

The Art of Meditation

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As explained throughout Rahimi Singla's (2011) paper "Origins of mindfulness & meditation: Interplay of eastern & western psychology," the concept of meditation dates back thousands of years to eastern Asian texts, with a particular emphasis on works from ancient India. However, it's only been in recent years that scientists have analyzed the practice for possible health benefits. The results of these experiments have a general positive trend but also show examples of negative effects for people who misunderstand the practice. Therefore, it is imperative to be knowledgeable about what meditation is in order to get the most out of it.

When looking into the art of meditation it is important to know that the word mediation refers to several things. The reason for this is because when eastern Asian texts before being translated into other languages such as English, multiple words were translated as mediation. Dr. Alok Kanojia (2020) explains this in his YouTube video titled "What even is meditation," as well as how the word meditation is both an action and a state of mind. The action part refers to the physical practice of meditation, for example, the posture a person takes during the activity. The state of mind, on the other hand, is one where a person is conscious without thought. It is the latter of these two that most people think about when referring to the goal of meditation. However, in actuality both are equally important since there are different kinds of meditation for different purposes.

These kinds of practices fall on a spectrum ranging from ones that are designed for reaching a state of open-mindedness and ones to help a person ground themselves in reality (Kanojia 2020). There are many different kinds of techniques for achieving a desired goal. For

example, if someone was having difficulties expressing their emotions, they would use an open-minded type of practice such as sitting down and closing their eyes. On the other hand, if someone was unable to control their emotions and having a panic attack then they would want to use a grounding technique like dunking their head in ice water. It's also possible to find techniques that do a combination of the two, such as Yoga.

In recent years, numerous studies have looked into these kinds of practices to find out if they actually have positive benefits. In a collaborative study headed by Magdalena Wójcik (2019) titled "Meditation and its benefits," they found that "[m]any studies of meditation practices showed their beneficial effect on depression, mood, anxiety and stress" (Wójcik et al, p. 2). Similar results can be found in Rashmi Singla's (2011) paper as well as in Veronika Engert's (2023) study "Spreading positive change: Societal benefits of meditation." The latter of the two also illustrates secondary benefits to partaking in the practice. Outside of direct positives, meditation could also grant extra benefits outside of the individual. In Engert's (2023) study they proposed that when a person's mood increased, then they could basically transmit their positive energy to others (Engert et al 2023).

All of these papers and studies show a direct correlation between meditation and positive benefits, but are they accurate? Edo Shonin and Mark D Griffith's (2021) pose this question in their paper titled "Does mindfulness work?" In it, they call into question the validity of various studies such as how some "have failed to control for a placebo effect," as well as noting that it can take upward of three to six months to have effects similar to that of antidepressants (Shonin & Griffith, p. 1).

Part of the reason it can take so long is how difficult the practice can be for newcomers and in essence is a "skill that can be leveled up" (Kanojia 2020, 7:00). In other words, it is

something that you can get better at over time and might not see immediate improvements. As a result, a lot of people who quit early on, might be missing out on the benefits gained from repeated practice. Singla's (2011) paper also has an entire section called "Mindfulness and meditation: avoiding perils in a transforming worldview," where she openly acknowledges some of the challenges people face when practicing meditation (Singla, p. 6).

Outside of being difficult and having delayed benefits, the practice can also be harmful if used incorrectly. In his video this is something that Dr. Kanojia (2020) discusses and is also supported by other studies and papers. For example, Ausilas Cebolla's (2017) collaborative study, they looked into unwanted effects associated with practicing meditation. The survey showed that out of 342 people, 87 of them experienced unwanted effects (Cebolla et al, para. 2). Going further, Sahanika Ratnayake & David Merry (2018) also published a paper titled "Forgetting ourselves: epistemic costs and ethical concerns in mindfulness exercises," acknowledging how mindfulness can lead to a loss of self. In addition, in Sulochana Joshi's (2021) collaborative paper, they investigated the "case of a 33-year-old male patient who developed acute and transient psychosis twice after meditation" (Joshi et al, para. 1).

The next logical question is why are there cases of people experiencing negative effects? The reason appears to stem from how there are different kinds of meditative practices with different purposes. For example, by reexamining Cebolla's (2017) paper, one can see that there were more frequently reported cases "in relation to individual practice, during focus attention meditation, and when practicing for more than 20 minutes and alone" (Cebolla et al, para. 3). Therefore, if practicing a focus attention meditation doesn't work then maybe they should try a body awareness technique. Furthermore, they could also practice with other people and for shorter periods of time. Also, in Joshi's (2021) conclusion to their paper they state that "the

practice of meditation should be adjusted according to each meditator's need and monitored throughout by the meditation teachers" since there are benefits to be had for the practice (Joshi et al, para 16). It's just that people need to be properly informed and taught how to meditate.

In conclusion, meditation refers to two different things: a physical act or posture and a state of mind. "Research over the past decades has revealed a variety of beneficial effects of meditation training," and someone can improve their lives through direct and indirect means over a period of time (Engert & Kanske para. 1). There are also potential negative effects that can result from the practice when someone is meditating incorrectly which can be alleviated by changing the circumstances in which they meditated in. Therefore, to prevent such negative effects and gain the most out of the practice, people need to be properly informed about the art of meditation.

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