

Book Review

Goleman, D., & Davidson, R. J. (2018). *Altered traits: Science reveals how meditation changes your mind, brain, and body*. New York, NY: Avery.

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It's been two years since I embarked on making meditation a daily routine, and over the last two years my practice has grown from a thought-jangling, mind-wandering, "Is it time yet?" 5-minute sitting to a steady, breath-aware and attention-centered sitting of anywhere between 45 minutes to an hour. It's now something I so thoroughly enjoy that it's with a deep sense of relaxed regret that I experience my programmed digital Dengze gong sounding the end of the sitting. What has caused this change? Could I dismissively ascribe it to "habit"? Or were there deeper mechanisms at work here? Why have I stopped reacting to impatient car honks that sometimes greet my slow acceleration at traffic lights, for instance? And what other changes have I undergone that I'm not even aware of?

There is a saying: When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. That's exactly how I felt when I chanced upon Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson's latest work *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes your Mind, Brain and Body* at my local library. Containing a wealth of wisdom explaining why and how meditation works, all validated with scientific references and elaborations of the key concepts and effects of meditation, *Altered Traits* provides a logical and rational explanation for what has historically been understood as a strictly spiritual endeavor.

Daniel Goleman is most well-known for his seminal work on Emotional Intelligence. What is not so well known about Goleman is the years he spent, starting in the early 1970s, pursuing mindfulness meditation, as well as bringing what was then seen as an esoteric Eastern, almost otherworldly practice, to Western shores. Richard J. Davidson, an acclaimed neuroscientist and meditation practitioner in his own right, and good friend and compatriot of Goleman's, spent decades pursuing and validating the science behind

meditation. Their joint experiences, practice and knowledge cover close to a hundred years of combined work in the field and synthesize millennia of wisdom from various spiritual traditions from across the globe.

At the heart of the book is a key idea that the authors seek to explain and substantiate, using different perspectives, research studies, lab experiments, and the wisdom of the ancients. That idea, stated upfront in the very first chapter, is

Beyond the pleasant states that meditation can produce, the real payoffs are in the lasting traits that can result.

An altered trait – a new characteristic that arises from a meditation practice – endures apart from meditation itself. Altered traits shape how we behave in our daily lives, not just during or immediately after we meditate. (p. 6)

And

the most compelling impacts of meditation are not better health or sharper business performance but, rather, a further reach towards our better nature. (p. 7)

Goleman and Richardson trace the research on the efficacy and efficiency of meditation ever since it became “hip” in the late 1960s and early 1970s, through the phases of the flower-power movements, sojourns to the foothills of the Himalayas, and swamis of dubious claims, who nearly consigned the practice of meditation to the realms of just another new-age fad. The authors delve into various findings from contemporary neuroscience, including neuroplasticity, PTSD, MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction), as well as the science of flourishing, empathy and compassion, and tie it all up in the concept “The after is the before for the next during” which, while not easy to immediately cognitively appreciate (at least for me), sinks in once you have, well, meditated on it.

The scientific concepts are embellished with stories from the Dalai Lama, Zen masters and the Buddha, almost creating a ying-yang effect of pithy Eastern wisdom being juxtaposed with Western scientific experiments. In fact, as I read through the book, I could not but marvel at what the ancients knew about attention, cognitive control, mindfulness, amygdala response, hypertension, the brain’s construction of the self – all of which are now being validated in neuroscience labs across the planet, as cited in the various studies in this book.

So why is this book relevant to coaching? To what use can a coach put the wisdom held in its 300 or so pages? Perhaps it's best for me to let the authors respond, quoting from the last few paragraphs from the book

So, why this book now?

Simple. We feel that the more upgrades in the brain, mind and being are pursued, the more they can change the world. What sets this strategy for human betterment apart from the long history of failed utopian schemes comes down to the science.

We have shown the evidence that it is possible to cultivate these positive qualities in the depths of our being, and that any of us can begin this inner journey. Many of us may not be able to put forth the intense effort needed to walk the deep path. (The path taken by the monks). But the wider routes show that qualities like equanimity and compassion are learnable skills, ones we can teach our children and improve in ourselves.

Any steps we can take in this direction are a positive offering to our lives and our world. (p. 292)

My personal reason for reading, and re-reading, this book (I mentioned this to Daniel Goleman when I met him at the 3rd International Columbia Conference in New York City last month) is that as coaches I believe we need to work at two levels: firstly, at the level of our personal self, where we need to be constantly aware, mindful and present to ourselves and our coachee; and, secondly, we can use the great insights from this book to help coachees appreciate the “hows” and whys of reflective practices, of which meditation, as *Altered Traits* so aptly demonstrates, is the very pinnacle.