Contents

Introduction

Forms and Effects of Meditation

Meditation is the inward focus of attention in a state of mind where ego-related concerns and critical evaluations are suspended in favor of perceiving a deeper, subtler, and possibly divine flow of consciousness. A method of communicating with hidden layers of the mind, it allows the subconscious to surface in memories, images, and thoughts while also influencing it with quietude, openness, and specific suggestions.[1] It has an overall beneficial and often healing effect and has made major inroads in Western society, both in spiritual and medical contexts. Doctors increasingly recommend it for stress relief, pain management, and the alleviation of psychosomatic conditions.[2]

While meditation with its general emphasis on mental focus and attention to breathing usually benefits the practitioner, its various forms are not created equal. Part of age-old mystical traditions, they have grown from vastly different historical and cultural environments, which tend to be overlooked in scientific studies. As the Evidence Report of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality notes:

> The spiritual or belief component of meditation practices is poorly described in the literature and it is unclear in what

[1]This is the definition used in this book. There is no overall consensus on a working definition of meditation that is applicable to the multiplicity of heterogeneous practices usually called by this name. Scholars and scientists tentatively agree that meditation in general is a self-induced state that utilizes a clearly defined technique with a specific anchor of concentration and invokes muscles relaxation as well as the easing of logic and preconceived assumptions (Cardoso et al. 2004; Ospina et al. 2007, 9). Some also define it as a "family of self-regulating practices that aim to bring mental processes under voluntary control through focusing attention and awareness" (Walsh and Shapiro 2006).

[2] Proven medical results of meditation appear in conditions of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and substance abuse (Ospina et al. 2007, 4). Psychosocial effects on personality traits, positive emotions, and social relationships form a secondary level of outcomes (Ospina et al. 2007, 102).

> way and to what extent spirituality and belief play a role in the successful practice of meditation. (Ospina et al. 2007, 3)[3]

Each form of meditation, grown from different beliefs and cultural settings, has its own vision of the body-mind, espouses a unique goal, and accesses the subconscious through a different mode. More than that, the historical roots of meditation in the mystical traditions of the world's religions makes it part of the Religious Studies debate on the nature of mystical experience. Is there only one universal, same-for-all mystical experience? Is there only one underlying divine reality that is merely named differently in different traditions? Or are there in fact multiple mystical experiences and large varieties of cosmic visions? And is the experience of union and inherent oneness culturally determined and thus dependent on the conscious intention and perception of the seeker?[4]

The dominant tendency in Religious Studies is toward the latter position, and this book leans in the same direction. The argument is that meditation in both practice and effects is culturally determined and that whatever the seeker sets out to discover he or she will eventually find, coming eventually to "live in a pleasant garden of one's own creation."[5] The worldview and vision at the foundation of any training system determine the specific practices used, the way the subconscious is accessed, the transformation the mind undergoes, and the eventual results of the practice. People who desire healing and relaxation will receive just that; those who hope to be at one with a deity will move in exactly this direction. It is, as in mystical traditions the world over, extremely unlikely that practices of one system lead to realization as defined in another or, in more practical terms, that someone thoroughly immersed in a Christian context will experience visions of Krishna.

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[3] The Dalai Lama places a series of "preliminary steps" at the foundation of meditation. They include homage to the Buddha, offerings of body and self, contrition and confession of ill deeds, admiration for good virtues, an entreaty of the deities to support one's practice, and a formal dedication to all beings, a sharing of one's merit (2002, 110-11).

[4] The position of the cultural determination of the mystical experience is represented by Steven T. Katz (1978; 1983; 2000). The leader of the unitive position is Robert Forman (1990; 1997; 1998; 1999). A general discussion is found in Jones 1993.

[5] Krishnamurti 1967, 9.

While certain experiences of relaxation, increased focus, and heightened awareness may be related to physiological changes in brain chemistry, there is generally an a-priori determination of the meditative path and outcome. This feature, as well as the basic nature of meditation as a state of mind, where critical thinking is suspended and subconscious layers of the mind are accessed, moreover, make meditation a close companion of hypnosis. Both place people into a state of intense concentration or deep relaxation, work with the subconscious layers of the mind to effect major change, allow hidden memories and emotional patterns to emerge, and guide practitioners or clients toward a particular goal.

Both, furthermore, require the personal guidance of a teacher, master, or hypnotist, at least in the beginning stages, and demand trust and obedience from the practitioner. The intimate relationship between guide and follower usually leads to a strong emotional connection which, if left unchecked, may cause patterns of transference and dependency, leading the disciple to attribute great powers of good and evil to the teacher.[6] Described as a karmic bond over many lifetimes in Asian traditions, this closeness between master and disciple can be highly beneficial or lead to abusive relationships and even cult situations.

Based on these common points, most hypnosis books agree that meditation is another "doorway to the same room" of trance-induced "mental reprogramming," and that both work by inducing a state of ego-receptivity, which "can best be described as a movement from secondary to primary process mentation (of images, sounds, and creative associations), combined with an attendant transient restructuring in a subsystem of the ego such that executive ego functions are suspended and receptive functions become figural."[7] The main difference between the two, as Ormond McGill suggests, is that meditators still the mind to allow the divine to unfold from within while hypnosis clients intentionally program their subconscious (1981).

However, there are plenty of meditation methods that use conscious, direct suggestions, notably *metta* (loving kindness), *lojong* (conscious compassion), *tonglen* (assuming others' pain and sharing goodwill

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[6] Fromm and Nash 1997, 63; Spiegel and Spiegel 1978, 26.

[7] Citations from: Fisher 2000, 179; Blair 2004, 5; Fromm and Nash 1997, 77. On the importance of belief systems in hypnosis and personal transformation, see Heller and Steele 1987.

with them), and the various kinds of visualization.[8] All forms of meditation, moreover, have clearly expressed visions of body, mind, and world, and plant active ideas of what to expect as the final goal. At the same time, hypnosis practitioners frequently speak about waking the inner wisdom, encouraging natural intuition, or even unfolding the true self in their clients.[9]

The difference, then, is one of degree: meditation is more diffuse, a more long-term, general make-over of the self, while hypnosis and related practices like neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) are highly specific, fine-tuned, and often fast-working interventions. Both are essentially forms of self-hypnosis, aided by religiously inspired meditation masters or clinically trained hypnotherapists. Self-hypnosis, moreover, employs very similar techniques as meditation and, if used on a long-term, regular basis, has much the same effect.[10]

Both represent in essence ways of the conscious mind to communicate with the subconscious, planting concrete ideas of future states that manifest in reality over time. The more focused the effort and the better the method is suited to the individual practitioner—e.g., visualizations for visually oriented people—the easier the path is and the faster results come about. A pure, formless, and undetermined experience at the core of mysticism and at the end of meditation is not borne out by either literature or experience. Meditation masters everywhere strongly advise against mixing methods, and time and again people who try to combine forms that are conceptually incompatible come to encounter numerous difficulties. Studying forms of meditation in their cultural settings thus clarifies just how the techniques are used, what worldview adaptations they require, and where their practice ideally leads.

Based on the theoretical background of mysticism studies, decades of research on Asian religions, long years of meditation practice, and basic training in hypnotherapy, in this book I explore meditation from the perspective of access to the subconscious. In a distinct chapter on

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[8] *Metta* consists of the extension of good wishes from oneself through a friend, neutral person, to enemy, to all beings. See Fryba 1989, 165-71; Kamalashila 1992, 192-206; Kulananda and Houlder 2002, 77-79; Salzberg 1995. On the conscious cultivation of compassion, see Dalai Lama 2001; Hopkins 2001; Kyabgon 2007.

[9] See, for example, Banyan 2003; Emmerson 2003; Gordon 2000.

[10] On self-hypnosis, see Alman and Lambrou 1992; Ansari 1991; Blair 2004; Fisher 1991; Hunter 1998; Powell and Forde 1995.

each form, I outline the different approaches to physiology, worldview, and practice, then describe relevant medical adaptations and modern settings. In each case, I try to present examples from the Daoist, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions. Before delving into the depth of the different forms, moreover, I provide a brief overview of the main types and main social patterns of meditation in this introduction, followed by a chapter on breathing and concentration, the foundations of all meditation practice.

Types of Meditation

Deane Shapiro, following the Buddhist model, divides meditation into two types: concentrative and insight.[11] Concentration (*samathā*; *zhi*) is one-pointedness of mind. It involves complete control of attention and the absorption in a single object to the exclusion of all else. The object can be a sound, a visual diagram, or a concrete object (e.g., flame, vase, deity). Beginners in most traditions start with the breath, observing it with the help of counting either the number or the length of respirations. The goal is to still the conscious mind so that the subtle murmur of the subconscious can be perceived.

Insight (*vipāsyana*; *guan*), on the other hand, is mindfulness. It involves a general openness to all sorts of sensory stimuli and encourages a sense of free-flowing awareness with detached observation. Insight meditation usually begins with the recognition of physical sensations and subtle events in the body. It also means paying attention to reactions to outside stimuli, recognizing but not evaluating them. Often associated with notions of deeper understanding or wisdom, it encourages the appreciation of life as flow and lets practitioners see body and self as unstable, ever-changing energetic entities.

Developing this fundamental division, the Evidence Report of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality proposes a division into five broad categories: mantra, mindfulness, yoga, taiji quan, and

[11] Shapiro 1984, 6. The same fundamental distinction, called "stabilizing" and "analytical" is made in Dalai Lama 2002, 118-19. It is also found, supplemented by an "integrated" form in the analysis of meditation by Daniel Goleman (1988). He begins his book with an outline of the Theravada Buddhist classic *Visuddhimagga*, then places the practices from different world religions into this twofold schema.

qigong.[12] Authors acknowledge that this classification is problematic, since it merges a number of essentially different methods into one group such as, for example, hatha and kundalini forms of yoga or breath awareness and chanting under the heading of mantra. It also completely ignores, as much as the ancient Buddhist system does, the important category of visualization.

Approaching the problem from a completely different angle and after examining many meditation methods in a comparative, cultural context, I propose to classify the various forms according to the venue they use to access the subconscious mind. Most obvious are three ways that match the major modes of human perception: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. That is to say, the meditation forms of visualization, sound immersion (mantra practice), and body awareness

Visualization, a key method in tantric Buddhism and medieval Daoism as well as the essential working tool of hypnosis, means the mental focus on a specific scene or sequence of events, such as energy flows, deities, cosmic patterns, saints' lives, or potential future events. The scenes are either seen with complete detachment or involve the participation of the practitioner. In all cases, visualization opens consciousness to more subtle levels, allowing the powers of the unconscious to manifest and bringing new dimensions to the practitioner's life.

Mantra practice, which I call "sound immersion," is the vocalized or silent repetition of a sound, word, or phrase. First documented in ancient Hindu sources, it appears as scripture recitation in Daoism and forms an important part of some Mahayana Buddhist schools, such as Pure Land and Nichiren. It approaches the subtler layers of consciousness through the auditory system, creating vibrations in the brain that have a calming effect and, especially if used in conjunction with deity devotion, lead to a sense of selflessness and connection to the divine.

Body awareness, sometimes also called kinesthetic practice, centers on the body as it is moved or placed into different postures. Although commonly undertaken in hatha yoga, daoyin, taiji quan, and qigong, most people think of this practice more as a form of body cultivation. Yet, while it does have distinct physical effects, body awareness also has clear meditative purposes. With its deep focus on the movements

[12] Ospina et al. 2007, 3. This order reflects the frequency of healthcare studies undertaken so far.

both of the physical and the energy body, it can release emotional issues and lead to spiritual transcendence.

Beyond these three fundamental types, three further modes include observation, immediacy, and body energetics. Each utilizes again a different mode of accessing and modifying the subconscious mind, sometimes but not necessarily in combination with one of the main modes of perception (e.g., awareness of physical sensations in observation).

More specifically, observation, used in Buddhist insight meditation and Daoist inner observation, establishes a detached, objective observer or "witness consciousness" in the mind, a mental position of distanced seeing, the faculty of taking a step back from involvement with experiences and emotions. From this viewpoint adepts identify, observe, and cleanse negative emotions while cultivating positive states as defined by the tradition: compassion, calmness, and joy. They also see the world increasingly as a succession of changing phenomena and learn to relax into all kinds of different circumstances.

Immediacy is the practice of Chinese Chan, Japanese Zen, and Tibetan Dzogchen, originally based on ancient Daoism as documented in the *Zhuangzi*. Rejecting sensory perception and the conscious mind as inherently dualistic and potentially misleading, practitioners of this mode strive to access what they call pure experience by strengthening gut feelings and intuition, the power of the inborn, natural mind—a pure reflection of original cosmos in human beings. Unlike in other forms, posture and body control become essential and all critical thinking as well as connection to deities are radically overcome.

Body energetics, finally, appears in Daoist inner alchemy, kundalini yoga, and Western alchemy (Hermeticism). The meditative refinement of tangible forms of body energy (most commonly sexual forces) into highly spiritual forms, body energetics activates subtle energetic powers that connect the person to the ultimate. The method works with an intricate network of subtle energy channels, centers, and passes that need to be opened and activated and ideally leads to the emergence of a new spiritual dimension, through which the adept can communicate and ultimately become one with the divine.

Underlying all these different modes of meditation is elementary or access concentration, commonly reached through a sustained focus on the breath. All meditative paths in one way or another begin with this.

Practice Goals

Meditation practice can be pleasurable or an excruciating effort, especially if the mind wanders and is swamped with thoughts or the body is in discomfort from prolonged sitting or awkward poses. Still, people continue to flock to meditation trainings because of the powerful effect of the practices. These effects, moreover, match specific social settings and allow a yet different kind of typology according to practice goals: meditation for self-improvement, spiritual transcendence, or release from responsibility.

Self-improvement is key to meditation in modern Western societies, be it in the form of healing, stress-reduction, pain-management, increased productivity, or a general calming of the mind. Thus, concentration exercises create better efficiency at work, insight meditation eliminates unwanted emotional baggage, and visualization can help in healing, pain-control, and past-life regressions, as well as in sports training and business management. In some cases, practitioners go beyond this; they "reach deeply into the experience of being to find something authentic, some real light" in a quest for a higher level of aliveness,[13] but the goal ultimately remains personal fulfillment.

Spiritual transcendence is the goal of meditation in traditional cultures and religions. Often joined by devotion, it forms a major part of mystical traditions in their quest to connect with the divine and to realize spiritual attainment. The mental calmness it provides and the access it offers to the subtler levels of consciousness serve to awaken a greater power or universal force—the "divine," defined in different traditions as God, Dao, *ātman*, buddha nature, and so on.[14] Meditation suspends conscious and ego-related thinking and thereby allows the divine or cosmic powers to come to the fore. It expands the vision and understanding of the practitioner and eventually transforms him or her from an ordinary to a sagely or enlightened person.

A third and completely different goal of meditation is the release from responsibility. This is its effect as practiced in destructive cults, where it is used to brainwash followers into dependence on the cult leader. Often combined with a poor diet, sleep deprivation, acts of humiliation, and a lack of privacy, meditation can become a strong

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[13] Brazier 1995, 12.

[14] A classic on Christian mysticism is Underhill 1911. On the mystical tradition in Hinduism, see Zaehner 1961; for Buddhism, see Nanamoli 1979; on its Tibetan form, see Govinda 1960; for Daoism, see Kohn 1992.

tool of mind control and a key vehicle of indoctrination and personal dependence. Determined in content and methodology by the cult leader, meditation in this context leaves no personal freedom to the follower and often succeeds in the complete abolition of his or her critical thinking and sense of self-preservation, which may initially feel like a release but is ultimately harmful.[15]

In all these different modes of meditation, the suspension of ego-related concerns and critical, intellectual evaluations in a state of self-hypnosis forms a cornerstone of the practice and is the basis of its success. However, there is a distinct difference in degree. In its contemporary application as a way toward self-improvement and healing, critical evaluation is only suspended very lightly during the actual practice and remains strong otherwise. The entire effort, after all, is motivated and framed in terms of egotistic concerns and personal interests, the vision of a well-adapted, successful, and sexy self being the guiding light of the effort.

Traditional religions typically set harsh tests before they teach meditation and warn people off rather than encourage them. Practitioners have the clear and conscious intention to suspend their egos in order to attain a deeper, personal religious experience—defined clearly in the terms of their creed and often involving an encompassing awareness of the divine and a consciousness of detached altruism or compassion. The goal is the overcoming of the self, however sexy or successful, and merge with the divine as defined by the tradition.

In cultic contexts, finally, the suspension of ego-based thinking is made permanent and replaced with a brainwashed dependency on the cult's doctrines and the leader's orders. Apparent benefits of this state include freedom from personal responsibility and decision-making, a sense of immersion in the group, a lack of doubt, a sense of community support, and a feeling of belonging. Although it may feel good at first, this state of dependency and uncritical surrender is harmful in the long run and often leads to ill health and psychological trauma.

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[15] On cults and their ways of mind control, see Enroth 1983; Galanter 1999; Hassan 1988; Lane 1994; Langone 1993; Tobias and Lalich 1994. Release from responsibility, strict obedience, and a high degree of personal dependence are also characteristic of other forms of total institutions, including monasteries, prisons, military bootcamps, and Communist states. See Goffman 1961; Turner 1969.

Meditation Characteristics

The various kinds of meditation differ significantly in terms of their understanding of the greater universe, the role of human beings in the scheme of creation, the concepts of mind and body, the vision of the ultimate goal, the role and importance of the master, and the advanced methods they use. Yet underneath all these there are several common characteristics—besides the general suspension of critical thinking—which make all forms of meditation part of the same phenomenon. These characteristics include a focus on the breath, ethical rules or requirements, the creation of social communities, the goal of mental transformation, and certain physiological effects.[16]

The first thing most meditation schools teach is an awareness of breathing. This may be a count that accompanies inhalation and exhalation, a counting of only the exhalation, the silent repetition of "in-out" as the breath comes in and goes out. Or it may involve a physical awareness of the feeling of the breath—either at the nostrils where it enters and leaves, or at the abdomen which rises and falls with it. The practice may also involve a pure awareness of breath, with no specific counts, vocalizations, or kinesthetic locations. Or it may be a special effort at lengthening or holding the breath, making it work in ways other than usual. In all cases, the breath is seen as a bridge between body and mind, as an expression of mental reality, closely linked to emotions, nervous conditions, and peace. The more the breath is deepened and calmed, the quieter the mind becomes and the easier it is to suspend the critical factor and enter into the serenity of the meditative state.

All forms of meditation also come with some kind of ethical code. In some cases it appears in specific rules, such as the five precepts of Buddhism or the *yamas* and *niyamas* of yoga. In others (as in Zen and Daoism), it is a general encouragement to cultivate goodwill and compassion, a sense of harmony and oneness with all beings and the world.[17] Goodness in the broadest sense is one of the goals of medita-

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[16] A similar list of phenomenological characteristics, including breathing, relaxation, attention, spirituality and belief, as well as criteria for successful practice, appears also in Ospina et al. 2007, 27-28.

[17] On the ethics of Daoism, see Kohn 2004. For Buddhism, see Brazier 1995, 45-52; Keown 1992; Prebish 1975. On ethics in traditional Hinduism, see Perrett 1998. On the four great moral rules, see Gert 1970. The benefits of ethical behavior in Buddhism come in a sequence: acting well leads to freedom from remorse, which leads to the arising of joy within, which over a

tion and, with the exception of destructive cults where the methods are abused, meditators not only become more sensitive to their own internal realities and feelings but they learn to be more sympathetic and considerate toward others and toward nature.

The fundamental idea behind "meditation as an ethical process" [18] is that—whatever agency or force is at the center of the worldview of the tradition in question—one cannot connect to it unless one reaches a certain level of purity and divinity within. This purity carries an ethical dimension and is, at least in the beginning, often expressed as moral rules and precepts. Most common are the four great moral rules against killing, stealing, lying, and sexual misconduct, but most traditions have more extensive and in some cases highly specific precepts and regulations. Negativity in any form, meditators find in personal experience, brings harm and is a great obstacle on the path. Being anxious, angry, aggressive, cheating, or distrustful feels bad in the body, and it takes large amounts of mental energy to suppress these unpleasant feelings. It is easier to be honest, straightforward, kind, and gentle—but that does not mean one can or should avoid forceful action when necessary. Ethics thus form a major gateway to liberation in all traditions.

Even with proper ethical conduct and good personal discipline it is, as every practitioner of yoga, meditation, or other training will confirm, quite difficult to be consistent and strong in the practice on one's own. It is also hard to learn it merely from audiotapes, videos, DVDs, or books. Thus likeminded people come together to form communities, often around certain teachers, whom they find compassionate, charismatic, or even enlightened. Traditional meditation communities are monastic and placed at a distance from the ordinary world. Both there and also in centers today, the communities are usually hierarchically organized, with the teacher and his assistants at the center of command and various kinds of administrators managing the group.[19]

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longer period results in rapture. This in turn, gives rise to profound calm, which leads to deep happiness, from where meditative concentration can fully arise. This causes further disentanglement from things and eventually leads to enlightenment. See Kulananda and Houlder 2002, 56. Some ethical effects of meditation may have to do with changes in brain chemistry. See Pinker 2008.

[18] Brazier 1995, 34.

[19] On monasteries in Daoism, see Kohn 2003; in Indian Buddhism, see Dutt 1962; in Zen, see Buswell 1992. On Hindu institutions, see Creel and Nara-

yanan 1990. On the necessity of community in meditation, see Brazier 1995, 259.