

What, Me Meditate?

by Joan Borysenko, Ph.D.

In terms of strategies for managing the mind, meditation is like doing mental push-ups that strengthen the muscles of awareness and choice. While it's not a practice that most people are willing to adopt for life, even several weeks of meditation can help train your mind and change your attitudes. If you should decide to keep it up, the benefits for the body are just as positive. The majority of regular meditators, however, are most interested in the soul. In virtually every religious tradition, meditation is practiced as a way to reach divine union.

However, you don't have to be religious to meditate. One of my mentors and former colleagues, Harvard cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson, realized in the 1960s that any repetitive mental activity that shuts down the mind's busy chatter elicits a physiological shift to peace. He called this the relaxation response. It is the body's natural balance to the fight-or-flight, or stress, response. Research on the relaxation response proves that even ten minutes a day can strengthen your immune system, improve sleep, lower blood pressure, help to prevent irregular heartbeat, lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, decrease anxiety, and increase joy and peace. That's a big return for a few minutes of your time.

You may not think of yourself as a meditator, but everyone has done it. For example, when you're totally focused on balancing your checkbook, recording each number and doing the calculations, time seems to fly. Rather than thinking about other things, you're absorbed in the task. It can be a relaxing activity unless you're worried about your finances. Knitting has a similar effect. The repetitive movement of the needles and yarn quiets the mind and allows your naturally peaceful inner core to shine through. Perhaps that's why knitting has become so popular in our busy world.

But you can't whip out your knitting needles or your checkbook everywhere you go. The most portable focus for eliciting the

relaxation response is in your mind. If you're religious, you can use a bit of scripture or song from your tradition as a repetitive mental focus. A Greek Orthodox patient of mine experienced profound peace whenever the "Kyrie Eleison," a hymn about the mercy of Jesus, was sung in church. I suggested that he begin his meditation by chanting it aloud a few times, letting peace fill him up. Then he chanted it silently for 10 or 15 minutes. Not only did this simple, pleasurable practice elicit the physiological benefits of the relaxation response, it was a communion with his Higher Power.

Bringing the mind to a single focus is called concentration meditation. If we were taught this skill in childhood, think how much more creative, productive, and peaceful we would be as adults. Focusing the mind isn't easy. It takes practice. But just like learning to play the piano or driving a car, it soon becomes second nature. Can you remember how difficult it was to keep everything straight when you learned how to drive? It was hard, but after a few weeks, things fell into place. The key to learning meditation is realizing that most people find it difficult at first. They aren't automatically delivered to a state of bliss -- they might still be thinking about trivial matters such as what to eat for breakfast.

You might decide, for example, to concentrate on belly breathing as a form of meditation. Perhaps you're focused on noticing your belly expand on the in-breath and relax on the out-breath. Then a thought occurs: This is so relaxing, why don't I get around to it more often? One thought leads to others: I'm so busy and stressed. I really need this. No one helps around the house. Am I the only one who can change a toilet paper roll? Soon you're ruminating rather than meditating. The key is to notice your thinking as soon as possible, and then as gently as you can, let go and return to the repetitive mental focus.

Many people give up on trying to meditate when they find out how busy the mind is. Thoughts such as, I'm no good at this; other people relax right away, but my mind is too busy, can stop you in your tracks. Make no mistake about it. Thinking will continue. That's the nature of the mind. The goal of concentration meditation is not to stop the mind, but rather to learn a potent form of mental martial arts. When thoughts come (and they will), you have a choice. You can notice and let them go, or keep on thinking. In 10

or 15 minutes, you might have to bring your mind back to focus dozens of times. This strengthens the mental muscles of letting go. After just a few weeks of practice, you'll see that it's much easier to control your mind throughout the day. You've been in training.

With a little more practice, you'll discover a layer of mind deeper than your thoughts. Just as the surface of the ocean can be turbulent-although it's calm several feet below -- so goes your mind. Meditation trains you to descend to the level of peace. It's another way of finding the eye of the storm.

Benefits of Meditation

One of the greatest benefits of meditation is awareness. If someone were to say, "I'll give you a penny for your thoughts," I'd wager that about half the time you couldn't really say what you were thinking. You were vacationing in Never-Never Land, that zoned-out state in which you miss your exit on the highway. That's the familiar mindless condition where the lights are on, but nobody's home. Meditation increases mindfulness so that you can experience more choice, freedom, and pleasure.

Mindfulness meditation is a tradition unto itself. Unlike concentration meditation, in which you keep bringing yourself back to a single focus, mindfulness meditation is about expanding your awareness to notice all that you can without judging it. If you feel cool, for example, the idea is to avoid thinking of that as bad or good, which immediately changes the experience. Instead, you simply notice what the sensation of coolness is like. My favorite mindfulness meditation is eating a piece of chocolate cake with full attention. You might like to try it.

My colleague Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, does an exercise in which every participant gets two raisins. They eat them mindfully, savoring the smell, the texture, and the sensation of saliva filling the mouth that makes the taste extraordinary. Mindfulness meditation can expand the world and make even the most mundane activity an adventure. You might enjoy Dr. Kabat-Zinn's book on mindfulness, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.

There are as many ways to meditate as there are human beings. What works for one person may leave another cold. Concentration meditation is straightforward and can be learned from a book. Mindfulness meditation is more easily learned with a teacher. Fortunately, Dr. Kabat-Zinn's Stress Reduction and Relaxation programs are available at several hundred hospitals across the country.

This week, give meditation a try. If you're a beginner, start slowly. Five minutes is enough. If you like it, you can increase the length as you see fit. Research shows that 10 to 20 minutes, four or five times a week, is enough to create and sustain the physiological and psychological benefits of the practice. Keep this advice firmly in mind: The only definition of a good meditation is one that you did. The goal is not to experience peace during the practice session. The goal is to train the mind so that gradually you will feel more peace, awareness, and choice at all times. If the whole five minutes seems to consist of hauling your mind back from its reveries, then rejoice. You got a lot of practice in mental martial arts.

Like all habits, meditation takes commitment. It's best to meditate at the same time and in the same place each day. If you've created a place of refuge in your home, meditate there. On the other hand, one of my patients used to do it in her car during her lunch break at work, since she had small children at home. My friend Janet takes her shower and then meditates while her hair is drying. When she's done, it's at the perfect degree of dampness for blow-drying. I like to meditate before bed, but some people find that this revives them and interferes with sleep. The most important thing is to find a time that works for you ... and to be consistent about the practice.

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