

D. Goleman; R. Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*

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Meditation is a topic that, throughout history, has always aroused the interest of many scientific areas, in order to, in this sense, help the human person to know how to face and integrate all the situations that give rise to stress, such as example, difficult economic situations, family problems, overwork, health problems, worries, etc., especially nowadays, where multitasking, speed and frenetic competitiveness prevail, something that is still increasing plus our stress levels. In fact, if these stressful situations persist in the long term and, at the same time, we do not know how to integrate them into our lives, we will jeopardize our bodily, psychological and spiritual health, including that of those with whom we live.

All people want to have an undisturbed mind, in order to, generally, improve their well-being and thus be able to self-fulfill. Hence the importance of resorting to meditation. However, many times, when analyzing this theme, many authors tend to fall into various reductionisms. In this sense, this work, «Altered Traits», is quite interesting, by Daniel Goleman, psychologist and scientific journalist, and Richard Davidson, psychologist, psychiatrist and neuroscientist, because they analyze this theme, to which they have already dedicated several years of investigation, in a realistic and interdisciplinary way, that is, from a philosophical, sociological, anthropological, historical, theological, psychological and neuroscientific point of view, thus showing that meditation plays an important role in the life of any human

Altered Traits



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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
Daniel Goleman & Richard J. Davidson

person, allowing, in this sense, so that harmony reigns in societies, something that undoubtedly allows future generations to flourish in a more fruitful way, and so on.

Associated with this, it is also important that, many times, the authors seek to highlight, throughout their work, the limits of their investigation, especially concerning aspects of testing and experimentation. In fact, as they focus and appeal, all scientific research must be transparent and truthful; thus, never violating ethical principles, something that, as they point out, unfortunately, happens to some, mainly because of personal reasons or because of economic, political and social interests. In the same way, pertinently, they also appeal to researchers to eliminate all prejudice that they may have, consciously or unconsciously, something that negatively affects the quality of their research.

To achieve the objective of showing how important meditation is for the human person and societies, the authors decided to divide this work into 14 chapters: 1. The Deep Path and the Wide; 2. Ancient Clues; 3. The After Is the Before for the Next During; 4. The Best We Had; 5. A Mind Undisturbed; 6. Primed for Love; 7. Attention!; 8. Lightness of Being; 9. Mind, Body, and Genome; 10. Meditation as Psychotherapy; 11. A Yogi's Brain; 12. Hidden Treasure; 13. Altering Traits; 14. A Healthy Mind.

By reading this book, many conclusions can be achieved. Among them, the following stand out. The first is that the authors consider meditation not only a naturally human act, since it presupposes, in the strict sense, intelligence, conscience and self-conscience, typically human faculties, but also essentially cognitive, where will and affectivity also play a crucial role.

At the same time, they distinguish meditation from other cognitive acts that are often confused with it, although they can be related to each other, such as perception, learning, concentration, attention, etc. In fact, good perception, learning, concentration, attention, etc. allow the human person to improve the quality of his meditation. In the same way, meditation makes it possible to improve the quality of the various cognitive acts, something that undoubtedly allows for a better development of the human person. We are, therefore, facing a «symbiotic» relationship; other interesting symbiotic relationships are present throughout the work, as we will see below.

Following this reasoning of these authors, it is also pointed out that for them meditation is an intentional act, where the subject establishes an intellectual, conscious and significant relationship with a certain object, which motivates meditation. Regarding the object of meditation, according to them, one can meditate on many different objects; for example, we can meditate on ourselves, on our actions, on a particular virtue, etc. In this sense, meditation is distinguished from those states of mind caused, for example, by drugs. This is made clearer by the fact that, after the effects of drugs wear off, we are still the same person we were before, something that doesn't happen with meditation, which can radically change a person's character. So, another characteristic feature of meditation is that it interferes a lot with our personality.

Another idea that the authors highlight, speaking of meditation, is that mind and body are not two substances, thus avoiding a sort of dualism, but two essentially distinct entities, which are part of the same substance, the human person. However, despite being two essentially different realities, this does not mean that they cannot be related to each other. On the contrary. This becomes clearer when the authors show that when we meditate we use the brain. In the same way, whenever we meditate, we can shape the different brain areas and thus improve our brain health; reasoning that can be extended to the whole body, that is, whenever we meditate we can improve the health of our body, as can be seen, in particular, in cardiovascular diseases and immunological diseases; in the most extreme cases, even end some illnesses. On the other hand, meditation doesn't have to deal with the side effects that pharmacology often causes.

However, the opposite process can also occur, that is, good bodily health also allows us to improve our capacity and quality of meditation and our mental health, and so on.

Talking about meditation, the authors also argue that it is convenient to have a good instructor, master, director or guide, who will allow us, in turn, not only to develop meditation techniques, but also to assist us in choosing meditation most suitable for us, so that later it can guide us in the best way in meditation. Likewise, having friends and a community to meditate with is far more beneficial than doing it alone, as the authors point out.

Thus, in this line, another interesting point that the authors highlight, when talking about meditation, is that there are different types of meditation and not just one, although they, throughout the work, give particular emphasis to «mindfulness». In this sense, as there are several, it is necessary for the meditator to choose the most suitable one for him, as not all types of meditation are suitable for a particular person.

Another idea that the authors highlight when analyzing meditation is the fact that it allows us to know ourselves better, as well as the other people with whom we interact. Thus, it allows us not only to free ourselves from many vices, but also to develop virtues, where the authors give more importance to patience, generosity, compassion and love, something that makes us, in its time, healthier and happier.

However, as they show, meditating on a virtue does not mean that we possess it or will in fact possess it. However, it predisposes us to do so. In the same way, Goleman and Davidson also show that the cultivation and development of virtues, throughout our lives, also allows us to improve the quality of our meditation and so on.

Allied to this, it is also important to focus on the fact that the authors associate meditation with the importance of a person having a «sense of life». In fact, whoever has a sense of life can meditate better; in the same way, those who meditate can find or consolidate their meaning in life. At the same time, the authors also demonstrate that those who have a meaning in life are better able to develop virtues, for example, they are more capable not only to face negative situations, but also to become more resilient and, at the same time, recover and integrate more easily from the negative situations they had experienced.

We have seen the impact that meditation has on the volitive ambit. In this sense, the authors also demonstrate that meditation also has a positive impact in the affective sphere. In other words, by meditating, we can, not only better educate our affectivity, but also allow us to free ourselves and better integrate negative psychic states into our lives, including those from our unconscious.

Meditating also prevents emotional burnout, as they similarly highlight. However, when touching on this theme, I think that the authors present a limit, as they convey the idea that our affective experiences, shall we say, unpleasant, are essentially negative. That is, not all unpleasant affective experiences are always negative.

Likewise, not all pleasant experiences are always positive, something the authors do not clearly demonstrate.

However, returning to the positive points, another one that the authors pertinently highlight is the fact that the quality and quantity of meditation interfere with the results. That is, as they demonstrate, people who meditate better, as well as those who meditate longer, achieve better results.

Another point that the authors emphasize when talking about meditation is the fact that people who meditate can build a better society. In other words, we have seen that meditation allows a person to develop virtues and at the same time get rid of their vices. Thus, those who meditate not only become a better person but can also serve other people better, something that also ends up building a better society.

For Goleman and Davidson, meditation has a fundamental role, thus allowing, as we have seen, human beings can develop and, in this way, contribute to the creation of a more harmonious society. In this sense, it is finally highlighted the fact that the authors call for the promotion of meditation in public spaces, for example, through its incorporation in companies and health centers. In fact, as they demonstrate, those who meditate in these spaces improve their performance as well as their health, respectively. Reasoning that can be applied to other areas.

This book review ends, if it is allowed, encouraging the authors to continue with the excellent research work that they have been developing over the years, not only concerning this theme, but also concerning others, in particular, concerning to emotional intelligence, another crucial topic that, without a doubt, also allows not only a better human development, but also the creation of a more harmonious society.

