OVERVIEW AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF MANTRA, FAITH-BASED, BREATH-COUNTING & MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

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A “master” level meditator and meditation scholarly expert I am not. However, along with my personal meditation experiences and study, I increasingly incorporated, expanded and applied meditation teaching and practice as a professor of social work, and since 2011 with private practice clients at Advanced Psychotherapy (Gulfport, MS). Various MSW students and clients have found mantra, breath-counting, mindfulness and either or both faith-based and non-faith-based meditation to be helpful – as have I. Also, I have incorporated Gestalt, cognitive-behavioral and trauma-focused elements with various meditation strategies.

This writing reflects both the extent and the limitations of my meditation background…:

- 15 months of Gestalt Therapist Training (Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles, 1971-72) that included considerable focus on enhancing personal awareness
- Initial training in mantra-based Transcendental Meditation (TM) in 1975, that included receiving a Hindu (Sanskrit) word as my personal mantra
- Six weeks total of intensive advanced residential TM-Siddhi training, 1976-77
- Regular meditation, +/- 20 minutes of TM, twice daily, until the late 1990’s
- Continuing meditation, at varying frequencies and varying lengths of sessions
- Incorporating an alternate mantra, the Latin pronunciation of “Jesus,” that I use at times, typically while in church (I am a regularly practicing Christian/Catholic).
- Increasingly teaching and practicing meditation strategies with clients with a range of presenting issues – anxiety, depression, trauma, life-adjustment/enhancement

I will describe (1) faith-based versus non-faith based meditation; (2) mantra- and breath-count-based meditations that typically are self-directed and practiced in solitary, sit-down settings; and (3) mindfulness meditation that is practiced both in solitary, sit-down settings and “in-action.” Finally, there is a description and discussion of applying various meditation strategies outside of solitary sit-down settings – in what I refer to as “spot” meditations.

While many elements of meditation definitely can be self-taught, I encourage you to:

- receive at least some face-to-face training with an experienced meditator
- practice meditating a number of times and then discuss with an experienced meditator
- receive follow-up instruction, if needed, to adjust or “tweak” your meditation practice
- eventually you might become adept at “self-correcting” and “self-enhancing” your meditation practice

Note: I strongly discourage mental health and health care providers who do not have meaningful personal experience in meditation to attempt to apply or teach this information to clients or patients. To me, that is a serious violation of “best practices.”

I am aware that some (or a lot...) of the following will conflict, be incomplete or inconsistent with teachings of a number of meditation masters -- and possibly with your personal or

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religions. Please accept this writing as derived from my personal and professional experience and those of a number of my clients -- and trust your own experiences.

**WHAT IS MEDITATION?**

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

*Buddhist saying:* “Don’t just do something, stand there.”

It is important to note that the word “meditation” has become generalized to include a wide array of practices. Indeed, there are dozens of specific styles or forms of meditation practice, and many different types of activity commonly referred to as meditation (i.e., see Naranjo and Ornstein, 1971; Coleman, 1977; and “Meditation,” accessed in Wikipedia November 23, 2015.) Thus, when someone uses the word “meditation,” it is important to understand what specifically the user is referencing and operationalizing as “meditation.”

This writing focuses on *attentional* strategies of meditation, which consist of two general varieties (Coleman, 1977; Naranjo & Ornstein, 1976): (1) **concentrative**, and (2) **opening-up awareness of the external environment or mindfulness** where “the mind observes itself.”

**1. Concentrative type meditation** involves a restriction of awareness in which there is a focusing of attention on the object of the meditation or the repetition of a word. In other words, 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.”

- The attentional strategy is to fix one’s focus on a single object, constantly bringing back one’s wandering mind to this object.
- Instructions range from an active assertion of will to stick with the target object of attention and to resist any wandering, to a passive mode of “simply regenerating the target object when it is lost in the flow of awareness.”
- Most schools of meditation are eclectic, using a variety of techniques, except for those systems that center on a single technique, i.e., Transcendental Meditation and Krishnamurti.
- Yoga is an example of a more varied practice, in which concentrative meditation is only a part of the totality of the yogic activity that includes attempts to alter basic “involuntary” physiological processes such as blood flow, heart rate, digestive activity, muscular activity and breathing; training in breath control; and some form of meditation, such as the use of a mantra or a guided meditation.

**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.
- As soon as one is aware that one is no longer focused on the mantra, attention is returned to the mantra.
- The actual selection of a mantra is determined by what specific form of mantra-based meditation you are practicing, i.e., such as Transcendental Meditation (Hindu-based)
or a Buddhist form of meditation. For such forms of meditation, there is very specific guidance as how a mantra is selected and what the mantra might be.

- If you practice 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 form of mantra meditation I instruct clients in; they choose their own mantra. The preference is to 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.”

**Breath-counting/breath-focusing** is another concentrative form of meditation.

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

Over the years, I have used this instruction on airplanes as a metaphor to offer perhaps the single most important and useful guidance to clients -- the essential reminder to **take care of yourself first**, if you are going to be of any help to others. For a number of clients, this metaphor has become an informal “mantra” that they remember and repeat at various times. Of course, this metaphor reminds us of the central importance of an intake of sufficient oxygen. In addition, 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):
- A 2-4-4-6 sequence: pause for two counts, in-breath for four counts, pause for four counts, out-breath for six counts

Variations on the 2-4-4-6 sequence that I and a number of clients appreciate:
- A 2-4-2-6 sequence: some clients have found that an effective modification is: pause for 2 counts, in-breath for 4 counts, pause for 2 counts, out-breath for 6 counts
- A 2-3-2-5 sequence: other clients report that a six-count out-breath is too long, and we have modified to a 2 (pause), 3 (in-breath), 2 (pause), 5 (out-breath) sequence.

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

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2. **Mindfulness** is perhaps the most common “opening-up of awareness” meditation:

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, 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).

Several practical applications are described later that include a mindfulness focus. In the footnote below, there is a detailed example of focusing on the awareness of eating 2 (If you find this too detailed to do in its entirety, you could simply and 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]

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2. (An illustrative example of one of 111 mindfulness tools, techniques and activities described by Burdick, 2013, involves awareness of eating: “Set your intention to focus your full attention on the process of eating. Whenever other thoughts arise, notice them, dismiss them, and remind yourself of your intention to pay attention to eating. Notice how the food looks as it sits on your plate. Be aware of the food’s aroma, color, shape. Before you start to eat, notice how your stomach feels. Does it feel hungry, empty? Is it comfortable, uncomfortable? Can you connect how it feels with hunger? Tune in to how your stomach feels and make sure you are hungry before you eat. As you put the food on your fork, notice its weight and consistency. As you place the food in your mouth, notice the aroma, the temperature, how it feels in your mouth. As you chew, focus on the flavor, the texture, the chewiness. Pay attention to how it feels when you chew the food. Notice if it is tender, tough, slippery, smooth, rough, tangy, sweet, sour, hot, or cold. Be aware of if it sticks to your teeth. If your mind wanders, just remember your intention and bring your attention back to eating. Again notice the feeling of the food in your mouth, on your teeth, on your tongue, on your lips. Chew until it is completely ready to be swallowed. Pay attention to how the food feels as you swallow and it leaves your mouth and slides down your throat. Notice if there is any food still in you mouth or if it’s empty now. Tune in to how your stomach feels. Notice if there is any food still in your mouth or if it’s empty now. Tune in to how your stomach feels. Notice how it feels different after you have eaten a little food and then after you have eaten a lot of food. Repeat this process until your food is gone or until you feel full.” (p. 14)
There is an array of advice how long a meditation session should or needs to be. The variables that impact on the answer 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 or strategies that help with reducing 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 hundreds of thousands of other TM practitioners. Perhaps the most common recommendations of other meditation forms seem to range between 15 and 45 minutes or so. And, typically, most people find it easiest to begin with shorter times and progress to longer, more optimal lengths of time.

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. Some people achieve at least some benefits from meditating as little as 2-4 minutes a day.

MEDITATION, BALANCE AND ANXIETY

Yogic saying: ‘What you put attention on grows in your life’. (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi)

I consider awareness to be like a spotlight that illuminates and nourishes the subject of your awareness. If you put your awareness on negatives, those will grow in your life; awareness on positives will grow those in your life. And the very process of increasing personal awareness makes it possible to become more self-corrective and self-enhancing. [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”
- Confucious 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.” [Interestingly, two things are identified as exceptions to the rule of moderation – love, and contemplation itself (Johnson, 1973). In other words, you cannot love too much, or contemplate/meditate too much... That sounds like good advice...😊]
- “This, too, shall pass” is an ancient adage (Persian, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish...). Many people use it incorrectly to only give themselves solace “when something bad” is
happening. Yes, this can be a helpful reminder that the bad will not last forever. However, the meaning of the adage is that all material conditions, be they positive or negative, are only temporary. This adage is consistent with the doctrine of the golden mean. And I encourage clients to remind themselves of it whenever any significant highs or lows are being experienced. For some, this can be a meaningful mantra to promote balance in thinking, in doing, in expectations.

In my experience (and as described by many others), the practice of meditation:
- Promotes “balance” and reducing “extremes” of emotions/thinking/actions
- At its most basic level is a technique to reduce stress and promote relaxation
- Facilitates being, more completely, in the present moment -- irrespective of what else is going on now (the present), or might happen (the future), or did happen (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]

[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 has 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 can be practiced with or without a religious/spiritual element

In more recent times, meditation can be utilized as a method or technique of stress reduction/relaxation that has absolutely no spiritual or religious element whatsoever. Meditation has been practiced as described as far back as 3,000 years in ancient recorded history with a spiritual/religious element or centrality.
1. Meditation as a method or strategy of stress reduction/relaxation 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 (1975) 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 described 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.

- Research on various meditation and relaxation response techniques practiced regularly, especially mantra- and mindfulness-based, document such benefits as:
  - Lowered stress levels, anxiety & hyperventilating, relief of chest pain
  - Increased creativity, sense of well-being, sense of peace and quiet
  - Reduced heart irregularities, insomnia, frequency & intensity of headaches
  - Reduced hypertension, blood pressure, cholesterol levels & resting heart rate.

[Note: Benson (1985) subsequently wrote about “multiplying” the benefits of regularly practicing the Relaxation Response by adding “the Faith Factor”; in other words, combining (1) the Relaxation Response with (2) your deeply felt personal system of beliefs.]

2. Meditation with a Spiritual/Religious Core or Thrust.

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
  - Can include a religious element intrinsic to the meditation form being practiced (Hindu, Buddhist, Christian...) -- or 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, Taoism, Buddhism ...
  - Is a central element in Christian “contemplative” prayer, also described as “Christian meditation,” and more recently as “centering prayer.” (Merton, 1960). Such prayer places a strong emphasis on “interior silence”, and getting in touch with God who dwells within each of us through meditation-like practice. (Johnston, 1973)

In more recent times, it is my understanding that “prayer instruction” in mainstream western religions has tended to emphasize such factors as: not making demands of God; being given particular prayers or scripture (passages from the Bible) or having certain prayers suggested; praying alone and/or in groups; “hands-on” praying; silent, spoken and/or singing prayer; reciting, reading, repeating prayers; urging you to concentrate
harder, pray more frequently or longer; and to emphasize what Jesus would have done and connect with God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

In addition to the above, congruent with centering/contemplative prayer, it is possible to apply meditation principles and dynamics to one’s prayers for the purpose of enhancing your prayer life. For example, when you pray and have distracting thoughts, consider incorporating the meditation strategy of maintaining a neutral awareness about any distracting thoughts occurring and gently return to a focus on the prayer words.

**Centering Prayer.** Some directions for 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,”...
- 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.

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”, “Kyrie eleison” (“keer-ee-ey ee-lay-ah-sawn”—“Lord have mercy”), “Allah”, “Serenity”, “Savior,” “Abba”, “Shalom”, “faith,” “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” “life is a journey…”

Please note: there are Christian denominations and writers who contend that practices that are not “Christocentric” in nature (such as Hindu- and Buddhist-based) are to be avoided and are not compatible with Christianity. Other Christian critics go further and contend that practices that involve “emptying one’s mind”, “being still,” and “not thinking” (hallmarks of many meditation approaches, to include contemplative prayer) in an attempt to reach God, are dangerous, occult and un biblical, not in harmony with Scripture, e.g., the meditation focus “should be on God, on God’s word…” [i.e., see 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 with strong religious beliefs, in my experience it is possible to consider meditation an acceptable religious or non-religious method of stress reduction or relaxation. For example, you have the choice, in a mantra-based form of meditation, to:

- Utilize a religious or spiritual word or phrase -- if that is acceptable to you -- or
- Incorporate a mantra that has no religious or spiritual meaning.

**Maintaining the focus of your meditation:**

“I can’t meditate, because I have too many thoughts.”
If this were a valid reason *not* to meditate, extremely few people could meditate well, in that thoughts literally are unceasing, in most everyone (except for such as truly enlightened meditation masters or gurus). Hence:

- **It is not the absence of thought** that is essential to meditation; rather, it is *our attitude and reactions towards* our thoughts -- or towards anything else -- that distracts us from the meditation focus.
- **Per TM**, it is essential to develop an attitude of “neutral awareness” regarding any “distractions” that take you away or divert you from the focus of your meditation.
- **You can develop 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 the focus of your meditation (mantra, breath count, mindfulness…)

I have found that maintaining a meditation focus - while *simultaneously* or *alternatively* thinking about anything else – *is similar* to two music metaphors:

- **Playing the piano.** The left hand is playing the base notes -- which can be considered to be like a mantra; simultaneously, the right hand is playing the melody line, which can be considered to be like various thoughts 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 repetitive series of notes, while the rest of the band plays melody and other notes/sounds. Playing the bass guitar lick is like repeating the mantra, while the rest of the band’s music is the “noise” or distractions that happen simultaneously.

A practical “pad and pen technique” to address:

- **Distractions while meditating:** if while meditating you are 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 and 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 or it will become much less intrusive -- 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 empty your mind…]

- **Intrusive thoughts while trying to sleep:** This technique also is helpful when trying to go to or return to sleep but 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.
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/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.

- **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 particular smells, such smells become intimately associated with the meditation experience and facilitate both entering into and staying with the meditation state.

- **Prayer or rosary beads/crystals/gemstones/smooth or “worry” beads/stones**: using the sense of touch to induce a meditative state and help to focus the mind, i.e., prayer beads, the use of five stones that are considered meaningful in several traditions, worry beads (that have no religious or ceremonial purpose).

- **Applications (“Apps”).** There are hundreds of applications (“apps”) that have been developed and can be downloaded from the web. Many of them are cost-free; others are available at a very low cost or offer some elements free and other elements for a cost. There are apps designed to provide 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 I Pad 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...
  - **Sleep Easily Meditation by Shazzie (free version)**: Stress and burnout expert Jayne Morris recommends this app to help to sleep. There is a 26 minute guided meditation that combines soothing music with talking you through the relaxation process. The female voice is surprisingly calming and effective in inducing sleep.
  - **There are a number of other websites that provide independent descriptions and evaluations of recommended apps.** For example: “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 was trained in and usually prefer to meditate “the old-fashioned way”—just me alone, in a quiet space, silently repeating my mantra. On the other hand, I have experienced the extraordinary amplification of the power of meditating that can occur when meditating together in a group. And, more recently, I am also using and teaching about “spot” meditations (discussed later) to complement my regular sitting meditations. Of course, what is most important is for you to find what is most conducive to your effective meditating.

Three 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 statement was not at all surprising, and needs to be understood in the context of what I have come to experience and describe to clients as “three 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 accumulates and becomes entrenched physically in your body.
- The exact physical location of accumulated stress and anxiety varies within each of us.
- Typically, such stress is manifested as tenseness or physical anxiety in one or more of the following areas: the head/jaws/mouth/lips, other facial muscles (wrinkled brow or forehead), shoulder(s), back, chest, stomach, legs. For example, in my younger days, I would shake and move my legs like crazy—often while sitting and not infrequently while standing. [And I would smile incessantly, no matter the occasion or how I was actually feeling, to include when I was uncomfortable or felt awkward.]

Clients have found my description of three phases of meditation to be very helpful:

“Lose your mind and come to your senses.” [Fritz Perls]

**Meditation Phase I:** During this initial phase of meditation, 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. [Thus, arguably it is ideal to meditate twice daily—once early after waking, to clear your mind and begin your day “fresh”; and then later in the day to clear your mind of stresses that have built-up during the day 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 the thoughts that occur during meditation are stress being released.] Rather than being self-critical or agitated that such thoughts are occurring and thinking, “this meditation is not working,” it is vital to neutrally accept and not be self-critical that such thoughts are happening during meditation in that:
Thoughts are indicators of, or the actual release of (mostly more recent) stress, and
Becoming agitated or otherwise preoccupied with distracting thoughts will take you
away from what should be your meditation focus.

**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. Such physically embedded stress is *more resistant to being released*
than mind/thought related stress—*because it has become embedded or entrenched physically*--
and thus 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 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 stress happens more *subsequently.*

Typically, if during your practice of meditation, there is *not* ultimately a noticeable or
sufficient reduction of your *physically* embedded stress, this 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.
- Possibly over time such profound physically embedded anxiety/tenseness accumulates
  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, and/or anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) medication to directly impact
  on physiological or biological markers of embedded stress.

**Meditation Phase III.** With *both* immediate or more recent stress and physically embedded
stress being released sufficiently, it is possible to move into phase III and have *peace,
calmness, quiet* begin to accumulate *physically in the body.* Thus, you can begin to develop a
“reservoir of peace/calmness” physically that you, literally, carry within you and that begins
to permeate your thinking, emotions and body.

This development allows you to better prevent the accumulation of new stress *and* to better
maintain an increased level of tranquility that permeates within you physically, cognitively
and emotionally. You truly are learning to increasingly be able to “empty your mind” for at
least moments of time and accrue deep-seated physical calmness ...

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

- As you enter Phase III, 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 “emptying your mind” and “transcending” the being and awareness of here. 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.
- Others can experience “being beyond the confines of your individual physical presence” and closer in touch with a more transcendent life force.
- Indeed, all concentrative systems of meditation describe a similar journey into “transcending”, a central state that is evoked by the process of repetition, that may be experienced as a state of emptiness, a non-response to the external world or a profound sense of joy, peacefulness, etc. (Coleman, 1976; Naranjo & Ornstein, 1977).

I have found that only some people living a relatively normal, active, busy lifestyles are able to fully attain this third phase (though a partial attainment can occur). Such persons seem to “exude calmness in any storm” or in the course of the stresses and challenges inherent in everyday living in most or all aspects of life. However, you can hope to move towards at least beginning to enter this phase III, and moving back and forth between phases II and III.

While difficult to fully achieve, entering at least somewhat into phase III of meditating can be an on-going life-enhancing journey. You become able to at least dip into and out of this phase, thus increasing your ability to (a) minimize the negative effects of stress and (b) maximize the positive effects of peace, balance and joy. 3

### Breathing Properly and The Prevention of Panic Attacks/Severe Anxiety

**An antidote to Panic Attacks:** No matter what meditation, breathing or other type of stress reduction/relaxation is utilized, in my experience there are, by far, three critical factors:

- **You find a breathing or calming sequence that works best for you**
- **If you breath out more than you breath in, then it will be impossible to have a panic attack or significantly increased anxiety – I repeat, it will be impossible.**
- **And this always will be the case—if you begin the breathing out more than breathing in before the anxiety has risen too highly to where “there is no turning back.”** [Please refer back to the earlier description of a breath-count form of meditation as a method to insure proper breathing so that the out-count always is longer than the in-count.]

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3 It is important to note that, of course, there are persons able to achieve a very substantial measure of peace/calmness/joy -- cognitively, emotionally and physically -- and yet they do not meditate. This includes, for example, those who are so devoted to a religion or spiritual practice/beliefs that their very beings are faith-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...
**10-Point Scale.** Helpful to being aware that your anxiety is rising and an intervention is needed now: utilize a 10-point scale of anxiety. You need to be able to be aware of:

- What is your baseline level of anxiety? On a scale 0 to 10, with 0 an absence of anxiety and 10 being 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 might be a 3 or 4 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, etc. – to become aware of your current level of anxiety and how this level of anxiety 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” 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 then.

**Applying Meditation Principles Outside of Regular Meditation Sessions**

Meditation dynamics can be applied, very practically, outside of meditation sessions to everyday multi-tasking, or to your reactions to having your focus simultaneously split between two or more foci of attention. Through practicing meditation regularly, you can develop a direct practical dynamic in your daily life to be able to better focus -- and minimize competing thoughts intruding and interfering with your preferred 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:

- Being aware of yet maintaining a neutral awareness about distracting thoughts related to the argument the night before, and gently returning your focus to the work task
- If more distracting thoughts about the argument happen, again simply be aware of these thoughts and gently return to focusing on the work task. [Repeat as necessary.]

**“Spot” or “In-Action” Meditations**

When a full-length meditation is not practical, many clients have been helped learning what I describe as relatively brief “spot” or “in-action” meditations. Please note:

- For spot meditating to be of maximum benefit, it is important to first practice meditation sufficiently to become at least somewhat habituated to meditating, and
- Spot meditations do not substitute for regular, daily full-length meditations

**Focusing on your mantra or breathing – anywhere and at any time:**
You can silently repeat your mantra, breath count or focus on your breathing in and out, at any time—such as when you realize your anxiety is increasing. For example, a client described how right before giving a presentation to her college class, she mindfully breathed in and out (a little longer out than in) a few times; then, while presenting, she paused several times to take a mindful breath in and out.
While driving and getting stuck in a traffic jam or at a railway crossing:
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 made this being stuck in his car an opportunity to pause, focus on his mantra and calmly meditate for several minutes.
- Thus, 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/centering...

Being late -- to meet someone or for an appointment or meeting, etc.: 
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 probably 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 to accomplish by focusing – not on the “then” of the destination that is yet to be reached—but on the “now” of the present moment, the mantra/the breath count, and focusing 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 is inevitable if 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 finding yourself staying longer in a social situation than you wish to:
The same dynamics utilized at and after the railway crossing apply. Because 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 silently focusing on your mantra/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:
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 a grocery cart in a busy supermarket as a buffer to alleviate anxiety:**
A client, Jill, avoided supermarkets except late at night due to her extreme anxiety when shopping in a crowd. We developed the following strategies:

- **Option:** Parking a little farther away from the crowded section of the parking lot, and doing a minute or so spot meditation before exiting her car;
- **Option:** if she saw an empty cart in the parking lot when she arrived, that she get that cart to begin to use immediately to help “ground” her anxiety by pushing along the empty cart before getting into the store and then continuing with the cart into the store.

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 each step being taken, while 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 she found her anxiety at being around people starting to increase, she would once again focus on her hands contacting the cart, the grounding of this contact and the act of pushing the cart, and positioning the cart as a safety barrier between herself and others.

Also, Jill was instructed how to focus on being very mindful or putting her full and complete attention on looking at the items on a given shelf, mindfully focusing on the process of picking up a can or container, mindfully focusing on the label, and then focusing on deliberately returning the item to the shelf. In this way, Jill was able to significantly prevent her anxiety from increasing and to be better able to reduce her anxiety if it did start to rise. As a back-up strategy, she also would engage in repeating her mantra or breath-counting.

**Using positive affirmations as a spot meditation mantra/focus:**
In addition to using a “regular” mantra, some clients have found it helpful to utilize positive affirmations as a mantra at different times that correspond to and balance or counter negative or self-defeating emotions, feeling state or thoughts, 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**, considering a mantra such as “calm,” “peace,” “love,” “peace begins with me.”
- When feeling **sad**, a mantra such as “joy”, “happiness”, “hopeful,” “this, too, shall pass,” “tomorrow is a new day.”
- When feeling **self-critical**, a mantra such as “I am worthy,” “I deserve” or “I deserve____.”
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.

**Using Meditation to Enhance Both Getting to Sleep and Getting Back to Sleep**

One client had a recurring problem of waking up at 4:30 when her partner’s alarm would go off and he then would get ready to go to work. Once he had left for work, she found it almost impossible to be able to go back to a sound sleep for the two additional hours or so remaining before she actually had to get up.

I encouraged her to try a 10 or 15-minute meditation -- while lying in the bed. She found that this was helpful in allowing her to be able to return to a much deeper sleep than she had been able to accomplish.4 (See also “Sleep Easily’ Meditation application described earlier)

**Meditation is Not for Everyone. Issues, Cautions and Limitations**

“Don’t push the river, it flows by itself.” (Fritz Perls)

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:

- I usually introduce clients to both mantra-based and breath-counting based meditation, and sometimes to mindfulness meditation.
- 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 works better. For example, some clients find breath counting to be “too busy” and confusing; others find breath counting makes it easier to focus and ignore thoughts.
- Some clients have found more than one type of meditation to be beneficial and vary which meditation type to utilize—or alternate the specific mantra utilized.

4 [Benson (1985) describes a procedure to combat insomnia that combines progressive relaxation and meditation. This includes:

- relaxing all of your muscles, beginning with your feet and progressing up to your calves, thighs and abdomen, combined with
- a focus on your breathing and silent repetition of a mantra such as “peace.”
- You then progress to direct your attention to what you are feeling in various parts of your body while maintaining a focus on your breathing; for example, while continuing to focus on your breathing you focus your attention on the feeling in your right big toe, then your right second toe, etc., and then to your right ankle, your calf and thigh, and then to your left toes, ankle, calf and thigh, and then up to your abdomen.
- And to repeat this procedure, if necessary.
- And all the while, when any distracting thoughts appear, returning your focus to your breathing and awareness of the feeling in your various body parts...]

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

- **Persons with psychosis symptoms.** If someone has *an active psychosis* (i.e., hearing voices, having hallucinations, living in an alternate reality than that which most of the world lives in, etc.), it is possible for meditation to exacerbate such psychosis symptoms and can 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 closely monitor the meditation experience to insure that it is not exacerbating psychosis symptoms and/or to discourage 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 does have such really strong negative concerns about meditation and 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 discuss in any detail what their concerns might be.

- **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 extremely little likelihood of doing too much meditation.

- **A partner does not approve of meditation.** *A partner might be concerned* with, or not be fully supportive, of their partner: (1) meditating at all, (2) “meditating too much” or (3) “meditating at the wrong time.”

*Such concerns usually can be resolved by:*

- Fully explaining to the partner what is meditation and what its purpose is,
- The partner observing that meditation, indeed, 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 coming home from work and immediately going into isolation to meditate. In such a situation, it is likely best for the person to figure out a way to meditate *sometime prior* to arriving home from work -- such as in one’s office at the end of the work day, or stopping in the car somewhere to meditate along the commute route; alternatively, to meditate later in the early evening.
Even considering all of the above concerns and issues, it is my experience over the past several years in private practice with clients with a very wide range of presenting issues:

- That a substantial percentage of clients have found meditation to be very 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 with meditation, did not put in the regular and sustained effort necessary to develop meditation skills or found it too difficult to do on any kind of consistent basis.

In conclusion: I have found meditation to be a most helpful coping strategy for a number of clients and other persons with a very wide range of symptoms and life issues.

And the pieces de resistance?

- Meditation is available 24 and 7
- Most forms of meditation do not require another person to facilitate the meditating
- And meditation is absolutely free...😊

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P.S.: “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” (Yogi Berra, NY Yankee Catcher...😊)

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SELECTED REFERENCES


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