



An Introduction to Meditation

by Kevin Allen, LMT

Editors note: This is the second in a series of articles examining different self-care options.

The practice of meditation has been around for thousands of years. While it is much more common in eastern cultures, it has had a place on the periphery of western culture. This has been changing in recent years as western studies have convinced many skeptics of the benefits of meditation. Listed below are some of those benefits.

Physiological Benefits

- * Deep rest.
- * Lowered levels of stress hormones.
- * Unstable oxygen molecules reduced - likely a factor in aging & many diseases.
- * Decreased high blood pressure.
- * Indication of lower stress & anxiety levels.
- * Drop in cholesterol levels.
- * Improved airflow to lungs (i.e. easier breathing).
- * Younger biological age.
- * Higher levels of DHEAS in the elderly. Lower levels are associated with aging.

Psychological Benefits

- * Increased brain wave coherence - associated with greater creativity, improved moral reasoning, & higher IQ.
- * Decreased anxiety.
- * Decreased depression.
- * Decreased irritability and moodiness.
- * Improved learning ability & memory.
- * Increased self-actualization.
- * Increased feelings of vitality and rejuvenation.
- * Increased happiness.
- * Increased emotional stability.

Conditions Benefited

- * Drug Addiction.
- * Prolonging Life Expectancy.
- * Stress Control and Tension Headaches.
- * Pain Management and Fibromyalgia.
- * Cancer and Other Chronic Illness.
- * Heart disease & high blood pressure.
- * Infertility.
- * Respiratory crises.
- * Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS).
- * Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Ulcers.
- * Insomnia.

Now that we know how meditation can positively affect us, what is meditation? To put it simply, meditation is quieting and focusing the mind. The reasons why people meditate are various, including: managing the stresses of our fast-paced lives, healing, emotional cleansing and balancing, deepening concentration and insight, help in finding root causes of behavioral impulses, unlocking creativity, and spiritual growth. The manner in which people quiet and focus their minds also vary. Generally all of the various meditation techniques can be divided into two categories: concentrative and mindfulness. In concentrative meditation you focus on something specific, such as your breath, an image, or a sound.

In mindfulness meditation you allow your mind to open up and become aware of what is happening around and within you without reacting to it. Meditation techniques can also be divided into still techniques and moving techniques. The rest of this article will focus mainly on still meditation, while moving meditation will be covered in the next article of this series, which will explore Qigong and Tai Chi.

There are generally only a few requirements in order to begin meditating. They are: a quiet place and time, free from distractions; a set of firm cushions or a cushioned chair to sit on; a passive attitude with an intent to let go of your expectations and the stresses in your life; know what it is you will be focusing on during the meditation; and know how long you plan to meditate (five minutes is a fine starting point, working up to ten or fifteen minutes). As far as the object of your meditation, it can be your breath, a candle, a serene and peaceful picture or a mantra. A mantra is simply a word or short phrase that connects deeply with your

Self-care is any activity in which you partake that helps connect you to yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually. It is any activity that strengthens the body and mind's ability to stay balanced and function at peak efficiency, thereby increasing its ability to fend off disease from within and without.

(over)

personal belief system. You might use something like peace, love, the beginning of a prayer or other short invocation. Also, if you are hungry, go ahead and have a bite to eat before you meditate. Once the above requirements are fulfilled you may begin:

- * Sit comfortably and erect. If seated in a chair, feet should be parallel and flat on the floor, and your thighs should be parallel to the floor. If seated on cushions on the floor, fold your legs with either ankles and knees both on the floor, one foot in front of the other, or your lower legs overlapping each other, thus creating a triangle with your thighs. You should be seated on one small cushion that elevates your bottom while having a larger, flatter cushion that can cushion your knees.
- * Your hands can either rest on your knees/thighs or be cupped together in front of you, with left hand on top of the right and tips of the thumbs lightly touching. The shoulders to be relaxed without drooping forward or pulling back.
- * Close your eyes.
- * Breathe slowly and naturally, in through the nose and out through the mouth, with your tongue touching the roof of your mouth. Allow the breath to fill your whole torso, but especially your lower abdomen.
- * Progressively let go of all the tension in your body, starting at either your feet or your toes, by tightening each set of muscles and then letting go.
- * If the focus of your meditation is your breath, continue to feel the breath filling up inside of you and exiting. If the air coming in and going out takes on a particular color let it do so - it may be one color coming in (a peaceful color) and another going out (a color representing tension or any blockages in your life). If the focus of your meditation is a word or short phrase, say it as you breathe out in a relaxed but full manner. If the focus of your meditation is a candle or picture, open your eyes and gaze at the candle or picture with a relaxed focus, as if you are looking through the object.
- * As you meditate, thoughts and feelings may come to mind that seem to interfere with your focus object. This is okay. Simply acknowledge them and then let them go, returning your focus to your chosen object. Do not try to force your thoughts away, but try to gently return to your focus object.
- * Do not try to force anything to happen or overanalyze the meditation, and do not worry about doing it 'right'.
- * To stay comfortable, it is okay to make slight physical adjustments that are done slowly and while keeping your mind focused. If a leg begins to tingle, either tense the calf or thigh muscles or straighten the leg until the tingle goes away.
- * Continue in this way until the chosen amount of time is up. I like having a soft alarm go off to let me know time is up.

The most important thing to remember while meditating is to be relaxed. If, especially at the beginning, you need to lean against a chair back, a wall, etc, then do so. You can also lay flat on your back if you have physical limitations to sitting up straight. Just remember that when on your back it is easier to fall into actual sleep as opposed to falling into a deep meditative state. If laying down, you may want to have your eyes slightly open rather than closed all the way.

The above simple meditation is a general one drawn from a variety of traditions as well as my own experience. There are a variety of traditions such as walking meditation, vipassana (mindfulness) meditation, body scan meditation, vibrational meditation, journey meditation, transcendental meditation, and a myriad of Qigong meditations, which will be touched on more in the next article.

Meditation is generally safe for most people to practice, but should be avoided or done with the guidance of a professional if you are prone to psychotic or paranoid episodes, if your reality-testing function is poor, or are likely to develop delusions of grandeur from the altered states meditation can bring. Insight meditation should be avoided by those with very high anxiety.

References

<http://www.meditationcenter.com/info/index.html> *General Information.*

http://1stholistic.com/meditation/hol_meditation.htm *Meditation on Holistic Online.*

http://www.bodyomics.com/page3_meditation.html *Benefits of Meditation.*

Wade, Sherrie. *The Benefits of Meditation.* Transformation Meditation, Boca Raton, FL. 2003.

- This publication is available by email from:
<http://www.transformationmeditation.com>