

MEDITATION FOR THOSE WHO WONDER WHAT IT IS

January 5, 2011

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Mind training is going secular. It no longer has to be associated with a religion or even with spirituality. And it won't be long before corporations realize the very great advantages to having employees with some mind training and then meditation will go public big time. It will no longer be alternative and it will no longer be an alternative. It will be mandatory. As I like to say: what college diplomas are today, mind training certificates will be tomorrow.

What I am pointing out here is that although mind training is an integral part of Asian religions like Buddhism, it can also stand alone by itself (secular) or be used with other religions. As I have tried to explain in previous blogs, mind training is a method to develop greater awareness and not a religion or religious by itself. However, mind training combined with a spiritual practice can be very potent. It is unfortunate that the general public is confused about just what meditation is.

The confusion stems from the fact that here in the west we have a single word for meditation and that word has to cover the enormous variety of practices that people actually do that are called "meditation." I want to mention just a few of them. I imagine each has its own use and value.

For example, many people understand the word 'meditation' to mean something like contemplation, taking a concept like "compassion" or "impermanence" and turning it over and over in the mind, looking at it from all angles – contemplating it.

Others speak of "guided meditations" where someone (a guide) talks them through a guided tour or journey into some section of the mind or experience, usually with the eyes closed. Still others speak of levels and going deeper and deeper into Beta and Theta, and so on.

There are many Christian meditations that are forms of prayer and Muslim methods of meditation that tend to focus on Allah, often by reciting the Holy Scriptures from the Qur'an. Many forms of meditation make use of sound or mantra, reciting a short series of Sanskrit (or other language) syllables in a constant or drone-like (but clear) manner and focusing on the sound.

There are dozens of New-Age meditations which tend to focus on sitting quietly, eyes-closed, and touching on or into our common spiritual essence and thereby refreshing the mind. And incense and candles often help to set the mood.

And there are even other methods of meditation that recommend the ending of all thought, while still others point out that any meditation method and effort to meditate is not meditation, and that "no-meditation" is meditation. And methods like Transcendental Meditation, once used by The Beatles, advocate the silent use of mantra with eyes closed, practiced 10-20 minutes twice a day, and going deep within that. I could go on and on.

My point here is that there are scores of meditation methods and it is no wonder that anyone interested in mind training is immediately confronted with their own ignorance of these many methods. How would you choose? And, since each method requires patience and lots of time

before results appear, who could afford to shop around? It is easier just to avoid the topic altogether.

And I may have one up on readers, because I was introduced to meditation at a very early age. And this method was popular when I was a child. My very first mantra, which my father presented to me, was “O Wa Tay-Goo Si-Am,” which he told me to recite over and over. I did that and he had a good laugh on me. That was his take on all things spiritual. It didn't help me a bit. It is no wonder that many of us have avoided any type of meditation for most of our lives.

Trying to sort out and judge the merits of the many forms of meditation out there is not my goal. For one, I have not tried most of them and so have no opinion. However, there is a kind of consensus as to what meditation is, so let's start with the word itself. “Meditation” comes from the Latin word “Meditari” which simply means “to concentrate.” Most or at least the majority of meditation methods involve concentration of one sort or another.

To my understanding, the most common form of meditation as used in Asia, in countries like India, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Japan, and many parts of China is called “Shamata,” a Sanskrit word that means “calm abiding.” It is about learning to let the mind just rest. This is easier said than done as most of us who have tried it well know.

“Shamata” is the main form of meditation used by Buddhists, including the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists and, although names for it may differ, this is the one we will be considering here. If you want to know about the most prevalent and ancient form of meditation (2500 years or longer), it appears to be Shamata of one kind or another. And there are different kinds of Shamata, but they all accomplish the same function, that of allowing the mind to come to rest naturally.

Practicing Meditation

And let's be perfectly clear here that meditation is a habit that you learn and nothing instantly in itself. In other words, we do not just sit down quietly and call what we do meditation. That is called “sitting down quietly.” Traditional meditation is something that we must learn and practice. Meditation requires effort on our part and the ‘effort’ part is not meditation. That's why it is called ‘practice’. We ‘practice’ meditating. Learning meditation is trial and effort, and is not usually relaxing for beginners by any means.

Those who light a candle or some incense and retire to a cushion in a corner, close their eyes, and go deep within, only to emerge 20 minutes later refreshed and relaxed are not doing Shamata meditation. They are just relaxing a bit and we all could use that, but this is not what we are looking at here.

Shamata meditation (and I will just call it ‘meditation’ from this point onward) is a habit that has to be formed and it requires diligence and work. You may enjoy it, but I seldom did. I found it boring, irritating, exasperating, and painful much of the time. But I found playing piano scales as a kid that same way. I have trouble with rote learning. How about you?

I have never been a good student, at least in school. And I was not a good student in meditation. It took me years to develop what I hope others can do in a much shorter time: gain some proficiency at meditation. I wish someone had told me what I am trying to point out here. It would have helped.

I did not know back then that meditation practice was “practice” and not the final result. I called it “practice” like everyone else did but the word never registered as ‘practice’. I wish someone had explained to me that mediation is a habit we have to build, much like we practice music, learn our times tables, or anything else. If I had known that, I would have relaxed into that and probably gotten the hang of it a lot sooner. After all meditation is all about developing awareness by letting the mind naturally relax and rest.

Meditation is a habit that has to be learned, a habit that has to be repeated until it becomes habitual (pun intended). Meditation practice is like scaffolding that will eventually be removed once we begin to actually get a real feel for it. Once again, it is like learning music. We practice fingerings and scales until we have learned them and then we are free to just play. Practicing meditation is like that.

And I did not understand back then that the habit of meditation writ small on the cushion looms large in real life, in the rest of my day. I thought I was going for those twenty minutes of enlightenment and that if I didn’t get that or some result, my meditation was no good. I went around for years thinking that my meditation practice was lousy, when actually my meditation, with all its trying, groaning, impatience, irritation, and avoidance, was just fine. I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing. But 37 years ago when I was taught to meditate, there was no support structure that I had access to that could explain this to me. I was taught to meditate by no less than the Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche himself, but I never saw him again. I was on my own for many years.

And as for feeling bad about my meditation practice, I assumed that I was just being delinquent, failing to get what others perhaps easily got, and generally missing the point. I missed the point alright, which was that everything I was experiencing (that I tried to deny or felt ashamed of) was simply par for the course and totally normal. It is hard to learn to meditate for many of us. That’s the way it is. We are building a habit and that takes effort in the beginning.

I will close this blog by reminding readers that the whole point to meditation is to become more aware each moment in our lives. The two key concepts to proper meditation are called mindfulness and awareness. Awareness is the goal or result of meditation and mindfulness (being more mindful) is how we get there. Having after all these years learned to meditate a little I can say that the increased awareness that comes from meditation practice, however small it may be, could be all the difference in the world between ignorance and awareness. In another blog I will look at meditation in more detail.

If you have questions, I will try to answer them.

Graphic Design by Sange Wangchuk and Michael Erlewine. This is the Tibetan style of “OM.”

