

# **Mindfulness Meditation**

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# CONTENTS

- *Foreword*
- Introduction—*A link to Emotional Skills Training*
- Meditation and emotions
- What is Meditation?
- Mentally Skilful
  - Stability of Mind
  - Flexibility of Awareness
  - Self-Awareness
  - Non-Reactivity
- Mindfulness
- How To Meditate
- Suggested Ways To Improve Your Practice
- Dealing With Distractions
- Effective Strategies
- Conclusion

# INTRODUCTION

Meditation is more than is commonly imagined. Its simplicity should not fool you. Meditation will provide you with an opportunity to develop your mind and manage your physical and psychological world in ways not imaginable at the start of your practice. It is my experience that a sound meditation practice will open doors to a way of experiencing the world that will provide you with ultimate freedom. It will make achieving all of your life goals more efficient and sustainable.

Your view of meditation may be biased by religious connotations. In this book I am predominantly focusing on the mental and emotional skills achieved through meditation. That is not to put down the spiritual element of meditation. It is just that the focus is on the psychological elements of meditation practice. This is not a new approach. In the 1970's Herbert Benson (1974) took the relaxation elements of meditation and applied them to stress related conditions. He scientifically researched these elements of meditation and developed today's relaxation techniques. Later, a technique was developed called Attentional Control Training. This approach took the core elements of meditation and relaxation techniques to develop psychological skills that assisted athletes to achieve their best performance. More recently mindfulness based cognitive therapy, stress management and pain management programs have evolved from meditation that has been scientifically proven to be effective in managing depression, stress and chronic pain (.Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 1995: Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 1992)

There is increasing evidence that particular psychological skills can be developed through meditation practice. There is also increasing scientific evidence (Goleman, 2003) revealing that long term practitioners of meditation have achieved a "rewiring" of their brain and have a psychological skilfulness that is unseen in the normal population.

Professor Davidson's work cited in Goleman (2003) suggests that practitioners of meditation achieve a shift from a predominantly right frontal lobe neural activity to that of a higher level of activity in their left frontal lobe which is sustained post meditation. The importance from a psychological perspective is that right frontal lobe activity is related to negative emotions and the left frontal lobe is associated with positive emotions. Clearly we would anticipate that a psychologically healthy individual would experience more positive emotions than negative. That is they would have more neural activity in their left frontal lobe. Some people due to genetics or their environment tend to have greater left frontal lobe activity. For others it is the right frontal lobe and hence the negative emotions which have a higher level of activity. It would appear that meditation offers an opportunity to shift individuals into more positive emotional experiences.

People mistakenly believe that many years of meditation practice are required to achieve the benefits attributed to meditation. Davidson (Zetter, 2003) conducted research over eight weeks on 25 employees of a biotech company who practiced mindfulness meditation daily for 45 minutes. The results identified improved immune system functioning and greater left frontal lobe activity. These results support many earlier studies that illustrate a range of health and psychological benefits from short term implementation of meditation practice. As a psychologist and meditation teacher with over ten years experience I have received feedback of significant personal benefits by participants. These include:

- Cessation of blood pressure medication after six weeks.
- Absence of pain after 2 weeks.
- Headaches gone after one session.
- Reduced symptoms of depression.
- Decreased experiences of anger.

Many have suggested that meditation has saved their lives. I do not take this literally although that may be true, but it represents the intensity of improvement in emotional

wellbeing that some people have experienced. If you would like more information regarding the benefits of meditation there are many references available. You may select some from the end of this book or you can access references from most local libraries.

Meditation is offered here as an opportunity for you to achieve emotional and psychological skilfulness. My personal and professional experience suggests that practicing meditation will fast-track the development of specific psychological skills and cement these skills, so that you will have them for an enduring length of time.

I ask you to bring an open mind to this practice. Try it for at least three weeks. If you do not notice its benefits in this time then feel free to give it away. All I ask is that you give it a chance to prove its usefulness to you.

## **MEDITATION AND EMOTIONS**

Emotions are like a slippery fish. That is they are not always there when you want to practice on them. When they are there you are not always able to hold on to them. It would be useful to develop an environment that would allow us to see the fish and to then hold it long enough to increase our understanding of the fish. Meditation is an opportunity to practice the necessary skills for psychological and emotional wellbeing in a simplified and controlled environment. That way we do not have to wait for the heat of the battle or when we are in the midst of an emotion, such as when we are angry or depressed in order to begin our practice. If we assume that we are unskilful, then it would be a tough ask to put ourselves into a difficult situation and then expect to show mastery. For example, if we are learning to play the guitar, we practice in an environment where we feel safe, comfortable or unthreatened. The bedroom would be a good example. We do not start practicing in an auditorium full of people who have paid large sums of money to hear us play the guitar.

It is important to note that I do not think we are emotionally retarded. In fact, I believe we are emotionally skilful. We have managed and achieved for many years in very challenging environments. However, we all have the potential to do it better. Also, we often recognise that some of our emotional reactions are not providing us with the best outcomes. Meditation provides us with the forum to strengthen our existing skills to the point where we are working at our optimum. Not just getting along but rather excelling, full of energy and with a deep seated contentment that is difficult to shift.

It is important to note that in cultures where meditation has been practiced for thousands of years, such as India and Tibet, emotions are not distinguished from mental activity (Goleman 2003). Emotions are a component of mental activity. I am not convinced of this as I think emotions can have a physical element outside of mental activity. Mental activity may cause physiological experiences but I think it is possible that physiological sensations may trigger mental activity and emotions. Irrespective of the outcome of this debate, I am convinced that emotional skilfulness requires mental skilfulness. We need to manage our minds with more skill in order to be skilful with our emotions. Emotions arise and provide data for the mind to mentally act on. A typically unskilful response is to not listen to our emotion or to over react to them. Whether the emotion occurs first or the mental activity precedes it is less relevant as it is what ever we are aware of first that is significant. Until we are aware of the emotion or mental activity we are unlikely to manage either. In becoming aware of the emotion and/or the mental activity, we tend to ignore the data or over-react to it. Therefore, managing our mind is critical. Meditation is an attempt to retrain our mind to deal with emotions skilfully. To develop new habits of emotional reaction. This book attempts to link the skills that constitute emotional and psychological skilfulness with the practice of meditation. It will highlight how meditation actually achieves the development of specific skills that enhance our psychological and emotional wellbeing.

# WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Meditation provides a productive and simplified environment in order to practice our emotional skilfulness. Meditation allows you to work with your physical sensations, emotions and thoughts. As you practice your mind follows its habitual patterns. Therefore as you practice meditation you can gain insight into these habitual patterns. You also have the opportunity to practice working with these habitual patterns. This is not easy. It is not easy even in this “controlled” environment. Its difficulty hopefully will stimulate you to acknowledge the value of this practice. In meditation you effectively sit and wait. For what, you do not know, but something will happen. Thoughts or emotions will arise. The experience of boredom might arise. It might be fear. It can be any one of the multitude of emotions. This provides us with the opportunity to practice working with our mind and our emotions and their interactions. Meditation provides us with the opportunity to see how these experiences arise and how they are sustained by our reactions to them. This is a unique opportunity. We rarely get to observe how these experiences occur for us. We are generally too caught up in them or the consequences of these experiences to actually observe the process which generates the experience.

The objective of meditation is not to achieve relaxation. The objective is to develop your mental skills. It is in some ways a form of mental gymnastics. Meditation is the practice field for developing mental skills that can be applied in day to day living, specifically in the area of emotional and psychological skilfulness. It is a practice field in that it is attempting to establish an environment that is simplified and relatively controlled. It is like learning to play tennis. When you first begin your tennis training, you do not head to the main court at the Australian Open for your first hit out. You begin in an environment ideally without any spectators. You start by practicing some basic strokes and you refine these strokes with repetitive practice. You may even have a ball machine that shoots the ball to you at a controlled speed and to the same spot every time so that you can practice. In the beginning the complexity of the game is removed and the task is made as simple as possible. Once your skill level improves, then more complexity is added. You are then given more difficult strokes to learn and

more complex situations to apply them. Meditation is exactly like this. It is not about achieving some particular state as numerous mental states will occur in meditation practice. You may achieve some exceptional skillfulness from regular and committed practice. These are the outcomes of the practice but not the practice itself. Meditation is the forum for practice. It is not the only way to achieve the outcomes of mental and emotional skillfulness but it is a very effective way. Meditation is a way to achieving mental health. It has numerous researched benefits such as reducing stress, preventing the re-occurrence of depression, improved pain management and assisting with numerous physical conditions such as heart disease and cancer.

Meditation is about creating a controlled environment that enables you to practice a complex set of skills. These skills are mental skills that when applied will significantly alter your relationship to your emotions, thoughts and actions. This shift in your interaction with your mental and emotional world is difficult to explain. It is difficult to put this experience into words. It is an experienced event. Once experienced you will think .....”this is so simple, why haven’t I done this before?”. This book attempts to put the practice and experience of meditation into words. However this book’s objective is to set out the framework for the process to achieve this outcome, not in explaining the outcome. You will notice progressive shifts in your experience and you will experience benefits from the practice that will more readily express the outcomes than any words on paper. For you, you need to practice. Then let the practice prove itself. If it doesn’t prove itself then you will not continue with it. Give it two months of regular practice at least 30 minutes each day (ideally 45 minutes each day). Let it prove itself.

You are training your mind to be more skilful in the way it functions on a day to day basis. This is a practical process, not some esoteric concept. However it is a difficult task. Like any skill, mastery is achieved over long periods of practice and with much persistence and effort. However, it is very common to experience quite significant results in the early stages of practice.