

Lama Surya Das, longtime meditation teacher, chides self-centered use of mindfulness

by [Jay Michaelson](#) in the [July 8, 2015](#) issue

Lama Surya Das is one of the handful of Westerners who have been teaching meditation for decades. And yet, he says we're doing it wrong.

"So many people seem to be moving narcissistically—conditioned by our culture, doubtless—into self-centered happiness seeking," he said. True meditation, he said, generates wisdom and compassion, which may be very disquieting, at least in the short term.

Born Jeffrey Miller, he was given the name "Surya Das" by the Indian guru Neem Karoli Baba more than 40 years ago. But Surya Das shifted gears in the early 1970s to Tibetan Buddhism, subsequently completing two three-year silent meditation retreats and becoming one of the first Westerners to be authorized as a Tibetan lama.

Now meditation—especially mindfulness, which trains the mind to observe nonjudgmentally and attentively—has gone mainstream. In secular forms, it's widespread in health care, education, the corporate world, even the military. Each year, 1 million Americans take up the practice for the first time.

Surya Das is not entirely happy about that. Because of the way meditation is taught, many people think they can't do it, he said. "'Quiet your mind' or 'calm and clear your mind' are instructions I hear way too much," he said. "Some teachers actually encourage people to try to stop thinking, when in fact meditative awareness means being mindful of thoughts and feelings, not simply trying to reduce, alter, or white them out and achieve some kind of oblivion."

In his new book, *Make Me One with Everything* (the answer to a Buddhist joke: "What did the Zen monk say to the hot dog vendor?"), Surya Das argues for a return to the original purpose of Buddhist meditation: not relaxation, but liberation. The goal, he said, is "to genuinely learn how to gain direct access to Oneness, wholeness, completeness, integration with all the parts of themselves and life."

He proposes what he calls “co-meditation”—not trying to find a quiet “moment of Zen” apart from the messy, noisy world of work, family, and children but inviting all of the noise into meditation. That is part of the ancient Tibetan tradition known as Lojong, which often features elaborate visualizations.

“The anti-intellectual meditators, thought-swatters, and imagination-suppressors have long ruled meditation-oriented circles in the West,” he said. “But authentic meditative practices can enhance and even unleash the creativity and imagination.”
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