone speaking loudly on their cell phone, experiencing more compassion for the person asking us for change on the street, tasting more delight in the flavor of a piece of chocolate cake, and feeling more awe at the beauty of a sunset.

In "Why Meditate: The Science of Slowing Down," I talk about how meditation provides an antidote to the 'fight or flight' reactivity of the body and mind in our modern world. By incorporating meditation in our lives, first we slow down the cascade in the body triggering us to prepare for battle or retreat. Second, in noticing the continual mental muttering, we give ourselves greater choice in how we

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experience and interact with the world. I'm not implying that this happens overnight or that it's easy. But it does happen. And over time meditation actually changes the brain, engaging those areas more consistently which allow us to fully experience whatever is happening in our lives.

So all in all, evidence seems to support that meditation is a pretty good idea. And yet, as outlined in 'Why Meditate: The Science of Slowing Down,' there are some consistent obstacles that I find prevent people from trying. First, many people believe they don't have time. After all, in this culture our lives are filled and measured by what 'we do.' And to complicate the idea of adding one more thing to one's 'to-do' list is the misunderstanding that somehow meditation is *inaction*. After all, with a frantically busy life, why would you add something that's not doing anything? I hope this article has clarified that indeed meditation is an action of compassion for your body, your mind, your community and the world. Second, many people don't necessarily understand how to meditate or assume that it is tethered to a particular religious tradition. No single religion has proprietary rights on pausing, breathing and remembering to observe the moment-by-moment experience of being alive. Finally, when some people dedicate themselves and try to meditate, they feel like failures when their minds "won't be quiet." Hopefully, the content of this article will clarify how your mind is just like everyone else's, and that meditation can be a tool to discover more ease with your hyperactive mind. Consider the suggestions below and on the following page for how to incorporate meditation in your days:

- **Start small on your own.** 5-10 minutes every day.
- **Simply follow your breath.** Notice how it enters and leaves your body and allow it to anchor you back to the moment. There are several guided meditations on my website Resources section. Also, the Seattle Area Mindfulness Resources list provides information about organizations in the area to support your efforts.
- **Establish a regular meditation at your workplace.** This can be a 5 minutes day starter, or a 30 minute lunch hour, whatever seems appropriate to your environment.
- **Find a buddy.** If you want to introduce meditation to your work place, talk to a co-worker you think may share the same interest. Offer this article and "Why Meditate: The Science of Slowing Down" to your Human Resources Department.
- **If you are a teacher, propose a school-wide effort.** You could introduce a 5 minute *Pause* at the beginning of assemblies, classes, teacher or faculty meetings.
- **Incorporate a moment of reflection or *Pause*<sup>ix</sup> at the beginning of meetings** at your place of business.
- **Introduce a *Pause* bell into meetings.** When discussion becomes overly heated or contentious, anyone has the right to ring the *Pause* bell.

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- **Create a small neighborhood meditation.** This could rotate amongst houses close-by weekly, bi-weekly or monthly.
- **Introduce a short meditation to your book group, therapy group or other group activity.**
- **Share with your family.** Ask those you share your living space with about a time for Pause. This could occur once a week or be a simple moment of quiet before meals.
- **Download one of myriad *mindfulness apps* or guided meditations onto your smart phone or computer.** While these can be very supportive, one note of caution; no app is a replacement for the real thing of just pausing to follow your breath.

Please contact me if you have questions about the content of this article or would like support to introduce meditation into your school, place of business or group meeting. My hope is this short article will inspire you to begin meditation and to consider incorporating it as an action of compassion for yourself, those in your life and your community.

**Amy C. Darling** is an Acupuncturist, Herbalist and Health Educator. Outside of clinic, she serves as speaker and educational instructor in a variety of health-related topics, promoting the effects of meditation and dietary choices on health and well-being. She has been practicing Zen Buddhist meditation since 1996. Amy has facilitated meditation in diverse group settings including for hospice clinicians and prison inmates, for professional caregivers and her own patients. She currently offers a free weekly lunch hour meditation in the Medical Dental Building in downtown Seattle. Additional handouts and MP3 files with simple, secular meditation instructions are available on her website Resources page. She is available to educate academic, community and professional groups introducing meditation and its health benefits. She welcomes your inquiries.

<sup>i</sup> Mason MF, et al. (2007) "Wandering Minds: The Default Network and Stimulus-independent Thought." *Science* 315(5810):393.

<sup>ii</sup> Raichle ME, et al. (2001) "A Default Mode of Brain Function". *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.* 98(2):676.

<sup>iii</sup> Christoff K, Gordon AM, Smallwood J, Smith R, & Schooler JW (2009) "Experience sampling during fMRI reveals default network and executive system contributions to mind wandering". *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.* 106(21):8719-8724.

<sup>iv</sup> Killingsworth MA, Gilbert DT. "A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind." *Science*. 2010;330(6006):932.

<sup>v</sup> Goldin PR & Gross JJ (2010) "Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) on emotion regulation in social anxiety disorder." *Emotion* 10(1):83-91

<sup>vi</sup> Lutz A, et al. (2009) "Mental Training Enhances Attentional Stability: Neural and Behavioral Evidence." *J. Neurosci.* 29(42):13418-13427.

<sup>vii</sup> Moore A & Malinowski P (2009) "Meditation, mindfulness and cognitive flexibility." *Conscious. Cogn.* 18(1):176-186.

<sup>viii</sup> Farb NA, et al. (2010) "Minding one's emotions: Mindfulness training alters the neural expression of sadness." *Emotion* 10(1):25-33.

<sup>ix</sup> The Pause is the first of 6 instructions encompassed in [Insight Dialogue](#), an interpersonal meditation practice created by Gregory Kramer, PhD and Vipassana Buddhist teacher. [Insight Dialogue](#). 2007. Boston: Shambala.

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