

Meditative Story Transcript – Aasif Mandvi

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I still hope to find some way to heal myself of my chronic condition. But as my brain begins to cope with the ringing, I begin to become aware of an underlying truth about my life: I am more vulnerable than I think I am. I am less in control than I think I am. I’m more lonely than I like to pretend.

GUNATILLAKE: Born in India and raised in England, actor, comedian, Aasif Mandvi has given us so many laughs in his role as a correspondent on *The Daily Show*. Many of you will also know him from his lead role on the television series *Evil*. Aasif is a great storyteller, and when you’re next at the bookstore or shopping online for something to read, pick up his collection of humorous and personal stories called *No Land’s Man*.

In today’s Meditative Story, Aasif shares a delightful, relatable story about falling in love that starts with a ringing in his ear. That’s right. Keep listening. All will reveal itself.

In this series, we combine immersive first-person stories and breathtaking music with the science-backed benefits of mindfulness practice. From WaitWhat and Thrive Global, this is Meditative Story. I’m Rohan, and I’ll be your guide.

The body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

MANDVI: One summer, a new friend invites me to join them at a house in the Hamptons, a ritzy seaside community a few hours outside of New York City. I accept.

I head out of the city and meet them at this spacious five-bedroom home. Except for my new friend, the others in the house are all strangers to me. The house itself is quiet – it’s not by the ocean, and it’s not by the road. I’m not used to this. I’m used to the noise of the city. I’m used to hearing the traffic: Cars honking. The thrum of strangers talking over each other. Whooshes of stale air as subways come and go. But out here in the Hamptons, once night falls, and everyone else goes to sleep, it’s quiet. Still. Silent.

My bedroom is modern, posh, and minimal. The bed has white sheets and white pillows. I switch on the white lamp on the matching white side table. I stroll across the pale, blond wood floors to look out the window. It's dark outside. So dark – all I see is my own reflection mirrored back.

My life is going great. Just great. I've been a working actor for two decades now but recently I've found the kind of success that I only ever dreamed of. I'm a correspondent on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. I make good money. Movie roles are being offered to me. People recognize me walking down the street. I'm also single, and meeting women who would have never spoken to me 10 years ago.

My life is mostly about my career. That's just what it takes to make it as a brown guy in show business. And now it's all finally paying off.

I sit down on the bed. I turn off the bedside lamp and in the darkness, I hear it for the first time. A high-pitched sound. Like electrical wires. What is that? I sit up and switch on the light. I look out the window. Nothing. I walk out into the hallway, it follows me. I walk into the bathroom, it follows. The sound, I quickly realize, is in my right ear. I reach my finger inside to block my ear, but that only makes it worse. Nothing works.

In this silent, sparse room, there's nowhere to go to distract myself. I walk around the room, not knowing what to do. I can't escape this sound, and I dare not make a noise in this quiet house where everyone is asleep.

What am I going to do about this sound in my head? I breathe, deeply, to calm myself. Finally I think to reach for my phone and put on some white noise. It helps. I can't tell if it's the white noise or exhaustion, but I finally fall asleep.

GUNATILLAKE: Let's enjoy the relief here. Aasif, finally asleep after all the turbulence, thanks to white noise. Let your shoulders be soft. Your hands. Let go of any noise in your head. We'll just take this moment.

MANDVI: After my trip to the Hamptons, I sit in a cold, sterile Ear, Nose, and Throat specialist's office. I've been sent here by my last ENT, a young attractive, vivacious doctor who I found myself flirting with until the day she looked in my ear and said, "It looks like your canal is closing, I don't know, I've never seen it before. Not the thing you want to hear from your doctor."

She does a minor surgery. It causes scar tissue that leads to hearing loss which leads to, you guessed it, tinnitus.

This new doctor is cold and sterile. He tells me, "You have a chronic condition. We can open up your ear canal, but it will keep closing down."

I say, "But the tinnitus will eventually stop right?"

"No. Probably not. 'Fraid you're stuck with that."

I stammer: "What do you mean, stuck with it?"

"Exactly what I said. You'll get used to it. It's fine." How can he be so dismissive?

"Doctor, what do I do about restaurants and bars and loud places? It's really hard because the ringing gets even worse."

And with an irritation in his tone, he answers: "Well, don't go into loud places then."

I walk the streets.

Is this the end of my career?! I'm an actor. I'm a comedian. I make a living performing in loud venues. Going to parties and hobnobbing is part of my job. For my work on *The Daily Show*, I need to be able to actually hear the people I'm interviewing. I live in New York City, I'm always in loud restaurants and bars.

Western medicine has no answers for me. So I begin my own search for the cure. I try anything that anyone suggests that might possibly make things better.

I cut vinegar out of my diet completely. I stop eating mushrooms, or anything fungal. I eliminate gluten. I go to chiropractors and osteopaths. I get so much acupuncture I look like Pinhead. I fly to Denver in the dead of winter to visit a healer to unpack traumas that may be hidden in my body. I send a lock of my hair to a guy in Toronto who uses my genetic code to custom-make pills that I have to take 4–5 times a day in order to heal my ears. None of the miracle cures work.

Part of what makes this condition, this ringing and the hearing loss so hard, is that it's invisible. If you break your leg, people look at you and see you have a broken leg. But this isn't a broken leg. It's all happening inside my head. It's completely lonely. Standing in a crowded room, I seem fine except that I'm having a totally different experience from everyone else.

I used to relish having it be all about myself: my career, my own space, my own momentum. But now I'm trapped inside my own head, obsessed with the noise that won't let me have a moment of peace.

I show up at gallery openings or events to meet friends and realize, "This is too noisy for me, I can't actually go in." How did I suddenly become this old guy who can't hang with people?

The ringing is all-consuming all of the time. Until, eventually ... it's not.

After some time, it slowly begins to recede into the background. My brain adjusts to its presence. It's a part of me. My brain starts to go, "Oh, okay, this thing that I was afraid of, I'm not as afraid of anymore."

I still hope to find some way to heal myself of my chronic condition. But as my brain begins to cope with the ringing, I begin to become aware of an underlying truth about my life: I am more vulnerable than I think I am. I am less in control than I think I am. I'm more lonely than I like to pretend.

Two years later, the doors open onto a packed Christmas party in a loft on the Lower East Side in Manhattan.

I look over at Shaifali standing next to me. We're friends; at least that's what we tell each other. She's nothing like the women I date. She's so chatty. Before her, I'd never met anyone chattier than me. It leads to long late-night conversations. She's beautiful, and interesting, and really smart. We both feel a connection, but is it more? It's been a few months since we've met and neither of us has taken the risk to find out.

It's the kind of party that I already know I'm too old for. There are beer stains on the floor and paper cups stacked up by the pillars. That's right, there are pillars. I can tell Shafali's thinking what I'm thinking: We won't be staying here too long.

When I come back from getting us drinks, I see that she's smiling up at some other guy. He's giving her his number. She takes it!

I think to myself, "Oh, I guess to her I'm just this guy that she knows. She's getting numbers, she's out there in the world. She's not waiting around for me."

And I realize that I can either turn back inside my own head, and let this person slip away – or I can take a chance.

And I ask, "Who was that?" She says it was just some guy she was talking to.

"But you took his number?" She looks up at me. "Yeah. What do you care?"

She knows, but she's going to make me say it. "I'm a little bit jealous," I tell her.

And when I say that, the energy shifts. Suddenly, for the first time ever, we're kissing in this crowded party with beer stains and paper cups. We go upstairs to get our coats so we can get out of here.

The hosts have thrown everybody's coats into a bedroom, and when we open the door, there are just coats everywhere. There must be 100 coats! On the bed, on the floor, everywhere.

We dig and dig and find our coats, pick them up, and ... we're kissing again.

And we start to lose our balance. And I think, "Oh god, oh god, we're gonna fall over. Don't let her hit her head! Oh my god do not let her hit her head." We crash to the ground with a huge thud.

Seconds later, five people burst into the room to see if we're okay. Shaifali and I are on the floor, laughing in a sea of coats. Her head's fine, but it must have sounded like this crazy loud bang downstairs. We didn't hear it.

The woman I fell into a pile of coats with is the woman I marry.

One night when we were first dating, Shaifali tells me about her dream to go to Italy and sit in a restaurant in Tuscany and eat pasta. She has this *Lady and the Tramp* fantasy, where she's splitting a plate of house-made linguini with the man of her dreams.

"I don't eat gluten," I say casually. It's a holdover from my years of trying every diet under the sun to heal my ears.

"You don't eat gluten? What? How can I be with a man who doesn't eat pasta?" she says, very seriously.

"I'll order chicken," I say.

But her dream is to go to Italy and eat pasta. And I don't fit that. We start fighting about it, literally about how things could possibly work between us. Until I finally take a step back, and I realize, you know, we have no plans to go to Italy. No one's bought a ticket. We're home in our apartment, in New York. This fight is just a fear of something that might happen, and that might look different than we think it should.

And because this is a fight about imaginary pasta ... we both start laughing. We have this saying now in our marriage, "pasta in Italy." It means we're fighting over something that isn't real. It means we have chosen to go down a rabbit hole based on something we have created in our heads.

I'm terrified of getting married. Needing someone or having someone need me feels like a trap. Shaifali and I love each other, but we're also very different, but these differences have opened me up to a new depth of experience. Exploring and challenging the parts of myself that were shut off to me.

On some level, the same is true with my tinnitus. It's still here. It's still hard. My chronic condition is still there, but it reminds me every day how much stronger and bigger and more resilient I am than the things that I fear.

GUNATILLAKE: When faced with the difficult, we can either turn away or move towards it. Both can be the right thing to do. Let's do what Aasif does. Let your mind rest with hearing all sounds that are being received, wherever you are. And open out to them, letting them be here. Breathing with them.

MANDVI: Our son Ishan is born in March. New York City is just beginning to shut down from Covid. It's quieter outside on the streets now, with less people out. Still, some ambient noise trickles into the darkened corner of my son's bedroom in our apartment. I sit on a rocking chair, Ishan lays on my chest. It's taken me 54 years to get here.

I sing him to sleep. I cradle his head, mindful to protect it – a little like I did for his mother, as we fell into a pile of coats together at a Christmas party years ago. I'm so focused on getting Ishan to sleep that the city sounds barely reach me. The ringing in my ears has taken a back seat over the years, still there, still a nuisance, but I look around at the life I have created, and I look down at the life I have created, and it is bigger than the sound in my head.

I sing Elton John's "Your Song" as I rock back and forth gently, and watch Ishan's eyelids grow heavier and heavier.

It's a little bit funny, this feeling inside...

I sing him the same song every night.

Ishan doesn't know that I never thought I'd be here, holding him. He doesn't know about the noise of the city outside, or the ringing in my ears. He doesn't need to know anything about any of this yet. He only needs to hear me singing to him, so he can fall asleep.

I'm still me. I still battle what I battle.

So here I am, I'm exhausted, it's 3 AM. There is a pandemic raging in the world, and uncertainty everywhere, but I have this baby napping on my chest, and I have this wife, the pasta lover, trying to catch some sleep in the room next door.

GUNATILLAKE: Thank you, Aasif. In just a moment, I'll guide you through a closing meditation.

For me, the theme that struck me most from Aasif's story was of letting go. Letting go of the tension around his tinnitus and letting go of the need to be the center of the universe. And more besides.

The idea of letting go is a bit of a meditation cliché but for good reason. It is a real rabbit hole, and the more you understand what letting go means and how it works, the more you fall in love with it. So for our meditation together, we're going to play a little letting-go game.

And it's based on the idea that we as humans tend to pay more attention to the worrying and the stressful, compared to the pleasant and the positive. Not sure if you've noticed.

And while there are parts of life when that can be useful, it's not especially useful when we're trying to get to relax and be stable. So let's try out a special technique which changes that around, and emphasizes the positive over the negative. Encouraging us to move into the next part of our day, open and lifted.

But before we get into the technique itself, let's just start by settling in. Letting where you're standing or sitting or lying down support you. Letting it take your weight. The ground, the chair, the bed, whatever, doing all the work so you don't have to do anything. Feeling the weight of the clothes on your body. Enjoying the warmth. And allowing your body to relax and soften into it.

Safe. Protected. Here

And the technique we're going to use here is called "noting the positive," and noting everything else, release. That means that we're looking out for any positive or pleasant sensations and thoughts. Such as warmth in the body. A feeling of calm. Or a kind thought.

And when we notice something positive or pleasant, we make a silent note to ourselves. A one-word label that approximately describes it. Whatever word makes sense in the moment. There are no wrong answers: Warmth. Calm. Kindness. Softness.

Silently saying to ourselves a single word that simply represents the pleasant parts of our experience that we're aware of: Relaxation. Fuzziness. Quiet. Breath.

Whatever the pleasant or gentle sensation is, however quiet, just giving it a name. And when you notice something that could be called negative or difficult, instead of naming it with any particular detail, just noting the one word: Release.

Whatever it is, difficult physical sensations, or thoughts, or patterns of thoughts. Not getting tangled up with the details but just noting: Release.

Release. Release. Release.

Naming the positive or the neutral. And letting everything else just be noted as release.

The big idea of this meditation is that we're tuning our mind more into positive experience and just leaving the other stuff alone.

Letting it go. Letting it release.

And because positive experience is naturally relaxing, it sets us up for what comes next with lightness and joy.

Thank you, Aasif. And thank you.