

The Mind Illuminated

An Interview with Culadasa and Travis Newbill

[0:00:00.0] Travis: Hello and welcome back to day one of the Science of Meditation. My name is Travis Newbill and I'm here with Culadasa and we're going to have a conversation on the topic of attention and meditation. I'm so glad to have Culadasa, incredible teacher and source of wisdom online today, so thank you so much for joining us, Culadasa, and maybe we can just get right into it. So the topic of attention which is always or often associated with meditation, attention is obviously something that we're all working with, dealing with, experiencing throughout our lives. People are paying attention to me speaking now, maybe, people will be paying attention and possibly losing attention throughout the course of this video. People's attention, these days especially what we hear a lot is people's attention's sucked away from what they want to be paying attention to and into more distraction level things. People are reporting "I don't even know what I looked at on the internet for the last 45 minutes, but I was not paying attention to the work that I wanted to be doing." or "I don't know how long I was just looking at my cell phone, but I was not paying attention to the people that I'm in the same room with", people having trouble actually giving attention to the meaningful parts of their lives, their loved ones, their work and this and that. And so there seems to be some urgency in learning how to work with this to really reclaim our lives, and so meditation. What can you say, how can meditation help us in this day and age?

[0:02:08.4] Culadasa: Well, what you've talked about is very common, we overuse attention to begin with, but for the most of us we haven't learned to train our attention and in every form of meditation, even those forms of meditation where they tend to discount the development of concentration, they actually are learning to stabilise concentration. An example would be the Mahasi style insight practice, it involves noting. Now often teachers in that tradition will say "You're not going to learn concentration" but you really are, you're learning... I don't like the word concentration because in English it has a lot of connotations that don't actually fit what you're trying to do in meditation, the actual word is Samadhi, which means the drawing together of the mind, and so I like to say what we're doing in meditation is learning to stabilise attention. Training attention to stay on one thing. That has two consequences, one of course is that we're able to stay with whatever it is that we're doing, we're able to pay attention to what the other person is saying, and having stable attention is a very valuable thing. But a much more valuable thing that happens and hasn't been explicitly recognised until recently in the fields of neuroscience and cognitive science is that we have another, completely different way of knowing and perceiving that's going on simultaneously with attention and the two are working together, and it is extremely under-utilised and that is what I've chosen to call awareness or peripheral awareness. Basically, when you stabilise attention, you just anchor it to an object, it gets attention out of the way so you can be in the developed, powerful awareness, at the same time that you're developing control over the attention so that awareness and attention can actually work together the way that they're meant to.

[0:04:47.2] Travis: I think what a lot of people experience is they sit down and meditate to begin with, and what they get is just scattered mind, jumping all over the place and then the idea like "Wow, I am not good at meditation" or "I'm not the sort of person who can be a meditator because my state of being is like this and I do not feel at all like the person that I saw on the cover of Time Magazine, who's in a state of total control, bliss, I must not be good at meditation", what they're kind of sitting down and experiencing, maybe we could say is like a puppy, kind of jumping around, is that?

[0:05:27.7] Culadasa: Yeah, you could use that as an analogy. That's what happened to me when I first started learning to meditate, I think it happens to everyone, it's a number of things. First of all, let's say that you're meditating on the sensations of the breath through the nose, because that is a commonly used object, so you put your attention on that, you're paying attention to those sensations. What's confusing is that at the same time there are thoughts coming and going in your mind and there are sounds and there are sensations in your body, so it feels to you like even though you're paying attention to your breath you're a lot of other things at once, and in fact you are. And so then this creates the sense of "I must not be doing something right, because my focus should be exclusively on the breath of my nose, and so these other things are extraneous things, so I'm not doing something right." The other thing, and in that part of the scenario, your attention is not completely stable but relatively stable. But then of course what happens is because your meditation object, the breath through your nose, is not really interesting, a thought will come up that is more interesting and the next thing you know, you suddenly realise that you've been sitting there for the last five minutes thinking about something, or maybe thinking about several things, whatever the thought was that captured your attention, and then it led to something else and to something else. So it's kind of a sequence of events that takes place, something comes along that... Well, if we go back to the beginning, your attention is focused on your meditation object, but you're also quite aware of a number of other things, the thoughts and sensations and sounds and so forth, and if you have your eyes open you may actually have some visual input as well, something in that background begins to stand out and draws your attention, so it captures your attention, and if it captures your attention for very long you forget you're supposed to be meditating, you forget all about your meditation object, so forgetting is a distinct event, so if you just think about that one thought and then you wake up to the reality of "oh, I'm supposed to be meditating", then we say "ok, I forgot and was captured by that thought", I like to use the term mind-wandering for what really typically happens with a beginning meditator is that thought leads to another and another, where you finish that thought and something completely new comes up, so you have a whole series of thoughts. So the initial distraction leads to forgetting, and the forgetting leads to mind-wandering, and then this wonderful, magical kind of thing comes out of your unconscious and says "Hey, wake up, you're not doing what you're supposed to do." And of course the typical response is to get mad at yourself, you blame yourself or you objectify your mind and say "my mind just won't behave, my mind keeps doing this..." and those negative emotions get associated with the most recent event. What is the most recent event that happened in your mind? The most recent event is that you realised you're not doing what you're supposed to, so you negatively reinforced the most valuable thing that's happened in the last period of time in your meditation.

[0:09:30.4] Travis: So what would some positive reinforcement look like in a meditator's session or journey?

[0:09:40.3] Culadasa: If, when you realise your mind was wandering, is that you say "Oh, great, wow, now I'm back," and there's a feeling associated with that and every meditator will know what I mean, even if they haven't paid much attention to it, they're aware of it, when you do suddenly realise that "Oh, I'm supposed to be meditating", there's that feeling of being fully present and being more awake and alert, that period of mind wandering, in a way had almost a dreamlike quality and now you've woken up from that and now you're really like "Oh, I'm sitting here, I'm meditating, I'm trying to achieve these wonderful things that have.." so that is the positive reinforcement that you give, is you be glad that whatever it was that woke you up, happened, and that makes that happen more quickly and more easily in the future.

[0:10:43.9] Travis: Yes, it seems like it could be so subtle, when you catch that you're not meditating, either there's some kind of negative tone to it or there's a positive tone to it and that's so powerful. And I wondered now, in your book you wrote about conscious intention, I wonder how that plays into this experience that we may have while we're meditating, how we actually experience the meditation either as positive or negative or any of these things, so how does intention play in?

[0:11:23.9] Culadasa: Well, this is kind of a profound statement and may trouble some people when I first say it, but all we ever really do is form and hold intention. We don't do anything, like right now you can intend to raise your arm and your arm will raise, you can't raise your arm you just form the intention, if there was something wrong with the neural connections in your brain or your arm or to do with your muscles or something like that, you wouldn't be able to move your arm. You form the intention and all these automatic processes happen as a consequence of it. The same thing, you sit down and you form the intention to meditate, and there are competing intentions, there are other parts of your mind that would rather do something else, not necessarily in terms of good intentions and bad intentions, but you have the intention to meditate, and you have these competing intentions and when the process of meditating either becomes a little bit boring or when something else arrives in your consciousness that is much more interesting, and it carries with it the intention that you pay attention to it, then that tends to happen, your attention moves to that other thing. So what we're doing is intending, where we kind of get off is we have this illusion that there's somebody inside here that is doing things and is responsible for what happens, and really, intending is the only thing that we do. There's not some me that puts my attention on my meditation object, instead the closest thing to a me doing something is a me that forms the intention to meditate and then my attention goes to the meditation object and it just stays there until something else comes along to draw it away. So if you know this and if you understand this then you can avoid a lot of the negative thinking, that "I'm not doing this right, there's something wrong with me, maybe I'm just not meant to meditate", that kind of negative thinking, instead it becomes "Oh, all I have to do is just keep forming the intention, and I have my meditation instructions, I know what to do when my mind wanders, I know what to do when forgetting happens" and one of the most important things that we haven't mentioned, talking about peripheral awareness, is we form the intention to remain aware of everything else while our attention is being focused. So actually I've said two things that might come as a surprise to people, one is that we don't ever do anything and the other is that when you're focusing your attention on one thing you have to allow the peripheral awareness to be there, because that's actually what's going to help you in the long run and it's actually what you need to develop. You could almost say that the main purpose of stabilising your attention is to get it out of the way so you can develop that peripheral awareness.

[0:15:13.7] Travis: At the beginning of a meditation session, what does it look like to set an intention and then that's the only thing we do and we're not actually doing anything else, so to... I'm sitting down on a cushion, and I say "I'm going to cultivate attention of my breathing and while this is happening I'm not going to shut out the rest of what I'm experiencing but I'm going to allow that to be there and so that's setting the intention for attention and also to not neglect the peripheral awareness, does that sound right? So it's kind of an explicit we're saying "this is what I'm here to do while I'm on this cushion for this 15 minutes", and then we shove off.

[0:16:13.0] Culadasa: That's right. Well, there's a few more intentions that we can form too, which is we know that we're going to forget, because the last time we tried to meditate we spent a lot of time with mind wandering, so we know that the mind-wandering is going to happen, so we also set the intention that when we wake up to the fact that we've been in mind-wandering, that we're going to feel good about waking up and we're not going to feel bad about the mind-wandering, because

we knew it was going to happen anyway. So that's another part of it, and we form the intention that after we've taken a moment to feel good and to appreciate how nice it is to be fully present and doing what you meant to be doing, then you gently, not abruptly, but gently go back to your meditation object and you try to maintain, you hold the intention to stay in that place of being fully aware as long as possible. So there you have a whole set of intentions and they're really not all separate intentions, they're all really the same thing "I'm going to stabilise my intention on my meditation object, but I'm not going to lose awareness, and when I forget I'm going to feel good about waking up and remembering, I'm going to gently return to my meditation object and I'm going to stay awake as long as I can until the next time I forget." And you know you're going to forget and mind-wander again, at least until you become such a skilled meditator that it doesn't happen anymore.

[0:17:47.4] Travis: So we've been talking about attention and awareness and I think you made clear the difference between those two. One word that has not come up yet, that is coming up all over the place is mindfulness. How does that relate to what we've been talking about so far?

[0:18:13.1] Culadasa: The simple answer is that, the best definition of mindfulness that I've ever been able to come up with, and there are a lot of definitions out there, if you look at them they're all pointing to this. My definition of mindfulness is the optimal interaction of attention and awareness. When you have an argument with somebody that you care about, what happens is your attention is entirely focused on whatever it was that upset you, on your emotions and you've lost awareness. The function of awareness is to create context, and you lose the context of "Hey, the person I'm yelling at is somebody that I really care for deeply and the words that I'm saying are going to hurt them", that's the function. If you had awareness functioning the way it was supposed to, if you had the optimal interaction of attention and awareness, then there would be a pause and you would not say some of the things that you say, and you would have much greater clarity as to "How do I want this situation to turn out?" and you would choose different ways of speaking and acting to achieve that, now we would say that you have mindfulness of the situation. What does mindfulness mean? It means living your life, paying attention to the things you need to pay attention to but at the same time having a broader awareness and having the two in balance. And then our entire culture has been built on the overuse of attention and the neglect of awareness, especially introspective awareness. So we actually are a kind of being, living in a kind of culture where we suffer from severe Awareness Deficit Disorder, a different kind of ADD. But we also haven't learned to train our attention too, so our attention is sort of wandering around, always chasing after whatever's more interesting, whatever is more valuable, whatever is going to be more fun to pay attention to, or whatever is dangerous, or whatever we have to avoid or so on and so forth.

[0:20:43.1] Travis: So what we're talking about when we're talking about somebody living with mindfulness, or you could say somebody who's on the path of mindfulness or cultivating mindfulness, we describe this person, and let me know if this sounds in alignment to what you've said, is a person with the ability to pay attention to what a person needs to pay attention to and experiencing that within the context of the environment, or the social situation, or the cultural situation or the societal situation or whatever it may be, so we have those two elements happening, which seem quite positive, useful qualities for a person to have. And then there's this, seems like a third aspect of this, is having this introspective awareness of actually really being able to reflect deeply into one's own experience and mind with some sort of inquisitiveness. If all that sounds right, a question that comes out of this, for some people, ok, so being on the path of mindfulness and having a regular meditation practice, being a person who actually has that, there may be some hesitation around like what am I going to transform into? The word transformational is associated

with meditation, am I going to lose parts of myself that I like or that allow me to function in the world, am I just going to be this introspective space being that no longer has fun or has relationship or can work or do stuff, am I going to be a passive, detached log or frog or something? How might this look, to be on the path?

[0:23:00.6] Culadasa: It's totally different, we talk about being mindful and if we think about somebody who has experienced some degree of awakening, they are fully present. As a matter of fact one of the ways that mindfulness is often discussed is as being fully present. How are you fully present, while you're at the same time remembering the past? How are you fully present when you're engaged in an intensive way with planning for the future? How are you fully present when you're filling out your income tax return or carrying on a technical discussion with somebody? That would not be possible if we didn't have these two ways of knowing simultaneously. Awareness allows us to be fully present while our attention can be focused on something that's in the present, or if we're having a technical discussion it can be focused on the past, it can be focused on the future, and it can be focused on somewhere else. So we have this wonderful ability to be simultaneously fully present and still be able to do all the things that we need to do in the course of our lives, only we can do them much better. Haven't lost anything, we've gained a lot. The quality, what we find with meditation and with increase in mindfulness is all of our relationships improve, because we're fully present and we're using attention appropriately. We find that we are much less reactive, we're not acting out of conditioning to the same degree as before, because we are fully present and we can see that "Oh, this reactivity that is starting to arise in me" we have that introspective awareness, we see "Oh, I'm about to react in this conditioned way and if I do it's not going to serve the purposes of the situation", that gives us an opportunity, it creates choice where there was no choice before and so we become much less reactive.

[0:25:28.3] Travis: To close our time, if you may lead us in a short, guided practice, now that nobody has to be afraid of evaporating into the cosmos. Will you lead us in a short guided meditation?

[0:25:45.3] Culadasa: I would suggest that we do this with our eyes closed. And become fully present, whatever external sounds there are, all the sensations in your body, regardless of how you're sitting there's the pressure of the weight of your body, and the touch of your clothing and your hair moving over your skin, sensations of breathing, the thoughts in your mind coming and going. So just be fully present, now while you're fully present, notice how you can focus your attention on one particular thing, let's say the sensations in the palm of your right hand. I'm paying attention to it but I'm still aware of everything else. Now I can move my attention to, well, you are paying attention to my voice, but I'll be quiet for a moment, perhaps some external sound in your environment that you can focus your attention on, or you can simply use your attention to explore the realm of hearing and see whether there are any sounds there.

[0:27:29.9] Culadasa: As you're doing that, notice how you can remain aware of the sensations in the rest of your body, you can remain aware of the thoughts, probably you had a few thoughts. Thoughts related to what you're trying to do.

[0:27:59.4] Culadasa: Now you deliberately directed attention, go ahead and do that, direct attention to specific things and just notice how your attention can land on different things and stay there for a few moments without you losing awareness of everything else.

[0:28:30.0] Culadasa: And now stop intentionally directing your awareness of your attention and just let your attention move however it will.

[0:28:47.3] Culadasa: When I'm meditating and I do that it automatically goes to my breathing.

[0:28:56.2] Culadasa: Then it goes to the thought about that.

[0:29:20.8] Culadasa: So now you've experienced both spontaneous movements of attention and intentional movements of attention, all without losing that background of awareness. Now what we'd like you to do is to restrict the movements of your attention and attend only to sensations in your body, continue to be aware of any sounds or thoughts, but aware of them, don't let your attention go to them and if your attention goes to them bring it back, but let your attention move wherever it wants to within the realm of bodily sensation.

[0:30:49.4] Culadasa: Now I'd like you to direct your attention specifically to the sensations in your body that are produced by breathing. So that would be the rise and fall of your abdomen, the movement of your chest and possibly your shoulders, the movement of the air in and out of your nostrils. And this will be the domain of attention and continue to be aware of bodily sensations and external sounds. So attention is on movements related to the breath, any movements, and at the same time you're maintaining awareness. Your awareness includes thoughts that come and go, but keep all the thoughts and the bodily sensations and sounds in the background.

[0:31:39.2] Culadasa: If your attention goes to them just bring it back.

[0:32:17.9] Culadasa: Explore the sensations of the rise and fall of your abdomen without losing peripheral awareness of everything else, including the activity of your mind.

[0:33:20.8] Culadasa: Now shift your attention to the sensations of the air moving in and out of your nostrils.

[0:33:31.0] Culadasa: But continue to be aware of everything else, including those breath sensations in your abdomen that you were looking at before.

[0:34:18.3] Culadasa: See if you can count ten continuous breaths, watching the sensations of your nose. And if your attention goes to something else, bring it back and start over. But continue to be aware of everything else, including what's going on in your mind.

[0:36:05.5] Culadasa: The most important thing while you're doing this is to notice what's actually happening in your mind.

[0:36:51.8] Culadasa: So simply use sensations of the breath through the nose as an anchor for your attention, while exercising your faculty of peripheral awareness and introspective awareness.

[0:38:01.6] Culadasa: The day will come where you can be introspectively aware of a distraction before it captures your attention, when that happens, if you repeat that often enough it will become automatic and you will never lose the focus of your attention again.

[0:38:25.9] Culadasa: If you continue to practice in that way you'll become more and more aware of the activities in your mind on a continuous basis, regardless of what you do with your attention. You need to make your mind more powerful first, so think of practice like we just did as a way of exercising and increasing the power of your consciousness so that you can use attention and you can remain aware at the same time.