

MEDITATION: THE ART OF LEAVING THINGS ALONE

BY BRENNA HOLLAND

The first of January is just another day—its physical properties do not differ from any other day in the calendar year. On this day, the earth does not reset, the planet's orbit does not adjust and, as far as I'm aware, nothing of note in the universe is scheduled for annual renewal.

However, if you observed the customs the Western world has built around this concept of 'The New Year' objectively, you might assume that something galactic was about to happen and, as a society, we were preparing ourselves for it.

Take the prevalence of New Year's resolutions for instance—a tradition in which individuals make promises to themselves, and sometimes to the people around them, that they will change one or more of their undesirable traits. The most popular of the resolutions being to "stay fit and healthy,"

the second most popular being blatantly to "lose weight."

The months that follow New Years—January, February and (let's be generous) a little bit of March—are characterized by juice cleanses, gym memberships, diet books and self-help podcasts. In the end, only 8 percent of people successfully follow through with their New Year's resolutions, with the rest of us teetering off during months one and two.

As "New Year, new me," remains plastered across Instagram posts and vision boards alike, many of us have begun to suspect that happiness in the New Year relies more on making peace with things as they are, rather than forcing and failing to make things change. My suspicion that perhaps my New Year's resolution should have been "New Year, same me and that's okay" was solidified during a conversation I had with a man named **MARK VAN BUREN**.

Van Buren is a busy guy. Not only is he the owner of Live Free Yoga Studio in River Edge, he is also a mindful-living trainer, a public speaker and a musician with two albums under his belt. The author of two books, the most recent titled “A Fool’s Guide to Actual Happiness,” Van Buren shares a publisher with His Holiness the Dalai Lama—which gives him quite a bit of street cred in the world of meditation.

Van Buren rang in the New Year by joining the staff of the Graf Center for Integrative Medicine at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center. Thanks in part to long-time friend of the Graf Center, Laura Rodgers, the newly created Rodgers Family Meditation Program is designed to expand meditation offerings to not only the sick, but also the well.

Van Buren, along with other instructors, now lead meditation classes for those with chronic conditions such as cancer or heart disease, as well as those looking to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and manage pain. All of the classes are held at the Graf Center, located inside Englewood Hospital and Medical Center.

“While we all need meditation and mindfulness, someone who is going through cancer treatment or any treatment that lands them in the hospital is going to get the most from this practice,” Van Buren said.

He proposes that while we tend to see suffering and pain as strictly negative experiences, they can often be the catalyst to look deeper into things, go beyond and ask the questions we have never had the courage to ask before. Suffering can actually be an opportunity to pursue a deeper sense of compassion and wisdom.

“This is what I’m hoping to share with people: don’t be so afraid of discomfort, pain, stress and anxiety. Don’t try to destroy these feelings, instead try to radically accept all of it, to embrace it and get to know it.

Know that anxiety and pain will come and go naturally. It’s just a passing energy like a thunderstorm. You can’t do anything about a thunderstorm, you just let it do its thing and pass. Think of meditation as cultivating the art of leaving things alone.” Van Buren said.

Leaving things alone can feel counterintuitive, especially in a society obsessed with productivity and forward motion, but Van Buren explains that this concept is not the absence of goals or a vision for the future; it is simply learning to “rest with things as they are.”

You can develop this acceptance through meditation practice, during which you sit or lie comfortably and draw

your attention to your breath. When stray thoughts appear—and they certainly will appear—you simply acknowledge them and leave them alone. This practice is a kind of workout for your mind that teaches you not to react unconsciously or habitually to feelings of stress, anxiety or sadness.

“Normally when thoughts and feelings arise we grab hold of them, we identify with them, and we take action based on them—it’s like we’re slaves to circumstance. With meditation you’re learning to just be with things as they are instead of getting lost with them.

Think of our minds and our emotions as a web we’ve created, most of us are like flies, we get stuck on the web and we wonder why we suffer as we do, but there’s a different way we

can relate to this web—like a spider that can just walk over it,” Van Buren said.

As meditation continues to snowball into a mainstream trend, there is a renewed importance of remembering why this practice has played such an important role in various cultures since 1500 BCE—not as a Magic Bullet or as a weight loss technique, but as a way of life that can foster deeper compassion, wisdom and a sense of permanent peace.

“Because in the end, what does a nice body have to do with happiness? Nothing much.”

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