

Mindfulness Meditation

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Traditional Buddhist approaches to understanding and transforming consciousness have a great deal to offer Westerners who are seeking personal growth and development. To cite some examples:

- Buddhist concentration and mindfulness meditation can help steady and calm the mind, while loving-kindness meditation can help develop self-regard and self-care.
- The Buddhist understanding of the insubstantial nature of self can help people to let go of self-images and definitions that are negative or overly confining.
- Buddhist ideas concerning “skillful means” and “right speech” can help people to reduce interpersonal conflict
- The Buddhist conception of the nature of thinking can help people to stop identifying with their habitual self-defeating ideas.
- Buddhist ideas of selflessness and compassion can help people see the importance of enhancing their connections to the community and to nature.
- The Buddhist idea of karma can assist people in taking appropriate responsibility for their actions.
- The Buddhist belief that desire and aversion are the cause of suffering can help people to develop less controlling, demanding, and acquisitive lifestyles. This enables one to concentrate on what brings true happiness in life: the cultivation of equanimity and caring, and an open, respectful attitude to oneself, others, and all of life.

You don't have to be a Buddhist to make use of these ideas: Meditation, for example, is a practice that doesn't require any specific set of religious beliefs. You don't have to be a Buddhist to meditate, just as you don't have to be a Christian to love your neighbor.

Mindfulness Meditation is the jewel at the heart of Buddhist practice: It is a remarkable tool for personal growth, enhanced health, and spiritual liberation. The positive effects of meditation are legion: First, it calms the body by its direct and indirect effects on the autonomic nervous system, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, and the autoimmune system. (Research has shown, for example, that it can reduce chronic pain, reduce anxiety, reduce the risk of relapse for depression, reduce blood pressure, and reduce the healing time for skin lesions such as psoriasis.) As the body becomes calmed, thoughts begin to settle and quiet, and the mind becomes peaceful and concentrated. In the internal quiet that develops with the meditative

state, one becomes more intimate with the present moment, with one's body, and with the stimuli in the environment. One learns how one's mind/body reacts to thoughts, feelings, and environmental stimuli, and one learns to become less reactive to them. One also learns to see repetitive thought patterns which can lead to grief if allowed to proliferate unnoticed and uninterrupted.

Lastly, one develops a deep sense of connection to the present moment as it unfolds, and an awareness of how our mind/body is connected to nature and society. This sense of connection in turn engenders a sense of compassion for oneself (including the parts of ourselves that have been previously disavowed) and others.

Jon Kabat-Zinn has defined Mindfulness Meditation as "paying attention on purpose to whatever is happening right now." All one needs to do is to resolve to sit still with minimal movement for a set period of time (ideally 20 minutes or more). Begin by finding a place where you can sit without interruption and find a position to sit in that is dignified and sustainable. Resolve to meditate daily at the same time and in the same place for a fixed period of time – maybe just starting with a resolution to sit daily for a few days or weeks to "see what happens." As you sit, don't expect or try to attain anything remarkable, for example, to have a "mystical experience," or to "block out thoughts." Try as best you can to sit without any expectation or intention (with a full appreciation of just how paradoxical this idea of trying to sit without expectation or intention is!). Just sit and notice whatever is happening.

What is happening, off course, is really nothing special — just a stream of sensations, feelings, and thoughts: the awareness of sensations in the body, the hearing of sounds, wondering how much time has passed, feeling momentarily bored, happy, or restless - one thought and one sensation after another. Your only job is to notice these mental events as they happen without judgement, without clinging, without aversion. A good deal of the time you will find that your mind will wander off and that you are no longer aware of the stream of consciousness; instead you will be lost in thinking, planning, or day dreaming. Whenever this happens, all you need do is to remember to return to being aware of the stream, without judging yourself, or your progress, for having drifted off. That's all there is to meditation. It's just that simple. And just that hard. You are hereby formally invited to give it a try.

As important as meditation is, please do not make the mistake of thinking that meditation is a substitute for psychotherapy or medication if we suffer from a serious depression or anxiety disorder. A few years ago, I heard a Zen master tell a conference how his decades of meditation had not cured his depression, but that an antidepressant medication had made all the difference in the world. Meditation does not cure illnesses, but it helps us grow as human beings: grow in our own self-understanding, wisdom, and compassion.

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