

Teaching an Old Shrink Some New Tricks: One Psychologist's Experiences with TM

By Anthony Pantaleno, Ph.D.

Well for starters, the key word in the title of this journey is "experiences." As with so many of the ways we assimilate knowledge in this lifetime and with this human brain, I for one, have done my fair share of reading, sitting in lectures, sleeping through WAY too many power points, and exhausting the left side of my human brain's language functions. When one becomes a student of meditation, one leaves the world of language, thinking, and human left-brained constructs behind. We learn to nourish the part of our right brain that observes, that notices, and acquires knowledge from a sensory space that requires no words on any page nor any prerequisite problem-solving capacity. Our "doing mind" is sent on a holiday, and our "being mind" takes center stage.

I have studied meditation from the comfort of my laptop for the past 12 years, taught and immersed myself in workshops, conferences, and the like, but it was not until I *finally* found the time to complete the David Lynch Foundation basic course in Transcendental Meditation™ as well as the standard Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course originally developed and piloted by Jon Kabat Zinn in 1979 that I finally came home to that long overdue place that life had somehow never found the time for me to visit: my own being.

It all began in the summer of 2013. A TM course was being offered near my home and the four consecutive days needed to complete the course miraculously opened themselves up before my disbelieving eyes - without any other scheduling conflicts that so often had a way of popping up. When I first called the TM center, I was told that initial study in TM involved seven steps – two brief lectures, a personal interview with a certified teacher, and four ninety-minute lectures/practices on four consecutive days in a small group. I showed up with the requested items - a white handkerchief, a piece of fruit, and a flower. As I was to learn on the first day of the course, these items were part of a "witnessing" ceremony - a ritual to give thanks to the lineage and to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi for bringing TM to the western world. We were not asked to subscribe to any spiritual philosophy or belief system, only to stand beside our teacher and passively listen to (e.g., "witness") some prayers chanted in Sanskrit that were offered before a poster-size photo of the Maharishi. My mind immediately began to drift and to wonder what John, Paul, George, and Ringo thought of their experience when they traveled to Rishikesh in 1967 to study TM with the Maharishi himself at a time when most of the western world thought that this was pretty weird stuff.

Shortly after, I received my mantra. Naively thinking that I would use one of my favorite words - "beach"- as my mantra, it was explained to the group that a mantra was not a word, but more of a sound-word, a vibration, whose purpose was to settle the mind and give it just one thing to focus on as our insanely hyperactive left brain tried to pull us to a thousand different places. We met in a group of about 8 students, regular folks from all walks of life - all seeking something that could not always be conveyed in the enormously limited spectrum of the English language. We sat as a group and chanted our mantras softly to

ourselves until the mantra literally disappeared as an audible signal and became a soft, subtle phenomenon in our brains. We were asked to practice being with our mantra for 15 minutes twice per day for the rest of our lives. We were invited to return to our teacher for a refresher session, or a "checking session" as often as we needed at no charge, also for the rest of our lives. And that was it. No gimmicks. No need to now spend large sums of money on advanced training. Just practice being with our mantra. Sounded easy enough...

But now began the real-deal "practice" of meditation, and not just what I had been teaching myself for the past ten years. I now understood why all of the meditation teachers from all the world traditions used the word "practice." It is because in this humble world of seeking the inner landscape of our own hearts, there is no SAT to pass, no level of mastery that one attains by getting a passing score in "mantra basics." We practice for the rest of our lives because that is how long this course really takes to unfold. We never seek to attain perfection because that was never the goal. As one of my favorite teachers, Tara Brach, has always taught: In meditation, there is no mountain of mastery to climb because what we are is already whole. Humans just have the blessing/curse of a language-driven left brain that learns at a tender young age how to judge ourselves, often overly harshly, and to judge our parents, our kids, our peers, and just about everything else under the sun, in so many moments and on so many days.

As the next years went by, there were stretches of time where my mantra and I really became fast friends and came through some tough times. But there were also those times when I shamelessly abandoned by new friend without giving her a reason. My mantra has always been female in my mind because it bears an amazing resemblance to the first name of a female colleague who I always respected and found to be such a genuine and caring person. You might think that my mantra would never want to speak with me again, not to mention sit with me one more time on an overstuffed chair for our fifteen minute rendezvous. Happily, she was always there when I was ready to be there for her. She never accosted me for abandoning her, and we came to have an understanding that our relationship would always survive. It was just a question of remembering how much we truly valued and respected each other - the same characteristics inherent in a long-term committed relationship. PS - I can't share my mantra with you for reasons that I admit I don't fully understand yet. Apparently there are a set number of mantras, with each TM teacher assigning each student his or her own mantra based on certain criteria. My left brain has some further studying to do on this point.

So as life would have it, in the Fall of 2016 - the next part of this tale began to unfold. I found that I was able to commit 8 Friday mornings and a Saturday "all day" retreat to a course in MBSR - Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. This work comes to us courtesy of Jon Kabat Zinn, who abandoned his promising career in molecular biology in 1979 to open the first MBSR center in the middle of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, MA. His first students were not Zen monks or robed gurus. They were people in pain - chronic back pain, AIDS patients, survivors of medical conditions that their physicians had done all they could to treat. They were real people who were suffering, being referred to an untested pioneer who felt that he had a way of helping these good people cope more

effectively with their pain. From this humble beginning came the standard MBSR course taught now at over 750 hospitals worldwide.

Similar to the simplicity of the TM center where I learned my mantra, the room where the MBSR course met was also a lovely undecorated space with a shiny wooden floor and a row of windows on one wall. Interestingly, I had learned in my TM class that having a window facing in the direction of the rising sun was actually a planned element of the layout of the TM studio. In a small storage closet in the corner of this room was a treasure chest of meditation cushions of all kinds, accompanied by meditation benches for students to sample different sitting postures.

As in the MBSR course, the TM instructor asked this diverse group from their early twenties to their seventies to share briefly what had drawn them to the course. In a word, in how many ways can twenty-one human beings encounter stress - in our family relationships? significant other relationships? at work? at play? and in the thousands of other places that the demon lives? These types of stress we had all tried to manage through many different approaches with all our dissimilar paths merging in a willingness to try meditation. Not that all of us were meditation groupies or anything like that - in fact, some were outright skeptics... all the better as I was to learn. The skeptics were just asked to keep an open mind.

We learned about the history of MBSR. In our first class, we learned about the body scan, one of the primal tools we would be exposed to over the next eight weeks in 2.5 hour sessions that were intended to transport us from the discursive "doing mind" of thinking, planning, and problem-solving to the world of "being mind", where we would come to observe, notice, and allow our senses to lead the way while we sent our thoughts on hiatus. On some days, gentle yoga postures were incorporated into the teaching as another variant of this same goal of shedding the left brain "knowing" in favor of feeling the right brain "allowing." Central to the course was the opportunity for students to share their homework experiences and the victories or the struggles they encountered from the previous week. Each person learned that he/she was not alone when being in able to find the time to practice or stick with the schedule they had made with good intention, or when a stressful practice emerged instead of a relaxing one.

We were provided with a web site developed by our teacher, where we could access a variety of meditation practices, with the goal of developing a time and a place where we would "take our seat" and engage in the experience of formal mindfulness for brief or for more extended periods. We also learned that we could be mindful, or fully present, by simply observing the simple sensory joys of common daily events like washing dishes, taking a shower, or taking a short walk. What many people envision when they think of robed gurus sitting in the full lotus position was not at all what MBSR was all about. From week to week as we engaged in eating meditations, walking meditations, sitting and lying down meditations, meditations with thoughts and feelings, visualizations, loving-kindness meditations, and more, we became intimate with the tendency of our minds to wander quite effortlessly, with a gentle instruction to just notice that wandering, without self-judgment, and return to the present moment via the always-present anchor of our breath. There is a

widely known quote of JKZ that always resonated with me: "So long as you are breathing, there's more right with you than wrong with you."

At the end of the seventh session, we were reminded of what we knew would be the next class when we originally signed up for MBSR - the Saturday "retreat". On a bright and cool day in November, we dutifully arrived at 8:30am and truth be told - wondered how many of us might still be standing when we reached the dismissal hour of 4pm. What none of us expected, however, and had learned in class just the day before, was that this was to be a daylong silent retreat. Once the class began and we settled in, there was no talking of any kind. The only sound that could be heard was the instructor's voice guiding us through a mix of all of the MBSR practices that we had been learning up to that point. At first, this wasn't so bad - especially for someone like me who treasured nothing more than sitting at an empty beach on a summer's day just gazing out on the horizon. Admittedly, the experience reminded me of just how much I really sucked at the number of yoga practices that went into that day, but this time, I thanked my mind for reminding me and just went on.

By lunchtime, however, we were all bursting at the seams and ready for a good chat with some of the folks we had now come to know so well. No such luck - the lunchtime break was stocked with light lunch choices - but these were to be enjoyed and focused upon in silence. If you've never enjoyed a meal in silence, I highly recommend it. You eat less and taste more. But that was not so much the point of the day. By the time the end of the day arrived - all of us were still present! Hooray! The real take-home message, however, was that our "minds" had an experience that more of us could probably use - the nurturing and healing power of silence. In a world where we were bombarded continuously by all kinds of electronic and natural noise, there was a place to go where we did not need to have an agenda.

In the end, I suppose that for me personally each of these approaches were like so many facets of the same sparkling diamond, although some of the leaders in TM would have us believe otherwise. They espouse that TM is more than mindfulness, and actually define their lineage of meditation as bringing practitioners to a fourth state of consciousness with loads of EEG research data to back up that claim. As stated by world-renowned TM psychiatrist Dr. Norman Rosenthal (who incidentally was responsible for the DSM diagnosis of Seasonal Affective Disorder) in his NY Times bestseller *Transcendence*:

"During TM practice, the subject-object relation that defines customary experiences is transcended. In *focused attention* the object of experience is sustained in awareness – the subject (experience) and object coexist; they are independent but interact. In TM, the object of experience fades away – you use the mantra to lose it. When the mantra disappears, the subject, or the experiencer, as Maharishi puts it, “finds him/herself awake to his/her own existence.”

Judson Brewer, MD, is the Director of Research at the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, the birthplace of MBSR. He has perhaps captured the synthesis of both TM and MBSR in terms that the average person can more

easily relate to. In the February, 2017 article of Mindful magazine, Dr. Brewer's article, "When Ego Falls Away," cites the original research of Russian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who first coined the term "flow" in the 1970s, which he defined as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake." We all know *that feeling*. You know you're in that zone when all clock time is suspended, you have no idea of how long you've been there, your focus and awareness are laser-sharp, there is no sequential planning, and you forgot to eat or to use the bathroom. You become one with yourself. You are in the present moment. Distractions fall away. In using the example of learning a piece of music, Dr. Brewer states, "Music adds a magical ingredient that helps us *transcend* our everyday self-centered experience." Our ego is less self-critical, perhaps dwelling in what the MBSR folks would call a state of choiceless awareness and the TM folks would call a state of transcendence.

The point is, we are not in our "doing" minds but come into a place of "being". Oh, that all of humanity could inhabit this place a bit longer each day, for in this place – amazing things happen. Creativity blooms. Old worn-out habits and cravings become less "driven". We become acquainted with our own interior landscape, and less drawn in by the external world. We have transcended the everyday human mindset. Please notice how in these two purportedly different meditation traditions, the descriptive elements of its own key proponents seems to blend – the perfect example of how human language can foul up a good thing. If we can learn one thing from the current trend of psychotherapy integration, it is that we are more often speaking about the same therapeutic interventions more so than we have formerly been willing to acknowledge. REBT, CBT, DBT, MBCT, FAP, and ACT practitioners have seemed friendlier to one another in recent years rather than in our former culture where we just sat at the cafeteria table with those of our own persuasion. So may it be one day when it comes to the art and science of meditation.

Researchers may one day be better able to define the critical elements of meditation - of whatever variety - and in years to come help us bring these into our clinical practices, schools, and corporate settings with the certainty and knowledge which the scientific community is just now beginning to piece together. The interested reader is directed to the October, 2015 Special Issue of the American Psychologist: "The Emergence of Mindfulness in Basic and Clinical Psychological Science" for a more comprehensive understanding of the state of meditation research. This same issue presents a fascinating historical overview from the exploration of meditation by psychoanalysts in the 1950's to the current research on the lengthening of telomeres, the portion of the chromosome which is correlated with longer life and regular meditation practice.

Humanity has the unfortunate tendency to take good things and somehow pit them against each other. The debate of "which" brand of meditation consumers wish to endorse will ultimately be a function of many individual, cultural, familial, and other moving parts. Each of us is asked to determine which of these practices, if any, will resonate for each of us, and if so, how we may assimilate the requisite skills to teach meditation in an ethical and empirically-supported manner.

At the end of the day, I gaze at the Beatles' album cover/poster in my office and smile at the title-the most important legacy when we drill down to the core of meditation: Let It Be.

In October, I will sit for my first seven-day silent retreat at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY. I invite any seekers to join me. Go to www.omega.org and type course number 248 in the light blue search bar.

Recommended reading:

Brewer, J. (2017) *The craving mind: from cigarettes to smartphones, to love: Why we get addicted and how we can heal*. Yale University Press: New Haven.

Goldstein, E. (2016). *Uncovering happiness: Overcoming depression with mindfulness and self-compassion*. Atria: New York, NY.

Marturano, J. (2014). *Finding the space to lead. A practical guide to mindful leadership*. Bloomsbury Press, New York, NY.

Rechtschaffen, D. (2014). *The way of mindful education: Cultivating well-being in teachers and students*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY.

Rosenthal, N. (2011). *Transcendence: Healing and transformation through transcendental meditation*. Penguin Group. New York, NY.

Tony Pantaleno, Ph.D. is currently in private practice in Commack, NY, where he treats preadolescents, adolescents, and adults utilizing cognitive-behavioral and mindfulness therapies. He serves as the coordinator of the Long Island School Practitioner Action Network (www.lispan.org) and helped to launch the Long Island Mindfulness and Resiliency Consortium (LIMARC) earlier this year. He may be reached via his web site at www.drpantaleno.com.