



Three
Minutes
a Day

CHAPTER ONE

Nearly Struck by Lightning

Nowadays, because of security cameras, you can find all kinds of videos on the internet. If you search for “person struck by lightning,” many come up. You’ll see a flash, and when you slow down the video, you’ll see the person struck fall like a log.

One 2019 video is a little different. Taken by a security camera in South Carolina, it shows a man hurrying along a walkway in the pouring rain. He is striding along, taking about two steps a second, hiding under his umbrella. About halfway across there is a huge flash, and then he doubles over, recovers himself, and runs away. You can see the video on YouTube here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq6QojuQ6qA.

Slow it down, and something really important emerges. The video captures the actual moment when the lightning bolt hits the grass a few feet from him. In the next frame a huge flash whites out the entire screen.

But the next frame shows the man still walking, gait unchanged. He takes a whole step, almost half a second, before you see him doubling over, staggering, and then beginning to run for cover. So what happens in that half a second — that finger snap between actuality and experience, even when the actuality is as intense as nearly getting hit by lightning? This is what meditation helps us to examine.

Meditation has entered our common language. It's quite the vogue nowadays. We are told to “attend to the present,” to “be here now,” to “develop mindful awareness.” Somehow the simple act of sitting quietly and watching something, normally the breath, brings all these benefits. But why? And how?

In this book, I attempt to answer these questions and present a selection of short but effective meditation practices that relate to the answers. In so doing, I hope to remove some of the preconceptions that make meditation an obsession for some — and a seemingly unattainable goal for many others.

Behind the Curve

Meditation is a skill. It's like learning to ski, knit, or play the violin. It's not a religious activity per se; it is a method of working with our own experience. Meditation is a way of doing something that in modern times we generally don't often do, which is to look at our own experience *as experience*. Meditation helps us to

hold back from merely looking through our experience at “things” we identify outside ourselves, or reacting to thoughts and feelings that might arise in our inner world. Rather, it enables us to look at our experience itself.

We’re not used to doing this, so it takes a little practice.

This new skill of learning to look at our own experience produces inner resilience, the ability to deal with challenge and stress more effectively. Now, why would it produce inner resilience? This question is really a key to the whole issue of meditation. What comes next is a surprise initially and then sinks in as a piece of obvious common sense. It is the realization that our experience is constructed. Our experience is generated from our sense impressions and is the result of many rapidly unfolding processes scientists have been studying for over a century. But what do we know about such activity?

Many of us were taught in school that the three dimensions we see with our eyes are actually a construct, made from differences between the images processed in one eye compared with the other. Depth as an experience is a creation of our sense apparatus. In a similar manner, our ability to locate the source of sounds that we hear is computed from phase differences between the sound arriving in one ear and the other. Modern experiments and discoveries, like the phenomenon of phantom limbs experienced by amputees, for example, show that our body image is equally a construct. Indeed, this is quite generally the case with all our sense

inputs; all our experience is constructed. But how? Can we gain access to direct experience without these layers of construction?

Meditation can help us answer this question. It can help us understand the display or map in which we live. This statement is not an attempt to make arm-waving metaphysical claims about the world, that it doesn't exist or anything like that. It is simply pointing out something pretty obvious: we all have a *reaction time*. A reaction time is the time it takes us to react to something. It's what we experience when we see a glass falling to the floor and attempt to reach it with our hand but miss it. But as the lightning video shows us, all our experiences happen within a reaction time, and that reaction time is actually quite long. It means we are effectively one finger snap behind reality, behind whatever is happening at the time, all the time.

So let's return to our question. What happens in that finger snap between an event and our reaction to it? What lies there? The practice of meditation reveals that in that gap lies something really important. In that gap of a little under half a second it takes for us to experience anything, our experience is configured, colored, influenced, not only by our sense inputs, but also by what we believe and all the experiences we have had, good and bad. Those influences make us who we are. The problem is, that configured experience is something we then react to, receiving it as if it is the world itself. We react to the display we ourselves have created

as if it is unreservedly real, actually the case. This blindness to our own situation is why we find ourselves so often feeling nervous, feeling uncomfortable, feeling out of sorts and not really knowing why. Often we find ourselves triggered by things, and we don't know the reason. Our blindness to all that unconscious, reflexive reactivity is a profound source of stress.

If we can learn how reactivity occurs and how we might get a handle on it, we develop resilience, become more flexible, and learn to deal with situations as they are rather than merely reacting to them. We become more accommodating. This is not the same as becoming unresponsive; rather, it is developing the ability to understand our reactivity and hence reduce it. This is one of the great fruits of meditation.

Shamata and Vipassana

The practice of meditation has two elements. The first one is calmness meditation. It's called *shamata* in the Pali language of old India, where it was developed. You can think of *shamata* like this: You have a glass of water. It's full of chalk dust or fine mud, so when you stir it up, the water's all cloudy and turbulent. You can't see through it at all. But if you put the glass down on a table and wait, over time all the dust and mud particles settle. Eventually all that is left is clear water with a sediment on the bottom. This process of settling is very similar to *shamata*. *Shamata* is about learning to