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Mindfulness: Getting Its Share of Attention

By DAVID HOCHMAN

What is the sound of one hand texting?

As Soren Gordhamer patiently quieted a packed Wisdom 2.0 event in San Francisco in September for a guided meditation, a few in the communal meeting space known as the Hub couldn't resist thumbing another message or two before pocketing their sacred devices. A willowy young brunette in a black T-shirt shot video of the crowd with her iPad from her front-row seat. Even after Mr. Gordhamer, who is tall with a sculptural face and Errol Flynn hair, urged the group to "come into presence," his voice rising in emphasis, someone's phone was buzzing like a dragonfly.

Mr. Gordhamer started Wisdom 2.0 in 2009 to examine how we can live with technology without it swallowing us whole. The wait lists for his panel talks and conferences now run into the hundreds.

The "Disconnect to Connect" meet-up was typical. The audience was mostly young, mostly from the Silicon Valley tech scene and entirely fed up with taking orders from Siri. "There was a time when phones didn't tell you to do everything," said Mr. Gordhamer, 45, as the conversation got rolling. "What's work, what's not work, it's all become blurred."

And yet, the problem may offer a solution. Loïc Le Meur, a French blogger and entrepreneur and the evening's guest speaker, recommended a meditation app called Get Some Headspace. The program bills itself as the world's first gym membership for the mind. "It's a way to have a meditation practice without feeling weird about it," said Mr. Le Meur. He was wearing Google Glass with only a hint of irony. "You don't have to sit in a lotus position. You just press 'play' and chill out."

Earlier that morning at Google headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., Chade-Meng Tan, a veteran engineer, was laughing about the demand for an in-house course he created called "Search Inside Yourself." The seven-week class teaches mindfulness, a loose term that covers an array of attention-training practices. It may mean spending 10 minutes with eyes closed on a gold-threaded pillow every morning or truly listening to your mother-in-law for once. Google naturally sees it as another utility widget for staying ahead. "Whenever we put the class online, it sells out in 30 seconds," Mr. Tan said.

This is not just a geek thing. Everywhere lately, the here and now is the place to be. George

Stephanopoulos, 50 Cent and Lena Dunham have all been talking up their meditation regimens. “I come from a long line of neurotic Jewish women who need it more than anyone,” Ms. Dunham, who’s been meditating since she was 9, told a capacity crowd last month at the David Lynch Foundation for Conscious Based Education and World Peace in New York. Then there was the tweet last April from @rupertmurdoch, who announced: “Trying to learn transcendental meditation. Everyone recommends, not that easy to get started, but said to improve everything!”

The Marine Corps is testing Mind Fitness Training to help soldiers relax and boost “emotional intelligence,” the buzzwords of the hour. Nike, General Mills, Target and Aetna encourage employees to sit and do nothing, and with classes that show them how. As the high priestess of the fully aware, Arianna Huffington this year started a mindfulness conference, a page dedicated to the subject on The Huffington Post and a “GPS for the Soul” phone application with a built-in heart sensor to alert you when you’re calm or stressed.

The hunger to get centered is especially fervent in the cradle of the digital revolution. The Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz told Wisdom 2.0 audiences about modeling his current software start-up, Asana, after lessons learned in his [yoga](#) practice. At the same summit, eBay’s founder and chairman, Pierre Omidyar, shared the stage with Thupten Jinpa, the Dalai Lama’s English interpreter, and pegged the auction site’s success on human goodness and trusting in complete strangers. At another, Padmasree Warrior, the chief technology and strategy officer at Cisco, detailed analog weekends devoted to family, painting, photography and haiku.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist leader who introduced mindfulness to Westerners (Google got first dibs on him as a guest speaker), once said, “The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention.” Yet for the majority of sentient beings today, simply getting through an episode of “The Big Bang Theory” without tending multiple screens is a quasi-mystical triumph. Naturally, the architects of our electronic age approach the situation as if it were an engineering problem.

“This isn’t the old San Francisco hippie fluff,” said Mr. Tan, who started the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute as an extracurricular program in 2007. More than a thousand Googlers have gone through the course, which uses scientific research and the profit motive to entice coders and programmers to be here now.

Hundreds of peer-reviewed studies verify the benefits of mindfulness training, and Mr. Tan appeared familiar with all of them. Meditation thickens the brain’s cortex, it lowers blood pressure, it can heal psoriasis and “it can help you get a promotion,” he said. Companies like Goldman Sachs and Farmers Insurance also hire Mr. Tan and his team to teach techniques like pausing before sending important emails and silently wishing happiness upon difficult co-workers.

Mr. Tan’s official Google title is Jolly Good Fellow, which nobody can deny. During the interview, he sat cross-legged and barefoot at a conference table inside the Googleplex, and was

never far from an enlightened one-liner. “People come to me with profound concerns like how do you get through 211 items on your to-do list,” he said. “I tell them, one item at a time, duh.”

It is easy for Mr. Tan to joke. With the financial benefits that come from being Google employee No. 107, he works only three days a week and concentrates more on giving away his wealth than growing it. “I don’t have much sympathy for miserable rich people because sharing money is the key to happiness,” he said. “For me, becoming rich was a wonderful experience, but then the thought became, now what?”

That’s a question Evan Williams said he asks himself frequently. The billionaire-to-be co-founder of Twitter is a regular at Wisdom 2.0 events and began meditating just over a year ago. His practice has made an impact in ways both profound and less so. Last month as Twitter was finalizing its paperwork to go public, Mr. Williams did the unthinkable for someone in his position. He took a 20-minute walk through San Francisco without his phone. “I was able actually to look around and think about things for most of that period,” he said. “I would have had many more fleeting anxieties doing that a year ago, but I’m better with those silences now.”

Mr. Gordhamer said the desire is rampant for “non-doing,” as he put it. “What the culture is craving is a sense of ease and reflection, of not needing to be stimulated or entertained or going after something constantly. Nobody’s kicking out technology, but we have to regain our connection to others and to nature or else everybody loses.”

Mr. Gordhamer’s response to this came five years ago while residing in a double-wide trailer in remote Dixon, N.M. He was newly divorced and had lost his job organizing events for Richard Gere’s Foundation. At the time, Mr. Gordhamer was reading a lot of Eckhart Tolle and kept returning to one idea: Rather than asking, “What do I want from life?” he asked, “What does life want from me?” Convinced he had settled on an answer, Mr. Gordhamer withdrew the last \$10,000 from his bank account and started Wisdom 2.0.

With prominent speakers from the technology and “wisdom” communities, the first conference in 2009, held outside San Francisco, was a modest gathering of 325 people. By 2012, the wait list ran to 500, with headliners that included co-founders of Twitter, Facebook, eBay and PayPal. Last winter’s lineup featured Ford’s chairman, Bill Ford, interviewed by his meditation guru, Jack Kornfield; Congressman Tim Ryan on using mindfulness to transform education; and Marianne Williamson, on ending world hunger with the aid of social media. The conference in February, at a convention hotel in downtown San Francisco, is expected to draw around 2,000 attendees over four days and is part of a year-round cycle of events.

At the Wisdom meet-up in September at the Hub, a smiley young man with a nametag that read “Walter Inward” was showing off a new smoking-cessation app he had created for the iPhone. On one wrist, he wore a Buddhist mala bead bracelet; on the other, a high-tech Basis band that uses skin conductivity to record heart rate, sleep and steps.

He turned out to be Walter Roth, 30, chief executive of a tech start-up called Inward Inc. Mr. Roth said he had attended every Wisdom 2.0 event since 2009. Mindfulness has made him

more competitive, he said. "Not only do I put fewer things on my to-do list but I actually get them done and done well. It's like I've learned that to be more successful and accomplish more, I must first slow down."

The paradox of profit-minded techies engaging in the realm of nonattachment is not lost on those shepherding these wired flocks. Marc Lesser wore the black robes of a Buddhist priest as director of the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center near Big Sur in the 1980s. "I literally didn't know what to do with the \$60 monthly stipend I used to get," he said. Today, as an M.B.A. and chief executive of Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, he is comfortable integrating money with mindfulness. "All business is about helping people in some way and you can't do that without focusing on success," he said. "The hope is that turning a profit can be done more wisely and compassionately."

At his first Wisdom 2.0 conference in 2010, Arturo Bejar, Facebook's engineering director, sat in the back row. "I was reluctant because I'm primarily a numbers person," he said. But hearing the author and meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn say that if people fully saw one another, they could get along better, a light bulb went off for Mr. Bejar. He decided to integrate that idea into his work handling content concerns from Facebook's one billion users.

Collaborating with neuroscience and psychology researchers at Stanford, Berkeley and Yale, Mr. Bejar made significant changes to the ways communication happens on Facebook. This year, the company introduced emoticons to capture a broader range of human feelings, along with a gentler formula for settling tension between users. Previously, someone tagged in an unfortunate Facebook photo could flag the image as offensive and hope the other person would remove it. Now, a form pops up with options like, "It's embarrassing," "It's inappropriate" and "It makes me sad," along with a polite request to take the photo down.

Introducing that simple, thoughtful language has tripled the likelihood that users will send a message asking for the photo to be removed, Mr. Bejar said, adding that the overall response has been significant. In the United States, if someone marks a Facebook photo as "embarrassing," it is 83 percent likely that the poster will respond or delete it. Facebook will soon add a similar function to text posts. "We didn't realize how hard it was to feel heard in electronic communications, but now there are mechanisms for being more expressive and thoughtful," Mr. Bejar said.

Those mechanisms are spreading like ripples on a mountain pond. The Huffington Post added a page this year called "The Third Metric" that focuses on cultivating balance, appreciation and calm. Around 200 people crammed into Arianna Huffington's TriBeCa living room in June for a kickoff conference where guests like Candice Bergen and Mr. Stephanopoulos all but shared their mantras.

Last month, the people behind Lululemon started whil.com, a site that encourages visitors to turn off the brain for 60 seconds by visualizing a dot. "The hour-and-a-half yoga break is too much for most people," said Chip Wilson, a co-founder. "Getting away from the chaos of work

and technology even for one minute is all you really need to feel refreshed.” Still too great a time waster? Mr. Tan at Google said one mindful breath a day can lead to inner peace.

Even the most distracted are easing up and letting go. These days, Mr. Williams spends most of his time overseeing an online literary venture called Medium. The office holds companywide nature retreats and offers guided relaxation sessions twice a week. “Meditation always had bad branding for this culture — it seemed very hand wavy,” he said. “But to me, it’s a way to think more clearly and to not feel so swept up.”

Asked if he might make a habit of strolling through San Francisco without a device vibrating in his pocket, Mr. Williams paused for what sounded like a moment of reflection, but then he laughed.

“It wasn’t a conscious effort to turn off my phone,” he said. “It happened that I needed to charge it.”