

Meditation for Dummies

By RICHARD HAINES

The human mind, by its very nature, is in a state of constant activity.

We are constantly subjected to sensory input and our minds are always active in the process of thinking. We read the newspaper, study books, write papers, engage in conversation, solve problems, create problems, hear about problems and a multitude of other tasks that constantly work our brains to a state of near exhaustion. As we do these normal day to day activities we engage in a constant mental commentary, that although we are constantly making we rarely realize that we are engaged in.

The act of meditation allows all this activity to settle down, and often results in the mind becoming more peaceful, calm and focused. In essence, meditation allows the awareness to become "rejuvenated," or as some people put it, "quiet the monkeys in our minds."

Meditation can be considered a technique, or practice. It usually involves concentrating on an object, such as a flower, a candle, a sound or word, or the breath. Over time, the number of random thoughts occurring diminishes, as they diminish our mind becomes more rested and we detach ourselves from our constant inner commentary. As we perfect this separation from thought, we lose the need for a focal point and become truly thoughtless while meditating.

Experiences during meditation probably vary significantly from one individual to another, relaxation, increased awareness, mental focus and clarity, and a sense of peace are the most common by-products of meditation. While much has been written about the benefits of meditation, the best attitude is not to have any expectations when practicing.

Having a sense of expectation of (positive) results is likely to create unnecessary strain in the practice. You sit there and continually wonder if you're meditating yet, then you

realize that the act of wondering is thought, so you try to stop that, then you wonder again if you're there yet, then you realize... well you get the picture.

Failure to experience silence, peace of mind, mental clarity, bliss, or other promoted benefit of meditation is not in itself a sign of incorrect practice or that one can't concentrate properly or concentrate enough to be good at meditation.

Whether one experiences peace or bliss or not isn't what is important. What is generally considered important in meditation is that one is regular with his or her meditation -- every day -- and that one makes a reasonable effort, but not strains, to remain with the object of concentration during the practice.

With regular practice one inevitably acquires an increased understanding of and proficiency with the particular meditation technique. Patience is a virtue after all, especially when it comes to the art of meditation. Use patience, and eventually peace will come.

For some people, meditation is primarily a spiritual practice, and in some cases the meditation practice may be closely tied to the practice of a religion such as Hinduism or Buddhism. Meditation has been and still is a central practice in eastern religions, for contacting "God" or one's higher "Self." Christianity also has semblances of meditation, such as the biblical statement "The kingdom of heaven is within you," churches have a meditative atmosphere which can't be denied.

Meditation deals with contacting something within us that is peaceful, calm, rejuvenating, and meaningful. Whether one calls this something "God" or "soul" or "the inner child" or "theta-wave activity" or "peace" or "silence" is not important. It is there and anyone can benefit from it regardless of what they believe.

Although religions have historically taken exception with one another since the beginning of time, who can deny that the end "moral"

right in each religion is any different, or that the inner peace felt by a devout Christian or a mindful Buddhist are any different.

Most people in the world have already meditated. If you have relaxed looking at a beautiful sunset,

allowing your thoughts to quiet down, this is close to meditation. If you have been reading a book for awhile, then put it down to take a break and just sat there quietly and peacefully for a few minutes without thinking; this is close to meditation.

Meditative Techniques

Meditation involves concentrating on something to take our attention beyond the random thought activity that is usually going on in our heads.

This can involve a solid object or picture, a mantra, breath, or guided visualization. Typical objects employed include a candle flame or a flower. Some people use pictures, such as a mandala -- a highly colored symmetric painting -- or a picture of a spiritual teacher in a high meditative state.

Mantras are sounds which have a flowing, meditative quality and may be repeated out loud or inwardly. The breath is also a common focal point.

Guided visualization is also considered by some to be a form of meditation. A guided visualization can help to bring one into a meditative state; also, visualization may be used once a meditative state has been reached to produce various results.

A few recommended guidelines for meditation are as follows: 1) It should be done every day, preferably at the same time, 2) It should preferably be done before a meal rather than after a meal, 3) A spot should be set aside for meditation, which should be a quiet place and used for nothing but meditation, 4) One should sit with the spine straight and vertical (a chair is ok to use), although it is standard to use a "Lotus" position to meditate even those who have been doing it for years do not necessarily use. Some people practice a half lotus, or sit in a chair, or even partake of "moving meditation" such as the practice of Tai Chi Ch'uan.

The most common physiological effects of meditation are reduced blood pressure, lower pulse rate, decreased metabolic rate and changes in the concentration of serum levels of various substances.



Stressed out?

-photo by Richard Haines