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Understanding Meditation

Western saying: "Don't just stand there—do something."

Eastern saying: "Don't just do something—stand there."

Cynics of meditation are prone to criticize meditation as “just sitting there and doing nothing.” However, even beyond the confines of an isolated meditation and prayer sanctuary, what is going on when one is “doing nothing” in sitting and meditating actually is much more than nothing. So, what is this much more than nothing?

[There is] a form of mental surrender, as effortless performance, intuitive action, open receptivity to constantly changing circumstances or at its peak as an experience of imminent completeness without anything to be done and nothing to be sought after. . . . The art of doing nothing does not cling or grasp but instead moves along effortlessly and smoothly with the current . . . by letting go you achieve everything. (Foreman, n.d.)*

“By letting go you achieve everything” is a wonderful description of how meditation is beneficial. Ultimately, meditation is developing a presence, a way of being that carries over to whatever life situation the person might be involved in (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971). You do not cling to what is happening and allow yourself to go in harmony with the current of life’s happenings. Barry Stevens (1970) described this most eloquently, in the subtitle of his book: “Don’t push the river (it flows by itself).”†

Meditation has been described as simply putting your attention on some object of focus and keeping your attention on that object of focus for a time. Watts, in his concise yet seminal work on meditation, *Still the Mind: An Introduction to Meditation* (2000), offers this simple yet essential guidance: “Sit quietly and be with your breath, your mind, and all your feelings” (p. 121). Watts advises meditators to avoid clinging to what is happening

*Reprinted by permission of the author, August 12, 2016.

†This is the subtitle of Barry Stevens’s (1970) book, *Awareness: Don’t Push the River (It Flows by Itself)*. Many attribute this saying to Fritz Perls, but neither I (nor five gestalt therapy institutes that I contacted nationwide) were able to verify any original source by Perls for this saying.

and allow themselves to go in harmony with the current of life's happenings: "Watch what's going on. Watch not only what's going on outside, but what's going on inside. Treat your own thoughts, your own reactions, your own emotions about what's going outside as if those inside reactions were also outside things" (p. 94).

This is the power and significance of meditation that I routinely repeat to clients. Meditation is not simply a technique to reduce stress and promote relaxation—though it can be extremely effective in doing so. It brings us to the *moment of the now* in a way that few other experiences can. You learn to bring yourself back to a single, unwavering source of attention, again and again, no matter how many thoughts (of the past or the future), images, and external distractions might be occurring.

Effortless and constant returning to a meditation focus brings you, the meditator, more fully into the present moment. You are able to experience and appreciate the vitality of existence. You learn to achieve balance and become more fully present in the here and now. Your mind is no longer distracted, bothered, or fragmented by thoughts of the past or future. Meditation allows us to facilitate our discovering abilities—to find that which has been hidden beneath the noise of daily living. This discovery can be considered a process, a process of discovering or uncovering. Is this not essential to living a full, healthy, and satisfying life?

Is there a unifying principle that cuts across all forms of meditation? Naranjo and Ornstein (1971) pointed out that "all forms of meditation emphasize awareness: In all meditations there is a dwelling upon something" (p. 10). However, the specific nature of that "dwelling upon something," or awareness, varies.

Watts (2000) contends that there is an essential process of meditation: you "simply watch everything going on without interrupting to change it any way, without judging it, without calling it good or bad. Just watch it. That is the essential process of meditation" (p. 95). This is the central process that I attempt to help clients and patients appreciate and learn, as I describe in this book—how to teach clients to learn that which seems so extremely simple—yet which is so very challenging to accomplish. Simply, you learn to be an observer and to be more fully in the now, in the present moment (see also Watts, 1977).

LOTUS POSITION, INCENSE, CANDLES, AND YOGA

There is a widespread impression that meditation is restricted to sitting down, in an uncomfortable lotus position, for a significant period, and in a secluded location. Perhaps incense wafts through a candlelit room during

the meditative session. Maybe the meditator has chimes, singing bowls, or a recording of mystical chants playing in the background. While each of these descriptors can apply to the meditation process, they fail to capture its range and depth. In my own search to find a meaningful and sufficient definition for meditation, I realized that any definition must attend to both the process of how to meditate and the end result of where you arrive.

Meditation is not only a seated, solitary practice with an inward emphasis and relevance. Thich Nhat Hanh (1997), a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, elaborates on how Zen Buddhism incorporates receptivity and mindful awareness into any and all daily activities (see also Tanahashi & Levitt, 2013):

If you practice “dwelling happily in the present moment,” *drishtadhar-masukhaviharin*, you will enjoy every moment of your life. As you walk to the kitchen or to the meditation hall, each step can make you happy. If you remain mindful while you clean the toilet, you will see that cleaning the toilet is just as pleasant as practicing sitting meditation. Every act, every word, every look, and every step of a monk or a nun should be in mindfulness. Don’t struggle. Just be aware of each step and each breath and you will have peace. (pp. 105–106)

This quote illustrates that meditation is not just a technique, it also is a “process of being.” Meditation allows us to discover that which has been hidden beneath the noise of daily living. However, the word “discovery” implies that the process of meditation has an end point. Watts says that this end point is the ability to actually be present in the immediacy of the moment. In this very moment, we fully experience life, the essence of what life is. Of course, this is not a static end point but an ongoing process (Watts, 2000).

AWAKENED STATE

Is there a common goal that all forms of meditation share in their facilitating a meditator’s discovery of the essentiality of being here, in the now, in the immediate moment? Goleman (1988) states that such a common goal does transcend all forms of meditation: to literally “transform the consciousness” of the meditator so that “the meditator dies to his past self and is reborn to a new level of experience” (p. 112).

This new level of experience is an “awakened state” that ultimately leads to increasingly “prolonged meditative awareness” that becomes infused throughout all aspects of the meditator’s existence—awake, sleeping, and dreaming (Goleman, 1988). I will describe this fourth and final state of meditation in the next chapter, “Phases of Meditation Practice and Transcendence.”

TWO PATHS OF MEDITATION: CONCENTRATIVE AND OPENING UP OF AWARENESS

Most if not all traditions and forms or techniques of meditation may be categorized along two primary dimensions or paths: the path of concentration or “shutting down” of awareness (to include mantra and breath-count-based forms of meditation) and the path of insight or “opening up of awareness” forms (to include mindfulness forms of meditation). And many forms of meditation include elements of both (Goleman, 1988).^{*} How one attends to the breath is an essential element in all forms of meditation that I am aware of. Mantra, breath, and mindfulness forms of meditation are emphasized in this book.

Concentrative (Shutting Down) Path

The concentrative forms of meditation involve a restriction of focus or of meditative attention on an external or internal object. In such forms, there is an attempt to restrict one’s focus of awareness on a single, unchanging source for a period of time. For example, Zen, yoga, Sufi, and early Christian practices each have concentrative exercises that involve the different sensory modalities. External objects that are the focus of attention can include, for example, a candle or a sound such as water flowing, the ringing of a bell or gong, a chant or prayer, or an image such as the (Christian) cross or a statue of Buddha. Attention is returned, again and again and again, to this external source of awareness; awareness is directed completely on the focus of the meditation, such as a word or words, a sound or the visual object. For example, in yoga there is the practice of *tratakam*, or “a steady gaze” on external objects, such as a stone, a vase, a candle, or a light.

The meditative attention can be on a physical movement of the meditator, such as on repetitive movements over a prolonged period of time in the Sufi tradition. Gurdjieff is credited with an exercise to simply become aware of oneself by maintaining continuous awareness on a part of one’s body, that is, an elbow, a hand, or a leg (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971). There can be an internally directed focus, such as on one’s breath, on the abdomen, or on a repeated word or phrase—a mantra. And whether the meditative focus of attention is an external object or an internal focus, in both cases the focus on the external or the internal object becomes the entire concentrative focus. This source of meditation focus is repeated over and over and over, either out loud or silently (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971). Two of, if not the most, common or popularly practiced forms of concentrative meditations in North

^{*}For more elaborate categorizations of types of meditation, see Goleman (1988), Travis and Shear (2010), and Vilines (2017).

America and western Europe are mantra meditation (the focus in chapter 5) and breath-count meditation (the focus in chapter 6).

“Opening Up” of Awareness Path

The second basic type or form of meditation focus or attention involves the active practice of “opening up” of awareness while in the process of meditating. Such opening up of awareness practices are present in all of the major meditation traditions. For example, in Zen, one specific meditative exercise is “right-mindedness” that requires being “conscious of everything one does, to attend very closely to ordinary activities, and to open up awareness to these activities while engaged in them”—such as during one’s daily work or personal life routine (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971, p. 198). In yoga, a term for self-observation is “the Witness”—an attempt to be a “neutral observer” of oneself as if you were another person who simply observes (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971). Similarly, there is the Tibetan tradition of a dharma exercise in which every activity that one engages in is considered to be of equal importance in terms of concentrating of one’s attention (Spiegelberg, 1962). It is important to note that many schools or traditions of meditation emphasize a combination of the two major foci of meditative awareness or attention—both the concentrative or “shutting down” and the self-observation through opening-up of awareness (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971).

CLOSING

In closing this brief discussion of what meditation is, a melding of the previous descriptions of meditation (both the technique or process and the end or the result) brings us back to Allan Watts: “Meditation is the discovery that the point of life is always arrived at in the immediate moment” (cited in Jones, 2019, para. 4).

When the mind appears every morning, don’t jump to the usual conclusion, “This is me; these thoughts are mine.” Instead, watch these thoughts come and go without identifying with them in any way. If you can resist the impulse to claim each and every thought as your own, you will come to a startling conclusion: you will discover that you are the consciousness in which the thoughts appear and disappear. You will discover that this thing called mind only exists when thoughts are allowed to run free.

Annamalai Swami (Godman, 1994, pp. 261–262)*

*Permission granted by David Godman, October 6, 2016.