

‘Meditation Techniques: An Introduction for Psychiatrists’

‘Keeping body and mind together: meditation made simple’

Reported by Dr. Sarah Eagger

Introduction

The SIG has presented a meditation workshop run by Dr Sarah Eagger and Dr Larry Culliford at four College Annual Meetings. These have always proved to be very popular - perhaps with all the head-filling content of the conferences, people are interested in ‘not thinking’ for a time. The aims of this workshop are to promote the benefits of a calm and discerning mind, both in clinical practice and everyday life, by offering instruction in one or two simple meditation techniques that bring body and mind into harmony. It seeks to increase our capacity to stay focused in the present and remain attentive with equanimity, while allowing us to improve our capacity to witness and endure distress, and sustain an attitude of hope.

A workshop on meditation is indeed a good place to begin an exploration of the mind. We (SE and LC) introduce ourselves and explain that we have both been meditators for over 20 years, finding meditation to be a beneficial and useful practice that had enhanced our personal and professional lives. Even though we two have learned and practised meditation from different traditions, we feel there are underlying universal principles that are simple and easy to learn.

We ask the participants what they hope to gain from the workshop and interestingly usually only about one third have practised meditation before. Most hope to have a glimpse of the experience and to gain an understanding of how it could benefit their patients.

We are keen to emphasise that this is *not* going to be a lecture but that we shall be going through several exercises to introduce them to some basic concepts and experiences of meditation.

Like riding a bicycle

Sarah begins with some thoughts on meditation, outlining the idea that before or behind our thoughts there is a ‘ground of being’ that is silent and peaceful. Has anyone ever wondered from where his or her thoughts came? All meditation techniques are a way of returning to this place that is sometimes described as ‘bringing the mind home’. It is important to distinguish between the technique and the actual experience of meditation. It has been described as something akin to learning to ride a bicycle; one day you just suddenly ‘get it’.

Usually meditation involves focusing one’s attention away from everyday thoughts and simplifying the content of the mind. Many techniques prescribe the repetition of a word, sound, prayer, phrase or muscular activity. Others recommend focusing one's awareness within oneself, on the breath, or on an image such as a flame. What they all encourage is a passive disregard or detachment from other thoughts. There have been many studies examining the physiological changes that happen during meditation. They are all usually effects of deep relaxation, often called the ‘relaxation response’, including decreased respiratory rate, heart rate, oxygen consumption and the generation of alpha waves. However, that is not the only goal of meditators; it can also be a way to

develop awareness of the full range of their mental abilities. Most see it as a spiritual practice that brings them closer to the sense of who they really are.

Larry then tells the story of how he once attended a discourse on meditation by a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Forty people were waiting for the monk to speak. It was not until at least half way through the allotted time that he did. As each one's expectations and irritations began slowly to evaporate, the Lama spoke and said, "Meditation is just this. It is simply being with yourself".

Sitting in silence

We then do a very simple exercise of sitting in silence to observe what happens. Participants are instructed to sit quietly for a few minutes and try to find a silence in their minds, to observe the spaces between thoughts, before or beyond thoughts, and to consider where their thoughts come from. After a few minutes, they are invited to share their experiences.

Most people are aware of how their minds jump around and how it is quite difficult to still the mind. Some feel tired and a few inevitably fell asleep! Noises, and comings and goings, and the heat of the room, distract others. This is acknowledged as being one of the first hurdles of meditation, which is why it is useful to focus on something. It is difficult to stop the mind racing and jumping about. It is often called the 'monkey mind', like a monkey leaping from branch to branch. We note the ability or power of the mind to travel to the past and future and to create experiences.

We explain that whatever a person has experienced is a useful observation on how the mind works and there is no 'right or wrong'. We encourage the participants (professionals who already possess good powers of concentration) just to be curious and experiment with the techniques until they find one that suits them.

We then repeat the exercise observing what happens to thoughts as we reach for silence. We tell them that thoughts might wander but this time to watch the pattern of their thoughts. Where is the silence? What do they feel, what do they observe happening in their body, emotions and thoughts? The important thing is not the content of the experience but the level of awareness in the observation of the content of thoughts, sensations and feelings.

'Body scan' and breathing

After the group have the initial experience of sitting in silence, we then explain that most methods of meditation suggest focusing on something as a way of slowing down distracting thoughts and getting into the experience of peace. Larry then talks us through an exercise of using the mind's eye to visualise each part of the body and systematically become aware of it and relax it. This is a good way of settling into a meditation and letting go of a lot of the stress and tension built up in our muscles. Following this 'body relaxing', he then focuses us on our breathing. This is a gentle instruction of simply observing the breath and then, if we find our minds wandering, to bring awareness back to the breathing. After doing this for about ten to fifteen minutes, people appear more relaxed and usually say they enjoy the experience. We get up between each exercise and have a stretch and a jiggle around to keep the circulation moving.

Guided meditation

Using the idea that thoughts lead to an experience, Sarah uses the method of a guided meditation commentary with music to deepen further the experience of peace. She explains that being peaceful, still and quiet are really the first steps in a meditation but that with practice this leads on to other more profound experiences such as love and even bliss. In addition, as most people regard meditation as a spiritual practice, there is often a sense of feeling connected to a higher being or source of spiritual power. This is something to experiment with and come to understand through one's own experience and not to be accepted just on hearsay. With peaceful music in the background, she quietly speaks through a commentary that goes something like this:

Sitting comfortably I begin to observe my mind. I can see many thoughts coming into my mind - thoughts about the day, thoughts of other people, and thoughts about my own activity. Now I begin to step back from these thoughts and watch them. I then choose to let these thoughts go. Each one is not important to me at the moment – they are just passing through. Gradually they slow down. My mind begins to be quiet. The quiet spaces between each thought grow. I become more aware of the silence that there is before a thought even begins. In this silence, I begin to experience a deep sense of peace. Peaceful thoughts and peaceful feelings come into my mind.

I am aware that I am peaceful energy, a peaceful being. As I focus on myself, I begin to feel very relaxed and light. I am just flowing peaceful energy. I am very still... floating away...like a tiny star in a sea of peace. Waves of peace wash over me and through me...

I feel I have reached a very quiet and still place, the home of the mind. This place is like a beautiful silent room where I can just slow down, be myself and be free. This is a very special room because it has no walls, or ceiling or floor ... it is just light and peace. This is my home where there is no fear, just peace.

As I feel comfortable here in silence, I may become aware of another presence. This very benevolent, loving presence is filling me with beautiful good feelings and refreshing my tired old thoughts. I come to know this supreme energy as my friend, a constant source in an ever-changing world.

Sarah then explains that for her, meditation means turning away from the external and taking her attention within. It is here that a special peace, which does not depend on anybody or anything outside, is located. Meditation is observing the mind's thoughts and realising that they are the energy that leads to an experience. Positive thoughts can lead naturally into an experience of peace, inner strength and love. Peace is something that can be created within the mind.

A versatile message

We sometimes do a walking meditation if the room is big enough. Larry demonstrates this to the participants. It really does not look a lot different to normal walking, which is his point! What is important is walking with attention on where your feet connect with the earth and with the sensation of walking as a focus for the mind. The aim is to show that meditation is dynamic and not just confined to sitting cross-legged in a monastery. It is a versatile practice for use in every day life, walking, standing or sitting on a bus.

People sometimes ask what to do if you felt sleepy and the best advice is to go to sleep. It is much better to meditate when awake, as it is a highly attentive and skilful state of mind that keeps the mind both tranquil and alert.

‘The sound of one hand clapping’

A wide range of questions often comes up in the discussion that follows. There can be an interest in what was happening to the brain during this process. Studies have shown increased alpha rhythm and a decrease in depression and anxiety. Many physiological effects appear to relate to the autonomic nervous system.

It is not easy to define the actual act of meditation, as it can be as elusive as imagining the sound of one hand clapping. Because of its subtle nature, mediators wonder if they are doing it right and it can be difficult in the beginning, as one is struggling to overcome the internal chatter. There really is not any right or wrong but if you feel better in the end, then you are probably doing it right.

We are asked if this is of use to patients. We aim this workshop at professionals in particular, but meditation has been shown to be useful in anxiety states, stress disorders and bringing psychotherapeutic insights. It can facilitate mental health by bringing about a higher level of self-acceptance and insight about oneself. It is a form of training for the mind, a discipline that promotes acceptance rather than denial.

Recently there has been evidence for the effectiveness of a therapy known as Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (DBT), which uses Mindfulness Meditation as its central tool in the treatment of borderline personality disorders. It is generally thought best not to use meditation in acute psychotic states.

Finally, we outline some of the basic principals of the practice of meditation; that it is best when done on a regular basis, quite useful to do with other people, and often invaluable when done under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

References and resources

Cary Barbor. The Science of Meditation. Psychology Today – May, June 2001

Larry Culliford: Psychiatric Bulletin – Meditation 1991, 15, 295, and Meditation: Bringing the Mind Home 1994, 18, 366.

Larry Culliford: Love, Healing & Happiness: spiritual wisdom for secular times, Winchester, O Books, 2007

Sarah Egger Introducing Meditation. BHMA - Tapes for Health series in BHMA shop <http://www.bhma.org/>

Mike George: In the Light of Meditation. O books 2004

Mike George and Sister Jayanti. Meditation for Extremely Busy People (boxed set) BKWSU Publications 1997 www.bkpublications.com

Thich Nhat Hanh: The Miracle of Mindfulness. Rider London 1991

BK Jayanti: Practical Meditation – Spiritual Yoga for the Mind. Brahma Kumaris information services 2006 www.bkpublications.com

Jon Kabat-Zinn Wherever *you go, there you are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Hyperion, New York 1994

Mindfulness Meditation audiotapes: www.mindfulnessstapes.com