

Calm down, dear: the model meditation guru

The Duchess of Sussex credits Light Watkins with making her happier. So what's so special about his meditation method? [Bridget Harrison](#) signs up for a class

When the Duchess of Sussex — Meghan Markle at the time — was introduced to Light Watkins by a mutual friend in California a few years ago she wrote in her blog: “He was one of those people that has such a quiet confidence, a manner that makes you calm the F down. Every ounce of me had to wonder: ‘What is he on?’”

Watkins was a well-known meditation instructor. She took his course, reporting afterwards that the twice-daily meditation practice made her feel noticeably happier. “I can’t put my finger on the why or the how, but I will tell you this much, for me... I am just happier and meditation has much to do with that,” she wrote in her lifestyle blog, *The Tig*. She and the Duke of Sussex now meditate every day, the duke has recently said.

Watkins teaches mainly in Los Angeles and New York, but last week he was in London, spreading his

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“meditation made easy” message. Many people struggle with the idea of sitting still and feeling Zen, but Watkins believes that if it’s hard, you’re not doing it right, and that most forms of mindfulness are “bullshit”.

When I met him, it was not hard to see why the duchess also described Watkins as “illuminating”. He is distractingly handsome. He is 45, but could easily be a decade younger. It’s a Thursday night in central London and he stands 6ft 4in tall, barefoot, in a trendy grey jumper, jeans and jacket, greeting a group of mainly young professionals who have come to learn about his £750 meditation course, which will take place over the next four days. “I’m the guy who you go to see if you don’t believe in meditation,” he quips with a megawatt smile.

“Meditation has a huge image problem,” he adds. “Many think it’s all about sitting, desperately trying to empty a frazzled mind.” But when taught properly, he says, meditation is enjoyable and easy, and has a multitude of proven physical and psychological benefits (he



“I’m the guy people go to if they don’t believe in meditation”

quotes the Harvard Medical School professor Herbert Benson), from boosting the immune system to decreasing anxiety and aiding sleep.

Originally from Alabama, Watkins started out as an ab-crunching model living in New York, travelling the world and being booked for fashion campaigns for labels such as Gap. On one of his trips to the gym he spotted women filing into a yoga class, was intrigued and soon became hooked. He moved to LA, changed his name to Light (he says he prefers not to reveal his real name, “not because I’m embarrassed, I just don’t think it really matters what it was”) and began teaching yoga, which took him on the path to meditation.

“I was probably the stiffest yoga teacher in LA and it was something I was a little bit ashamed about,” he says. “Because I couldn’t demonstrate poses very well, I became very good at explaining things instead.”

Then, in 2003, a friend took him to a course on Vedic meditation run by one of its best-known teachers, Thom Knoles. “It was a revelation. I learnt that to meditate you don’t have to sit on the floor in an uncomfortable position,” Watkins had an epiphany. “It was like a drug, even though I’d never done drugs. It’s your first taste of this whole other world existing inside of you, and I realised there is no reason why

everybody shouldn’t have this experience.” Watkins became Knoles’s apprentice for four years, learning to teach with him in India, before starting out by himself in LA in 2007.

Since then Watkins has taught more than 2,500 people how to meditate. Many thousands more have taken his online courses. He has given a TED talk (debunking the myths about meditation), written two books, including *Bliss More: How to Succeed in Meditation Without Really Trying* (Ballantine, £18.99), and has become a go-to meditation teacher in LA. He has taught Hollywood actors, including Rosario Dawson, chief executives and athletes.

“If you make meditation your habit,” he says, “it can impact all the other habits you want to have — eating better, being a better communicator in your relationships, being more productive at work, sleeping better. But in order to get the benefits, you have to meditate every day. But if you don’t enjoy it, you are not going to keep it up.”

And for all of us who think they don’t have time to meditate? “If you say you’re too busy, what you are really saying is that you don’t have time to be there staring at the back of your eyelids. But if you know you can have a deeply restful experience, it goes from something you didn’t want to do for five minutes to something you can’t wait to do for 20 minutes.” And, he points out, how many of us can find 20 minutes a day to scroll through Instagram?

It’s the same message he had for Meghan when he first met her. As she put it when raving about meditation in her blog: “I told Light I didn’t have enough hours in the day to do it, and he told me that’s why I needed to meditate twice as much. Not gonna lie, I rolled my eyes thinking, ‘Oh give me a break, mystic man.’ But lo and behold, this mystical man was right.”

I sign up for the same course that Meghan took and arrive at a bright, intimate meeting space in Soho. Three other women are in the class: a plastic surgeon, a BBC radio journalist with young children, and a senior PR executive. We all want to sleep better, feel less angry and improve our quality of life.

An essential part of Vedic meditation is that practitioners have a private mantra — a simple, meaningless sound with Sanskrit enunciation decided on by your teacher that they repeat silently in their heads to settle the mind. After a brief introduction, Watkins takes each of us out of the room in turn to give us our personal mantra. Mine sounded a bit like the word “ding-dong”, but you are supposed to keep it to yourself. He tells me that I will need to think it slowly and quietly as I start each meditation, until my mind begins to wander off. There will be no prompts, no more instructions. We simply have to sit comfortably and silently for 20 minutes and let our mind go where it will.

Watkins is no fan of apps such as Headspace, which guide you through your meditation. “When someone is

The 15-minute de-stress

Before you start, don’t worry about your chattering mind
The way to overcome the “monkey-mind” syndrome might surprise you: instead of trying to control the mind, go the other way with it and embrace the thoughts, especially the negative ones. Try not to push them away; just bring yourself back to your happy thoughts or to noticing your breath. The more you practise this, the sooner you’ll discover that the key to settling the mind is to be completely indifferent to all of your thoughts.

You don’t have to sit completely motionless...
Sitting with your back relatively straight is fine. But if you have to move to stay comfortable during meditation, you won’t disturb the effects.

...or on the floor with your legs crossed
Likewise, sitting on the floor is uncomfortable for most people, so feel free to sit in a chair or even on a couch. If you prefer to sit on the floor, use as many cushions or pillows as you need to find comfort.



Close your eyes, off you go
Sit comfortably and place your phone next to you with a soft-sounding alarm set for 10-15 minutes. Shut your eyes and be aware of your breathing. You will more than likely get lost in random thoughts. Expect this to happen quite a bit, and when you remember that you are meditating, passively return to your breath. Repeat this cycle throughout the meditation, and once you hear your soft alarm, you’re done. Count down from ten and slowly open your eyes. You’ve just meditated.

Go for quantity over quality
No, that isn’t a typo. Practise being completely unconcerned about the quality of your meditations and instead strive for quantity. Meditate daily. What you’ll discover is that, eventually, the quality of your inner experiences will improve with the number of times you meditate.

Sometimes it’s the last thing you want to do, so give yourself a goal
Keep your aim small and achievable. Start with a goal of meditating at least once a day for at least 15 minutes for seven days in a row, and as you meet your objective, increase your time from there up to 20 minutes.

talking you through the experience, telling you what to think about, your mind will remain active, which is the opposite of what you want.”

He’s equally scornful of the term “mindfulness”. Most of it is “bull” he says, describing it as a marketing term with no real meaning. “True mindfulness is a state, not a practice,” he points out. And while he concedes that the idea of mindfully cooking or eating a strawberry is a nice one, you are still active. “I don’t feel that exempts you from also needing to sit in eyes-closed silence — with no prompts, no cues.”

Watkins doesn’t believe you can forcibly quieten your mind. “Think of your thoughts as guests at your birthday party who all want to come up to talk to you. If you focus on trying to beat them away, it will make your mind even busier.

“If you practise regularly you should start to sleep better, feel more patient, make better decisions

Instead you should welcome them with an attitude of nonchalance.” Gradually, he says, with the help of the mantra, your mind will become less focused and meander to a quieter place.

To my surprise, this approach makes it much easier to meditate when I, Watkins and the other students sit silently together for 20 minutes. We do this several times during the course and each time I tell Watkins I am fairly sure I just fell asleep. This is fine with him. There is no “meditation goal”, he says. The only thing he requires is that we must do this daily: morning and afternoon. I try to seek out quiet places where I can meditate during the day, but really anywhere that you can safely close your eyes is OK. “You’re learning how to rest your mind and body any place, anywhere,” he says.

Despite his success, there are no signs that Watkins is trying to build an empire. Last year he gave up his two-bedroom apartment in Santa Monica to see what it is like to live a more nomadic life. He uses Airbnb, stays with friends or family. The downside, he admits, is that it has meant relationships are hard with no real base. He is single, but says he would like a family one day.

“Meditation is about helping you rise above the noise to listen to your small, still voice inside that will always know what is best for you.” And that is the way to tell meditation is working for you, he tells me during my last session. “It is not what you achieve in those 20 minutes with your eyes closed, but how you feel in the other 23 hours and 40 minutes of your day. You should start to sleep better, feel more patient, make better decisions.”

Is he popping into Kensington Palace while in London? He won’t say. But all his pupils, including the Duchess of Sussex, have his email address and number in case they need his help.

It has only been a few days since I attended his course, but I can report that I have managed to meditate twice every day — and enjoy it — which I consider to be a small miracle. I have been sleeping well and have felt noticeably less angry with my children and husband. How long can I keep it up? It’s too soon to know. Would I have felt so inspired had the course been headed by a wizened old hippy-type in baggy yoga pants? Probably not.

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Above: Light Watkins. Right: Rosario Dawson and the Duchess of Sussex

