5 Life Lessons Learned at a World-Leading Contemplative Research Conference

When you're surrounded by nearly 800 yogis, meditation experts and contemplative practice scholars, you’re bound to pick up some wisdom.

The Mind & Life International Symposium for Contemplative Research is the flagship academic conference for researchers, teachers, scientists, scholars and practitioners looking to contemplate, well, contemplation, which, at times, can be just as complicated as it sounds. We were excited
Nearly 800 people from 33 countries and six continents—and take diligent notes at a dozen lectures, panels and workshop in Phoenix, Arizona this November.

Here’s a handful of the standout life advice that may help you find a little more peace in your day-to-day.

1. **Where you practice matters less than with whom.**

To kick off the conference, respected Ashtanga teachers Mary Taylor and Richard Freeman, who both studied under their late guru, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, led a 6 A.M. yoga class in a windowless conference room. On hotel carpet. With towels in lieu of yoga mats. Freeman and Taylor were mic’d. Fluorescent lights blazed overhead. A large projection screen was erected at the front in preparation of a presentation later that day. It was the least inspiring impromptu “yoga studio” ever.

None of this mattered.

About 100 of us showed up to practice, and we created the perfect ambiance all on our own. Freeman and Taylor’s voices were amplified, yes, but still quiet and calming. Their encouraging instructions were easy-to-follow for all levels (I particularly liked when Taylor suggested we “inhale as if you’re trying to drag yourself forward an inch” in Sphinx pose). I managed to enjoy a relaxing savasana with bright overhead lights. It was us who created the awesome atmosphere. Our positive energy combined. So, no, you don’t always have to be in an idyllic yoga shala to find your zen. With the right community and the right teachers, you can practice anywhere.

2. **If visionary thought-leaders can laugh at themselves, you can, too.**
Jack Kornfield, PhD, the legendary meditation teacher and monk, widely credited with introducing Buddhist mindfulness to the West, cracked a few jokes throughout the long weekend. During the opening panel, when discussing the modern day scourge of multitasking, he quoted Albert Einstein, quipping, “If you can drive safely while kissing a girl, you’re simply not giving the kiss the attention it deserves.”

The next day, before leading a loving-kindness guided meditation, he delivered a solid political one-liner that elicited loud, appreciative laughter from this decidedly liberal crowd. Intrigued, I peeked at his social media. While much of it is serious, earnest, and from the heart—sending metta to Californians affected by the wildfires, encouraging mindfulness while voting—I found this meme:

“If you can sit quietly after difficult news, if in financial downturns you remain perfectly calm, if you can see your neighbors travel to fantastic places without a twinge of jealousy, … if you can always find contentment just where you are, you are probably a dog.”

- Jack Kornfield

Bottom line: Don’t take yourself so seriously. You’ll be happier for it.

3. Technology for spiritual wellness is helpful, but it will never replace human connectivity.
During the opening keynote, four brilliant and influential minds—including Kornfield, the esteemed Buddhist practitioner and founder of Spirit Rock Center, Zindel Segal, PhD, distinguished Professor of Psychology in Mood Disorders at the University of Toronto Scarborough, Acacia Parks, PhD, Chief Scientist for Happify Health, and Darnell Lamont Walker, PhD, award-winning writer and filmmaker—gathering on stage to discuss how contemplative practice is now entering the digital age. Both Kornfield and Parks pointed out that while millions of individuals sign up for mindfulness apps, like Headspace, Calm and Happify, a strikingly low percent are still using them one month later.

Kornfield noted that the potential for contemplative technology to work is there, and some success has been noted—three 30 minute-sessions of online cognitive behavioral therapy sessions, for instance, has been shows to help reduce depression and suicidality among stressed out new physicians. But the deeper question, he said, is whether these types of technology allow people “to feel a connection with the vastness of the cosmos....

No amount of technology—not the internet, not the apps, not artificial intelligence, biotech, nanotech—is going to stop continuing warfare and environmental destruction and racism and the kind of conflict. Those are, really, sourced in the human heart.”

Kornfield suggested that combining an online component with a real-life relationship (i.e., a teacher, a friend, a mentor) likely has the best chance of success. “We need to keep a human connection as a thread in it for it to work at it’s best.”

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4. Find freedom in caring less about what others think.
director and senior teacher of the Daoist Foundation, led a group of us through a standing meditation and Qigong, a form of energy work involving slow, coordinated movements, breathing and meditation. We were outdoors on a lawn situated in front of a gorgeous adobe fireplace. (The conference took place at the Sheraton Grand at Wild Horse Pass, a Native American-owned hotel in Phoenix located on the Gila River Indian Community, home to the Pima and Maricopa people groups for 2000 years.) Komjathy stood at the front, near the fireplace; the rest of us faced him on the lawn.

Even though we were in sunny Phoenix, the mornings can be chilly. Wearing my yoga pants, a tank top, and a light zip-up hoodie, I was shivering, which is not ideal when you’re trying to focus on bringing the energy of the heavens down into your body.

Seemingly reading my mind, Komjathy invited any cold participants to come join him by the fireplace. Every bit of me yearned to be near that fireplace...but I stayed put. Joining him meant I’d be standing at the helm of 50 strangers, attempting to harvest my yang to tonify my yin for the first time in my life. I’m hardly a shrinking violet and I’m used to speaking in front of large groups of people (up to 1000) for my work. But this was different. This was unchartered territory for me. I wasn't sure I wanted to put myself on display as I made my way through the series of unfamiliar poses.

But then, through my downward-gazing eyes, I saw one man start to walk up to the front. Feeling like a sheep, I followed, and the two of us stood with the instructor, facing the audience, the back half of our body instantly warmed by the fire. And guess what happened?

Nothing.

No one cared. No one stared. Everyone was in their own world, tonifying their own yin. In fact, two more people joined us near the fire. I felt like the title character in Dr. Seuss’s What Was I Afraid Of?, when he realizes that
the spooky empty green pants in the forest are just as scared of him as he is of them. In yoga class, it's taken me years to realize that just because the woman next to me can nail Chaturanga after Chaturanga without keeping her knees on the mat doesn't mean that I should throw my right shoulder out attempting to do the same. I'm not sure why I wasn't able to apply that same knowledge to this frosty qigong situation from the get-go. Nonetheless, it was a timely reminder that when practicing mindfulness, you need to do what makes you feel good. Even better, heading up front and turning around meant I had a gorgeous new view of cacti and the Komatke Mountains to enjoy.

5. Though practicing daily mindfulness is ideal, you can still reap some rewards with minimal effort.

During a lecture titled, “Mindfulness Training in High Demand, Time-Pressured RealWorld Settings: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” Amishi Jha, PhD, associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, discussed her research on the ability of short bouts of mindfulness training to help individuals in high-stress situations, specifically, students, athletes during pre-season training, and military members. As part of her Mindfulness Based Attention and Training (MBAT) Project, funded in part by the Department of Defense, Jha is interested in learning if teaching mindfulness can help improve focus and working memory, both of which become compromised during times of stress. (MBAT is based on the principles of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, but adapted for military personnel to improve relevancy.)

The problem? These individuals are already time pressured, “so, how low can you go when it comes to teaching them mindfulness and resilience training? What content is critical and what can we cut out?” What she found: Four two-hour sessions, spaced out over four weeks, was enough to produce an effect. Not only did military members report less mind-wandering and improved memory, but they were able to bring their
Reported the ability to feel more present with their families—something they'd struggled with before MBAT training.

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