

Meditation – Introduction, Theory and Practice

Progress towards meditation and meditative techniques has several benefits: Here is a basic list to start with:

Health Benefits of Meditation

Meditation lowers oxygen consumption.

Decreases respiratory rate.

Increases blood flow and slows the heart rate.

Increases exercise tolerance in heart patients.

Leads to a deeper level of relaxation.

Lowers blood pressure

Reduces anxiety attacks by lowering the levels of blood lactate.

Decreases muscle tension (any pain due to tension) and headaches.

Builds self-confidence.

It increases serotonin production which influences mood and behavior. (Low levels of serotonin are associated with depression, obesity, insomnia and headaches.)

Helps in chronic diseases like allergies , arthritis etc.

Reduces Pre- menstrual Syndrome.

Helps in post-operative healing.

Enhances the immune system. Research has revealed that meditation increases activity of ‘natural-killer cells’, which kill bacteria and cancer cells.

Also reduces activity of viruses and emotional distress.

Meditation and Stress

Meditation has been proved scientifically to combat stress and stress-related disorders like high blood pressure, insomnia and heart diseases.

Why are we stressed most of the times ?

Normally, any life threatening situation triggers the STRESS RESPONSE. This response enables a person to act quickly and survive intense, short- term challenges, which require less brain activity and fast reflexes. This is possibly the survival response inherited from our pre-civilization days.

But today the same response is triggered in traffic jams, work related irritations, family squabbles and many such situations- meaning that with any petty problem, our body ends up preparing for a

life-death situation. And then as these situations don't come to an end, with a single confrontation, we remain in a perpetual state of stress.

What happens to our body during stress ?

During stress, the heart beats faster and blood pressure rises. The blood flow is diverted from the internal organs to the muscles as well as the areas of the brain that control muscle coordination. As a result, the brain releases chemicals that help the body cope better with injuries, including those that block pain and help the blood clot faster. All these symptoms lead to the feeling of being run down, tired and basically stressed.

How meditation beats stress ?

Meditation comes to the rescue in such a situation and induces 'RELAXATION RESPONSE'. Dr Benson (used to work at Harvard Medical School, did a research of physiological effects of meditation) found that there was a counter-balancing mechanism to the fight-or-flight response in most stress-inducing situations. As stress is induced by stimulation of the- hypothalamus of the brain, relaxation can be achieved by countering this stimulation - by stimulating other areas of the brain. This is achieved by practicing meditation, which leads to state of deep rest.

MEDITATION

Source: Charles MacInerney who has given permission for davannayoga to use this in our training manual

Everything you experience, see, hear, touch, smell, taste, think, anticipate, remember, every emotion you feel, everything you have or will ever experience, is experienced in your mind. Meditation is a discipline that teaches one how to control consciousness, rather than be controlled by it. Meditation teaches you how to control how you experience the world. There are numerous accounts of people in the worst of circumstances who are filled with awe and wonder and gratitude for the amazing gift of life. Conversely, one need not look far to find a millionaire who has mastered the physical universe, but is a slave to the whims of his or her own mind, and is miserable in the midst of external wealth.

If love, joy, happiness, bliss, anger, depression, hate and fear are all internal experiences of the mind, which does it make more sense to learn how to control, the external material world, or the internal world of your mind? Both are important, but if I had to choose, I would choose to be hungry and happy over being sated and miserable!

Some people object to the idea of controlling consciousness. These are usually people who have little control of their own mind, and are blinded by their own ignorance. Would you advocate that the owner of a computer should never attempt to learn how to control the software, that they should spend their lives pushing buttons at random and being amazed and surprised by what happens on the screen? Of course not. Would you advocate that the owner of a car should not learn the difference between the accelerator and the brake pedal, or that turning the steering wheel

counterclockwise turns the car left? Who do you think enjoys playing the piano most, the person who knows how to play it well, or the person who bangs on the keys randomly making noise? Such objections may arise from a belief that the more you know about something, the less there is to know, and the more boring and predictable your world becomes. The opposite is actually true. The more math you learn, the more you realize there is to know and the more magical and mystical the field appears to you. The more you know about music, the more you want to know.

Those who have begun to master their minds, are like a teenager who has learned to drive a car... the whole universe awaits their explorations.

Perhaps people's adverse reaction to the idea of controlling consciousness arises from the word control itself. Control has negative connotations for some people. The pianist never truly 'masters' the piano. There is always room for improvement. In fact, the better you are at an activity, the more room for growth and improvement you find. As you get better, your relationship to the activity gets more complicated, more elaborate, more exciting, more dynamic, more intricate... you evolve towards perfection.

The same is true of meditation's effect on the mind. The better you get, the more complex and mysterious your mind becomes, expanding gradually toward God or the universal consciousness, or oneness, or illumination, or infinite complexity, or whatever your belief system ascribes as the goal of your life.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

There are many different forms and styles of meditation. Here I will introduce you to a wide variety of styles, although by no means all of them. There are countless variations which I will not mention because I do not feel qualified to write about them. There are others that need supervision and should not be learned from a book.

To better understand meditation, consider the following analogy. Imagine a light bulb shining on an object. Now imagine that you have placed a lens between the light bulb and the object which concentrates the light on the object. Different lenses would concentrate varying amounts of light on the object. Now imagine that you also place a colored filter between the lens and the object, which allows you to also control the color of the light as well as its intensity. This filter can be replaced with any other color. Now imagine that the light bulb, the concentrating lens, and the filter are mounted on a board so that you can choose where to point it, and so select different objects as the target for your colored light. Using this analogy, the light bulb is your awareness and the lens is your capacity to concentrate, and the filter is comprised of one or more of your 5 senses. The light bulb always remains the same, but the intensity of the focus, the color of the filter, and the choice of targets can vary. So it is with meditation.

Each of the following styles of meditation have something in common: they concentrate your awareness on a target.

This target can be external to the mind, in which case it is experienced through one or more of your senses (auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory or kinesthetic). Examples of good external targets include bodily functions such as breathing, walking, eating, and sex, which can all be experienced through

one or more of the senses. Targets can be external to the body as well, like looking at a candle flame or a rose, or listening to a symphony.

The target can also be an internal experience of the mind. Any experience of the external world can also be re-experienced with the imaginary versions of any of the senses, for example visualizing the image of a rose with your eyes closed, rather than looking at a real rose, or hearing a sound in your mind rather than through your ears. Other internal experiences that lend themselves to being good targets of meditation include emotions, memories, concepts, silence, or even the flow of your own internal dialog.

Let us look at a specific example of a good target for meditation - Breathing. The breath can be experienced through the kinesthetic senses by feeling the rise and fall of the diaphragm and chest. The breath can also be experienced through the filter of the auditory senses, by listening to the sound of your breathing. The breath can also be experienced through the tactile senses by feeling the flow of air through the nostrils. You can practice meditating on your breath through one, or any combination of these filters.

In an eating meditation you experience food first with your imagination. Then with your eyes. Then with your touch. Then by smelling, tasting, chewing, swallowing, and finally meditating on the memory of the experience.

It is not important for you to learn and master every technique described in a book, nor is it even desirable. Instead you should search through books sampling the different styles until you find one that works for you. It is far better to perfect one or two styles of meditation than to be proficient at many. If you find that a meditation style no longer meets your needs then return to a book for guidance and search for a different exercise that you can continue to grow into, perhaps even returning to one that you tried and abandoned previously. Or work with a realized Master.

It is also important not to hide behind the expertise of a book, but to feel confident to launch out on your own, varying, combining and even abandoning these techniques. I had one student who was embarrassed because she kept drifting away from the techniques she was learning and each time had to force herself to come back to the exercise. When prompted about what was distracting her from the Mantric Meditation, she described seeing and moving towards a pure, bright white light, and a sensation of melting into it. She was proud to have been able to pull away from the lure of the light in order to return her attention to the mantra. Some people meditate for years waiting for just such an experience! The techniques are just tools. Do not confuse a technique with the goal of meditation. Do not reject the experience in favor of the exercise. The techniques serve as a wedge to open the door to a different state of consciousness. In such an event it is up to you to seize the opportunity to step through the door and explore what you find, not to hide behind the wedge that has opened that door.

“Meditation is one of the greatest arts in life - perhaps the greatest, and one cannot possibly learn it from anybody. That is the beauty of it. It has no technique and therefore no authority. When you learn about yourself, watch yourself, watch the way you walk, how you eat, what you say, the gossip, the hate, the jealousy - if you are aware of all that in yourself without any choice, that is part of meditation.”

So meditation can take place when you are sitting in a bus or walking in the woods full of light and shadows, or listening to the singing of birds or looking at the face of your wife or child.”

J. Krishnamurti - Meditations

WHO SHOULD PRACTICE MEDITATION?

Everyone should include meditation as part of their daily routine, along with brushing their teeth and washing their hair. How absurd to spend an hour or more a day feeding, exercising, washing and cleaning our bodies, and neglect doing the same for our minds. Life is experienced by your mind, in your mind. Although the tree may be growing in the middle of a field, your experience of seeing the tree, hearing the rustle of the leaves, smelling the flowers, touching the bark, all of these experiences take place in you mind! A crowded chaotic mind can neither notice nor appreciate the subtleties of the universe. A well-kept clean and quiet mind can accept and hold the image of reality in its purest form.

Imagine looking at the reflection of a glacier covered mountain range reflected in the silvery silent surface of a lake. Now imagine 50 people on jet skis, and motor boats racing up and down the lake, while around you people throw rocks and boulders into the water causing a chaotic churning of the water. Further imagine a layer of motor oil, fallen leaves, and trash scattered over the surface of the water. Clearly the image of the mountains would be lost, or at best vaguely comprehended, and only partially appreciated. The mountains are still there and just as beautiful, but their reflection in the lake is lost. So it is with your mind. Only a silent mind can capture and hold the vibrations of the universe. In such a mind, the sound of a bird is bliss. Meditation improves your capacity to experience and appreciate the universe. It also lowers blood pressure, reduces stress and anxiety, and much, much more.

WHO CAN PRACTICE?

Generally speaking, meditation is considered to be safe for most people to learn with or without supervision. Even if the practitioner is doing the techniques poorly or flat out wrong, it is not as hazardous as doing physical exercises wrong, and usually even poor meditation leads with practice to continued improvement.

If you find one that works well for you, you need go no further, unless you want to explore other styles. It is not important to learn every style of meditation. What is important is to find one you like and work on perfecting that one meditation.

Do, or do not... there is no try!

Yoda - from the movie “Star Wars”