# THINK LIKE A MONK

TRAIN YOUR MIND for PEACE
and PURPOSE EVERY DAY

JAY SHETTY

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

Simon & Schuster Paperbacks
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020



This Simon & Schuster paperback export edition April 2020

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Interior design by Ruth Lee-Mui

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN 978-1-9821-4981-9
ISBN 978-1-9821-3450-1 (ebook)

*For my wife,*
*who is more monk*
*than I will ever be*

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# *Introduction*

*If you want a new idea, read an old book.*
—attributed to Ivan Pavlov (among others)

When I was eighteen years old, in my first year of college, at Cass Business School in London, one of my friends asked me to go with him to hear a monk give a talk.

I resisted. "Why would I want to go hear some monk?"

I often went to see CEOs, celebrities, and other successful people lecture on campus, but I had zero interest in a monk. I preferred to hear speakers who'd actually *accomplished* things in life.

My friend persisted, and finally I said, "As long as we go to a bar afterward, I'm in." "Falling in love" is an expression used almost exclusively to describe romantic relationships. But that night, as I listened to the monk talk about his experience, I fell in love. The figure on stage was a thirty-something Indian man. His head was shaved and he wore a saffron robe. He was intelligent, eloquent, and charismatic. He spoke about the principle of "selfless sacrifice." When he said that we should plant trees under whose shade we did not plan to sit, I felt an unfamiliar thrill run through my body.

I was especially impressed when I found out that he'd been a student at IIT Bombay, which is the MIT of India and, like MIT, nearly impossible to get into. He'd traded that opportunity to become a monk, walking away from everything that my friends and I were chasing. Either he was crazy or he was onto something.

My whole life I'd been fascinated by people who'd gone from nothing to something—rags-to-riches stories. Now, for the first time, I was in the presence of someone who'd deliberately done the opposite. He'd given up the life the world had told me we should *all* want. But instead of being an embittered failure, he appeared joyous, confident, and at peace. In fact, he seemed happier than anyone I'd ever met. At the age of eighteen, I had encountered a lot of people who were rich. I'd listened to a lot of people who were famous, strong, good-looking, or all three. But I don't think I'd met anyone who was truly happy.

Afterward, I pushed my way through the crowds to tell him how amazing he was, and how much he'd inspired me. "How can I spend more time with you?" I heard myself asking. I felt the urge to be around people who had the values I wanted, not the things I wanted.

The monk told me that he was traveling and speaking in the UK all that week, and I was welcome to come to the rest of his events. And so I did.

My first impression of the monk, whose name was Gauranga Das, was that he was doing something right, and later I would discover that science backs that up. In 2002, a Tibetan monk named Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche traveled from an area just outside Kathmandu, Nepal, to the University of Wisconsin–Madison so that researchers could watch his brain activity while he meditated. The scientists covered the monk's head with a shower cap–like device (an EEG) that had more than 250 tiny wires sticking out of it, each with a sensor that a lab tech attached to his scalp. At the time of the study, the monk had accumulated sixty-two thousand hours of lifetime meditation practice.

As a team of scientists, some of them seasoned meditators themselves,

watched from a control room, the monk began the meditation protocol the researchers had designed—alternating between one minute of meditating on compassion and a thirty-second rest period. He quickly cycled through this pattern four times in a row, cued by a translator. The researchers watched in awe; at almost the exact moment the monk began his meditation, the EEG registered a sudden and massive spike in activity. The scientists assumed that with such a large, quick bump, the monk must have changed positions or otherwise moved, yet to the observing eye, he remained perfectly still.

What was remarkable was not just the consistency of the monk's brain activity—turning "off" and "on" repeatedly from activity to rest period—but also the fact that he needed no "warm-up" period. If you're a meditator, or have at least tried to calm your brain, you know that typically it takes some time to quiet the parade of distracting thoughts that marches through your mind. Rinpoche seemed to need no such transition period. Indeed, he seemed to be able to come in and out of a powerful meditative state as easily as flipping a switch. More than ten years after these initial studies, scans of the forty-one-year-old monk's brain showed fewer signs of aging than his peers'. The researchers said he had the brain of someone ten years younger.

Researchers who scanned Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard's brain subsequently labeled him "the World's Happiest Man" after they found the highest level of gamma waves—those associated with attention, memory, learning, and happiness—*ever recorded by science*. One monk who's off the charts may seem like an anomaly, but Ricard isn't alone. Twenty-one other monks who had their brains scanned during a variety of meditation practices also showed gamma wave levels that spiked higher and lasted longer (even during sleep) than non-meditators.

Why should we think like monks? If you wanted to know how to dominate the basketball court, you might turn to Michael Jordan; if you wanted to innovate, you might investigate Elon Musk; you might study Beyoncé to learn how to perform. If you want to train your mind to

find peace, calm, and purpose? Monks are the experts. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk who cofounded gratefulness.org, writes, "A layperson who is consciously aiming to be continuously alive in the Now is a monk."

Monks can withstand temptations, refrain from criticizing, deal with pain and anxiety, quiet the ego, and build lives that brim with purpose and meaning. Why shouldn't we learn from the calmest, happiest, most purposeful people on earth? Maybe you're thinking it's easy for monks to be calm, serene, and relaxed. They're hidden away in tranquil settings where they don't have to deal with jobs and romantic partners and, well, rush hour traffic. Maybe you're wondering, *How could thinking like a monk help me here in the modern world?*

First of all, monks weren't born monks. They're people from all sorts of backgrounds who've chosen to transform themselves. Matthieu Ricard, "the World's Happiest Man," was a biologist in his former life; Andy Puddicombe, cofounder of the meditation app Headspace, trained to be in the circus; I know monks who were in finance and in rock bands. They grow up in schools, towns, and cities just like you. You don't need to light candles in your home, walk around barefoot, or post photos of yourself doing tree pose on a mountaintop. Becoming a monk is a mindset that anyone can adopt.

Like most monks today, I didn't grow up in an ashram. I spent most of my childhood doing un-monk-like things. Until the age of fourteen, I was an obedient kid. I grew up in north London with my parents and my younger sister. I'm from a middle-class Indian family. Like a lot of parents, mine were committed to my education and to giving me a shot at a good future. I stayed out of trouble, did well in school, and tried my best to make everybody happy.

But when I started secondary school, I took a left turn. I'd been heavy as a child, and bullied for it, but now I lost that weight and began playing soccer and rugby. I turned to subjects that traditional Indian parents don't generally favor, like art, design, and philosophy. All this would have been fine, but I also started mixing with the wrong crowd. I became involved

in a bunch of bad stuff. Experimenting with drugs. Fighting. Drinking too much. It did not go well. In high school I was suspended three times. Finally, the school asked me to leave.

"I'll change," I promised. "If you let me stay, I'll change." The school let me stay, and I cleaned up my act.

Finally, in college, I started to notice the value of hard work, sacrifice, discipline, persistence in pursuit of one's goals. The problem was that at the time, I didn't have any goals apart from getting a good job, getting married one day, maybe having a family—the usual. I suspected there was something deeper, but I didn't know what it was.

By the time Gauranga Das came to speak at my school, I was primed to explore new ideas, a new model of living, a path that veered from the one everyone (including myself) assumed I would take. I wanted to grow as a person. I didn't want to know humility or compassion and empathy only as abstract concepts, I wanted to live them. I didn't want discipline, character, and integrity to just be things I read about. I wanted to live them.

For the next four years, I juggled two worlds, going from bars and steakhouses to meditation and sleeping on the floor. In London, I studied management with an emphasis on behavioral science and interned at a large consulting firm and spent time with my friends and family. And at an ashram in Mumbai I read and studied ancient texts, spending most of my Christmas and summer holidays living with monks. My values gradually shifted. I found myself wanting to be *around* monks. In fact, I wanted to *immerse* myself in the monk mindset. More and more, the work I was doing in the corporate world seemed to lack meaning. What was the point if it had no positive impact on anyone?

When I graduated from college, I traded my suits for robes and joined the ashram, where we slept on the floor and lived out of gym lockers. I lived and traveled across India, the UK, and Europe. I meditated for hours every day and studied ancient scriptures. I had the opportunity to serve with my fellow monks, helping with the ongoing work of transforming an ashram in a village outside Mumbai into an eco-friendly spiritual retreat

(the Govardhan Ecovillage) and volunteering with a food program that distributes over a million meals a day (Annamrita).

If I can learn to think like a monk, anyone can.

The Hindu monks I studied with use the Vedas as their foundational texts. (The title is from the Sanskrit word *veda*, meaning knowledge. Sanskrit is an ancient language that's the precursor of most of the languages spoken in South Asia today.) You could argue that philosophy began with this ancient collection of scriptures, which originated in the area that now covers parts of Pakistan and northwest India at least three thousand years ago; they form the basis of Hinduism.

Like Homer's epic poems, the Vedas were first transmitted orally, then eventually written down, but because of the fragility of the materials (palm leaves and birch bark!) most of the surviving documents we have are at most a few hundred years old. The Vedas include hymns, historical stories, poems, prayers, chants, ceremonial rituals, and advice for daily life.

In my life and in this book, I frequently refer to the Bhagavad Gita (which means "Song of God"). This is loosely based on the Upanishads, writings from around 800–400 BCE. The Bhagavad Gita is considered a kind of universal and timeless life manual. The tale isn't told about a monk or meant for a spiritual context. It's spoken to a married man who happens to be a talented archer. It wasn't intended to apply only to one religion or region—it's for all humanity. Eknath Easwaran, spiritual author and professor who has translated many of India's sacred texts, including the Bhagavad Gita, calls it "India's most important gift to the world." In his 1845 journal, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "I owed—my friend and I owed—a magnificent day to the Bhagavat Geeta [*sic*]. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us." It's said that there have been more commentaries written about the Gita than any other scripture.

In this book one of my goals is to help you connect with its timeless wisdom, along other ancient teachings that were the basis of my education as a monk—and that have significant relevance to the challenges we all face today.

What struck me most when I studied monk philosophy is that in the last three thousand years, humans haven't really changed. Sure, we're taller and on average we live longer, but I was surprised and impressed to find that the monk teachings talk about forgiveness, energy, intentions, living with purpose, and other topics in ways that are as resonant today as they must have been when they were written.

Even more impressively, monk wisdom can largely be supported by science, as we'll see throughout this book. For millennia, monks have believed that meditation and mindfulness are beneficial, that gratitude is good for you, that service makes you happier, and more that you will learn in this book. They developed practices around these ideas long before modern science could show or validate them.

Albert Einstein said, "If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well enough." When I saw how relevant the lessons I was learning were to the modern world, I wanted to dive deeper into them so that I could share them with other people.

Three years after I moved to Mumbai, my teacher, Gauranga Das, told me he believed I would be of greater value and service if I left the ashram and shared what I'd learned with the world. My three years as a monk were like a school of life. It was hard to become a monk, and even harder to leave. But applying the wisdom to life outside the ashram—the hardest part—felt like the final exam. Every day I am finding that the monk mindset works—that ancient wisdom is shockingly relevant today. That is why I'm sharing it.

These days I still consider myself a monk, though I usually refer to myself as a "former" monk, since I'm married, and monks aren't permitted to marry. I live in Los Angeles, which people tell me is one of the world capitals of materialism, facade, fantasy, and overall dodginess. But why

live in a place that's already enlightened? Now, in the world and in this book, I share my takeaways from the life I've lived and what I've learned. This book is completely nonsectarian. It's not some sneaky conversion strategy. I swear! I can also promise that if you engage with and practice the material I present, you will find real meaning, passion, and purpose in your life.

Never before have so many people been so dissatisfied—or so preoccupied with chasing "happiness." Our culture and media feed us images and concepts about who and what we should be, while holding up models of accomplishment and success. Fame, money, glamour, sex—in the end none of these things can satisfy us. We'll simply seek more and more, a circuit that leads to frustration, disillusion, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and exhaustion.

I like to draw a contrast between the monk mindset and what is often referred to as the monkey mind. Our minds can either elevate us or pull us down. Today we all struggle with overthinking, procrastination, and anxiety as a result of indulging the monkey mind. The monkey mind switches aimlessly from thought to thought, challenge to challenge, without really solving anything. But we can elevate to the monk mindset by digging down to the root of what we want and creating actionable steps for growth. The monk mindset lifts us out of confusion and distraction and helps us find clarity, meaning, and direction.

| MONKEY MIND | MONK MIND |
|---|---|
| Overwhelmed by multiple branches | Focused on the root of the issue |
| Coasts in the passenger seat | Lives intentionally and consciously |
| Complains, compares, criticizes | Compassionate, caring, collaborative |
| Overthinks and procrastinates | Analyzes and articulates |
| Distracted by small things | Disciplined |
| Short-term gratification | Long-term gain |
| Demanding and entitled | Enthusiastic, determined, patient |
| Changes on a whim | Commits to a mission, vision, or goal |

| | |
|---|---|
| Amplifies negatives and fears | Works on breaking down negatives and fears |
| Self-centered and obsessed | Self-care for service |
| Multitasking | Single-tasking |
| Controlled by anger, worry, and fear | Controls and engages energy wisely |
| Does whatever feels good | Seeks self-control and mastery |
| Looks for pleasure | Looks for meaning |
| Looks for temporary fixes | Looks for genuine solutions |

"Thinking like a monk" posits another way of viewing and approaching life. A way of rebellion, detachment, rediscovery, purpose, focus, discipline—and service. The goal of monk thinking is a life free of ego, envy, lust, anxiety, anger, bitterness, baggage. To my mind, adopting the monk mindset isn't just possible—it's *necessary*. We have no other choice. We need to find calm, stillness, and peace.

I vividly remember my first day of monk school. I had just shaved my head but I wasn't wearing robes yet, and I still looked like I was from London. I noticed a child monk—he can't have been more than ten years old—teaching a group of five-year-olds. He had a great aura about him, the poise and confidence of an adult.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"We just taught their first class ever," he said, then asked me, "What did *you* learn in *your* first day of school?"

"I started to learn the alphabet and numbers. What did *they* learn?"

"The first thing we teach them is how to breathe."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the only thing that stays with you from the moment you're born until the moment you die is your breath. All your friends, your family, the country you live in, all of that can change. The one thing that stays with you is your breath."

This ten-year-old monk added, "When you get stressed—what changes? Your breath. When you get angry—what changes? Your breath.

We experience every emotion with the change of the breath. When you learn to navigate and manage your breath, you can navigate any situation in life."

Already I was being taught the most important lesson: to focus on the root of things, not the leaf of the tree or symptoms of the problem. And I was learning, through direct observation, that anybody can be a monk, even if they're only five or ten years old.

When we're born, the first thing we must do is breathe. But just as life gets more complicated for that newborn baby, sitting still and breathing can be very challenging. What I hope to do in this book is to show you the monk way—we go to the root of things, go deep into self-examination. It is only through this curiosity, thought, effort, and revelation that we find our way to peace, calm, and purpose. Using the wisdom I was given by my teachers in the ashram, I hope to guide you there.

In the pages ahead, I will walk you through three stages of adapting to the monk mindset. First, we will let go, stripping ourselves from the external influences, internal obstacles, and fears that hold us back. You can think of this as a cleansing that will make space for growth. Second, we will grow. I will help you reshape your life so that you can make decisions with intention, purpose, and confidence. Finally, we will give, looking to the world beyond ourselves, expanding and sharing our sense of gratitude, and deepening our relationships. We will share our gifts and love with others and discover the true joy and surprising benefits of service.

Along the way, I will introduce you to three very different types of meditation that I recommend including in your practice: breathwork, visualization, and sound. All three have benefits, but the simplest way to differentiate them is to know that you do breathwork for the physical benefits—to find stillness and balance, to calm yourself; visualization for the psychological benefits—to heal the past and prepare for the future; and chanting for the psychic benefits—to connect with your deepest self and the universe, for real purification.

You don't have to meditate to benefit from this book, but if you do, the tools I give you will be sharper. I would go so far as to say that this

entire book is a meditation—a reflection on our beliefs and values and intentions, how we see ourselves, how we make decisions, how to train our minds, and our ways of choosing and interacting with people. Achieving such deep self-awareness is the purpose and reward of meditation.

**How would a monk think about this?** That may not be a question you ask yourself right now—probably isn't close at all—but it will be by the end of the book.

PART ONE

# LET GO

ONE

# IDENTITY

## I Am What I Think I Am

*It is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else's life with perfection.*
—Bhagavad Gita 3.35

In 1902, the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley wrote: "I am not what I think I am, and I am not what you think I am. I am what I think you think I am."

Let that blow your mind for a moment.

Our identity is wrapped up in what others think of us—or, more accurately, what we *think* others think of us.

Not only is our self-image tied up in how we think others see us, but most of our efforts at self-improvement are really just us trying to meet that imagined ideal. If we think someone we admire sees wealth as success, then we chase wealth to impress that person. If we imagine that a friend is judging our looks, we tailor our appearance in response. In *West Side Story*, Maria meets a boy who's into her. What's her very next song? "I Feel Pretty."

As of this writing, the world's only triple Best Actor Oscar winner, Daniel Day-Lewis, has acted in just six films since 1998. He prepares for each role extensively, immersing himself completely in his character. For the role of Bill the Butcher in Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*, he trained as a butcher, spoke with a thick Irish accent on and off the set, and hired circus performers to teach him how to throw knives. And that's only the beginning. He wore only authentic nineteenth-century clothing and walked around Rome in character, starting arguments and fights with strangers. Perhaps thanks to that clothing, he caught pneumonia.

Day-Lewis was employing a technique called method acting, which requires the actor to live as much like his character as possible in order to *become* the role he's playing. This is an incredible skill and art, but often method actors become so absorbed in their character that the role takes on a life beyond the stage or screen. "I will admit that I went mad, totally mad," Day-Lewis said to the *Independent* years later, admitting the role was "not so good for my physical or mental health."

Unconsciously, we're all method acting to some degree. We have personas we play online, at work, with friends, and at home. These different personas have their benefits. They enable us to make the money that pays our bills, they help us function in a workplace where we don't always feel comfortable, they let us maintain relationships with people we don't really like but need to interact with. But often our identity has so many layers that we lose sight of the real us, if we ever knew who or what that was in the first place. We bring our work role home with us, and we take the role we play with our friends into our romantic life, without any conscious control or intention. However successfully we play our roles, we end up feeling dissatisfied, depressed, unworthy, and unhappy. The "I" and "me," small and vulnerable to begin with, get distorted.

We try to live up to what we think others think of us, even at the expense of our values.

Rarely, if ever, do we consciously, intentionally, create our own values. We make life choices using this twice-reflected image of who we *might*

be, without really thinking it through. Cooley called this phenomenon the "Looking-Glass Self."

We live in a perception of a perception of ourselves, and we've lost our real selves as a result. How can we recognize who we are and what makes us happy when we're chasing the distorted reflection of someone else's dreams?

You might think that the hard part about becoming a monk is letting go of the fun stuff: partying, sex, watching TV, owning things, sleeping in an actual bed (okay, the bed part was pretty rough). But before I took that step there was a bigger hurdle I had to overcome: breaking my "career" choice to my parents.

By the time I was wrapping up my final year of college, I had decided what path I wanted to take. I told my parents I would be turning down the job offers that had come my way. I always joke that as far as my parents were concerned, I had three career options: doctor, lawyer, or failure. There's no better way to tell your parents that everything they did for you was a waste than to become a monk.

Like all parents, mine had dreams for me, but at least I had eased them into the idea that I might become a monk: Every year since I was eighteen I'd spent part of the summer interning at a finance job in London and part of the year training at the ashram in Mumbai. By the time I made my decision, my mother's first concern was the same as any mother's: my well-being. Would I have health care? Was "seeking enlightenment" just a fancy way of saying "sitting around all day"?

Even more challenging for my mother was that we were surrounded by friends and family who shared the doctor-lawyer-failure definition of success. Word spread that I was making this radical move, and her friends started saying "But you've invested so much in his education" and "He's been brainwashed" and "He's going to waste his life." My friends too thought I was failing at life. I heard "You're never going to get a job again" and "You're throwing away any hope of earning a living."

**When you try to live your most authentic life, some of your relation-**

**ships will be put in jeopardy. Losing them is a risk worth bearing; finding a way to keep them in your life is a challenge worth taking on.**

Luckily, to my developing monk mind, the voices of my parents and their friends were not the most important guidelines I used when making this decision. Instead I relied on my own experience. Every year since I was eighteen I had tested both lives. I didn't come home from my summer finance jobs feeling anything but hungry for dinner. But every time I left the ashram I thought, *That was amazing. I just had the best time of my life.* Experimenting with these widely diverse experiences, values, and belief systems helped me understand my own.

The reactions to my choice to become a monk are examples of the external pressures we all face throughout our lives. Our families, our friends, society, media—we are surrounded by images and voices telling us who we should be and what we should do.

They clamor with opinions and expectations and obligations. Go straight from high school to the best college, find a lucrative job, get married, buy a home, have children, get promoted. Cultural norms exist for a reason—there is nothing wrong with a society that offers models of what a fulfilling life might look like. But if we take on these goals without reflection, we'll never understand why we don't own a home or we're not happy where we live, why our job feels hollow, whether we even want a spouse or any of the goals we're striving for.

My decision to join the ashram turned up the volume of opinions and concerns around me, but, conveniently, my experiences in the ashram had also given me the tools I needed to filter out that noise. The cause and the solution were the same. I was less vulnerable to the noises around me, telling me what was normal, safe, practical, best. I didn't shut out the people who loved me—I cared about them and didn't want them to worry—but neither did I let their definitions of success and happiness dictate my choices. It was—at the time—the hardest decision I'd ever made, and it was the right one.

The voices of parents, friends, education, and media all crowd a young person's mind, seeding beliefs and values. Society's definition of a happy


life is everybody's and nobody's. The only way to build a meaningful life is to filter out that noise and look within. This is the first step to building your monk mind.

We will start this journey the way monks do, by clearing away distractions. First, we'll look at the external forces that shape us and distract us from our values. Then we will take stock of the values that currently shape our lives and reflect on whether they're in line with who we want to be and how we want to live.

## IS THIS DUST OR IS IT ME?

Gauranga Das offered me a beautiful metaphor to illustrate the external influences that obscure our true selves.

*We are in a storeroom, lined with unused books and boxes full of artifacts. Unlike the rest of the ashram, which is always tidy and well swept, this place is dusty and draped in cobwebs. The senior monk leads me up to a mirror and says, "What can you see?"*

*Through the thick layer of dust, I can't even see my reflection. I say as much, and the monk nods. Then he wipes the arm of his robe across the glass. A cloud of dust puffs into my face, stinging my eyes and filling my throat.*

*He says, "Your identity is a mirror covered with dust. When you first look in the mirror, the truth of who you are and what you value is obscured. Clearing it may not be pleasant, but only when that dust is gone can you see your true reflection."*

This was a practical demonstration of the words of Chaitanya, a sixteenth-century Bengali Hindu saint. Chaitanya called this state of affairs *ceto-darpaṇa-mārjanam*, or clearance of the impure mirror of the mind.

The foundation of virtually all monastic traditions is removing distractions that prevent us from focusing on what matters most—finding meaning in life by mastering physical and mental desires. Some traditions give up speaking, some give up sex, some give up worldly possessions, and some give up all three. In the ashram, we lived with just what we needed and nothing more. I experienced firsthand the enlightenment of letting go. When we are buried in nonessentials, we lose track of what is truly significant. I'm not asking you to give up any of these things, but I want to help you recognize and filter out the noise of external influences. This is how we clear the dust and see if those values truly reflect you.

Guiding values are the principles that are most important to us and that we feel should guide us: who we want to be, how we treat ourselves and others. Values tend to be single-word concepts like freedom, equality, compassion, honesty. That might sound rather abstract and idealistic, but values are really practical. They're a kind of ethical GPS we can use to navigate through life. If you know your values, you have directions that point you toward the people and actions and habits that are best

for you. Just as when we drive through a new area, we wander aimlessly without values; we take wrong turns, we get lost, we're trapped by indecision. Values make it easier for you to surround yourself with the right people, make tough career choices, use your time more wisely, and focus your attention where it matters. Without them we are swept away by distractions.

## WHERE VALUES COME FROM

Our values don't come to us in our sleep. We don't think them through consciously. Rarely do we even put them into words. But they exist nonetheless. Everyone is born into a certain set of circumstances, and our values are defined by what we experience. Were we born into hardship or luxury? Where did we receive praise? Parents and caregivers are often our loudest fans and critics. Though we might rebel in our teenage years, we are generally compelled to please and imitate those authority figures. Looking back, think about how your time with your parents was spent. Playing, enjoying conversation, working on projects together? What did they tell you was most important, and did it match what mattered most to them? Who did they want you to be? What did they want you to accomplish? How did they expect you to behave? Did you absorb these ideals, and have they worked for you?

From the start, our educations are another powerful influence. The subjects that are taught. The cultural angle from which they are taught. The way we are expected to learn. A fact-driven curriculum doesn't encourage creativity, a narrow cultural approach doesn't foster tolerance for people from different backgrounds and places, and there are few opportunities to immerse ourselves in our passions, even if we know them from an early age. This is not to say that school doesn't prepare us for life—and there are many different educational models out there, some of which are less restrictive—but it is worth taking a step back to consider whether the values you carried from school feel right to you.

## THE MEDIA MIND GAME

As a monk, I learned early on that our values are influenced by whatever absorbs our minds. We are not our minds, but the mind is the vehicle by which we decide what is important in our hearts. The movies we watch, the music we hear, the books we read, the TV shows we binge, the people we follow online and offline. What's on your news feed is feeding your mind. The more we are absorbed in celebrity gossip, images of success, violent video games, and troubling news, the more our values are tainted with envy, judgment, competition, and discontent.

Observing and evaluating are key to thinking like a monk, and they begin with space and stillness. For monks, the first step in filtering the noise of external influences is a material letting go. I had three stints visiting the ashram, graduated college, then officially became a monk. After a couple months of training at the Bhaktivedanta Manor, a temple in the

**TRY THIS: WHERE DID YOUR VALUES COME FROM?**

It can be hard to perceive the effect these casual influences have on us. Values are abstract, elusive, and the world we live in constantly pushes blatant and subliminal suggestions as to what we should want, and how we should live, and how we form our ideas of who we are.

Write down some of the values that shape your life. Next to each, write the origin. Put a checkmark next to each value that you truly share.

*Example:*

| VALUE | ORIGIN | IS IT TRUE TO ME? |
|---|---|---|
| Kindness | Parent | ✓ |
| Appearance | Media | Not in the same way |
| Wealth | Parent | No |
| Good grades | School | Interfered with real learning |
| Knowledge | School | ✓ |
| Family | Tradition | Family: yes, but not traditional |

countryside north of London, I headed to India, arriving at the village ashram in the beginning of September 2010. I exchanged my relatively stylish clothes for two robes (one to wear and one to wash). I forfeited my fairly slick haircut for . . . no hair; our heads were shaved. And I was deprived of almost all opportunities to check myself out—the ashram contained no mirrors except the one I would later be shown in the storeroom. So we monks were prevented from obsessing over our appearance, ate a simple diet that rarely varied, slept on thin mats laid on the floor, and the only music we heard was the chants and bells that punctuated our meditations and rituals. We didn't watch movies or TV shows, and we received limited news and email on shared desktop computers in a communal area.

Nothing took the place of these distractions except space, stillness, and silence. **When we tune out the opinions, expectations, and obligations of the world around us, we begin to hear ourselves.** In that silence I began to recognize the difference between outside noise and my own voice. I could clear away the dust of others to see my core beliefs.

I promised you I wouldn't ask you to shave your head and don robes, but how, in the modern world, can we give ourselves the space, silence, and stillness to build awareness? Most of us don't sit down and think about our values. We don't like to be alone with our own thoughts. Our inclination is to avoid silence, to try to fill our heads, to keep moving. In a series of studies, researchers from the University of Virginia and Harvard asked participants to spend just six to fifteen minutes alone in a room with no smartphone, no writing instruments, and nothing to read. The researchers then let them listen to music or use their phones. Participants not only preferred their phones and music, many of them even chose to *zap themselves with an electric shock* rather than be alone with their thoughts. If you go to a networking event every day and have to tell people what you do for a living, it's hard to step away from that reduction of who you are. If you watch *Real Housewives* every night, you start to think that throwing glasses of wine in your friends' faces is routine behavior. When we fill up our lives and leave ourselves no room to reflect, those distractions become our values by default.

We can't address our thoughts and explore our minds when we're preoccupied. Nor does just sitting in your home teach you anything. There are three ways I suggest you actively create space for reflection. First, on a daily basis I recommend you sit down to reflect on how the day went and what emotions you're feeling. Second, once a month you can approximate the change that I found at the ashram by going someplace you've never been before to explore yourself in a different environment. This can be anything from visiting a park or library you've never been to before to taking a trip. Finally, get involved in something that's meaningful to you—a hobby, a charity, a political cause.

Another way to create space is to take stock of how we are filling the space that we have and whether those choices reflect our true values.

## AUDIT YOUR LIFE

No matter what you *think* your values are, your actions tell the real story. What we do with our spare time shows what we value. For instance, you might put spending time with your family at the top of your list of values, but if you spend all your free time playing golf, your actions don't match your values, and you need to do some self-examination.

### Time

First, let's assess how you spend the time when you're not sleeping or working. Researchers have found that by the end of our lives, on average, each of us will spend thirty-three years in bed (seven years of which will be spent trying to sleep), a year and four months exercising, and more than three years on vacation. If you're a woman, you'll spend 136 days getting ready. If you're a man this number drops to 46 days. These are just estimates of course, but our daily choices add up.

**TRY THIS: AUDIT YOUR TIME**

Spend a week tracking how much time you devote to the following: family, friends, health, and self. (Note that we're leaving out sleeping, eating, and working. Work, in all its forms, can sprawl without boundaries. If this is the case for you, then set your own definition of when you are "officially" at work and make "extra work" one of your categories.) The areas where you spend the most time should match what you value the most. Say the amount of time that your job requires exceeds how important it is to you. That's a sign that you need to look very closely at that decision. You're deciding to spend time on something that doesn't feel important to you. What are the values behind that decision? Are your earnings from your job ultimately serving your values?

## Media

When you did your audit, no doubt a significant amount of your time was spent reading or viewing media. Researchers estimate that, on average, each of us will spend more than eleven years of our lives looking at TV and social media! Perhaps your media choices feel casual, but time reflects values.

There are many forms of media, but most of us aren't overdoing it on movies, TV, or magazines. It's all about devices. Conveniently, your iPhone will tell you exactly how you're using it. Under Settings, look at the screen time report for the last week and you'll see how much time you spend on social media, games, mail, and browsing the Web. If you don't like what you see, you can even set limits for yourself. On Android, you can look at your battery usage under Settings, then, from the menu, choose "Show full device usage." Or you can download an app like Social Fever or MyAddictometer.

## Money

Like time, you can look at the money you spend to see the values by which you live. Exclude necessities like home, dependents, car, bills, food, and debt. Now look at your discretionary spending. What was your biggest investment this month? Which discretionary areas are costing you the most? Does your spending correspond to what matters most to you? We often have an odd perspective on what's "worth it" that doesn't quite make sense if you look at all your expenditures at once. I was advising someone who complained that the family was overspending on afterschool classes for the kids . . . until she realized that she spent more on her shoes than on their music lessons.

Seeing posts on social media that compared spending and our priorities got me thinking about how the ways we spend our time and money reveal what we value.

A 60-minute TV show ("Flew by!")
A 60-minute lunch with family ("Will it ever end!")
Everyday coffee habit ($4/day, almost $1,500/year) ("Need it!")
Fresh healthy food choices (an extra 1.50/day, about $550/year) ("Not worth it!")
15 minutes scrolling social media ("Me time!")
15 minutes of meditation ("No time!")

It's all in how you see it. When you look at a month of expenses, think about whether discretionary purchases were long- or short-term investments—a great dinner out or a dance class? Were they for entertainment or enlightenment, for yourself or someone else? If you have a gym membership, but only went once this month and spent more on wine, you have some rethinking to do.


## CURATE YOUR VALUES

Doing a self-audit tells you the values that have crept into your life by default. The next step is to decide what your values are and whether your choices are in alignment with them. Contemplating monk values may help you identify your own. Our teachers at the ashram explained that there are higher and lower values. Higher values propel and elevate us toward happiness, fulfillment, and meaning. Lower values demote us toward anxiety, depression, and suffering. According to the Gita, these are the higher values and qualities: fearlessness, purity of mind, gratitude, service and charity, acceptance, performing sacrifice, deep study, austerity, straightforwardness, nonviolence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, perspective, restraint from fault finding, compassion toward all living beings, satisfaction, gentleness/kindness, integrity, determination.