Taylor LeMaster

Professor Samantha Langsdale

PHIL 2070s001

4 December 2015

The Art of Meditation as Stress Management

Since the beginning of time people have been trying to find peace. While world peace might not be achievable at this time many people have found ways to find their own inner peace. In this day and age with our fast paced society there are hundreds of reasons to be stressed. One popular way to deal with this stress and to find peace is meditation. In the Buddhist religion meditation is a central part of the culture. The title of the founder of the religion, Buddha, can be translated as “he who has awakened from ignorance or unawareness” (Foster 102). He used meditation to awake from the ignorance of life and enter Nirvana. He summarized life into four points called the Four Noble Truths. These truths are; “There is suffering, The suffering has a cause- namely desire, cessation or ending of human suffering is possible, there is a way leading to the ending of suffering –namely, the Eightfold Path” (Fisher 141). One of the tools to following the Eightfold Path is meditation. If used correctly meditation can be a path through the stresses of the world to find inner peace and studies have shown it has actual effects on the brain.

Just what is stress? Koster describes it as a “word derived from the Latin *stringere*, which means “to pull tight” or “tighten”. The term stress can be translated as “pressure” or “tension”; in everyday language we use it as an umbrella term denoting all kinds of tension” (3). There are many reasons one’s life can become full of stresses. In “Buddhist Meditation in Stress Management” Frits Koster gives four broad reasons that most stressors fall under. According to him stress can be caused by everyday events, aggravating circumstances, major events in one’s life, or traumatic events or experiences. Most of these stressors cannot be avoided. Life happens and with life comes stress. This importing thing is how you cope with these stressors. Inadequate coping measures can lead to a variety of issues with your mental and sometimes even physical self. According to Koster “inadequate stress management often starts when we deny or underestimate the source of stress or our physical reaction to it … This suppression mechanism, in turn can result in all kinds of psychosomatic problems”(47). Just as stress effects different people in different ways, each person has different needs when it comes to an effective coping method. Not every person will find the same things helpful, there’s not a universal formula with steps to solve everyone’s problem. However many people find meditation an excellent way to cope and usually it is quite effective.

So how exactly does one meditate? There are many different ways of teaching meditation. Even focused on just meditation in the Buddhist religion, the directions vary from teacher to teacher and there are multiple schools of thought. To pick one simply for the purpose of describing meditation for this paper I will use the path of *Samatha* meditation through the eyes of Amadeo Sole-Leris.

“The purpose of *samatha* meditation is the achievement of altered states of consciousness characterized by a high degree of tranquility and mental peace” (Sole-Leris 56). In *samatha* meditation there are eight progressive stages of mental absorption. These “*jhanas”* as they are called, are guides to help one achieve tranquility. You start with the first *jhana*, absorption. For this you need to find a place away from any distractions or desires. Dwell on the quietness and try to clear your mind of hindrances. The next *jhana* is called “Extending the Sign”. This stage focuses on expanding what was gained in the first. When the third stage starts, one is supposed to reach a point where the “happiness” and “bliss” are fading and only mindfulness is left. The fourth *jhana*, or the sublime state, focuses on equanimity. At the end of this state, and in the transition to the fifth, you move from the immaterial states. In the fifth you focus on becoming a formless base. You consider the nature of physical matter and realize its unsatisfactory nature. The sixth, Boundless Consciousness, turns away from the previous examinations and contemplates the state of consciousness. With the seventh, or the Nothingness, you reach a degree of total abstraction. Material objects have been discarded so one can focus on nothingness. In the final *jhana* you look into neither perception nor non perception. At this point you’re in an altered state of consciousness. This state has gone beyond logic. Sole Leris describes the results of completing these eight *jhanas* as “By completely surmounting the base consisting of nothingness, he enters upon and dwells in the base consisting of neither perception nor non-perception” (71).

The end goal of following the Eightfold Path and meditating correctly is to reach Nirvana. According to Buddha “the only way to end the cycle of suffering is to end all craving and lead a life free of attachment that has no karmic consequences”(Fisher 146). Nirvana’s nature makes it unexplainable because it takes you out of the verbal-conceptual categories of this world. However the best explanation I’ve found of what nirvana is was by Sole-Leris. “The facile identifications of ‘nirvana’ as simply a paradise (essentially similar to those of Christian or Moslem eschatology), a mystic union with the godhead, as the realization of the Atman/Brahman identity (as in Vedanta Hinduism), or as a total annihilation” (122). Nirvana might not be reached in your current lifetime but the goal is always to reach it. However even if you don’t reach that state, the path to Nirvana brings peace to the one searching for it.

As with any other religious practice there are many people who are skeptical about the results of meditation. To some people it might seem like a pointless activity or a waste of time. So how can you, as a scholar, fully analyze what meditation actually does for a person? You can always judge off of feedback. If enough people say that it works for them is that proof enough that it’s a useful tool? Is there a way to analyze it further?

In 2012 a group of doctors did a study with brain mapping to see if there were any physical effects on the brain from prolonged meditation. According to them “A convergent line of neuroscientific evidence suggests that meditation alters the functional and structural plasticity of distributed neural processes underlying attention and emotion” (Kang). They studied and compared the structure of 92 brains using magnetic resonance imaging and diffusion tensor imaging. 46 of the participants were experienced meditators, the other 46 had never tried any form of meditation. The results were outstanding. There were noticeable differences in the brains of meditators. The cortical anterior region of the brain was noticeably thicker and the posterior regions were significantly thinner in these participants. This means that meditation causes lasting structural effects to both the gray and white matter in the brain.

While there is no doubt that you can go further in depth when it comes to analyzing meditation now with new technology than you could 50 years ago, is it enough? If you take religion and belief out of the picture can you fully evaluate what meditation is and what it does to a person? Is it a full evaluation if it doesn’t take belief into consideration? I believe that there is still an element that you can’t completely quantify no matter how many tests you run. Just because there is proof that meditation helps with concentration and emotion regulation, this doesn’t fully explain why it happens. Is it the meditation or the belief in the meditation that’s producing results? Is meditation the one true path to inner peace or just one of many guidelines that may help you achieve something that’s already inside you?

Nevertheless, regardless of how you analyze it or what you believe in meditation is a popular and powerful tool. It has helped many people in many ways. Sometimes it only makes small change and sometimes it can change lives. Whatever the “why” or “how” the result is a measurable change in your way of thinking and dealing.

Works Cited

Fisher, Mary Pat, and Mary Pat Fisher. *Living Religions*. 7th ed. New York: Custom Pub., 2008. Print.

Kang, D.-H., H. J. Jo, W. H. Jung, S. H. Kim, Y.-H. Jung, C.-H. Choi, U. S. Lee, S. C. An, J. H. Jang, and J. S. Kwon. "The Effect of Meditation on Brain Structure: Cortical Thickness Mapping and Diffusion Tensor Imaging." *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 8.1 (2012): 27-33. Web.

Koster, Frits. *Buddhist Meditation in Stress Management*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm, 2007. Print.

Sole-Leris, Amadeo. *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Oldest Form of Buddhist Meditation*. London: Rider, 1986. Print.