The Laughter of a Man as He Passes By

We hardly ever listen to the sound of a dog's bark or to the cry of a child or the laughter of a man as he passes by. We separate ourselves from everything, and then from this isolation look and listen to all things. It is this separation that is so destructive, for in that lies all conflict and confusion. If you listened to the sound you would be riding on it— or, rather, the sound would carry you across the valley and over the hill. The beauty of it is felt only when you and the sound are not separate, when you are part of it. Meditation is the ending of the separation, but not by any action of will or desire. Meditation is not a separate thing from life; it is the very essence of life, the very essence of daily living. To listen to the bells, to hear the laughter of a peasant as he walks by with his wife, to listen to the sound of the bell on the bicycle of a little girl as she passes by; it is the whole of life, and not just a fragment of it, that meditation opens. (Jiddu Krishnamurti, 1971)

I offer the following, primarily based on my personal meditation experiences, beginning with initial trained in mantra-based Transcendental Meditation (TM) in 1978 and six weeks intensive TM advanced residential “Siddha” training, 1978-79; regular meditation, +/- 20 minutes of TM, twice daily, until the late 1990’s; continuing meditation, at varying frequencies and varying lengths of sessions; and incorporating a Christian faith-based mantra, along with my TM Sanskrit mantra. Many students and clients have found my instruction in “strategic” and “tactical” or “spot” meditation (mantra-, breath-based & mindfulness forms) to be helpful. Also, I have incorporated Gestalt, cognitive-behavioral and systematic desensitization with meditation strategies to treat trauma.

Western saying: “Don't just stand there, do something.”
Buddhist saying: “Don't just do something, stand there.”

What I present might conflict, be incomplete or inconsistent with teachings of truly enlightened meditation masters or with your personal or religious beliefs. Please accept the following as derived from my personal and professional experiences, and trust your own experiences.

Note: this writing is not a detailed “how to meditate” instruction. I strongly recommend that you:
*Receive face-to-face training with an experienced meditator
*Experience a few different approaches, practice meditating a number of times and “settle-in” with one or two meditation forms that seem a best fit for you.
*Review with an experienced meditator your experience to discuss your meditations and the positives as well as any issues or difficulties that might have arisen
*Receive follow-up instruction, as needed, to adjust or “tweak” your meditation practice.

Just What is Meditation? A definition of meditation from a medical dictionary ("Meditation," n.d., accessed January 27, 2016, http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Meditation): "Meditation is a practice of concentrated focus upon a sound, object, visualization, the breath, movement or attention itself in order to increase awareness of the present moment, reduce stress, promote relaxation, and enhance personal and spiritual growth.”

Alan Watts (1997, p. 95): “Meditation is the discovery that the point of life is always arrived at in the immediate moment.” There is the process or technique of meditating; how to be fully present in the
moment of the now. It is important to note that all forms of meditation emphasize awareness: in all meditations there is a dwelling upon something.” However, the specific nature of that “dwelling upon something”, or awareness, varies (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971, p. 10). Allan Watts: You “simply watch everything going on without attempting to change it in any way, without judging it, without calling it good or bad. Just watch it. That is the essential process of meditation.” (p. 95)

Osho (1976, p. 14) said, “People are so unaware of the present. People are not in the present at all. That’s how they are missing life. Life is the present, and you are not in the present. To be present—is to be in meditation. That’s all meditation is about. To be present is to be prayerful.”

Meditation is not simply a technique to reduce stress and promote relaxation, though it can be extremely effective in doing so. It brings us to the moment of the now in a way that few other experiences can. And in the process of arriving in the moment of the now, we are in awe of the immensity of that experience. At such moments, nothing else matters; we have transcended or moved beyond whatever is “the else”. And that is possible by being, truly and completely, here, in this the present moment.

*Jiddu Krishnamurti emphasized: “Meditation is both the means and the end.”
*Allan Watts: “When we dance, the journey itself is the point…And exactly the same thing is true in meditation. Meditation is the discovery that the point of life is always arrived at in the immediate moment.”

Finally, meditation is not separate from life. For example: in Zen Buddhism, "meditation is practiced in four ways. First, your mind and body are still. This is the source of all your Zen actions.” (Senzaki & McCandless, 1953, p. 53). And, there are three additional ways that meditation is practiced: “...your body is still but your mind moves, as in reading or listening to a lecture...your mind is still but your body moves, as in walking... your mind and body move as you do your work in daily life.” (Ibid.)

**Varieties of Meditation.** Most experts describe two basic varieties (Goleman, 1977; Naranjo & Ornstein, 1976): (1) **concentrative**, and (2) **opening-up awareness of the external environment**.

(1) **Concentrative type meditation** involves a restriction of awareness; attention is focused on the object of the meditation or the repetition of a word, e.g., there is an attempt to restrict awareness to a single, unchanging source of stimulation or attention for a definite period of time, e.g., a “one-pointedness of the mind” -- constantly bringing back one’s wandering mind to this one focus.

**Instructions** range from active assertion of will to stick with the target object of attention and to resist any wandering, to a passive mode -- “simply regenerating the target object when it is lost in the flow of awareness.”

*Mantra-based meditation is one of the most common concentrative meditations.* A mantra is a word or phrase that is repeated, time and again, during a specific meditation period of time in which time is set-aside specifically for this purpose.

- **The actual selection of a mantra** is determined by what specific form of mantra-based meditation you practice, i.e., in a mantra-based form of meditation that is not necessarily part of a traditional type such as Hindu- or Buddhist-based, the basic instruction is to select a mantra that is easily repeated, pleasant sounding and/or that might have special significance to the meditator. This is the mantra meditation form I instruct clients in: they choose their own mantra. The preference: choose a single-word (i.e., “joy,” “peace,” “love,” “faith,” “hope,” “serenity,” “Ohm” or “Aum,”) or a short phrase (i.e., “Peace begins with me,” “This too shall pass,” “My Lord, my God.”

- **Instruction on how to repeat/focus on the mantra** is basically the same: anytime you are aware that you are no longer focused on the mantra, attention is returned to the mantra.
The impact of the selected mantra can be altered by such factors as: changing the length of time that each syllable of the mantra is repeated, the pause time between repetitions, how “loudly” you are thinking the mantra, if you are repeating the mantra silently or out loud, and if you are meditating alone or in the presence of others.

*Breath-counting* is another common concentrative form of meditation.

“*Put your own oxygen mask on first.*” (Airplane instruction to passengers with children)

I use this instruction on airplanes as a metaphor to offer perhaps the single most essential reminder to clients -- to take care of yourself first, if you are going to be of any help to others. For many clients, this metaphor is an informal “mantra” that they remember and repeat at various times. This metaphor reminds us of the central importance of an intake of sufficient oxygen. Also, it is illustrative of the centrality of breathing to self-regulation, self-enhancement and the practice of all forms of meditation.

It is important to note that there are various strategies with differing emphases regarding breathing that are important in all forms of meditation, such as:

- Abdominal/diaphragmatic/belly/deep breathing versus more shallow breathing
- Focusing on breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth
- Having a specific focus along with the breathing, such as “breathing in calmness” and “breathing out stress” or selecting other foci of attention with the flow of breathing

A classic meditation breath count sequence that is widely used in Yoga and that I introduce many clients to (see Brown & Gerbarg, 2012):

- 2-4-2-6- sequence: pause for two counts, in-breath for four counts, pause for two counts, out-breath for six counts

A variation on the 2-4-2-6 sequence that a number of clients find that they prefer if they find that the six-count on the out-breath is “too long” and they start running out of breath:

- 2-3-2-5 sequence: 2 (pause), 3 (in-breath), 2 (pause), 5 (out-breath)

It is, of course, most important to find a breathing strategy(ies) that works best for you.

(2) Perhaps the most common “opening-up of awareness” meditation is mindfulness.

Yogism: “You can observe a lot by watching.” (as in Yogi Berra, NY Yankee Hall of Famer…☺)

- While based in principles of Buddhism, mindfulness meditation can be engaged in without the need to study or practice Buddhism.
- There are variations in current Western definitions of mindfulness. However, basically it refers to “the skill of attending fully to an experience (e.g., thought, emotion, action, sensation), in the moment (as it is happening) in an open and accepting manner… intended to increase the practitioner’s awareness of an experience as it is occurring and without judgment. When we are in a mindful state, we notice a thought, an emotion, an action/reaction, or physical experience as it occurs, and without attaching judgment to the experience as being, for example, positive versus negative, beneficial versus detrimental, or healthy versus unhealthy…

  - Traditional practices include: *mindful breathing* (simply focus awareness on your breathing in and out, with no attempt to alter the breath in any way), *walking*, *eating*, or *sitting* meditations; *yoga*; and *body scans* (moving from one part of the body to the next; focusing attention to movements making up a larger activity, such as attending to steps when going from the car to the house, or walking the dog, washing dishes, gardening, or brushing teeth). For example, when washing dishes, we may notice how the water flows over our hands, and then shift our attention to the feel of the sponge against our skin or the pressure involved in grasping a cup…full attention to
the toothbrush as it moves from tooth to tooth is another opportunity to practice mindfulness, as is any daily activity.” (Mizuki, 2013: p. 146). Burdick (2013) describes 111 mindfulness tools, techniques and activities, i.e., a very detailed description of mindful eating. (A simple mindfulness eating strategy is to fully put your attention/awareness on the experience of bringing the food from the plate to your mouth, the complete process of fully chewing, and/or the entire act of swallowing.)

How Long Should Each Meditation Session Last?

“You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes a day -- unless you are too busy. Then you should sit for an hour.” [Zen Proverb]

There is an array of advice how long a meditation session should be. The variables are many. How expert of a meditator are you? What is your general level of health—physically, mentally, emotionally? What kind of meditation do you do? How frequently do you meditate? How stressful, and how fulfilling, is your life overall? Does your life include other regular activities that help reduce daily or built-up anxiety, such as exercise, relaxing hobbies, prayer/faith, etc.?

TM devotees meditate 20 minutes, twice daily. This was my daily routine for +/- 20 years that I personally found to be very impactful and meaningful – as have millions of other TM practitioners. The most common recommendations of other meditation forms seem to range between 15 and 45 minutes or so, and in some approaches up to an hour. Typically, most people find it easiest to begin with shorter times and progress until arriving at a longer, more optimal length of time to practice regularly.

Bottom line: you need to find out what length, frequency, time of day and specific type(s) of meditation work for you. I have found, and observed in a number of clients, that a range of length of time for “optimal” regular meditation is between 15 and 25 minutes, twice daily. On the other hand, some people achieve at least some benefits from meditating as little as 2-4 minutes a day, to relieve recent stress.

“What you put attention on grows in your life.” Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

Awareness is like a spotlight; it illuminates and nourishes the subject of your awareness. If you put your awareness on negatives, those grow in your life; awareness on positives grow those in your life. [Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt Therapy, considers awareness in and of itself to be curative.]

The Golden Mean: In philosophy and many religions, the golden mean is the desirable middle between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency. For example:

* Aristotelian view: Courage is a virtue; if taken to excess, it manifests as recklessness; if there is a deficiency in courage, it manifests as cowardice.
* Buddhist philosophy: the concept of “the Middle Way”
* Confucius philosophy: “Doctrine of the Mean”
* Taoism: the “Way of the Golden Mean”
* Islam: “… the best choice is the middle ground/the golden mean.”
* Christianity: emphasizes moderation: i.e., “whoever fears God will avoid all extremes” (Ecclesiastes 7:18). Contemplative-based Christianity: “Avoid extremes of heat and cold; guard against too much and too little in reading, prayer, or social involvement…keep to the middle path.” (Johnson, 1973)

In my experience, the practice of meditation:

* Promotes “balance” and reducing “extremes” of emotions/thinking/actions
* At its most basic level is a strategy & technique, to reduce stress and promote relaxation
* Facilitates being more fully, more completely, in the present moment -- irrespective of what else is going on now (the present), or might happen (in the future), or did happen (in the past).
And for adept meditators, the regular practice of meditation can facilitate a “transcending” that goes beyond routine every-day experience.

“Anxiety is the gap between now and then.” Fritz Perls (1971, p. 3)
You are here, at this moment, but your attention is on something that will or might happen later—in the future, or on something that had happened in the past—and to focus on that future or past event or possible event, rather than being fully present in the moment of the now, is what creates anxiety.

A monk was traveling in a horse-drawn wagon with a companion. They were going to arrive many hours later at a destination where they were going to be confronted by a very angry and hostile crowd of people. While the companion was fretting, growing increasingly agitated at what they were going to be facing several hours later, the monk was playing his flute, seemingly enraptured by playing and enjoying the music and somehow oblivious to the approaching danger. The companion finally said, “How can you possibly just lie there, playing your flute, while we are going to face this serious danger in several hours?” The monk replied: “If I spend these several hours worrying so much about what we are going to be facing when we arrive in several hours, will the journey be any shorter, and will the danger that we are going to face be any less?”

Meditation as a (Non-Religious) “Technique” to Reduce Stress and Enhance Relaxation, Or with a Spiritual/Religious Centrality

Meditation that Does Not Necessarily Have Any Religious or Spiritual Basis
Meditation can be practiced from strictly a non-religious perspective as a technique to minimize stress and maximize relaxation. For example, Herbert Benson (1985) coined the phrase “the relaxation response”, a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional response to stress (rather than the typical “fight or flight” response). Benson contended that there were a variety of methods that can elicit the Relaxation Response, to include visualization, meditation, breathing techniques, yoga, massage or by removing yourself from everyday thoughts and by choosing a word, sound, phrase, prayer or by focusing on your breathing. Also, Rick Heller (2015) cogently describes “Secular Buddhism” that “removes the faith or religion” from the practice of Buddhism-based meditation. Also, he eloquently describes metta-loving kindness meditation towards self and others.

Meditation with a Spiritual/Religious Core or Thrust.

“Meditation is listening to the Divine within.” Edgar Cayce
The practice of meditation:
* Can be applied to one’s prayer life to heighten or amplify one’s prayer life and connection with God or with a higher power.
* In and of itself, can contain no religious content per se, or can include any religious element that the meditator might choose to include.
* Can be traced back some 3,000 years to Hinduism
* Is a vital, long-standing practice in many of the world’s religions such as in Islam, Sufism, Jewish Kabbalah, the Eastern Orthodox Catholic church, Taoism, Buddhism …
* Is a central element in Christian “contemplative” prayer, also described as “Christian meditation,” and as “centering prayer.” (Merton, 1971). Such prayer places strong emphasis on “interior silence”, and “getting in touch with God who dwells within each of us through meditation-like practice.” (Johnston, 1973)

Over the past several centuries, it is my understanding that the mainstream of western religions has tended to not provide much instruction on how to pray. Rather, one typically is given particular prayers or have certain prayers or scripture suggested with an emphasis on reciting or repeating such. Oftentimes, there
can be little additional instruction about *how to actually pray or deal with distracting thoughts* -- other than urging you to concentrate harder, and focus on connecting with God through his son, Jesus Christ.

Conversely, congruent with Christian centering/contemplative prayer, *it is possible to apply meditation principles and dynamics to prayers* for the purpose of *enhancing prayer life*. For example, when you pray and have distracting thoughts, to incorporate the meditation strategy of maintaining a neutral awareness about distracting thoughts occurring and gently returning to a focus on the prayer words.

Some directions for Christian centering prayer (see *contemplativeoutreach.org*):

*Choose a sacred word to be the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within, i.e., “God,” “Lord,” etc.*

*Sit comfortably, with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.*

*When distracted by your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.*

*At the end of the prayer period, remain silent, eyes closed for a couple of minutes.*

If so desired, you the meditator *can incorporate a mantra of any religious element of your choosing into the meditation*—i.e., “God”, “Jesus”, “my Lord and my God”, “Jesus is my Savior,” “Allah”, “Serenity”, “Savior,” “Abba”, “Shalom”, “faith”, “Let go, Let God”, “Lord let Thy will be done, not mine”…

Please note: there are Christian denominations and writers who consider practices that involve “emptying one’s mind” (which, by the way, meditation is not), “being still,” and “not thinking” (which are hallmarks of many meditation approaches, to include contemplative prayer), *in an attempt to reach God, are dangerous, occult and unbiblical, not in harmony with Scripture, not Christocentric*, e.g., the meditation focus “should be on God, on God’s word…” [i.e., Matt Slick, *carm.org/centering prayer*]. From this perspective, meditation *per se* or meditation focusing inward *to enhance one’s connection with God is not condoned. If this is your belief, meditation would not be acceptable.

However, for many people who have strong religious beliefs, in my experience and perspective it is possible to consider meditation as either a *non-religious or religious method of stress reduction/relaxation*. For example, *the choice can be yours*, in a mantra- or breath-based form of meditation, to:

*Utilize religious or spiritual words or phrases if that is acceptable to you – or, for example:*

*Incorporate a mantra that has no religious or spiritual meaning, i.e., “Peace,” “Happiness,” “Calm”.*

**Maintaining the focus of your meditation**

“Smile, breathe and go slowly. Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.” Thich Nhat Hanh (1997, p. 8)

“I can’t meditate, because I have too many thoughts.” Well, if this were an insurmountable obstacle, extremely few people could meditate well, in that thoughts literally are unceasing, in most everyone. “No matter what the thought, without judging it in any way, once again gently say to yourself, “Thinking,” and return your attention to the movement of your breath [i.e. or mantra, etc.]. This process of waking up and coming back to nowness will happen over and over…If we stay steady on our seat, we will see that all thoughts, happy and sad, simply float up to the surface and then fade away.” Cyndi Lee (2004, pp. 20-21).

- It is *not* the *absence of thought* that is essential to meditation; it is *our attitude and reactions towards our thoughts or towards anything else that distracts us from the meditation focus.*
Transcendental Meditation describes the necessity to develop an attitude of “neutral awareness” regarding any “distractions” that take you away or divert you from the focus of your meditation.

I describe developing a “gentle rhythm” between (a) simply being aware that your attention is going to a distraction (thoughts, sounds, temperature, smell, bodily sensations…) and (b) gently returning to your meditation focus (mantra, breath…)

I find that clients can relate to two music metaphors I describe to illustrate how it is possible to maintain a meditation focus while simultaneously having thoughts about something else:

- **Playing the piano.** The left hand plays the base notes, which can be considered like a mantra or other meditation focus; simultaneously, the right hand plays the melody line, which can be considered to be like distractions that are not the meditation focus—and you are able to do both at the same time.
- **Playing a bass guitar in a band.** The bass guitar repeatedly plays a series of notes or guitar licks, which is like repeating the mantra; simultaneously, the rest of the band plays melody and other notes/sounds, which is like the “noise” or distractions. And both are occurring simultaneously.

**Four Phases of Meditation Practice**

After we had a brief (+/− 5 minutes) meditation during a session because she was particularly stressed that day, a chronically anxious client said “Now that I have meditated, my mind is more relaxed, but my body is still very tense.” [This is not at all surprising and needs to be understood in the context of what I have come to experience and describe as “four phases of meditation practice.”]

It is important to note that stress is not only located “in your mind” or “in your thoughts” or “in your emotions.” Over time, stress/anxiety also accumulate and become entrenched physically in your body. The exact physical location of such accumulated stress and anxiety varies within each of us. Typically, such stress is manifested as tenseness or physical anxiety in one or more areas: the head, jaws, mouth, lips, other facial muscles (wrinkled brow or forehead), shoulder(s), back, chest, stomach, legs. In my pre-meditative younger days, I would shake and move my legs like crazy, often while sitting and while standing. And I would smile incessantly, no matter the occasion or how I was actually feeling. Later, I realized that both were physical manifestations of internal jumpiness and lack of inner calmness.

**Meditation Phase I:** During this initial phase, immediate or relatively recent stress is released. Typically, this is experienced as a lessening or “letting go” of thinking/cognitive agitation and a noticeable “quieting of the mind.” *This is primarily the initially felt positive impact of meditating – helping to “clear away” relatively recent stress that has occurred. [Arguably it is ideal to meditate twice daily—once early after waking, to clear your mind and begin your day “fresh”; and later in the day to clear your mind of stresses that have built-up so that you are in a more relaxed state for the last several hours of waking time.]*

Typically, relatively recent stress is noticeable as recurring/persistent/jumping around of thoughts that intrude upon or distract from your meditation focus. [Indeed, TM teaches that thoughts that occur during meditation are stress being released.] Rather than being self-critical or agitated that such thoughts are occurring and thinking that “this meditation is not working,” it is vital to neutrally accept and not be self-critical that such thoughts are happening during meditation: (1) they are indicators of, or the actual release of, (mostly more recent) stress and (2) becoming agitated or preoccupied with distracting negative or positive thoughts will take you away from the focus of your meditation.

**Meditation Phase II:** Once immediate or relatively recent stress has been released, meditation begins to facilitate the release of some of the stress that has been accumulated physically in your body – which is more resistant to being released than mind/thought related stress—because it has become embedded or
entrenched physically. Hence, physically embedded stress tends to be released after the more recent stress is released through thoughts and accompanied by the calming that happens through the meditation focus.

These processes that occur during Phase I and Phase II (and in phases III and IV) are not mutually exclusive but interconnected; both can be happening, to some extent, simultaneously. As a general rule, the release of stress through thoughts and the mind happens more initially, and the release of accumulated physically embedded and deep-seated stress happens more subsequently.

Typically, if during your practice of meditation, there is not ultimately a noticeable promotion of calming, nor sufficient reduction of your physically embedded stress, such can be attributed to:

- Not being sufficiently “neutral” in your awareness of distractions while meditating, and thus not gently returning sufficiently to your meditation focus,
- Not meditating frequently enough,
- Not meditating long enough during the meditation sessions, and/or
- Not having meditated over a sufficiently long period of time.

It is possible over time to accumulate such profound physically embedded anxiety/tenseness that, in addition to meditation, your body might require other strategies to directly impact on physically embedded stress, i.e., Yoga, physical activity, chiropractic manipulation, massage -- & perhaps anti-anxiety (anxiolytic) medication to directly impact on physiological markers of severe embedded stress.

**Meditation Phase III.** Once immediate or more recent stress is released, and physically embedded stress is being released sufficiently, it is possible to move into phase III. Peace, calmness, quiet begin to accumulate physically in the body. To the degree that you achieve entering and deepening this phase, you begin to develop a “reservoir of peace/calmness” physically that you, literally, “carry within you.” And such begins to permeate your thinking, emotions and body. This development allows you to better prevent accumulating new stress and better maintain an increased level of tranquility that permeates within you physically, cognitively and emotionally. You are learning to increasingly be able to “quiet your mind” and possibly for increasingly longer moments of time…

*For many meditators, this is the extent of the meditation experience. Such a level of meditating becomes a very effective stress reduction/relaxation practice that facilitates the enhancing of one’s daily functioning, coping and stress management.*

**Meditation Phase IV.** “Silence is not an absence, but a presence. Not an emptiness but repletion. A filling-up.” Anne D LeClair (2009, p. 34).

For adept meditators, a further ability is attained in which it is possible to have yet an additional depth or levels of experiences.

“…just watch your mind as if the mind is nothing but a traffic of thoughts or a film—a movie passing on the TV screen. You are just a neutral observer. This is the discipline. And if this discipline is complete, watching comes very easily, and watching is meditation. Through watchfulness mind disappears, thoughts disappear. And that moment is the most blessed moment: when you are fully awake and there is not a single thought, just a silent sky of your inner being.” Osho (2011, p. 9)

For such meditators, you can find yourself increasingly being able to “let go” of the range of intrusions and experience of being here in your routine physical presence. Indeed, you are able to increasingly experience longer and more frequent moments of “quieting you mind” and “transcending” the omnipresent being and awareness of here.
**Transcendence.** At such moments, if you are religious or spiritual, you might experience what feels like an intimate or profound connection with God or with a higher power or life force. Others can experience “being beyond the confines of your individual physical presence” and closer in touch with a more transcendent life force.

It is very challenging for many people to fully attain Phase IV and readily achieve “transcendence” (though partial or intermittent attainment certainly can occur). Persons able to increasingly do so seem to “exude calmness in any storm”, in the face of the stresses and challenges inherent in everyday living in most or all aspects of life. They, indeed, reflect an inner state of profound peace and bliss…

With regular and proper meditation technique and practice, certainly you can hope to move towards at least beginning to enter phase IV, moving back and forth between phases III and IV. And with even more practice, able to attain more frequent and greater ability to “let go” and at least dip into transcending moments that are both quite exhilarating and profoundly calming. While difficult to fully achieve, entering at least somewhat into phase IV of meditation can be a life-enhancing journey, to at least dip into and out of. This increases your ability to (a) minimize the negative effects of stress and (b) maximize the positive effects of peace, balance and joy.

It is important to note that there are persons able to achieve substantial enhancements of peace, calmness, joy, cognitions, emotions and physical presence -- and yet who do not meditate. For example, those who are so devoted to a religion, spiritual practice or beliefs that their very beings are infused with joy or bliss. And others whose profound dedication to a “cause” or “reason for being/for existing” permeates their very being to the point of feeling markedly content and fulfilled day in and out…

**Applying Meditation Dynamics Very Practically, Outside of Meditation Sessions**

*Nānā ka maka; ho'olohe ka pepeiao; pa’a ka waha. “Observe with the eyes; listen with the ears; shut the mouth.” Thus one learns. (Pukui, 1983, p. 248)*

Through practicing meditation regularly, you can develop a practical dynamic in your daily life to be able to better focus -- and minimize competing thoughts intruding and interfering with your preferred current focus. For example, you are at work, completing a work task while simultaneously thinking about an argument you had at home last night. You can learn to apply the meditation technique of:

- maintaining a focus on that work task, while simultaneously
- being aware of yet maintaining a neutral awareness about distracting thoughts related to the argument the night before, and gently returning to the work task focus, and repeating as needed.

A practical “pad and pen technique” to address:

- **Distractions while meditating:** If while meditating you are being distracted by an extremely persistent thought about something that will need to be done (i.e., going to the store to buy x, paying a bill…): have a pad and pen nearby; take a momentary pause during your meditation to quickly make a note about the persistent thought. You will be much more likely to “let go” of that persistent thought -- because you know that you will have a written reminder to read later. [For the record: my TM instructors did not approve of this strategy. Of course, you must be vigilant not to rely too quickly or too frequently on interrupting your meditation to write down recurring thoughts -- or you will impede your ability to learn how to “let go” of thoughts…]

- **Intrusive thoughts while trying to sleep:** This technique also is helpful when trying to go to or return to sleep. Your head is busy with a repeating thought that typically involves something you
want to remember, or need to remember to do. Simply jot the thought down. Because you know you have a note of the thought, you can more easily let go of it for now. And if the thought persists, you might have to elaborate some on the initial note that you wrote.

Breathing and The Prevention of Panic Attacks/Severe Anxiety

“If you want to conquer the anxiety of life, live in the moment, live in the breath.” Amit Ray (2010, p. 62)

There are various strategies with differing emphases regarding breathing, such as:

- abdominally-based versus more shallow breathing
- breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth
- focusing on “breathing in calmness” and “breathing out stress”

It is, of course, important to find a breathing strategy(ies) that works best for you. As mentioned earlier:

- A “7/11” breathing technique has been found extremely helpful by many of my clients. It is unique in that it involves fairly rapid breath counting of 7-in and 11-out breaths (Tyrrell).
- A classic meditation breath count sequence that is widely used in Yoga and that I introduce clients to (see Brown & Gerbarg, 2012): *in*-breath for four counts; *pause* for two counts; *out*-breath for six counts, *pause* for two counts. Note: Some clients report that a six-count out-breath is too long, and we have modified to a 3-2-5-2 count – as long as the out- is longer than the in-breath.
- A form of mindful meditation is to *simply focus on your breathing* in- and out-, without trying to change or adjust your breathing in any way. Any thoughts or other distractions are neutrally recognized and you return to being as fully aware as possible of your breathing in- and out-

Rather than allowing our responses to an event affect our breathing, we can learn instead to let our breathing change our relationship to the event. *The breath is the invisible bridge between our mind and our body.* (Cyndi Lee, 2004, p. 28)

An antidote to Panic Attacks: No matter what breathing strategy is utilized, in my experience by far a most important factor is: *if you breath out more than you breath in, then it will be impossible to have a panic attack or significantly increased anxiety. This always will be the case—if you begin breathing out more than breathing in before the anxiety has risen too highly to where there is no turning back. Being aware of your in-breathing is important—and it is vital to be aware of your out-breathing.*

10-Point Scale. Helpful to being aware that your anxiety is rising and an intervention is needed now: I instruct clients to utilize a 10-point scale of anxiety (that I have adapted from J. Wolpe’s 100 point subjective units of distress or SUDs scale) (Wolpe, 1969): You need to be able to be aware of:

- What is your baseline level of anxiety (or other troubling symptom)? On a scale 1 to 10, with 1 minimal anxiety and 10 anxiety that is “off the charts” panic, *typically what is the level of your anxiety more often than not in any given day*—i.e., your baseline of anxiety might be a 4 or 5 or . . .?
- If you know your baseline of anxiety, you can “check” or “scan” yourself at any time – your thinking, breathing, level of tenseness in the body. You can become aware of your current level of anxiety, and how this anxiety level of compares with your baseline level.
- If your current level of anxiety is above your baseline of anxiety, it may be prudent to immediately engage in a “spot” or “tactical” meditation or another strategy to stop your anxiety level from rising further before it gets to an 8 or so. Or else your anxiety probably will rise to a panic attack or extremely heightened level of anxiety -- no matter what you do at that point.
Use of External Stimuli to Enhance Meditating

Some people who are learning to meditate, or are regular meditators, find the use of “external” stimuli to be helpful to their meditating. These include:

- **Music/Bells or Chimes/Constant Sounds/White Noise**: a “noise maker/noise canceller” or soothing music/sounds like waves or running water, to turn on while meditating. For some meditators, such a pleasant, constant sound helps to mask out distractions and facilitate deeper immersion in the meditation experience.

- **Beads/Prayer Beads/Semi-precious or Smooth Stones**: used as a practical aide to facilitate repeating a mantra or other meditation focus; also some are considered to have special meaning or significance or impact on the meditator.

- **Guided” meditations**: a narrator verbally leads or “guides” a meditator by “calmly walking you through” a meditation, typically accompanied by soothing music or sounds.

- **Incense/candles**: if meditation typically is practiced with the usage of incense or candles, such smells become intimately associated with the meditation experience and facilitate entering into and staying with the meditation state.

- **Applications (“Apps”).** There are hundreds of applications (“apps”) that can be downloaded from the web. Many of them are cost-free, others available at very low cost or offer some elements free and other elements for a cost. There are apps with music or relaxing sounds, verbal guidance or other instruction to facilitate meditation, yoga, progressive relaxation, etc. For example:
  - **Breathe2relax**: a portable stress management tool (no cost) with detailed information on the effects of stress on the body, and instructions/practice exercise to help learn the stress management skill of diaphragmatic breathing.
  - **Calm – meditate, sleep, relax, breathe** (calm.com): is free for iPhone and iPad and has been highly praised by several of my clients. It includes verbally guided meditation sessions accompanied by optional background scenes and sounds—beaches, meadows, pouring rain…
  - **There are a number of websites that offer independent descriptions/evaluations of recommended apps**, i.e., “The Eight Best Apps for a Calm, Focused Mind,” HuffPost.com, 12.12.13. See also: “The 10 Best Meditation Apps” at independent.co.uk -- all available to buy from the Apple Store (itunes.apple.com) or Google Play (https://play.google.com).

Personally, I prefer to meditate “the old-fashioned way”—just me alone, in a quiet space, silently repeating my mantra. However: what is most important is for you to find out what is most conducive to your effective meditating.

“Spot” or “Tactical” Meditations

There are times when a full-length meditation is not practical. I have found with many clients what I describe as relatively brief “tactical” or “spot” meditations can be very helpful. [Please note that spot meditations do not substitute for the regular practice of full-length meditations.] Some examples:

- **While driving and getting stuck in a traffic jam or at a railway crossing**: Reframe a negative as a positive –as an opportunity.

  I saw a businessman, “Jack,” who had increasing difficulty with rising levels of anxiety. Our treatment included practicing mantra and breath-count meditation on a daily basis. One particularly problematic experience for Jack was that he had to drive to several sites in the city each day, and invariably would find himself stuck waiting for a train to pass (it passed through several times daily across two major roads in the downtown area, and inevitably a few times weekly he would get stuck having to wait). Repeatedly, he found himself getting very irritated and impatient, waiting for the train to pass by, and he would fill his head with such thoughts as “this damned train,” “oh, no, not the train again,” “I am going to be late...” and impatiently craning his neck to see when the last car in the train was approaching so
that he could be ready to quickly put his car in motion to hurry on his way to his next appointment. And, typically, he would continue to be impatient and irritated even after the train had passed by and he was again on his way. And this happened several times weekly.

Reframe: Jack was encouraged to consider it as an opportunity to have to wait for the train to pass (or being stuck in heavy traffic) – an opportunity to do a “spot” meditation while sitting in his car waiting for the train to pass. He puts his hands on the steering wheel, eyes open and neutrally observes the train cars as they are passing, while internally repeating his mantra or breath count meditation until the train has passed. He then has several seconds to finish his mantra, and proceed across the tracks.

Thus, instead of sitting and stewing about being “stuck” in his car, and growing increasingly irritated and anxious, he has taken the opportunity to pause, focus on his mantra and calmly meditate for several minutes. And so, when the train has passed and he can proceed, he is calmer and more refreshed. He has taken the opportunity to transform what had been a several-times-weekly disruptive, anxiety-provoking occurrence into several minutes of calming and centering…

- **Being late to meet someone or late for an appointment or meeting, etc.**

“Enjoy the way as much as the destination.” Sakshi Chetana (2011).

How often do you find yourself running late and you know that you are not going to make it on time for ________________ (fill in the blank…). And what happens is that you are so worried/anxious/exasperated that you are going to be late, that not only are you late, you also prolong and/or heighten an agitated state of anxiety as you hurry along. And so you arrive -- both late, and even more upset at being late!

Jack the businessman had a similar experience every time he got stuck waiting for the train to pass by — he knew he was going to be late and he worried and fretted about being late the whole way. And since he knew that there was nothing he could do to not be late (other than speed as fast as he possibly could, and get yet further agitated due to driving too fast and realizing that he still would be late anyway…), he would arrive both late and discombobulated.

However, he learned that once the train had passed and he had re-started driving to his destination, if he continued to focus on negative thoughts about being late, and repeating over and over in his head what he already knew— “I am going to be late” -- this would simply and inevitably fuel his anxiety and irritation yet even more.

Alternatively, rather than focusing on the fact that he would be late, driving too fast and fueling his anxiety yet further, he learned to re-start or to continue repeating his mantra after the train had passed and while he continued driving along toward his destination. This kept his anxiety from increasing and helped him calm himself.

The above is possible by focusing – not on the “then” of the destination that is yet to be reached. Rather, to focus on the “now”, the present moment, the mantra/breath count; to focus fully on the act of driving, mindful of the driving along towards one’s destination. This focus will center you in the present moments and take you away from the anxiety build-up that would be inevitable by focusing on what you will be facing at the destination…

- **Finding yourself “stuck” in a meeting or with someone you do not want to be with, or find yourself staying longer in a social situation than you wish to:**

The same dynamics utilized at and after the railway crossing apply. Since we can simultaneously have at least two different foci of attention, you can keep a more “distant” attention on the other person or what is going on in the room -- while simultaneously and silently focusing on your mantra or breath count. Then, if you have to say something, you can, followed by silently returning to your meditation.
• **Calming tactic to better engage in interacting with your partner:**

“*When the war inside of you, meets the war inside of me, the words are only a gun... When the peace inside of you, meets the peace inside of me, the war is over before it can start.*” Bob Silma (2014)

A client, Martin, had worked with me over two months about his anger and impatience towards his wife. Our sessions included learning and regularly practicing mantra and breath-count meditation. Even so, one recurring problem persisted. When arriving home from work, Martin too frequently would find himself having irritable and argumentative exchanges with his wife. He would tell his wife that he was aware of his agitation (and he would encourage her to let him know if she was experiencing his being agitated). When this awareness and “owning” it to his wife was not sufficient to allow him to change to a more productive and less agitated demeanor and words, he would tell her that he was going to take a five minute “meditation time out.” And, they both agreed that she could point out if he were becoming agitated. Martin then would go to the bedroom, do a spot meditation for 3 or 4 minutes, and then return to the room where his wife was. At this point, they would either continue the previous conversation or move on to a different conversation or activity.

Note: Of course, Martin had discussed this strategy with his wife before using it, and he had gotten her “buy-in” to his doing this. Her agreement was facilitated because she had already experienced how his overall level of calmness had increased noticeably once he had been practicing meditation regularly for several weeks. However, arriving home from work persisted as a time during which he tended to be impatient and negative. And they both agreed something new had to be attempted.

• **Mindfully using of a grocery cart in a busy supermarket as a buffer to alleviate anxiety:**

“*Nobody goes there anymore, it’s too crowded.*” (Berra with Kaplan, 2001)

A client, Jill, avoided supermarkets except late at night due to her extreme anxiety when shopping in a crowd. I got behind my office desk chair to demonstrate with Jill as if my chair were a grocery cart. Jill was instructed to take the “grocery cart,” place both hands on the handle, and as she would start walking inside the store, to put her full attention on:

- the sensory contact of her hands on the grocery cart
- the very act of pushing the cart along, and further focusing on
- the grocery cart as a “grounding” contact for her and
- how it was a comforting safety barrier between her and other shoppers.

Anytime her anxiety at being around people would start to increase, she would: again focus on her hands contacting the cart, the grounding of this contact and the act of pushing the cart, utilizing the cart as a safety barrier between herself and others. And I suggested that if she saw an empty cart in the parking lot when she arrived, she get that cart to begin to use immediately to help channel her anxiety by pushing along the empty cart even before getting into the store.

Also, Jill was instructed how to focus on being mindful, putting full and complete attention on looking at the items on a given shelf, mindfully picking up a can or container and focusing on the label, and then on deliberately returning the item to the shelf. In this way, Jill was able to significantly prevent her anxiety from increasing and was better able to reduce her anxiety whenever it did start to rise.

**Using Positive Affirmations as a Spot or “Tactical” Meditation Mantra/Focus:**

In addition to using a “regular” mantra or breath count, some clients utilize positive affirmations as a mantra: at different times, to repeat affirmations that correspond to and balance or counter negative or self-defeating emotions or thoughts. These range from single words to very short phrases, i.e.,
When feeling fear, considering a mantra such as “courage,” “strength,” “I am fearless,” “God be with me.”

When feeling anxiety, anger or irritation, mantras like “calm,” “peace,” “love,” “peace begins with me,” “Let go, let God.”

When feeling sad, mantras like “joy,” “happiness”, “this, too, shall pass,” “tomorrow is a new day.”

When feeling self-critical, mantras like “I am worthy,” “I deserve,” “I deserve______.”

Alternatively, longer phrases, favorite sayings, and prayers can be used to focus on in a meditative-like manner – even if they might be too lengthy to easily use as a meditation focus per se. For example, reciting the abbreviated or full version of The Serenity Prayer.

It is vital to find a self-affirming mantra or mantras that work best for you…trust yourself to “test” alternative mantras to find one or more suitable for you.

**Post-Traumatic Application of Meditation Strategies**

“A bird is safe in its nest – but that is not what its wings are made for.” (*Sri Amit Ray*, 2014, p. 1)

Meditation strategies can be utilized very effectively with trauma survivors to help counter anxiety, phobic, avoidance, detachment and other trauma-related symptoms. I have developed an approach that combine principles of existential and here-and-now strategies of Gestalt Therapy, and cognitive-behavioral therapy, with systematic desensitization. For example:

**Gestalt Therapy**

*“Lose your mind and come to your senses.”* (Perls, 1971, page 69);

*“I have one aim only: to impart a fraction of the meaning of the word now. To me, nothing exists except now. Now = experience = awareness = reality. The past is no more and the future is not yet. Only the now exists.”* (Perls, 2006, p. 14);

*“Now what’s the technique we are using in Gestalt Therapy? The technique is to establish a continuum of awareness. This continuum of awareness is required so that the organism can work on the healthy gestalt principle: that the most important unfinished situations will always emerge and can be dealt with. If we prevent ourselves from achieving this gestalt formation, we function badly and we carry hundreds and thousands of unfinished situation with us, that always demand completion. This continuum of awareness seems to be very simple, just to be aware from second to second what’s going on. Unless we are asleep, we are always aware of something. However, as soon as this awareness becomes unpleasant, most people will interrupt it.”* (Perls, 1971, p. 51).

**Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy:**

“How do you learn how to cut down trees? By cutting them down.” Bateke (African) proverb (Afrirtual, 2012)

Techniques such as the scaling of awareness from 1–10, focusing on helpful cognitions and eliminating unhelpful cognitions, and focusing on positive behavioral or action changes, along with meditation. These integrated strategies are described in detail in my book. Here is a brief outline of this approach:

**Systematic Desensitization**

“Always do what you are afraid to do.” *(Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1888, p. 245)*

**Step One.** The client identifies a progressively-increasing-in-anxiety hierarchy or series of situations or actions, i.e., situations are identified that are related to the traumatic or anxiety provoking event. Identified situations begin with the least anxiety-provoking and progressively along to the most anxiety-provoking – as defined by the client.
Step Two. The client is taught relaxation or coping techniques and skills. Wolpe postulated that: it is impossible to be both relaxed and anxious at the same time. I have developed a series of strategies utilizing breathing and meditation as the coping technique.

Step Three. The client repeatedly uses the learned relaxation or coping skills to reach a state of relaxation or calmness when introduced, in turn, to each of the progressively-increasing-in-anxiety situations. It begins with exposure to the situation lowest on the hierarchy of severity of anxiety: Thus, there is an alternation between:

* Being exposed to each higher-level anxiety producing situation and
* Using the learned relaxation strategy to overcome the anxiety that has been generated -- before moving on to the next higher anxiety-producing situation. (Wolpe, 1952, 1961, 1969)

This procedure continues until all of the situations on the hierarchy of severity of anxiety are able to be completed without a rise in anxiety. (In my book, I describe several acute and chronic PTSD case studies using meditation and systematic desensitization, to include: chronic, and acute, PTSD from severe auto accidents; traumatized by being arrested and subjected to a harassing police interrogation; war-related phobia to container trucks and containers carrying fuel or other combustible materials.

Meditation is Not for Everyone. Issues, Cautions and Limitations

“So, what is a good meditator? The one who meditates.” (Allan Lokos, p. 42)

I have found a rarity of documented negative findings or negative side-effects regarding meditation in research studies and in my practice. My overall experience is that the most common issue regarding meditation is “that it just is not working”. This unsuccessful outcome oftentimes is associated with:

- not taking the necessary repetitive and regular time and effort to become habituated in the first place with the process of meditating, and/or
- just finding it too difficult to calmly sit still long enough to be able to let go of intrusive thoughts or to concentrate on the focus of the meditation being attempted.

A frequently effective remedy is to change or modify the type of meditation focus. Thus I introduce clients to (1) mantra, (2) breath-counting and (3) breath mindfulness meditation, and at times to mindfulness meditation (i.e., mindful walking/eating). Most clients report that they strongly prefer one type of meditation to another. However, they need to experience (and not just hear a discussion about) each to discover if one is more suitable. Some clients have found more than one type of meditation to be beneficial, and vary which meditation type to utilize, or combine two – such as mantra with breath awareness. I use the mantra “Jesus” when in church, and the Hindu mantra “shirim” outside of church.

In a small minority of clients, one or more of several additional issues can be problematic.

- **Persons with psychosis symptoms.** Someone might have an active psychosis (i.e., hearing voices, having hallucinations, living in an alternate reality than that which most of the world lives in…). It is possible for meditation to exacerbate psychosis symptoms and be associated with increasingly retreating to such an inner world. Thus, it is important to screen for psychosis symptoms; and if present, be very cautious about encouraging meditation on any kind of regular basis. If meditation is being practiced, it is essential to be closely monitored to insure that the meditation experience is not exacerbating psychosis symptoms or to discourage or reduce the amount of further meditating.

- **Persons with very strong religious or other views that meditation is “evil”, dangerous or otherwise not something positive.** It is important to assess if a person has really strong negative concerns about meditation. If so, to at least engage in a brief dialogue to see if the person is able and willing to consider a form of meditation that is absent any religious-affiliated aspects. However, some such persons have strong objection to any kind of meditation. If so, it is very inappropriate to attempt to “force” meditation on such persons—or on anyone who has very strong objections and who might not wish to dialogue regarding their concerns.
Marijuana and Meditation.

“When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” (Yogi Berra)

Some persons who engage in very frequent usage of marijuana (or other drugs), especially higher potency marijuana, might find that (1) there is a “competing” or confliction that happens between marijuana/drug-induced highs and the ability to engage more fully in meditating, and/or (2) meditating might promote increasing isolation and detachment. The choice becomes obvious—continuing to get high through substances, or stay with your meditation—the choice is yours.

Meditating “too much.”

It is possible, though extremely rare, for someone to “meditate too much.” For example, meditating becomes such a preoccupation and habit that you ignore or increasingly remove yourself from your regular living responsibilities and social interactions. Also, a few clients have reported that they become confused and unsettled at the repetitive nature of repeating a mantra and/or breath count. In such very rare cases, there actually can be an increase in anxiety or depression symptoms.

However, I have almost always found the opposite to be true. The regular practice of meditation is highly associated with being responsible, engaging in activities and with others, promotes feeling more balanced and having a very positive impact on anxiety and mood symptoms. And there is very little likelihood of doing too much meditation—most do not meditate as much as they could.

A partner disapproves of meditation.

A partner might be concerned with, or not be fully supportive, of their partner: meditating at all, “meditating too much” or “meditating at the wrong time.” Such concerns usually can be resolved by:

- fully explaining to the partner what meditation is and what its purpose is,
- the partner observing that meditation seems to be having a positive impact, and
- working out with the partner when the best time to meditate might be.

For example, a partner might object to their partner (like I used to do…☺️) coming home from work and immediately going into isolation to meditate. Alternatively, (1) it is likely best to figure out a way to meditate sometime prior to arriving home from work. This could be one’s office at the end of the work day, or stopping in the car somewhere to meditate along the commute route, or (1) to meditate later in the early evening if that is less objectionable to the partner.

Meditation Research and Efficacy

Meditation is the medication to cure the illusion of a separation.

Om namah shiwaya, Om namah shiwaya.²

We are one when we are all together.

We are one when we are all alone. (Bob Sima, 2016)

It is my experience with clients (with a very wide range of presenting issues) that:

- perhaps 20-25% find meditation to be helpful and a very welcome “tool” or practice to incorporate into their lives -- ranging from being at least somewhat helpful to being extraordinarily helpful.
- only 1-2% found meditation to have a negative impact.
- the remaining clients had neither a particularly effective nor troubling experience of any kind with meditation. Typically, almost none in this category of client put in the regular and sustained effort necessary to develop and habituate meditation skills.

There are a very large number of research studies (1000+) on meditation, especially Transcendental Meditation and Mindfulness (I identify +/- one hundred in my book). There is scientific criticism of a

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¹ This is a hymn to Shiva, Hindu deity of destruction and transformation. Chanting this mantra “helps to get rid of internal imperfections, limitations and sins.” Also, “It is seen as a salutation to the divine, ‘I bow to God.’” (“Om Namah Shivaya – Ancient Mantra from the Yajurveda.” Jenny, 2010, accessed March 13, 2016, http://www.spiritualsun.com/practices/texts/hindu/om-namah-shivaya.)
number of these studies about the research methodology (i.e., lack of randomized controls/lack of being able to rule-out other factors that might explain the study results). Even so, the findings overwhelmingly are very positive on a range of factors (i.e., Ospina et al, 2007; Sedimeier et al, 2012, Hussain & Bushan, 2010). Positive findings include: physiological (i.e., lower blood pressure, lower standing heart rate, lower oxygen consumption, lower stress indicators, reduced heart attack risk…), psychological (i.e., lower anxiety, depression, anger symptoms, PTSD symptoms…), cognitive (i.e., cognitive abilities, short- and long-term memory, performance on intelligence tests…), performance and socialization (improved self-actualization, relationship satisfaction, social functioning).

In Closing: I have found meditation to be a most appealing and helpful coping strategy for a number of clients and others with a wide range of symptoms and life issues. And the pieces de resistance?
• Meditation is available 24 and 7.
• Meditation (most forms) does not require another person to facilitate its being practiced. And
• Meditation is absolutely free…😊

P.S.: Don’t push the river, it flows by itself. [Barry Stevens, 1970]

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SELECTED REFERENCES

Berra, Y., with Kaplan, D. (2001). When you come to a fork in the road, take it! Copyright @2001 by Yogi Berra. Used by permission of Hachette Books. All rights reserved.


