

Meditation

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Good evening. Meditation is an activity practiced by millions. It has been practiced for centuries, even millenniums. When we refer to meditation, we are referring to an activity where one concentrates, hopefully exclusively, on something. It may be the breath, it may be a mantra. The goal is to eliminate all thoughts from one's mind and just focus on whatever one is focusing on. Many say it is hard, if not nearly impossible, to entirely free your mind of thoughts, but such is the goal, nevertheless.

Proponents of meditation say meditation helps us move away from a rationalistic point of view. Those who are fond of meditation, in particular Buddhist thoughts, suggest when we're in a rational mind we are not enjoying life for how it is, but instead analyzing. The Buddha himself taught that "all existence is suffering." He also taught thinking can lead to suffering. This is how proponents of meditation view the rational mind as a source of suffering since thinking causes mental imbalances, tension, turmoil, stress, frustration.

In Buddhism, in particular, there's lots of talk about "being in the moment." Proponents of meditation say meditation helps us be calm in the moment more since we try to avoid anything that prevents us from experiencing life right now, this instant. Sometimes Buddhists compare the mind to "a monkey swinging on a tree or to a child that is full of energy." Buddhists say the objective "is to calm the child or calm the monkey."

I definitely have seen and experienced how thinking can lead to suffering. On the other hand, I see how thinking can lead to lots of joy. So I'm not sure that a rational mindset is necessarily bad. Some would say there's a time and place for it, but there's also time and place to be free from it. There could be something to that. Buddhists and other Eastern thinkers suggest rational analysis stifles enjoyment of reality. Some even say we need to become more like animals, since animals don't have rationality getting in the way. Paul Kurtz, the secular humanist philosopher, said something to the effect, "although it's good to meditate periodically, one should not spend all one's time in meditation." I think that is a good point. Many people, particularly monks and nuns, spend almost a quarter of the day,

even a half a day meditating, according to them. That is way too much for me.

Buddhism, in my book, is very similar to contemporary psychology. I was thinking about how the two seem to parallel each other. Then later I was reading other people making the same observations. Some even go as far as suggesting that the science of Buddhism's wisdom is the fact that science today is supposedly validating what Buddhism has been teaching all this while. Buddhism is very big on the notion we can control our emotions and thoughts, and thus we should not allow what happens outside of us to destroy us inside. Buddhists say "we have control over our thoughts instead of having the world be what affects our thoughts." This is very similar to Rational Emotive Therapy and other cognitive type therapies prominent today in contemporary psychology.

To a certain extent, I think there's some great wisdom in this. For example, I have long been the type who hates boredom. I don't think one has to get bored. A lot of people say, "I'm bored, there's nothing to do." But I have long realized that boredom is a state of mind. I'm not sure how far this whole idea should go.

Meditation is said [by observers] to help us not be so affected by our thoughts. And it is said [by observers] to be able to teach us how to control our thoughts. Buddhists believe that, or at least suggest they believe such. Some believe meditation can help you achieve enlightenment or nirvana. Some even say, "meditation itself is essentially what enlightenment is all about." Zen Buddhists in particular say something like that. Supposedly, when you meditate more and more, according to some, your being is more conducive to enlightenment, and thus you become more and more enlightened. Enlightenment, or nirvana, is a state of awareness, which is not a physical place, in which you have not only total insight about the nature of existence, but also total inner peace [say the Buddhists].

The greatest evil to Buddhists is attachment, and what is associated with attachment, desire [Common Knowledge]. The two are not synonymous, but they are close, they're related. That's one part of Buddhism I have problems with. I do not believe attachment is the greatest evil. The theme is hammered so strongly. I can understand how some people say attachment and desire are psychologically unhealthy, but I don't understand how they can be the greatest evils. What if someone is evil, but not attached and does

not desire much? Sociopaths don't have extreme emotions [say the psychologists]. Are they enlightened? I sure hope not.

Enlightenment is said [by Buddhists] “to be a condition where you are free from attachment and desire.” Since the Buddha taught desire is a root of suffering, by eliminating desire, you achieve nirvana. Furthermore, nirvana also frees one from what Buddhists call samsara, or the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. If you have attachment, which manifests itself in the form of karma, you come back to this world [Common Knowledge]. To Buddhists, the whole goal is to not have to come back to this world. Since they believe this world innately has suffering, when you achieve nirvana, you don't have to come back. However, supposedly, many do.

This is because of the notion of bodhisattvas. When you have a state of inner peace, you're also said to be full of compassion. Buddhism emphasizes how enlightenment is largely compassion. So, the mindset behind the bodhisattva tradition is because others in the world suffer, you want to go back into that plane of existence in order to help them achieve enlightenment as well. It is said [by Buddhists] bodhisattvas don't just stay in nirvana but instead sacrifice their glory of nirvana in order to bring others to nirvana.

I was reading this book on Tibetan Buddhism which quoted the Dalai Lama as saying, “He did not think he is enlightened.” That seems so odd to me. If he's not enlightened, then who is? He has dedicated his life to Buddhism and meditation [as his biographies relate]. I believe he was partially saying that to be humble and partially saying that because he believes it.

Over the years I have picked up habits and practices. Some I have been doing for over half my life. Some I have picked up several years ago. Some I have picked up a couple years ago. Some I have picked up fairly recently. Many of these practices that have become a part of my life seem very natural. These practices seem to be a big part of who I am.

Meditation, for whatever reason or reasons, is not something so natural to me. Running has seemed very natural to me. I started about 15 years ago and I have been running since. I have been fortunate enough to have good health to keep running. I started fasting in college. In 1999 I started fasting. Both of these practices have seemed so natural. I started them. It has been practices I have never put down.

Meditation has been very sporadic at best. It is hard for me to get meditation going. A big reason I finally got it to stick was because of the use of behaviorist techniques.

Towards the end of high school I started to explore the meaning of life. I focused mostly on Atheism and Christianity. I did study Buddhism some. I remember reading in a book that [said] "Buddhism believed existence was like an arrow trapped in you. Thus you do not ask how the arrow got there but how to get it out." I ordered materials from this Buddhist organization which sent it for free. A friend of mine and I visited a Buddhist temple. I knew a couple of Buddhists in high school. Senior year English class we read Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*. We also watched the motion picture based on the book. I believe Keanu Reeves played the role of the Buddha.

Later I got this book about meditative running. It suggested that you use your running rhythm as a basis for meditation. I tried it some, but it really didn't stick much. It was soon abandoned.

I was taking geology class in college and it was not going very well. I was scraping by. I was getting D. I feared failure. Not too much before then I did fail history class. I did not want to repeat that. So halfway through the semester I dropped geology class. Unfortunately, when you drop a class in the middle of the semester, you're in a bind. I needed to have a certain number of credits to be eligible for full-time financial aid and also for intervarsity athletics. When you withdraw from a class that late, the semester-long classes are already off limits. You just do not make up that much missed time. The only classes available to me were half a semester classes. Even those had already begun as it was just barely past the first half of the semester.

The best option was a mindful meditation class. I went to the professor. He said, "You must need credits." I told him that was the case. He was very firm saying, "You need to attend every class. Attendance is important and the highest grade you can get is a B plus since you have already missed two classes." Not having too many options, I agreed to that. Fortunately, at the end, I was able to convince him to let me do an additional paper to boost my grade up to an A minus. Even though he initially said I could only get a B plus, he was gracious enough to allow that.

I did not really like meditating. Although, I have never been one who lives at an extremely fast-paced life. I was more fast-paced then than now. That made it hard for meditation. I also didn't like having to talk in soft voices.

Besides meditating in the class, we also talked about philosophy of mindful meditation. We talked about how to get in better touch with ourselves. Also, we discussed how to evaluate more. We even had a retreat where we did various activities in addition to meditating. Interestingly enough, one dude from my track team was in that class. Even more interesting is the fact he was, and probably still is, a Republican. Republican and meditation do not often go hand in hand. So in a way, it is refreshing to see that.

After the class, I felt no great desire to keep meditating. It did not excite me or do much for me at all. I had a couple of Buddhist friends in college. We talked a little bit about it, but I don't remember too much.

I was visiting an Amnesty International group in Lacrosse, Wisconsin to give a talk about Homiya Bujamal. The person who invited me to the group also invited me to a meditation session. I went, but again, that meditation session didn't really do much for me. I was investigating meditation.

After graduate school, I started to explore Buddhism more and more. As religions go, it seemed to make more sense than most. I wanted to be more spiritual, so I decided I would try to meditate. Last summer, I finally began a consistent practice of meditation. I still don't like it much, but I have kept it going.

I first tried the breath type of meditation. Then I came to this realization that I wasn't necessarily doing anything. You could just be sitting there, and unless your mind was entirely focused, you would not be technically meditating, though you may be trying. Some say “the whole point of meditation is not doing anything.”

It scared me. I've long feared thoughts because thoughts go in so many directions in so many ways. It's been hard for me to control these thoughts. I have long taken comfort in the fact that I have not let these thoughts disrupt my behavior, but they still run amok.

I wanted to do a form of meditation that was at least a little more active, where I would be doing something. So even if mentally I wasn't meditating,

there would be some activity which would be done. So I switched to mantra meditation. I chose a word to focus on by repeating it. First I used the word "fire." I read about the symbolism of fire, and it was something I want to be more like. Later I switched to "confidence", since I want to be more confident.

One book suggested you go up in increments. Knowing about behaviorism, that was something that made a lot of sense to me. That is how I built up:

1. I started with five.
2. I went to ten.
3. I went to fifteen.
4. And then stabilized at twenty.

They seem like they're 20. I have integrated this into my running. I have killed two birds with one stone by breaking up the monotony of running, using time during running, also being able to meditate. This is different than the meditative running I tried earlier.

The term "meditative running" is very telling. Right now, I meditate while I run. I'm not engaging in meditative running per se, just meditating while I run. The rhythm of my run really has not that much to do, if anything, with my meditation. Hopefully, I'm benefiting some. I'm not liking it. I'm still not feeling all that natural.

Many say meditation helps one relieve stress since it makes you more calm. Others say the calmness leads to patience and tolerance. Therefore, you can tolerate people in life more. Some say, "we want to get into a meditative mindset all the time where we are calm and react to everything with great calmness."

Again, this parallels contemporary psychology. Rational emotive behavior therapy, for example, is really big on the theme of avoiding strong emotions. Buddhists want us to be in a state of constant calmness, not being too manic or too depressive, but having this nice, even approach. Some compare it to a rock, saying that "we want to be like a rock and let nothing bother us no matter what happens." I can see how in certain circumstances this is virtuous. I'm not so sure whether I want to be calm all the time.

It's interesting I mentioned that history class. The professor of that class was terrible. He was so dull. He talked in a nice, soft voice. Later, I was thinking how many of these Eastern thinkers, those who are good at meditation, for example, have nice, calm, steady voices. It drives me nuts. They have inner peace, but inner peace is so frustrating to listen to. It's so dull to listen to. I would prefer someone with less inner peace and more enthusiasm.

I don't think the evils of extreme emotions are as bad as Buddhists or rationally emotive therapists make them out to be. I don't think all that much harm can arise from extreme emotions.

It dawned on me that the professor who was so dull was also into Eastern ideas. More so than anyone else, the Buddha popularized meditation. After he spent some time with ascetics in his spiritual journey, he went under a bodhi tree to meditate. He sat there for days. He experienced turmoils, temptations, stress, frustrations, weaknesses, fatigue, exhaustion, but he kept going, and supposedly he achieved enlightenment. It sounds as if he was the first bodhisattva because he decided he needed to share this with the rest of the world.

One of my Christian friends in high school said, "Buddhism is stupid because the Buddha sat under the tree." I later told her that "saying Buddhism is stupid is not the most sophisticated way of refuting it."

Since the Buddha supposedly sat in what is called the lotus position, many recommend that as the ideal form of body position for meditation. Some also use what are called half lotus positions. I've read some authors saying "that the lotus position, even the half lotus position, is often hard for those of us in the West to do because they both require great flexibility." Thus these books often say, "if the lotus position or half lotus position is something you cannot do, then do a sitting posture which is as upright as possible." They say, "it's good for posture, it's good for meditative focus, plus it's what the Buddha supposedly did." Also the books often say, "when you're sitting upright, it becomes much more difficult to fall asleep."

I have indeed fallen asleep during meditation. Lying position, they say, "is very conducive to falling asleep, particularly if you are tired." However, I find sitting up makes it hard for me to follow my breath. I don't see and experience much of a breath. However, if I lie down, I can see that breath

much better. One book said, “If you feel like you're going to fall asleep while meditating, that is a sign you should take a nap instead of meditating.”

I have already alluded to a couple different types of meditations. There are several common forms:

1. The breath form of meditation, many say, is the most common. This is the type where you focus on your breath and you try to eliminate all other thoughts. Often you'll hear people say, “if you have a thought, just let it go and turn to the breath. “When I try this, I have felt more calm, more restful as people say you will experience.
2. However, when I have tried mantra meditation, I have not felt more calm. In fact, I have felt less calm. It seems to add to the stress. It feels like I'm holding my breath for two miles of running in a way. Also, since I run on sometimes busy roads, I must add to the stress of that by putting meditation on top of it. In mantra meditation, you focus not on your breath but some external chant, picture, icon, shrine, or whatever else. Often you want to be more like something. When I enchanted fire and confidence, I want to be more like fire, and I want to be more confident. Some people say, “The words are not arbitrary, but instead very precise and orderly collections of significant meanings.” Linda Goodman, the now deceased astrologer, was a big proponent of that. She said, “Each letter is very significant and words in every language are combined very precisely to create a great spiritual meaning.” She viewed that in the context of numerology [according to her book].

Insight meditation is a form of meditation where you meditate in order to get greater insight about something [Common Knowledge]. Zen Buddhists, for example, use koans to get insight [Common Knowledge]. Koans are these riddles posed by a master to a student [Common Knowledge]. “The riddles are not solved by rational analysis, but instead supposedly they're received through intuition by meditation” [Common Knowledge]. For example, one that is common is “what does your face look like before you were born?” [Common Knowledge]. I read that “sometimes a master realizes a student gets it when a student makes some sounds.” To me this would seem ripe for abuse. It would be easy to be fraudulent since you could claim that babbling sounds makes you insightful. Any fool can babble sounds, but there might be something to it.

Mindful meditation is a form of meditation we did in that class. Mindful meditation seeks to get you more aware of your life [Common Knowledge]. It seeks to get you to value it by not taking it for granted. Thus you try to become more mindful of how you eat, how you walk, what your body is feeling, and a lot else [Common Knowledge]. None of them seems to be so against analysis, but ironically mindful meditation seems to be a form of analysis. It has long drove me crazy to become aware of something I'm not aware of otherwise, but it seems to inevitably happen as my mind spins. It can even be painful. I would often rather not be aware. One book about running said, "the sound of your feet can drive you crazy." If that's the case, why do I want to be mindful about the sound of my feet?

Transcendental meditation is a form of meditation which supposedly connects you with God or the great oneness [Common Knowledge]. Wayne Dyer says, "Meditation itself creates these spaces between your thoughts which allows God to come in." Certainly this is not how fundamentalist Christians say you access God. Wayne Dyer is huge on meditation. Wayne Dyer is huge on meditation. He's big on transcendental meditation in particular.

There's certainly variations along different forms of transcendental meditation.