THINK LIKE A MONK

TRAIN YOUR MIND for PEACE and PURPOSE EVERY DAY

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SIMON & SCHUSTER

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.