

'Meditation Techniques: An Introduction for Psychiatrists'

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Workshop conductors:

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Introduction

In the spirit of the opening address of the conference, a workshop on meditation was indeed a good place to begin an exploration of the mind. We (SE and LC) introduced ourselves and explained that we had both been meditators for over 20 years, finding meditation to be a beneficial and useful practice that had enhanced our personal and professional lives. Even though we had learned and practised meditation from different traditions we felt there were underlying universal principles that were simple and easy to learn.

We asked the 30 participants what they hoped to gain from the workshop and were interested to see that only about a third had practised meditation before. They hoped to have a glimpse of the experience and gain an understanding of how it could benefit their patients.

We were keen to emphasize that this was *not* going to be a lecture, and we then went through several exercises to introduce them to some basic concepts and experiences of meditation.

Like riding a bicycle

Sarah began with some thoughts on meditation, outlining the idea that before or behind our thoughts there is a 'ground of being' that is silent and peaceful. Had anyone ever wondered from where his or her thoughts came? All meditation techniques were a way of returning to this place that is sometimes described as 'bringing the mind home'. It was important to distinguish between the technique and the actual experience of meditation. It's been described as something akin to learning to ride a bicycle; one day you just suddenly 'get it'.

Usually meditation involves focusing one's attention away from everyday thoughts and simplifying the content of the mind. Many techniques prescribe the repetition of a word, sound, prayer, phrase or muscular activity. Others recommend focusing one's awareness within oneself, on the breath, or on an image such as a flame. What they all encourage is a passive disregard or detachment from other thoughts. There have been many studies examining the physiological changes that happen during meditation. They are all usually effects of deep relaxation, often called the 'relaxation response' including decreased respiratory rate, heart rate, oxygen consumption and the generation of alpha waves. However, that is not the only goal of meditators; it can also be a way to develop awareness of the full range of their mental abilities. Most see it as a spiritual practice that brings them closer to the sense of who they really are.

Larry then told the story of how he once attended a discourse on meditation by a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Forty people were waiting for the monk to speak. It wasn't until at least half way through the allotted time that he did. As each one's expectations and irritations began to slowly evaporate

the Lama spoke and said, "Meditation is just this. It is simply being with yourself".

Sitting in silence

We then did a very simple exercise of sitting in silence to observe what happens. Participants were instructed to sit quietly for a few minutes and try and find a silence in their minds, to observe the spaces between thoughts, before or beyond thoughts and to consider where their thoughts come from. After a few minutes they were invited to share their experiences.

Most were aware of how their minds jump around and how it is quite difficult to still the mind. Some felt quite tired and a few inevitably fell asleep! Noises and comings and goings and the heat of the room distracted others. This was acknowledged as being one of the first hurdles of meditation, which is why it is useful to focus on something. It is difficult to stop the mind racing and jumping about. It is often called the 'monkey mind' like a monkey does leaping from branch to branch. We noted the ability or power of the mind to travel to the past and future and to create experiences.

We explained how whatever they had experienced was a useful observation on how the mind works and there was no 'right or wrong'. We encouraged the participants (professionals who already possessed good powers of concentration) just to be curious and experiment with the techniques until they found one that suited them.

We then repeated the exercise observing what happens to thoughts as we reach for silence. We told them that thoughts might wander but this time to watch the pattern of their thoughts. Where is the silence? What did they feel, what did they observe happening in their body, emotions and thoughts? The important thing was not the content of the experience but the level of awareness in the observation of the content of thoughts, sensations and feelings.

'Body scan' and breathing

After the group had the initial experience of sitting in silence, we then explained that most methods of meditation suggest focusing on something as a way of slowing down distracting thoughts and getting into the experience of peace. Larry then talked us through an exercise of using the mind's eye to visualise each part of the body and systematically become aware of it and relax it. This is a good way of settling into a meditation and letting go of a lot of the stress and tension built up in our muscles. Following this 'body relaxing' he then focused us on our breathing. This was a gentle instruction of simply observing the breath and if we found our minds wandering to then bring our awareness back to our breathing. After doing this for about ten to fifteen minutes people appeared quite relaxed and said they had enjoyed the experience. As the room was hot and stuffy we got up between each exercise and had a stretch and a jiggle around to keep the circulation moving.

Guided meditation

Using the idea that thoughts lead to an experience, Sarah used the method of a guided meditation commentary with music to further deepen the experience of peace. She explained that being peaceful, still and quiet were really the first steps in

a meditation but that with practice this leads on to other more profound experiences such as love and even bliss. Also, as most people regard meditation as a spiritual practice, there is often a sense of feeling connected to a higher being or source of spiritual power. This was something to experiment with and come to understand through your own experience not to be accepted just on hearsay. With peaceful music in the background she quietly spoke through a commentary that went something like this:

Sitting comfortably I begin to observe my mind. I can see many thoughts coming into my mind: thoughts about the day, thoughts of other people, and thoughts about my own activity. Now I begin to step back from these thoughts and watch them. I then choose to let these thoughts go. Each one is not important to me at the moment – they are just passing through. Gradually they slow down. My mind begins to be quiet. The quiet spaces between each thought grow. I become more aware of the silence that there is before a thought even begins. In this silence I begin to experience a deep sense of peace. Peaceful thoughts and peaceful feelings come into my mind.

I am aware that I am peaceful energy, a peaceful being. As I focus on myself I begin to feel very relaxed and light. I am just flowing peaceful energy. I am very still... floating away...like a tiny star in a sea of peace. Waves of peace wash over me and through me...

I feel I have reached a very quiet and still place, the home of the mind. This place is like a beautiful silent room where I can just slow down, be myself and be free. This is a very special room because it has no walls, or ceiling or floor ... it is just light and peace. This is my home where there is no fear, just peace.

As I feel comfortable here in silence, I may become aware of another presence. This is a very benevolent, loving presence that is filling me with beautiful good feelings and refreshing my tired old thoughts. I come to know this supreme energy as my friend, a constant source in an ever-changing world.

Sarah then explained that for her meditation means turning away from the external and taking her attention within. It is here that a special peace, which doesn't depend on anybody or anything outside, is located. Meditation is observing the mind's thoughts and realising that they are the energy that leads to an experience. Positive thoughts can lead naturally into an experience of peace, inner strength and love. Peace is something that can be created within the mind.

A versatile message

We had hoped to be able to do a walking meditation but unfortunately the room was too small, so Larry demonstrated this to the participants. It really didn't look a lot different to normal walking, which was his point! What was important was walking with attention on where your feet connect with the earth and the sensation of walking as a focus for the mind. The aim was to show that meditation is dynamic and not just confined to sitting cross-legged in a monastery. It is a versatile practice for use in every day life, walking, standing or sitting on a bus.

People asked what to do if you felt sleepy and the best advice is to go to sleep. It is much better to meditate when awake, as it is a highly attentive and skilful state of mind that keeps the mind both tranquil and alert.

‘The sound of one hand clapping’

A wide range of questions came up in the discussion that followed. There was an interest in what was happening to the brain during this process. Studies have shown increased alpha waves and a decrease in depression and anxiety. Many physiological effects appear to relate to the autonomic nervous system.

It isn't easy to define the actual act of meditation, as it can be as elusive as imagining the sound of one hand clapping. Because of its subtle nature, mediators wonder if they are doing it right and it can be difficult in the beginning, as one is struggling to overcome the internal chatter. There really isn't any right or wrong but if you feel better in the end then you are probably doing it right.

We were asked if this was of use to patients. We had aimed this workshop at professionals in particular, but meditation has been shown to be useful in anxiety states, stress disorders and bringing psychotherapeutic insights. It can facilitate mental health by bringing about a higher level of self-acceptance and insight about oneself. It is a form of training for the mind, a discipline that promotes acceptance rather than denial.

Recently there has been evidence for the effectiveness of a therapy known as Dialectic Behavioural Therapy (DBT), which uses mindfulness meditation as its central tool in the treatment of borderline personality disorders. It is generally thought best not to use meditation in acute psychotic states.

We then outlined some of the basic principals of the practice of meditation, that it's best when done on a regular basis, quite useful to do with other people, and often invaluable when done under the guidance of an experienced teacher. By the end of the afternoon of the first day of the AGM, a day when lots of talks had been talked and lots of thoughts had been thought, the weary group that had shuffled into the small airless room emerged 90 minutes later appearing quiet and relaxed.

References and resources

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