

Meditation Develops Awareness

From Nova Magazine:

Long practised meditator Eric Harrison explains the essence of meditation and why it transcends cultures and centuries.

A Canadian University recently did a megastudy of the scientific literature on meditation. They researched 800 of the best studies and concluded that very few of them reached the standards required of good research.

They made two valid points. The first was that hardly anyone even attempted to define what meditation is; the second was that few researchers put forth any explanatory theory as to how it works. In this article I'll try to shed some light on this very fuzzy concept.

Meditation is a technique designed to relax the body quickly and calm the mind. This restores to the body to a state of balance, and the resulting mental clarity prepares us for whatever we plan to do next. It not complicated to understand or do. Children get it quite easily. It actually works because it simplifies our mental activity. It requires no special props or beliefs. It can be done for a minute or for an hour, at any time we are alone. Most people get good results from their very first attempt, although improvement only comes with practice.

Meditation is based on three abilities that we all possess, namely relaxation, attention and self awareness. We can all relax, though usually not as well as we would like. We can all focus or pay attention to some degree, or we couldn't achieve anything at all. And we all have some ability to observe and therefore influence our thoughts and emotions. Meditation takes these three natural talents and turns them into conscious skills.

This enables us to relax whenever we want to; to focus on a thought or activity without getting distracted; and to manage our thoughts and emotions more effectively.

Another way to understand meditation is to examine what people actually do. Despite the diversity of styles, the vast majority of regular meditators do much the same thing.

They typically do a "sitting" of between 10 and 20 minutes. During that time, their bodies relax (through inactivity, if nothing else); they calm their minds by focusing on

something (the breath, the body or a mantra etc); and they gradually restrain their usual thoughts and emotional responses. They usually guide themselves with instructions such as: "Focus on the breath and let thoughts pass by." Although they still get distracted periodically, they nonetheless feel more relaxed and clear afterwards.

So how does sitting down doing virtually nothing produce such good results? What makes it any better than relaxation or sleep, for example? Meditation is not quite the same as relaxation. When we relax, our minds wander and get sleepy. When we meditate, our bodies are equally relaxed, but our minds are more focused and in control.

Meditation is not a blank or empty state. We still recognise thoughts and emotions as they arise, but in an objective, non-reactive way that disarms them. This calm, clear-seeing state of mind is usually called "awareness" or "mindfulness" or "the observer mind". Awareness is about becoming conscious of, and then restraining, the subtle impulses of the mind and the body. It is like slowing down the video to catch the detail. This is when a meditator can say, "I know this thought or feeling is in my mind, but I don't need to over-react to it." This clarity and detachment is what distinguishes meditation from a relaxation technique.

Nonetheless, the body still needs to relax before the mind can truly settle. Everyone can relax - everyone falls asleep eventually - but most of us don't do it well.

Meditators learn to initiate this natural process so they can relax whenever they want to. Instead of taking hours to wind down at the end of a working day, they can do it in minutes.

If done lying in bed at night, it will usually send them off to sleep, which is a great outcome. Sleep is crucial for good health and mental functioning.

We generally need more sleep than we get but we can't count on it relaxing us completely. People who are stressed are still likely to be over-aroused - restless, edgy, half-awake - even when asleep.

The reason we don't relax well, and the main cause of stress and poor sleep, is an over-active mind. Most of us think too much. Our thinking tends to be too fast, too scattered, too wasteful and too emotionally charged to let us wind down. The emotions behind our habitual thoughts, usually worry or annoyance, stimulate the body's fight-or-flight response. They send signals to the adrenal glands saying "More energy please! More adrenaline! This matter needs immediate attention and this is no time to take it easy." Thinking stimulates the body and counteracts the relaxation process, even if it happens to be 2am and we'd rather be asleep.

Thinking is hardly ever calm or dispassionate. It feels urgent. It is a worker. Its overriding purpose is "goal directed behaviour". Our minds constantly run scenarios about the past or future, while acting them out in our bodies to make them as real as possible. Thinking stimulates low level muscular activity in readiness for whatever we intend to do. If we are planning what to say to someone, our face and throat muscles will become active. If we are rehearsing a probable argument, our stomach and shoulders will become tense. To relax the body at all, we need to calm down this constant mental activity.

This is where meditation comes in. It doesn't kill off thoughts, or ignore them or try to blank them out. It uses another strategy: it starves them. Thoughts need fuel to stay alive and keep their place in the sun.

Because the brain doesn't have enough glucose and oxygen to do everything at once, it prioritises blood flow to whatever we pay attention to. When we focus on something, it becomes clear and vivid in our minds, but only by draining energy away from competing thoughts.

Focusing, or "selective attention", is when we choose to give priority to one thought or activity at the expense of everything else. If we choose to feed X, we automatically starve Y. If we neglect a thought for more than 20 to 30 seconds, it drops out of working memory and off the stage of consciousness. If we focus all our available attention on the breath or the body, for example, our thoughts about the past or future inevitably fade into the background.

We assume that we know what attention is. All day long we focus on one thing after another, but usually in a random, uncontrolled way. Our minds automatically attend to what we are doing, or to whatever thought wins out against other thoughts. This is our normal, reactive style of attention. It is usually quite shallow and easily distracted. It takes rather more effort to deliberately focus on one thing and to stay focused. When we try to hold our attention on the breath or the body against the competing thoughts, for example, it is often harder than we expect it to be.

Focusing is a skill like any other that only improves with practice and understanding, but the benefits are colossal. Attention is the gateway to all the higher mental functions - memory and learning, evaluation and decision making, planning and imagination. Modern science and psychology has explored these functions in far more detail than the Asian traditions ever did.

Buddhist and Yogic meditations tend to idealise the attainment of physical and mental stillness as ultimate goals in themselves, but they still have something to offer the West.

Our ability to pay attention is always fragile and subject to internal and external distractions. The Asian traditions understood that quality attention is directly dependent on a high degree of physical and mental stillness. These are beautiful qualities worth cultivating for their own sake, but they are also essential for good attention. Meditation is virtually the only technique, East or West, that deliberately cultivates this deep body-mind stillness.

This is how it works. It is all contained in the basic instructions: "Focus on the breath or the body, and notice thoughts with detachment." By focusing on the body, the brain shifts from thinking mode to sensing mode. It shifts from front brain activity (where most thinking occurs) to back brain activity (where sensations are processed). It shifts from verbal, conceptual, mental activity to immediate bodily awareness. It also shifts from the complexities of the past and future into the present, which is a much simpler place. All this slows the mind down considerably. We shift from the lightning fast speed of thought, to the much slower speed of muscular and visceral body sensations.

To be conscious of the body has another very positive effect: it accelerates homeostasis. The body is always trying to maintain a state of optimal balance by regulating its myriad functions around ideal set points.

In particular, it tries to maintain the right levels of arousal and muscle tension for every activity we do.

Homeostasis is managed automatically by the more primitive parts of the brain. Unfortunately, we can easily override it and throw ourselves seriously out of balance. We stay awake long after we are tired. We eat more than we need to. We run on excitement and worry and skimp on rest-and-repair time. We usually don't notice how far out of balance we are until poor sleep, anxiety and stress related illnesses slap us in the face.

Focusing on the body can reverse all of this. When you notice an imbalance, you almost immediately shift towards balance. When you realise your shoulders are tight, you drop them. When you notice you are holding your breath, you automatically sigh. The awareness alone does the trick. If you didn't realise how tense you were, your shoulders and breathing would remain tight, perhaps for a lifetime.

The brain maintains homeostasis through feedback mechanisms that are mostly unconscious. By focusing on the body we add an extra level of high quality, conscious feedback to the existing loops which greatly enhances the process. A meditator feels this occurring as ever more subtle shifts in muscle tone, blood flow, pulse and breathing. It seems to happen just because you notice it. With training, the body can attain an

extraordinary degree of stillness and inner harmony that is quite unlike sleep or any other activity.

When the body is perfectly still, it feels luxurious and alive, even in the presence of residual pain. It feels safe, sensual and completely at home with itself. You can feel the body repairing itself. The mind stops talking to itself and rests in the subtle, ever-changing sensations of the present moment. Stillness, silence and contentment are quite attainable if we develop a fine awareness of the body.