Dr. Paul R. Fleischman is a Yale-trained psychiatrist and Vipassana meditation teacher in the tradition of Mr. S.N. Goenka.

Dr. Fleischman has lectured widely in the U.S. and abroad about meditation. He just finished a series of lectures on meditation in the Northeast, at Yale University, New York University, and Northeastern University and will be heading out to the Pacific Northwest in April 2016 for another series of lectures.

We caught up with him to get a glimpse into his unique personal and professional perspective on a lifelong practice of meditation.

**Dr. Fleischman, you sat your first meditation course in India in 1974. What drew you to India, and why Vipassana meditation?**

I first went to India in 1970 while I was still in medical school. I had a fellowship to study Ayurveda. My time was completely taken up by studying medicine but I was captivated by India. I had previously studied India intensely at the University of Chicago, while I was in college, but going there to study medicine was an additional eye opener. I resolved to return to India after my medical studies would be complete so that I could study meditation. I returned to India in 1974 with my wife, Susan, and we were initially attracted to Vipassana because of Mr. Goenka’s style of teaching, which included his command of English, and his rational, non-religious, experience based presentation of meditation.

**You were asked by your teacher, Mr. S.N. Goenka, to take up the responsibility of being a Vipassana Teacher in 1998. At that time, you were a practicing psychiatrist, a husband, and a father. Since then you've lectured widely in the U.S. and around the world, and written articles and books. What effect has Vipassana had on your life?**

I have lived an ordinary life as a doctor, husband, father, writer, and friend. Over the course of 70 years, I have been uplifted and guided by more sources than I can understand.

Vipassana has been a companion and strength as I have crossed the difficulties that attend to any life. It has been a beacon that has guided me higher rather than merely forward.

In my early adulthood it helped me to set the direction that I followed for the rest of my life. In my middle years of adulthood, it helped me to hold a steady course among the demands, stresses, and tensions that attend upon professionals, parents, and householders. In the later years of my life, it has given me strength to face the decline that accompanies entropy and the decay of this body and mind.

It has been a key player in my ability to see my life every day as an apple hanging for a season on a bough in time. It has also guided me to many uplifting and companionable people and situations. It has threaded me on a string that reaches backward more than 2500 years in time, and forward towards the unknown.

**There has been a tremendous increase in media exposure for meditation over the last few decades, and increasing commercialization of an ancient spiritual practice. What are your thoughts about this?**
During the years that I have been giving talks on Vipassana meditation, the audiences have changed radically. Only a few decades ago, meditation was relatively exotic. Today, it has been the subject of thousands of studies and articles in the Western world, and is practiced to some degree by millions of people. The audiences that I address now have more scientific information, beliefs, assumptions, misinformation, enthusiasm, commercial interest, or psychological over-expectations and fears.

Vipassana meditation is best understood non-reductionistically. It is helpful to think of meditation as a complex network of interacting systems that include neural, psychological, social, historical, and cultural practices and values.

To think of meditation as something you do on your own to improve your health by putting your nervous system through a tune-up misses the point. Vipassana meditation is individual effort poured back into social connections. It is a way of life, a lifelong, spiritual path.

Meditation is a life of witness to universal values of self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-containment, self-responsibility. Communities come together to practice, preserve, and relay the meditative way of life. Vipassana travels between people and across generations on wavelengths of friendship and generosity.

*People try meditation for all sorts of reasons. Some people see it as an alternative to medical or psychiatric treatment. You’ve written about why this is not a good idea. Could you elaborate on this?*

Up until recent decades, Western medicine maintained Cartesian dualism that separated mind and body into two separate, non-communicating compartments. In recent decades almost all doctors and other health professionals have come to accept the idea that mind and body are integrated. However, a new confusion has arisen.

The correct idea is that mind and body can influence each other, and that a more balanced mind can sometimes lead to a more balanced body. However, this should not be confused with the exaggerated idea that all physical ailments are influenced by mental states, or that balancing all mental states will always facilitate physical healing.

Vipassana meditation can help people find a way of life that withstands the rigors of daily life, and provides personal insight, psychological development, heightened well-being, and spiritual community.

However, Vipassana meditation should be practiced in an atmosphere that is free of exaggerated claims for medical cure or radical personality transplant. One of the foundation blocks of meditation as a way of life is that it does not become misdirected towards limited goals. Vipassana is not a substitute for treatment of any kind. It is not a cure, nor a preventative for mental or physical disorders. No one can be cured of all disease, and any activity that focuses on cure loses the broad perspective that animates Vipassana, which is a lifelong, spiritual path, and not merely to eliminate disease.

Vipassana can only change what is changeable. No one can be transformed beyond the elasticity permitted at their birth. No batting practice makes everyone Babe Ruth. No education makes everyone Einstein. Valid educational institutions offer improvement but not magical exit from personal limitations.
Those familiar with meditation may have seen reports about “dark night of the soul.” What are your thoughts about this?

I am glad to see alert journalists, psychologists, and teachers sound a warning about negative experiences resulting from naive and unskilled tinkering in the name of meditation. Meditation today has been popped out of its context, commercialized and marketed with faddish enthusiasm and little care for its impact.

I don’t think that we need to fabricate new diseases or mental stages under new nomenclature, in order to understand these problems. Meditation ought to be taught by people trained and steeped in their own practice during decades. Prospective students should have a clear understanding of what they are choosing to undertake, and helpful assessment of their suitability.

We all need to keep in mind that all of us, all of the time, to some greater or lesser degree, are subject to our common human frailties of anxiety, depression, panic, and other forms of mental suffering. That’s why we seek out meditation in the first place.

Meditation does not cause all of the anxiety, confusion, or “dark night” that occurs in the lives of people who have meditated, because those people have had many other influences upon them before and after they meditated, such as their genes, family, religion, school, etc.

I have never met anyone who hasn’t had a dark night, and this is not caused by nor unique to meditation. We do not need to ignore centuries of psychology and psychiatry, and then reinvent them, to understand why mediation is properly taught with prudence, respect, training, and tradition.

In closing, I wanted to include some of the excerpts from your article “Why I Sit,” where you describe the reasons that you have chosen to meditate at least twice a day for decades.

I sit to be myself, independent of my own or others’ judgements. Sitting enables me to slip beyond that second, commenting, editor’s mind, and to burrow in deep towards immediate reality. When I sit, no one – beloved or enemy – can give me what I lack, or take away what I am. So as I live all day, I can orient myself into becoming the person I will have to live with when I next sit.

I sit to find mental freedom. As I sit, a million thoughts cross my mind, but in keeping with the traditions passed on from ancient India’s great teachers, I attempt to let all of them go, to let them pass like clouds, like water, like time. Sitting gives me a way back to fluctuant, preformed mind, the pregnant atmosphere in which metaphor, intuition, and reason are sparks. Surrounded by a culture of intellectual conquest, I have a preserve of wholeness, a sanctuary in which the wild deer of poetry and song can slip in and out among the trunks of medical cases and conferences.

I sit in solitude to lose my isolation. What is least noble in me rises up to the surface of my mind, and this drives me to be more than I was. When I am most shut into my dark self I find the real source of my belonging. Sitting helps me overcome my deepest fears. I become freer to live from my heart, and to face the consequences, but also to reap the rewards of this authenticity.
I sit to anchor my life in certain moods, organize my life around my heart and mind, and to radiate out to others what I find. Though I shake in strong winds, I return to this basic way of living. The easy, soothing comfort and deep relaxation that accompany intent awareness in stillness, peels my life like an onion to deeper layers of truth, which in turn are scored and soothed until the next layer opens. I sit to discipline my life by what is clear, simple, self-fulfilling, and universal in my heart. I sit to better love my wife, and those friends and companions with whom I share even a day’s journey on the flight from the unknown to the unknown.

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To hear more from Dr. Fleischman, join us for a couple of lectures sponsored by The Whole U and UW School of Medicine Wellness Programs on the University of Washington campus in April 2016.

On Wednesday April 20th, Dr. Fleischman will give an evening talk intended for the general audience on “The Universal Features of Meditation” on at Kane Hall. Click here for event details and to register: https://catalyst.uw.edu/webq/survey/updykl/296243

On Thursday April 21st, Dr. Fleischman will give an evening talk intended for health care providers on “Healing the Healer: The Role of Vipassana Meditation,” at Foege Auditorium. Click here for event details and to register: https://catalyst.uw.edu/webq/survey/updykl/296276

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Paul R. Fleischman, M.D., trained in Psychiatry at The Yale School of Medicine, where he served as chief resident before going on to practice psychiatry for more than 30 years. He was honored by the American Psychiatric Association for his “unique contributions to the spiritual and humanistic aspects of psychiatry and medicine.” He is a Vipassana meditation teacher in the tradition of S.N. Goenka. In the recent past, he has lectured at Brown, Harvard, MIT, Tufts, NYU, and Columbia, as well as in many countries around the world. He is the author of books such as “Cultivating Inner Peace,” “Karma and Chaos,” and “Wonder: When and Why the World Appears Radiant.”