

LESSON 6

MEDITATION IS AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO EXPERIENCE PEACE AND THE PRESENCE OF GOD

It is a common ground between all religions, theologies, and belief systems

Many books, videos, recordings, and cell phone apps are available to provide instruction on a variety of meditation practices. It's easy to be confused and unsure about where to start. One reason for this is that our Western culture does not have much to offer regarding meditation. We are aware of only a few states of consciousness: sleeping, waking, daydreaming, and Spring Break. Religious and spiritual groups in Eastern culture have been exploring states of consciousness for thousands of years.

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Initially, in my journey I kept a distance from the topic of meditation. The conservative Christians, in general, shy away from this because meditation is not mentioned to any substantial degree in the Bible and because it has strong ties to Eastern religious practices. This resistance was demonstrated in hundreds of conversations with my mom after I moved away from Evangelical Christianity and organized religion.

“Do you go to church regularly?” Mom asked.

“No.”

“Why not?” she replied, squinting at me.

“Because God is right here with us now. He is not contained in a building.”

“Do you pray?” she asked, continuing the interrogation.

“Yes, I pray. I’ve also been trying different types of meditation.”

“What do you mean, meditation?” Her brow furrowed, expressing even more skepticism.

“Quieting my mind, listening to soft music.”

“So you’re a Buddhist now? That’s not good,” she shot back in an accusatory tone.

“No, Mom, I’m not a Buddhist,” I answered, trying to calm her.

“Do you read the Bible?” She continued the line of questioning.

“Yes.”

“Good, okay. I’ll stop with the questions for now,” she concluded with a smile.

The most common method in meditation is concentrating on breathing. Our minds cannot focus on two things at once, so if we focus on our breath, we cannot

focus on any other thought. Even people who proudly state they are excellent multitaskers are shifting between two or more subjects very quickly, not simultaneously. Typical meditation exercises suggest taking a long breath in for a count of four and breathing out for the same count. Other methods direct people to breathe in and out for a count of one, then continue with two, up to a ten count, and back down to one. If you break your concentration at any point, you start over again at one until you can complete the full sequence without breaking your concentration.

As I explored different types of meditation exercises, I quickly saw the benefits. I could feel how it calmed me, especially if I was angry or experiencing stress. After maintaining a regular practice of meditation, I was able to concentrate better at work and on other projects and tasks. Fascinated by these results and driven by my innate curiosity, I had to learn more. I used my time in graduate school to review the research around this ancient practice.

The goal of most meditation is the control of brain activity leading to quietness and calming, which positively impacts nervous and physiologic systems. Common elements contained in all varieties of meditation are to increase awareness and bring the mind under conscious control. Individual practices vary regarding the specific imagery, breathing techniques, attentional strategies, and specific goal attributes used, such as increased generosity, love, compassion, or wisdom. Meditative practices to this depth are not usually found in our Western culture. However, some forms of meditation are growing in

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popularity in our culture and being used in stress management, relaxation, and self-confidence. More intense forms of meditation, called concentration or insight meditation, focus on examining the nature of the mind, consciousness, and expanded awareness.

Many studies with meditation have shown positive results in the treatment of anxiety, social phobia, bronchial asthma, insomnia, reduction of high blood pressure, drug and alcohol abuse, and myocardial infarction, among others. Changes of neural and physiological activities are thought to be accomplished through the use of imagery, calming, and quieting techniques.

Researchers at Harvard Medical School have also studied the impact of meditation. Led by Dr. Herbert Benson, this group identified a meditative state as the Relaxation Response (RR). This is when a person repeats a word, sound, prayer, thought, phrase, or muscular activity, resulting in breaking the normal train of thought. Their studies showed significant reductions in hypertension, cardiac arrhythmias, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression.¹

In my research on meditation, I learned about a specific practice called Vipassana Meditation, which means to “see things as they really are.” Many believe this approach was developed in India by Siddhartha Gautama more than 2,500 years ago. Siddhartha developed a ten-day sequence of activities to promote self-transformation through self-observation. It focuses on the deep interconnection between the mind and body. The method was presented as a “universal remedy for universal ills.” Siddhartha used this technique to become “enlightened” and thus became Gautama Buddha, the first Buddha.

Vipassana centers can be found around the world, teaching the same ten-day program used by Gautama. I found one in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, and put it on the top of my list of things to do. I soon realized that while the courses are ten days in length, participants are required to arrive one day in advance. This, plus travel back home, meant I needed a total of twelve days to attend the program. It took me eight years before my schedule was clear for the block of time required and I was able to accrue the vacation time. I booked a session one summer in late August.

The first three days of the session were one of the hardest experiences I ever endured. We spent about nine hours a day in a large room, or Dharma Hall, sitting on meditation mats, eyes closed. At times, we received direction on what to concentrate on from the leaders at the front of the room. We had breaks for meals and personal time to walk around the grounds or rest in our rooms. A required component for all participants is to take a vow of "Noble Silence." This means the participant could not bring any reading or writing materials, cell phones, or computers. Eye contact and speaking with others is also prohibited. The purpose of invoking Noble Silence is to help participants be alone with their thoughts in order to achieve the full benefit of the course. After the initial shock of literally no mental activity, I observed my mind slowing and relaxing significantly after day four. Without the deluge of TV, radio, phone, reading, and writing, the pace of the mind slows, but it was an excruciating process for the first few days. However, at the end of the ten days I felt much more emotionally grounded and

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had a newfound ability to concentrate more deeply and longer than ever before. The feeling for me was as if I had been treading water for some time and was finally able to touch bottom.

Engaging in meditation consistently has had more profound impact on me than any other spiritual or religious experience, practice, or activity. I know that when I am upset, angry, lost, or in need of solace, I can retreat to one or a combination of meditation practices to be restored to a good place once again.

The fascinating aspect of meditation is in its simplicity. Concentrating on breathing, quieting the mind, and mindfulness is the goal. There are no theological or religious requirements in order to engage in this activity and reap the benefits. Anyone in any religion or belief system can participate in one of the many forms of meditation. It is very much ... a common ground.

SUMMARY

Meditation can help you in two powerful ways. First, it will help quiet your mind so that your thoughts will not be bouncing around, commonly known as “monkey brain.” The benefit of this is a decrease in anxiety, an increase in peaceful feelings, and an increase in your ability to concentrate. The second way is something that many experienced meditators convey. Through meditation, you train your mind to control your thoughts. When you can choose what you think about, you can control how you feel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Meditation has become popular in recent years. Have you tried any methods, classes, or apps? What was your experience like?
- Did it help you in some way? If so, how?
- Do you think meditation competes with religion?
- Do you want to become more experienced in meditation? If so, what resources do you know of that are available?

