

Questions for Dr. Aditi Dave about Meditation, Medicine and Consciousness

Bill Zirinsky: Dr. Aditi, I know you as a deeply compassionate physician, as someone who was kind to our family when our daughter, Juliana, was facing end-of-life issues, both medical and human. You are a doctor working at the U-M Hospital, and you also work, independently, as a meditation instructor connected to the Art of Living community. Before you talk about the Art of Living programs that you lead, please briefly describe your medical training and credentials.

Dr. Aditi Dave: I received my medical degree in Florida, and completed a dual residency in Internal Medicine and Pediatrics at the University of Michigan. I am now 3 years out of residency, serving as a hospitalist and faculty member in the division of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan. As such, I take care of patients hospitalized, many of whom need tertiary care medicine.

Bill Zirinsky: You mentioned to me that the Art of Living program is not just a meditation program... Please tell us what it is.

Dr. Aditi Dave: The goal of the Art of Living program is to help people improve the quality of life. To accomplish our goal we use several approaches: providing training in mind-body practices; education of the negative habits and tendencies in the mind that directly affect everyday life; encouraging service programs to help those in need because service directly helps the recipients while also uplifting and transforming those who provide the service; and providing regular group events and retreats to delve deeper into mind-body practices and spiritual knowledge.

The mind-body practices we teach include yoga asanas, pranayama breathing, and several methods to achieve deep meditation. Meditation is a key component of the program because the rejuvenation of the mind that occurs in deep meditation is essential to establish peacefulness and expand awareness. True meditation allows the mind to settle into a state of stillness. It is different from the sleep state, it is not contemplation, and it is well beyond simple relaxation. While stillness is a natural state of rest, the extreme stress and over-stimulation common today makes it difficult for people to attain it. This is why proper training and technique is critical.

Unfortunately, meditation is widely misunderstood. Many have tried meditation and given up because they were not consistently having a deep experience. Others practice relaxation techniques that are called mediation, and while helpful, they do not offer the same opportunity for rejuvenation.

When the mind does not rejuvenate periodically through stillness in meditation the awareness gradually shrinks and the mind becomes hyperactive. What is thought of today as normal thinking is really hyperactive because very little time is spent aware of the present moment. Clarity is reduced and the feeling level of life, the joy and love, is over-shadowed by incessant thinking. Children start off living in the present moment but as they age stress accumulates and habits develop that cause the mind to constantly think about the past or future.

The result is that we rarely see the same level of joy, peace, enthusiasm, unconditional love, authenticity, and connection in adults that is natural to young children. Children show us that these qualities are the truest, unadulterated essence of humanness. Not knowing how to maintain these qualities into maturity our society accepts their loss as normal and life becomes more about coping than truly enjoying. Fortunately there are now many speakers and authors bringing



Photos by Rachael Waring

Dr. Aditi Dave is a hospitalist and faculty member in the division of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan. She also leads *Art of Living* meditation programs and workshops.

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attention to the importance of the inner development of life and living in the present moment.

BZ: Please tell us about Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

Dr. Aditi Dave: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has dedicated his life to serving humanity. He personally travels to 30-40 countries every year inspiring service for the disadvantaged and traumatized who need basic aid and comfort. To those lucky enough to have all their basic needs covered, he brings wisdom. This wisdom is shared through the Art of Living programs.

BZ: And is Art of Living completely separate from the Transcendental Meditation community founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi?

Dr. Aditi Dave: Yes, there is no working relationship between these two organizations; they are independent of one another.

BZ: I understand that the Art of Living’s introductory course teaches Sudarshan Kriya. Please tell us what Sudarshan Kriya stands for, and what it is.

Dr. Aditi Dave: Sudarshan Kriya is a unique practice that quickly calms the mind and flushes stress out of the system. It is also a gateway into deep, silent meditation. It is the cornerstone practice of the Art of Living Course and is only taught by teachers trained by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Once learned it is practiced at home for just 10 minutes. It provides great benefits on its own but is ideally included as part of a set of practices along with yoga asanas, pranayama, and silent meditation.

BZ: You have said to me that “the breath is in the present moment – you can’t breathe in the past or the future.” Say more, please.

Dr. Aditi Dave: The mind constantly wanders to the past or future without even being aware that it is happening. You cannot control this by using the mind. Try to concentrate and keep your mind in the present and you will see it drift away in less than a minute. But by using a skillful breathing practice the mind will automatically come to the present moment. This is when meditation can happen. Taking the time to perform practices daily reduces this tendency of dwelling on the past and future. Then, life spontaneously becomes better because of the richness of the present moment.

BZ: Aditi, tell me what you mean when you say “the breath is the link between

the outer world of activity and the inner world of silence?”

Dr. Aditi Dave: Using breathing practices is the most effective way to restore quietness to the hyperactivity of thinking. For a busy mind to attain the silence of meditation the breath is best used first to bring some calm and increase energy (prana).

BZ: Will you talk about our breath as a kite?

Dr. Aditi Dave: Without a string a kite can be blown in any direction by the wind. The mind also is blown around to the past and future by the many impressions, stresses, memories and habits inside us. The breath is like a string, using the breath the mind gains some focus, it comes back to its center, to the present where we can experience peace and become aware of the joy inside us.

BZ: How does the sudarshan kriya practice refresh an individual?

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Dr. Aditi Dave: Tension, stress, and anxiety leave the system, energy is increased, and the mind becomes clear and calm.

BZ: Aditi, along with many doctors and nurses and health care professionals who are trying hard to react in a human way in institutional settings, you also certainly encounter a good deal of “unawareness”. How do you bring your own conscious awareness to medical situations you face at the hospital? What are the small things you do each day, what are the challenges you face?

Dr. Aditi Dave: Yes, in a large institution, where patients are often extremely sick, skillful coordination of many services and specialties is required to get the patient better. Patients and their families come to us at a vulnerable time, often very stressed. In taking care of their needs, health care professionals can also encounter stress, which is then amplified if there is stressful interpersonal communication between health care professionals. In a field where effective, timely coordination of many services is vital in getting the patient better, I find being centered and aware, allows me to respond to stressful situations rather than REACT to them. The latter can often set off a chain reaction of stress in others. I find this happens a lot around the hospital: a ‘domino-effect’ of unnecessary stressful communication. In recognizing this as it happens, one can easily diffuse it instead of taking it into one’s own system. For example, recognizing that someone spoke to you unpleasantly because they are stressed (that comes out in their communication), allows you to still be harmonious in your communication. I can ‘save’ my own mind from outside stress in real time, rather than have to do extra-curricular activities to relieve stress after it has already happened.

“My experience helped me recognize how important it was to stay centered when helping others. The process of surgery and rehab in learning to walk again without pain gave me valuable perspective on what it is like to be a patient. As a doctor, this helps me empathize. My experience also inspired me to become a physician.”

For example, if a nurse is stressed due to something someone said to him/her, this may be carried over to the way I am spoken to, and so on. By being more aware, one helps diffuse this, rather than react to it or take on stress. It could be as simple as saying to the nurse, “It sounds like your day has been difficult, let me see what I can do to help.” Then his/her consciousness shifts from stress, back to the present moment of taking care of the patient.

BZ: You said to me that you wished there were greater efforts at the hospital to involve the medical staff in destressing the environment. What kinds of efforts would you like to see? And do you feel hopeful about strides being made in the medical setting, in terms of staff trying to be more conscious?... If so, please give us examples.

Dr. Aditi Dave: One of the challenges within the health care services is how to effectively take care of patients. Removing stress from the hospital environment means giving health care professionals an effective tool of distressing. I would like to see an established system within the hospital of taking care of the wellness and mindfulness of all health care professionals – from doctors, to nurses, to other allied health care workers. Bringing breathing practices such as Sudarshan Kriya and meditation into the hospital as opportunities for health care professionals to seize would create a de-stressed environment.

Industry and large organizations have already done this. For example, companies such as IBM, and organizations such as the World Bank, have arranged for Sudarshan Kriya to be taught at the workplace because they see the value of having their employees less stressed. It would be nice to bring such powerful techniques to the



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hospital staff. There are already individual staff at the University of Michigan who are doing this in their own way, and already practicing medicine with increased mindfulness and awareness. The next step would be to make these practices available for everyone interested.

BZ: What is the power of telling a patient to “keep her spirit up”?

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Dr. Aditi Dave: When a patient is sick, they have lost much of the “control” they have of the outcome. The one thing they do have control over is keeping their spirit up, and centering the mind on the positive rather than dwelling on the entire negative in the situation. At a time when the patient feels scared, or despondent, encouraging them to keep their spirit up, the one thing they do have control over, and to stay positive. Often they are very appreciative of this supportive reminder. This is reassurance that I am doing everything I can medically, while they do everything they can to remain positive and centered despite a tough situation.

BZ: Aditi, recently you said to me: “True Listening is a skill. Combined with compassion and clarity of mind,” and also combined with the skills and knowledge of a doctor, “doctors could be very effective.” Would you like to elaborate on that?

Dr. Aditi Dave: ‘True Listening’ means being *fully present* in that moment, and when this is combined with a clear, stress-free mind, the quality of your work is much more effective. One’s interpersonal communication skills become refined. True listening really makes the patient and families feel you are working with compassion and that you care.

BZ: You grew up in very interesting places. Can you tell us where you grew up, and a bit about how the experience of growing up in those places still influences and affects your perspective, and your life?

Dr. Aditi Dave: I was born in Kenya, and my first language was Swahili. I have picture memories of Kenya, of the immense generosity of the people and of course the wildlife. We moved when I was 5 years old to Belize, at a time when it still had not been discovered as a tourist destination. I spent my childhood there until age 12, and enjoyed the unspoiled nature and complete simplicity in life. I recognized just how happy and content people are without much of modern day amenities. I then moved to Canterbury, England, where I had my formative years, and later lived in London for college, before moving to the U.S. All these places hold a special place in my heart, and each make up a part of where I am from. It has made me realize that home is wherever you are. Each place offered a diverse array of experiences that definitely contributed to my desire to do International Health Care volunteer work. I recognized how we are not so different regardless of culture, the universality of Human Values and the need to give service to global needs even if we think of our place in society or on earth as insignificant.

BZ: I know that you experienced a significant hospitalization at a young age, and a lengthy rehabilitation. Your rehabilitation was, to me, a remarkable story of determination. How was that experience important to your path --- both in terms of becoming a doctor, and in terms of becoming someone who teaches people about conscious awareness?

Dr. Aditi Dave: It ultimately inspired me to become a physician. Doing rehab to be able to walk again also fueled my interest on the importance of mind-body connection in overcoming adversity. Raising one’s consciousness and being more mindful allows one to get through adversity more positively. My experience helped me recognize how important it was to stay centered when helping others. The process of surgery and rehab in learning to walk again without pain gave me valuable perspective on what it is like to be a patient. As a doctor, this helps me empathize. My experience also inspired me to become a physician. I remember thinking, “If I can help even one person the way my surgeon had, or encourage one person through a trying time, then the hard work in becoming a doctor will be more than rewarded.” As a teacher of Art of Living programs, my experience also allows me to give more of a personal inspiration to those who are in stressful situations in life.

BZ: And your spiritual upbringing? You were brought up as a Hindu and as a Roman Catholic? Tell us about that, please, and how did your parents help you to reconcile those religious elements?

Dr. Aditi Dave: My mother raised me with Hinduism, and I went to Catholic and Anglican schools. As a child, I wondered why prayer was through multiple, different methods. My mother reconciled these different religions when she said: “true religion is when you can see the divine in every human being.” She also said that all these religions were like paths up the same mountain. She focused on the universal spirituality that remains the same through all religious beliefs. This was invaluable. This resonates with the Art of Living Programs which are taught in over a 140 countries, crossing over all religious or cultural belief systems, because it focuses on raising the individual’s consciousness, his or her ability to live in the present moment, and servicing one’s spirit.



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BZ: How did you become involved in the Art of Living programs?

Dr. Aditi Dave: My brother took the course through a co-worker and loved it. I was in college at the time, and my brother arranged for the course to happen in our family home during my winter break so that I could take it. It was very sweet of him to give this to me as a gift. At the time, I knew I had done something very special for myself, but the effectiveness of the practices became apparent during medical school when my fellow students began asking me what I do to handle the stress as I seemed “so calm and happy at a stressed time.” They asked me to arrange a course for them. It was a huge success, and soon it became a volunteer activity to bring courses to Tampa, FL, during medical school. I found it very gratifying to see how positively this program affects people’s wellness.

BZ: And you’ve been leading programs and workshops? What programs are upcoming this fall? And how can people find out more about your programs, and about Art of Living programs?

Dr. Aditi Dave: The schedule of programs can always be found at www.artofliving.org by selecting the menu of courses for Ann Arbor, Michigan. All of our programs are run by volunteers and we do not have a physical office space so we do the best we can to offer the programs locally every other month. The next course will be offered in October, and are posted at: secure.artofliving.org (choose MICHIGAN).

BZ: Tell us about the Art of Living’s youth programs, and also about bringing sudarshan kriya to inner city kids.

Dr. Aditi Dave: The Youth Empowerment Seminar (YES) is currently being taught to inner city high school children ages 14-18, with programs in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York to name a few. Neither at school, nor at home, are children taught how to manage their mind or their emotions. Can you imagine how much empowerment can be given for kids to learn a practice they can do at anytime to handle stress at an early age. Often inner city youth have little to no mentorship at home or at school. Our public schools are in crisis, and our teachers are stressed from being given limited resources to help children reach their full potential. Having YES programs in schools transforms youth but also positively influences the teachers and administrators exposed to it.

BZ: You’ve said that “the emotions affect breath, and the breath affects emotions”. If there were one thing you’d like to get across, to help encourage someone to begin a breath practice, what is it?

Dr. Aditi Dave: These practices are not hard to do and the results are seen quickly. We all know the years in life go by fast and if we can just incorporate a half hour per day to sitting comfortably and doing some practices, the difference in our life will be tremendous.

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