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**Meditation: What is It?**

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There are many traditions and countless ways to practice meditation, and perhaps because of its polymorphous nature new meditators wonder whether they are doing it correctly. According to Roger Thomson, Ph.D., a psychologist in private practice in Chicago and a Zen meditator, there is one way to know for sure: "If you're feeling better at the end, you are probably doing it right."

Thomson makes it sound easy, but many people can't seem to get the hang of it, no matter how often they try. "It can be difficult," says Steven Hendlin, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Irvine, California. "It may be a struggle to overcome the internal chatter that we all experience."

Seeking methods for quieting that internal chatter and reducing stress are what initially attract many people to meditation. "It is a very effective stress-reducer, which is a way into the practice for many people," says Thomson, who sometimes refers clients to meditation. "If someone is struggling with feelings of anxiety, he or she may benefit from its calming aspects. And it's absolutely facilitative of mental health because it brings about a higher level of self-acceptance and insight about oneself."

But greater awareness about oneself can be a double-edged sword. Mark Epstein, M.D., a New York City psychiatrist in private practice and a meditation practitioner, extends a caution about one of the ironies of meditating. "It could actually raise your level of anxiety if there are certain feelings you are not owning." In other words, there's nowhere to hide when you're practicing "bare attention." And this, for some people, is both the good and the bad news.

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**Silence and Science**

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More new research offers additional encouragement. In a study published last year in the journal Stroke, 60 African-Americans with atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, practiced meditation for six to nine months. (African-Americans are twice as likely to die from cardiovascular disease as are whites.) The meditators showed a marked decrease in the thickness of their artery walls, while the nonmeditators actually showed an increase. The change for the meditation group could potentially bring about an 11 percent decrease in the risk of heart attack and an 8 percent to 15 percent decrease in the risk of stroke.

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Other recent research has looked at precisely what happens during meditation that allows it to cause these positive physical changes. Researchers at the Maharishi School of Management in Fairfield, Iowa, found that meditation has a pervasive effect on stress. They looked at a group of people who had meditated for four months and found that they produced less of the stress hormone cortisol. They were therefore better able to adapt to stress in their lives, no matter what their circumstances were.

Diana Adile Kirschner, Ph.D., a Philadelphia-area clinical psychologist, sometimes refers her clients to learn meditation and has seen firsthand how helpful it can be. "Not only is meditation an absolutely marvelous destressor, it helps people better relate to one another," she says. "I can tell when clients are following through with meditation. For instance, I had a couple who consistently bickered. After they started meditating, they came in less angry, more self-reflective and more loving."

So why aren't more people taking up the practice? "Because it puts us in the middle of ourselves, which is not always where we want to be," suggests Thomson. "Often, we want to fix things rather than accept them the way they are. Many of us feel as though we can't afford the time and energy to meditate, when in fact we can't afford not to."

Epstein and several other experts feel that meditation's effectiveness has to do with putting aside attachment to one's ego. As he says, "When you look directly at a star at night, it's difficult to see. But when you look away slightly, it comes into focus. I find it to be the same way with the ego and meditating. When one zeroes in on a sense of self through a practice of meditation, the self-important ego paradoxically becomes elusive. You become more aware that you are interconnected with other beings, and you can better put your own worries into their proper perspective."

A group of elderly Chinese maintain their connection by meeting every daybreak in the village common in Monterey Park, California. They swoop their arms and stretch their torsos in graceful harmony, and then stand absolutely still, simply meditating. Only puffs of warm air flow from their nostrils. All of them look vibrant and relatively young, when in fact they are well into their years.

While western scientists are still exploring exactly how and why meditation works, we already know that it has both physiological and psychological benefits. And many therapists consider it a valid complement to more traditional therapies. So perhaps we should simply take Thomson's advice—and the Tibetans' lead—and do what makes us feel better in the end.

**Questions:**

1. What are the ultimate goals of meditation?
2. What problems could emerge because of meditation?
3. According to the article, what effect can a 10-minute meditation session have on a person’s well-being?
4. What areas of the body does meditation target? Why are these target areas so essential?
5. Besides mental well-being, what other effects...
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