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WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS

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TEDX PRACTICE SCRIPT · TEDXGARY

The Power of Intentional Focus

The mahout's chain, an undiagnosed childhood, and the breathing practice that became a career.

By **Ravi R. Iyer, MD**



From the talk at TEDxGary. Retained as part of the record of how the talk was presented.

WHAT THIS ENTRY IS

The author's first TEDx talk delivered on a main stage, and the most-viewed work in this Record. Published on the official TEDx Talks channel, where it stood at **4,482,937 views** when read on 23 November 2026, credited there as "Dr. Ravi Iyer". The author records it as the most-viewed TEDx talk released in 2024. It climbed to that position: the speaker biography published by TEDxHandley Blvd Women in March 2025, four months after this talk, places it third most globally viewed of 2024, which is what it was then. Both figures are entered in the Record, each against the date it was true. Two later entries rest on it: the TEDxHandleyBlvd talk of 14 March 2025 (AR-2025-03-001) is an account of how this talk was propagated through the community of speakers who shared the TEDxGary stage, and the TEDxUMKC talk of 1 February 2025 (AR-2025-02-001) opens by referring to it as the first time its author spoke to the world at a TEDx event.

Have you seen an elephant? Not in a circus or a zoo, but up close, right next to you like this. I grew up in India and every morning, I'd sit at a roadside stall on a narrow lane pretty much like this one, eating a hot breakfast, and watch the elephant keepers, or mahouts as we called them, walk the temple elephants down the street on their way to the Ganges river for their bath.

The elephants were beautiful and majestic as they walked, lumbering down the street ears flapping, trunks swaying.

Those trunks ... Oh! Boy! The elephant's trunks would wander everywhere grabbing coconuts and fruit from roadside stalls, creating mischief of all sorts.

To prevent this the mahout employed an ancient time-honored strategy. They would give the elephant a chain to hold in its trunk and holding this would prevent the trunk from wandering after other things.

Watching this, I was able to immediately relate the wandering elephant trunk to my personal problem that had haunted me from birth.... my struggle with undiagnosed ADHD with its wandering unfocused thoughts. My problem had no name at that time. Nobody in my culture knew what it was. Though medical reports of individuals with abnormal degrees of inattention, distractibility and overactivity have existed since 1775, still it would be 1998, nearly 40 years after my birth, that concepts like neurodiversity and the recognition that nearly 20% of the global population is neurodiverse would become commonly accepted. The people around me just believed I was distracted, playful, or worse... that I was lazy. After all, my report cards ended with comments like... "Ravi has tremendous potential, he is brilliant, but he needs to focus more.

The idea of focus fascinated and frustrated me. "What is this thing called focus?", I wondered. What does focus look like? How does one do it? But no one was able to teach me what they meant by focus or how to achieve it.

This problem of mine was not trivial.

Looking back, I cannot begin to describe the pain, helplessness, frustration, and humiliation I felt during this phase of my life when I was constantly reminded of how I was failing the expectations of those around me. My inability to focus resulted in a disastrous performance in college that cost me my ability to get admission into one of the premier medical institutions, of India, even after qualifying in the selection examinations.

In Indian culture, like many societies with rigid familial structures and patriarchal hierarchies, the pressure for high academic performance, the pressure to not lose face and disgrace your family, and the constant push for family approval and conforming to social standards and values is intense. Each year thousands of students commit suicide in India after failing an academic exam.

In my case, as a 17-year-old teenager, the hurt and blow to my self-esteem was immense.

Imprisoned by judgment and diminished by comparison, but without the nourishing space of understanding, empathy, and mentorship, I lost my laughter. I became quiet, withdrawn, and isolated from family and peers.

I languished for a year in a local community college before I managed to get admission into a small little-known state medical school but my lonely struggle with focus was not over.

Then fate took a hand at that roadside stall in the form of the mahouts and the Elephant and its chain. Looking at the massive animal I wondered, what if I could find a similar kind of internal chain for my mind .... Something that would anchor me to my grounding idea of being a physician and harness the unfocused thoughts of my ADHD brain.

The idea of finally breaking free of my unfocused thoughts possessed my mind. I began to feverishly research literature for methods and practices on mental concentration that could help me.

I found an English translation of a 5000-year-old Sanskrit text,, and began to study the methods described in it. I was looking for something I could do by myself, anywhere at any time.

I found an ancient yoga breathing exercise of passively observing the flow of my breathing and began practicing this technique as my chain of focus while engaging in my everyday work. Over time I noticed that the storm of narratives of my ADHD mind began to settle somewhat.

Today we have multiple established medications, skilled counseling, and comprehensive therapies for ADHD, but I had none of those growing up in India. Just my secret solitary practice of focusing through attention on breathing.

My moments of clarity were initially brief but with practice, they began to extend for longer periods until eventually, I found myself functioning in a zone of intensely focused attention that I could direct at will to whatever task I was engaged in without becoming distracted.

Psychologists have long recognized this phenomenon as a flow state well documented among athletes and musicians, and I had arrived at the same zone of focused performance through my method of focus. The impact of my ability to focus for extended periods on tasks without distraction immediately began to yield direct benefits in my personal life, in my professional career, and in my ability to contribute to my community. First and foremost my perception of life shifted. I found that we all live our lives as narratives created by our minds from the raw material of our experiences.

I realized that my sensory experience was related to the physical interactions of my senses with my environment. The photons and molecules of the world around me that, interact with my sense organs and allow me to be aware of the colors of a butterfly or the touch of it landing upon my finger. The vibrant beat of sound as molecules of wind strike my eardrum, the delicious taste of ice cream on my taste buds or the fragrance of a flower drifting into my nose. On the other hand, the stories that I considered as real were only so many constructs of name form, context, interpretation, and meaning created by my mind out of past impressions superimposed upon my sensory experience and if I remained attentive to the physical experience, I could choose which narrative was aligned with the immediate goals of my life. I could then give power to my chosen narrative with the light of my attention. I found that the ability to remain anchored to experience allowed me to be open to life and its possibilities.

These benefits quickly allowed me to advance in my career and I moved to the premier All India Institute of Medical Sciences and then onwards to join Harvard Medical School as a physician, scientist, and research fellow. More importantly, the simplicity of the elephant and its chain of focus became the cornerstone of my medical practice and a way for me to help even my most ill patients.

I have a clear memory from my residency days at GWUMC in 1993, of sitting beside a dying HIV patient who was very near the end and engulfed in fear. It was during the HIV epidemic and his disease had progressed to such a point that nothing could be done for him. In those days of social stigma, there was no form of religious comfort available for him personally in his last moments. I saw firsthand how the method of focus allowed him to gain something more vital than a cure-- a sense of peace, acceptance, and empowerment that transcended fear.

His situation revealed to me that disease, should be seen as essentially a state of disempowerment, and I saw that the core service of what we do as physicians was to empower people to transcend the circumstances of disease.

Decades later, we used the same strategy in my medical clinic during the COVID pandemic. Having learned to manage our focus, we were able to think clearly and rationally amid all the fear and confusion.

The philosophy of the elephant and its chain of focus allowed my staff and patients— to think outside the box of the immediate circumstances and focus not on the fear of death but on the potential of the present moment.

Our clinic became a sanctuary of hope and safety, focused on a grounding narrative of empowerment and human connection, that directly counteracted the fear and disconnection that was fracturing our community.

We created a space where the people who came into our presence were able to experience their fear without getting trapped in a disempowering narrative.

Our experience repeatedly affirmed this truth for us:

Disease, like Adversity, should be seen as a state of disempowerment and what we can do for each other and ourselves through the method of focus is to empower.

The method of a chain of focus is therefore more than just a technique or a strategy. Whether it's an uncontrolled elephant's trunk wreaking havoc on the streets of India, a mind lost in the whirlwind of ADHD, or a community spinning in the chaos of division and despair, the need for focus has never been greater.

The philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset says it well when he states, “we live at a time when man believes himself fabulously capable of creation, but he does not know what to create. Lord of all things, he is not lord of himself.”

The problem of the lack of focus is not simply one that affects people with ADHD. Today we are inundated by continuous stimulation and distractions that threaten our ability to productively conduct our lives. Everything in our experience perpetuates a lack of focus through the intentional design. Whether it is social media, or apps, or phones, our world pushes towards a lack of focus in every moment of our daily lives. The advent of AI and other technologies of machine intelligence is only going to make this challenge ever more urgent. In such a world, the balancing countermeasure of focus allows us to manage both our genetic predispositions as well as the environmental effects that impel us toward loss of focus.

So, as we navigate through life,

I bring you the wisdom of the mahouts of India and their glorious, majestic elephants and suggest that the power of finding your inner chain of focused attention may hold the key to solving some of the biggest problems that face us as individuals and as humanity.

The solution is simple, available to each of us without restriction, and requires only the commitment of discipline to its practice.

Each of us will have to find the chain of focus best suited for our temperament … mine was attention to my breathing, you will have to discover the target that resonates best with your personality. We have to find the grounding idea that is most aligned with our goals… I chose empowerment as my idea of my core service… yours will be the idea most aligned with your unique gifts. But by harnessing the power of focused attention into everyday practice and linking it to our grounding idea we can set ourselves free to live a life of intention, and purpose, rewrite our narratives, transcend our fears, and shape a life experience that reflects the full potential of our being.

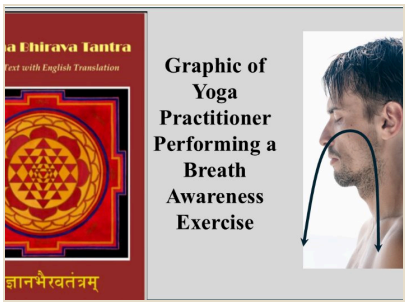
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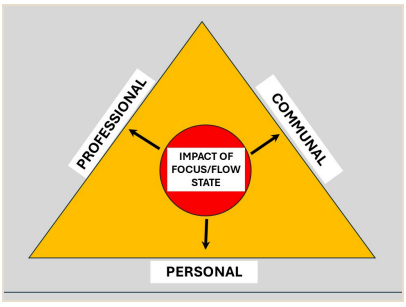
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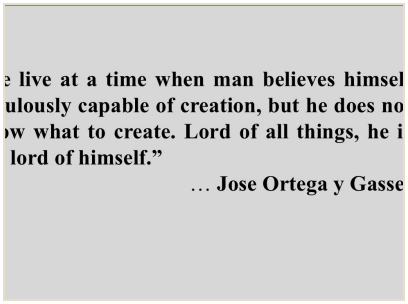




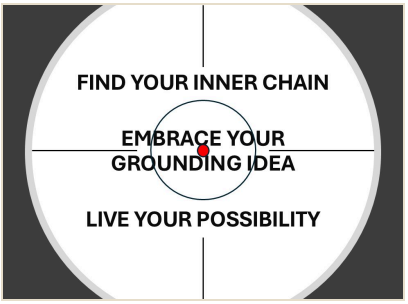












SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY, AS PUBLISHED BY THE EVENT

Dr. Ravi Iyer · Chief Medical Physician

Ravi R Iyer (Eye-yer), MD was raised in Jamshedpur, India and had his formative education at Little Flower School. He is a Harvard-trained physician-scientist, inventor, author, short film actor, transdisciplinary polymath and entrepreneur with research publications in the mechanisms of gene controls and several patents on human and veterinary medicines and devices, Dr Iyer's professional accomplishments include over 41 years of experience spanning the fields of science, medicine, biochemistry, molecular biology, and pharmaceuticals, a 9-year Directorship of a Hospice caring for dying patients, and a 4-year Chairmanship of a 225-bed hospital. His contributions have been recognized worldwide by organizations such as Marqui's Who's Who in America and Who's Who in TOP Doctors of America.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ravi R. Iyer, MD is a physician-scientist, entrepreneur, author and five-time TEDx speaker who has spent four decades exploring a deceptively simple question: what makes human beings, and the organizations they create, perform at their best? A Harvard-trained physician, corporate strategist and the founder of multiple healthcare and performance ventures, he is the creator of Neuroalignment, a framework for building high-performance organizations around the realities of human cognitive diversity. His work sits at the intersection of biology, leadership, technology and human behavior.

THE AKAASHIK RECORD

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