

# Why We Meditate:

## Seeking the Path to Silence, Stillness, Gratitude, and Finding Out Who We Really Are

*By Anthony Pantaleno, Ph.D.*

"It didn't work. That guy's voice on the CD really creeped me out and I fell asleep". A nineteen-year-old's "less than stellar" review of her first attempt at meditation. My reply: "Excellent. You're on your way"! She will soon come to learn that there is no good meditation session and no bad meditation session. It is the practice itself that we seek to cultivate. She will come to learn that she was aware of a "creepy" feeling, and that she was also very much aware of her tiredness. She will come to develop the understanding that meditation does not work like an Advil. Its benefits certainly do not arrive overnight, and even the very idea that meditating will "work" by making her "feel better" will soon fall by the wayside and will be replaced by the honest revelation that the practice of meditation offers no such promise. One never masters the skill of meditation. One does not seek to become a better meditator. One simply lets go of his/her incessant thought process, the "doing mind" drops into the state of "being mind", and then deepens it over a lifetime. You never arrive at the top. Game is *never* over. The goal is not to become the much-touted expert. You are forever a traveler, a

learner, and a practitioner. There is *always* more to learn, more to experience.

For most mental health practitioners, be they Freudian, behavioral, humanistic, or cognitive-behavioral in their orientation to the process of psychotherapy, the notion of teaching meditation practices to people who are in emotional pain would have had no place thirty or forty years ago. Even in 2009, I wonder what would be the reaction of a managed care reviewer if I indicated on an outpatient treatment report that one of my treatment strategies was to teach skills from the meditative disciplines. This is just a very brief fantasy since I abandoned managed care panels long ago, but one of the primary reasons that managed care is so full of problems. They don't understand what healing is really about. What managed care seeks is the best bottom line for the company -- a lessening of the insured's symptoms so that their clients can be returned to what Freud referred to as the "common state of unhappiness".

Instead of mere symptom relief (which is often available from thoughtful use of



### Why We Meditate (Continued from previous page)

the SSRIs), the 2500 year-old teachings of Buddhist psychology seek so much more – getting at the very roots of what lies beneath our Western notions of unhappiness, and in the process, finding out what it really means to be happy. In pondering such a profound transformation, we are challenged to consider how a reframing of the ego – our very sense of “self” and all of its trap doors, could bring what the traditional Western psychotherapies alone could not deliver. We are offered the means to be at peace in this crazy world, in our most significant personal relationships, and in our own hearts. So how many sessions would Optum or GHI authorize to achieve this? Will the managed care providers ever realize that meditation and psychotherapy can complement each other to achieve a state of symptom relief that neither could achieve on its own? As the battles in health care rage on, can psychology offer people an approach to physical and mental well-being that costs them nothing? We are certainly not in Oz anymore, Toto.

When we take the first steps on this journey, the turf is surely unfamiliar. What is being asked of the therapist is to set aside a harsh truth – that he/she really does not have a cure and really does not know what lasting cure really involves. Witness the rate and the statistics of depression relapse as an example. The most recent estimates suggest that at least 50% of patients who recover from an initial episode of depression will have at least one subsequent episode, and those with a history of two or more past episodes will have a 70-80% of recurrence in their lives. In attempting to formulate a depression relapse treatment protocol in the early nineties, an international group of prominent researcher-clinicians (Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale) were drawn to investigate the

benefits of mindfulness meditation. Their seminal book, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression* (Guilford, 2002) is MUST reading for all those who would seek to become more familiar with the integration of mindfulness teachings into their practices.

The authors relate the fascinating story of how they stumbled into the work of pioneer psychologist Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts in the late 1970s. They participated in on one of his stress reduction classes thinking they would perhaps borrow a technique or two and apply it to their own relapse prevention work. They come away transformed. Yes- transformed. A strong word and one that perhaps hints at some mystical experience, but one which is absolutely descriptive of what this group of researchers experienced. Note the deliberate use of the word “experience”. By definition, “experience” is not cognitive. It does not require thought at all. Experience is something that we feel in our gut. It involves processing information at the sensory level and not the cognitive level, “Coming To Our Senses” so to speak, and not coincidentally the perfect title of Dr. Kabat-Zinn’s most recent book.

Note at this juncture that the acquisition of a meditation mindset is not just a matter of reading a chapter or two in a book and “winging it” for the rest of the ride. The study of meditative disciplines begins with a study of oneself, and leads to the understanding that meditation is a natural partner to the work of psychotherapy. The basic notion of the self begins to dissolve, and we come to rest in something much larger and more stable than our microscopic concept of “self”. We come to rest in something called awareness. If our thinking minds are the waves of consciousness, then awareness is often compared to the ocean. This notion



### Why We Meditate (Continued from previous page)

of awareness is NOT just some leftover hippie term from the Summer of Love in 1969. It is real. It is profound. It is the "Aha", or the "I get it!" type of experience that internalizes our understanding of who we really are. Eastern mental health practitioners have long appreciated the role of this missing link in the historical traditions of Western psychotherapy. The story is told by author Mark Epstein (see references) of a William James lecture at Harvard University in the early 1900s. Upon realizing that a Buddhist monk was in the audience, James commented, "Take my chair. You are better equipped to lecture on psychology than I. This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now." As we begin to scratch the surface of renewed interest in psychotherapy integration, mindfulness practice forges a new template, a new foundation, upon which we can come to hold dear the healing power of a finely tuned contemplative mind.

To begin to comprehend the power of mindfulness meditation, let us reflect for a moment on a Renee Descartes quote from a long-forgotten college philosophy class:

"I think, therefore, I am".

So what does it mean if I don't think? Do I turn into a pumpkin? Do I cease to exist? I am no philosophy major for certain, but this quote surely makes one wonder. To willfully and in a planned and systematic way turn off our thinking minds is the easiest way to conceptualize what meditation is all about. It is about stopping. I can "be" without thought. It is about beginning the fascinating study of what our minds do when we do stop the incessant flow of our thoughts, judgments, and evaluations. The "doing mind" is a wonderful and indispensable tool for problem-solving. The technology that surrounds us would not be possible without it. On the other hand, that same "doing mind" is a lousy tool for beginning to understand human happiness. The practice of mindfulness opens our eyes by,

in the language of Buddhist scholars, "waking us up" to the many false notions (e.g., "illusions") created by our doing minds. Whether we use a psychoanalytic or cognitive-behavioral lens, it is these same false notions of reality (e.g., ego) that meditation practice gently asks us to examine and reflect upon.

Our Society and our Western culture dictate that it is almost un-American to stop our striving, to stop our drive to be number one, and worst of all – to challenge our human psyche to accept that we cannot have it all and cannot control it all. At an early age, we get the approval and acceptance (or we *fail* to get it) of our caretakers, our parents, and later our friends, teachers, and other significant others. We then spend the rest of our lives feeding this "approval addiction", or we spend years on the therapist's couch, trying to learn what was so unacceptable about us that we couldn't find that same acceptance and love in the first place. The early ego forms on this basis, and is fed by the stream of what we learn to like, dislike, seek, and avoid. In Freud's terms, we suffer this life of "common unhappiness" because we attach to states like "approval" that can easily become addictive.

To clarify, there is certainly nothing wrong or unhealthy in seeking to reach a particular personal goal. It is only when we become attached to, or identify with the label that we are prisoners. "Good students" don't always get the highest grade". "Good partners" don't always see eye to eye" "Thin is in" was only invented as a cultural golden rule by some very clever marketing teams that knew quite well how to appeal to the Western notion of beauty. The entire field of improving "self-esteem" has become a gold mine in America. Lose ten pounds. Make more money. Marry the "perfect" girl/guy... THEN you will be happy, or should I say you will be conditionally happy. The beginnings of all anxieties, depressions, the roots of anger and guilt all lie herein. We literally



### Why We Meditate (Continued from previous page)

talk ourselves into a paper chase, the illusion that any of these thousands of human addictions, when properly fed, will bring us that elusive state of peace of mind. Good luck, world. It is thanks to this nutty human notion that psychotherapists will never go hungry.

I recall one of Albert Ellis' lectures/rants against the evils of self-esteem. No need to repeat his expletives here. Suffice it to say that what he taught made perfect sense, that we as therapists would be well advised to teach self-acceptance, and not become junkies peddling cures for self-esteem. If a person learned to accept him "self" or her "self", with all the wonderful and not so wonderful qualities contained in that thing called "self" – then we would arrive! People would be transformed from irrational neurotics to the most resilient persons they could ever hope to be. But hold on for a minute! Is this "self" something that we can just bring to the gym and get into shape? Eastern writers think not. They speak of multiple notions of "self". On the one hand, we attach to the illusory and fixed sense of "me" that is composed of all of my individual personality characteristics at a moment in time (the concept of ego), and which can change a moment's notice ("I no longer like red meat". "I am a member of the Republican party").

Buddhist psychology has spent the millennia investigating the qualities of another "I", which is relatively stable and more enduring over time, no matter how my unique likes and dislikes may change. The more childlike and naturally curious "I" that was present at birth, long before the development of language is not the thousands of label that describe "me". "I" am timeless. I possess the same innocence and luminosity at age fifty-seven as when I was born. The world can influence "me"; the world can grab hold of "me" at an

early age and lure me into playing a role that is carried throughout my life, until I begin to see through it. Meditation speaks to the other sense of "I", becoming reacquainted with the "I" we lost touch with so long ago, and coming to realize that its strength and unchanging "beingness" is the light that can bring us out of any storm safely. Mindful practices do not invite us to become children again. They reconnect us with what it feels like to experience our inner child once again. We gradually learn to drop into "being" as often as we like, get comfy and cozy in this safe place, and come to respect and seek this sacred space when the winds of trouble blow harshly and without mercy in our lives.

The heart of learning mindfulness meditation practice begins with the challenge to stop. We find it so hard to do this. The government has even found a way to earn a buck off of our inability to stop. Across Long Island and in other communities throughout the land, cameras will now photograph the license plates of those drivers that rush through stop signs on the streets without stopping. E-ZPass even tells the government when we haven't stopped to pay our parkway tolls. Think of meditation as the E-ZPass of the mind. It encourages us to "stop", take stock for a few moments, and to gather in where we are in the process of our day before it carries us away like so many leaves on a river. When we don't learn to stop, we are "fined" -- plagued by all of the stresses, physical and emotional, that are the consequences of not stopping.

Often in working with people who are learning the power of influencing their emotions by a change in attitude (a change in cognitive processing), clients report that they were unable to make this happen in the heat of a difficult moment.



### Why We Meditate (Continued from previous page)

They are caught up in their anger or their anxiety. Their emotions literally carry them away. They *become*, they *identify* with, they *are* their emotion in that moment. Take any number of non-compliance issues that present in an initial school or family counseling/therapy session, where a child is being referred to address not doing homework, not studying, experimenting with marijuana or alcohol, cutting classes, hanging out with the "wrong" crowd, etc. When the child is asked to explain his/her non-compliance, there is a tightening as the initial feelings of anger or shame or any other emotion is first felt. The tendency to habitually react is strong. The immediate reaction is typically a defensive one, as the child's perceives some type of attempt by the adult to force compliance.

What follows is often some sharp words from the child, or more acting out, or maybe even further withdrawal. What is not taught to the child is exactly *how* they become "hooked" on pushing away the "no-good" feelings. Author/lecturer Pema Chodron describes this "shenpa syndrome" most eloquently in a web article available at the end of this article. Learning that a feeling is just a feeling is a powerful tool that changes everything. Perhaps, then, these feelings do not require being defended as much as understood. Can we help that child to "stop", observe that feeling without any urgency to defend it or change it? If we can, we let the child know that there is no need to "do battle", we take the "sting" out of what could be a highly charged emotional moment, and we help diminish the child's subsequent tendency to push the bad feelings away. We can then be less threatening as adults, and more easily guide children to seek an understanding of where the non-compliance really began and where it may lead. Children can learn

to take a step back, develop the ability to "just observe", and in doing so, perhaps more clearly see the cognitive rigidity that they were unable to connect with in a highly charged emotional state.

Meditation offers the tools to observe our typical reflexive and habitual ways of responding to emotion, develop a sense of non-reactivity, and come to know that while the world and the people in it may sometimes hurt the collective body of life rules embodied as "me", "I" am never injured in any way. "I" go on just the same whether people treat me with respect and kindness or whether they sometimes act poorly. "I" is always flowing, where "me" becomes so stuck. When we experience this reality, the urge to get the other person to change is lessened, the urge to push away charged emotions lessens, and we begin to realize that we no longer have to identify with the feeling itself. We begin to approach the "egolessness" that Buddhist psychology teaches, to dissolve our small selves and fixed mindsets, let go of winning and being right, and blend into the much larger universe of awareness. We begin the process of radical acceptance, getting away from the microscopic "me", and seeing clearly that reality is not based on my narcissistic personal cognitive drama, but rather on a reconnecting with a larger universal "I". We learn to rest in awareness.

Various American Buddhist authors and lecturers have written about the basic outline, or steps, that we can undertake as we begin the simple gesture of starting a daily meditation practice. Quieting the mind. Sitting in silence. In stillness. In a recent Friday night SCPA guest lecture, we heard from our colleague George Northrup, who eloquently spoke about "the importance of being nobody" --



### Why We Meditate (Continued from previous page)

letting go of the “me”, the labels, the attachments, saying goodbye to our narcissistic ways. Mindfulness is not so much about ridding ourselves of unwanted and unacceptable emotions and drives as much as it is learning to acknowledge their presence and just “noticing” them, much as we would observe and experience a rainbow. Another colleague and teacher, Buddhist psychologist Tara Brach speaks of the process of RAIN – recognizing, allowing, investigating, and developing a non-judgmental stance. Stepping outside of the stream and just watching. Pema Chodron refers to the four R’s – recognizing the “itch” (the upsetting emotion), refraining from scratching, relaxing momentarily, and resolving to continue this practice over and over again to the best of our ability.

This basic teaching is completely lacking in the Western educational system. We rush to fill the void of our children’s lives with more activities, more AP courses, and more play dates. We addict them to the “me” role and then wonder why they kill themselves and turn to drugs. When the “me” that society has created becomes too toxic, when our kids cannot live up to the false perfection that the commercials demand, is it any wonder that children try to kill their “me” and in the process often wind up killing themselves?

If you decide to experiment with meditation, or bring it into your psychotherapy practice, don’t expect that you or your clients will feel less anxious, depressed, resentful, shameful, or angry. Understand that the same feelings will still come and go. What will change is your relationship to them. In the end, you will come to appreciate, as will they, that all is well with “I”, all is well with others (even the ones who most challenge our patience), and all is well in reality.

Difficult relationships and even sometimes the catastrophic events in our lives may truly be the messengers sent as opportunities for us to deepen our mindfulness, guiding us to remember that we would do well to practice radical acceptance. In some sense, we have no other choice. What the real issue becomes is whether we can strive to accept reality more gracefully, or whether we are doomed to become prisoners of our own minds.

In my SCPA Newsletter article on mindfulness meditation last Fall, I provided some resources for practitioners to begin their own personal journey on the meditative path. Here are a few more. Without leaving your computer, check out the following web sites that will give you some online meditation audio lectures and meditation scripts. It is also highly recommended that you attend a one-day or a multi-day retreat at which you can hear and feel the power of these wonderful teachers. Don’t worry that you don’t know how to swim with more advanced meditators; they too first had to learn to float! Mindfulness meditation opens us up by taking us where we don’t want to go. But along that long and winding road, as we become old friends, our contemplative mind will become our best teacher.

To obtain an upcoming list of events and programs from a major sponsor of meditation programs in our area, visit [www.eomega.org](http://www.eomega.org) or go directly to:

1. [www.jackkornfield.org](http://www.jackkornfield.org)
2. [www.tarabrach.com](http://www.tarabrach.com)
3. [www.tibethouse.org](http://www.tibethouse.org)
4. [www.shambhala.org](http://www.shambhala.org) (features the writings of Pema Chodron)

For a hard-hitting, but eye-opening and very readable journey into what

### Why We Meditate (Continued from previous page)

awareness is all about, take a look at the work of Anthony de Mello. Tony was a Jesuit priest known throughout the world for his writings and spiritual conferences. His book, *Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality* will force you to rethink so much of what you have learned as a therapist and as a human being. His web site [www.demello.org](http://www.demello.org) is also an easy way of accessing some of his writings ***right now!***

A comprehensive and beautiful book, also available on CD, is Tara Brach's *Radical Self-Acceptance* (Sounds True, 2000, [www.soundstrue.com](http://www.soundstrue.com)).

Also highly recommended is a fascinating

set of works which blends psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective by psychiatrist/author Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without A Thinker* (Basic Books, 1995) and *Psychotherapy Without the Self* (Yale University Press, 2007).

A comprehensive 2008 two-day conference is captured on a seven-CD audio book, *Buddhist Psychology for the West and the Art and Science of Meditation*. It features the teachings of three prominent Buddhist psychologists, Jack Kornfield, Tara Brach, and Mark Epstein, and is available from [www.eomega.org](http://www.eomega.org). In closing, I offer the often-cited words of Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet:

### The Guest House

This being is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness  
Some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
Who violently sweep your house  
Empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
Meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent  
As a guide from beyond.