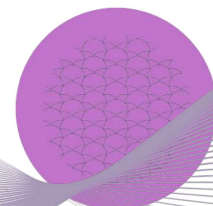


Meditation for Health: Back to the Roots

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Meditation almost seems to be a hype these days and articles about the health benefits of meditation can be found in abundance. These positive health effects are also scientifically proven. In most cases, meditation is presented as a successful technique to deal with negative feelings, stress and the health problems resulting from it (Goyal et al. 2014; Rose et al. 2020). Benefits that are mentioned are for example: less stress, less anxiety and depression, better concentration, less forgetfulness, less inflammation, better handling of pain, strengthening of the immune system, improved general well-being and much more (Zwaan 2020). The list is long, yet there are also warnings against meditation, such as 'meditation is not for everyone' and 'meditation can actually backfire'. The modern approach to this ancient technique raises the question for whom meditation is suitable and for whom it is not. After all, good or better health is what everyone wants, right?

Meditation was first written about in the Vedic scriptures and is particularly known from the work of Maharṣi Patañjali. In the 'Yoga Darshana' he explains the philosophy of yoga extensively. Meditation is a part of this. Maharṣi Patañjali spoke of the eightfold yoga path (Goenka 2015). The first six steps in this are: 1. Yama (five ethical principles, that which you refrain from); 2. Niyama (five self-observations, that which you do); 3. Āsana (body exercises, also called Haṭha yoga); 4. Prāṇāyāma (breathing exercises, control over the breath); 5. Pratyāhāra (withdrawal of the senses); and 6. Dhāraṇā (concentration). Most agree about the interpretation of these steps. The crux lies in the next steps: 7. Dhyāna (contemplative meditation) and 8. Samādhi (meditative state of self-realisation). Maharṣi Patañjali explains that Dhyāna is nothing more than the conscious continuation of Dhāraṇā (concentration on one point) until a state is reached in which this continuous contemplation results in the mind and the object of concentration becoming one (Bawra 1991). In this state, the mind is completely engrossed in the thought or contemplation of (the qualities and nature of) this object. If this is continued uninterrupted, at some point ego-consciousness disappears and individuality is no longer experienced. Then, there is complete unification of not only the mind, but also the ego and the intellect with the object of contemplation. This is Samādhi, or the meditative state of self-realisation (Bawra 1991).



Two points are important here. First, the current approaches to meditation often do not clearly distinguish between contemplative meditation and the meditative state of self-realisation. In practice, these two are often used interchangeably. On one side, there is an emphasis on dealing with and controlling feelings, emotions and thoughts. These are properties of the mind, and thus related to contemplative meditation. On the other side, meditation is often associated with clearing the head or being thoughtless. Yet, this is impossible in this step of contemplation that requires a clear object of concentration. This is only possible in the meditative state of self-realisation (Samādhi), when there is no self (individuality) left. The lack of a clear object of concentration in contemplative meditation could indeed backfire and cause meditation not “work” for everyone.

Second, contemplation involves deep reflective thoughts about something (the object). From this point of view, anyone can contemplate. So why are there still warnings against it? The current approach to contemplative meditation does not work for everyone. The reason for this is that the mind is not well prepared for this step. This means that the previous steps have not been followed or have not been followed fully (Bawra 1991). The steps outlined by Maharṣi Patañjali are logical sequential steps in the process of yoga. The preceding step reinforces the successive one and is a prerequisite for successful progress on the path of yoga. For example, without having practiced concentrating on a single point, it is not to be expected that the mind can calmly contemplate a particular thought. It is only natural then that different thoughts will arise and intermingle; this is the nature of the mind. In the current approach to contemplative meditation, meditation is disconnected from the other steps of the eightfold yoga path. This causes the mind to be insufficiently trained to engage in contemplation, and this can create noise instead of calmness. Immediately striving for the highest goal, without proper practice, is nothing but a waste of time (Bawra 1991) and might indeed backfire.

So, does this mean that contemplative meditation is not suitable for everyone? It indeed is, but under the conditions that the mind is properly prepared for this and that the difference between contemplative meditation and the meditative state of self-realisation is well understood and applied in practice. The practice and continuation of contemplative meditation have positive effects on the mind, and therefore the body, and can certainly lead to better health and well-being.

The positive effects are now well known and scientifically proven. More importantly, contemplative meditation can bring health benefits to everyone, provided that it is integrated in a holistic, and thus complete approach to yoga. The question 'for whom and for whom not', is not relevant in this case. So, everyone can start contemplative meditation in daily life to enjoy the innumerable health benefits of this ancient technique.

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