

An Introduction to the Benefits of Meditation

By John Culbertson

What Is Meditation?

The word 'meditation' conjures a variety of images in people's minds, depending on their experiences, beliefs and prejudices. For some people the word stirs deeply spiritual ideas, whilst for others, images of calm tranquility and deeper self understanding. For those new to the idea of meditation, it may be associated in their minds with purely religious practice, although this is certainly no longer the case. There are many benefits of meditation which have well established backing in the medical world, and there are many types of meditation to suit all individuals, regardless of religious beliefs, or even if they have no religious belief at all.

Much of the practice of meditation can be traced through the traditions of yoga, which were brought to the West from India, and so there are deep roots within Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and other Eastern traditions, but in fact the practice of meditation predates this introduction from India, and the concept flourished in the world of martial arts, where focus, concentration and the health benefits were long recognized an essential part of the training.

The idea of using meditation to relax the muscles and calm the mind has long been used in counseling procedures, and with an increase in the amount of stress and chaos of our modern daily lives, these techniques have been shown to have a dramatic effect. Those who work in psychotherapy see people every day who are suffering from the stress of work, family, finance or other concerns, and consider meditation in one form or another to be an integral and essential part of not only the healing process, but in providing a way of dealing with the continuing life after the counseling is over.

Meditation has many forms, and the purposes of meditation and the benefits depend upon the type of meditation performed. The medical world, in particular those who work in both psychology and physiology agree that the practice of meditation actually has a measurable effect on the brainwaves, and that we enter a state of consciousness which is distinct from our normal everyday awareness. It is believed that this changed state of awareness not only has health benefits that are physical, such as cardiovascular health, but can lead to a deeper understanding of oneself.

Within this context of both physical and mental well-being, there are two main types of meditation, although each may take on different forms, and the benefits of meditation may vary depending upon the type practiced. One type usually referred to as 'mindfulness' has the person focusing on keeping an open mind, and not focusing on any one particular thing. Instead, they try to shift focus so that no particular concentration on a problem, question, object or concern occurs, but instead the mind is repeatedly brought back, and encouraged to skim along the surface. The other type is quite the opposite, and

encourages the person to focus very deeply on one object or thought, to the absolute exclusion of anything else.

Both of these types of meditation share the same general benefits, of taking the mind, or at least the conscious mind, away from the everyday troubles and concerns, and into a place that is calm. In so doing, the body responds by relaxing the muscles, and if performed for a reasonable length of time, and regularly, the long term health benefits for the body are very established and meditation should be considered as beneficial physically as it is for the mind.

People often assume that in order to meditate it is necessary to sit on the ground, in a form of yoga position, but this is not the case. Certainly there are forms of meditation based in the yoga tradition that do encourage this method, but it is by no means the only form, and not always the most practical either. It is perfectly possible to practice meditation whilst walking, or doing some other repetitive task – even knitting!

The Benefits of Meditation

The benefits of meditation are twofold – there are those for the mind, and there are also those benefits for the physical body. The two elements of a person are not, of course, separate and distinct. The healthier a person's mind, then often the healthier they are physically. Often it is clear that those people who are healthy and live a good long life have a positive attitude, and a healthy mind, whereas it is also very obvious that people can think themselves ill, and become physically poor in health merely by dwelling on the idea, or on stressful or negative things.

Our world, and our mind, is busy places, and sometimes it seems as though we have no time to stop and think. If we don't have time to stop and think, then clearly we cannot be doing much thinking! Think of it a little like running your bath – the tap is on, and the water is rising, and we manage very well. But eventually, unless we learn to turn the tap off or pull the plug occasionally, the bath will become full, and the water will simply begin flowing over. Meditation has been likened to the idea of turning off the tap, reducing the level of the water, and allowing room for fresh ideas or thoughts. In this way, one of the many benefits of meditation is considered to be the way in which it helps to open our minds to new ideas, to new levels of creativity. Not surprisingly, those who are highly creative people in one field or another, whether it be science or art, are often those who practice meditation. Because there are so many types of meditation, it is not always obvious that this is what is being done, but Both Einstein and Edison were firm practitioners of meditation, and no one can argue that their minds weren't open to new ideas and positive creative thoughts!

Aside from the clear psychological benefits, there are many physical ones too, and through developing ability to quieting the mind and calm the body, the breathing slows down, the pulse slows, blood pressure reduces and the whole body relaxes. It has been shown to improve blood flow, and for those with high blood pressure or recovering from heart problems or surgery, this has shown to be of huge benefit.

Meditation has also been proven to reduce the risk of anxiety attacks, muscle tension and even improve conditions such as arthritis and certain allergies. During meditation the level of serotonin, a chemical produced naturally by the body, is increased. Serotonin is directly responsible for the way we feel, and so meditation can trigger a physical process that results in us feeling happier, less depressed or anxious, and in turn this can help those who suffer from headaches, insomnia, low esteem or low self confidence and negative behavior such as anger. Many phobias have been decreased in severity or even cured through repeated meditation.

Additionally, meditation has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on the immune system, by increasing the rate at which the cells in our body that combat infections are produced, including bacteria and even cancer. Ultimately it is quite clear that almost anyone can benefit from the health advantages that meditation can bring, and improved health and welfare is in turn likely to lead to a better quality of life, and a longer one.

Types of Meditation

There are so many different forms of meditation that there is almost certainly one for everyone, regardless of spiritual, physical or environmental conditions or limits. Generally, after looking at the various types of meditation there will be one that seems to stand out more than the rest, and usually this is the best one to try, at least to begin with.

The three main forms are known as insight, visualization and mantra, although each of these has many different forms too. The first type, insight meditation, encourages you to clear your mind of all thoughts, and to focus on something such as your breathing. By concentrating entirely on your breathing, you try to clear your mind of all thoughts, and this can help to create a sense of oneness, and of peace and clarity.

The second method of meditation is visualization, and in this the person has a clear goal in mind – for example, to have a more peaceful life. During the meditation they would focus entirely on this goal, and visualize in their minds the goal coming true, creating a clear picture of what their life would be like if they achieved that goal, how they would see themselves. Often the best way of achieving something is to regularly visualize it being the case, and meditation of this type not only has all the benefits of other forms, but helps to create a greater chance of the goal being realized.

The third type is the mantra, often the one most commonly imagined when the word meditation is used. Most often this involves the person making a repeated sound – the most well known being either ‘om’ or ‘ah, alah’. By making these chanting sounds, the mind is cleared of thoughts, and the sound or mantra becomes the only thing that is being focused on or thought about. Not only this, but some sounds, such as ‘om’ create a deep resonance in the body, and help to stimulate it, generating a number of health benefits. Some mantras, such as the ‘ah, alah’ have deep spiritual meanings in some religious faiths too.

Certainly it is quite clear that meditation helps us to achieve peace, a more open mind and consequently a mind more open to new ideas, and greater welfare physically, resulting in better health and a better quality of life. Clearly these benefits don't occur overnight, and meditation is a practice that should be followed on a regular basis. Indeed, it is the regular use of meditation, and its anticipation, that generates a good deal of the benefits.

Whether practicing alone, in your own home, whilst out walking, or as part of a group, you will be able to find one of the types of meditation which best suits you and how you feel about it, and you may even feel that some of the benefits of meditation suit your particular needs and that therefore one particular form is of greater benefit to you. No matter what your beliefs or circumstances, there will certainly be a form of meditation to suit you, and to provide greater peace, creativity and well being in your own life.

John Culbertson is a new age teacher, speaker and lecturer. He teaches and speaks on psychic development (a six-month course), psychic protection, numerology, astrology, angels, tarot and almost anything else relative to the new age field. He is available for private psychic channeled, reiki, and spiritual coaching sessions through his web site www.mysticjohnculbertson.com He owns the new age store Starchild: www.starchildbooks.com. He also enjoys ghost writing.

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