

The Healing Science of Meditation

By Dr. Andrew Vidich

A New Model for Healing:

Let me begin by relating a Sufi story, which may provide for us a point of hypotheses in terms of our inquiry. This story, tells of a man named of Mullah Nasruddin known for his iconoclastic wisdom. As the story goes, he was a self-employed businessman who traveled back and forth between the borders of Saudia Arabia and Egypt. During this time, there was a border guard whose job it was to inspect all traders as they entered or left Egypt to make sure they were not carrying any contraband. Every time that he crossed the border, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, for four years, he would be accompanied by a donkey carrying a saddlebag on his back. Each time he was inspected by the border officer who never found anything suspicious. This continued for 4 years. Then, Mullah Nasruddin retired a wealthy man. One day, after his early retirement, he is sitting in a coffee shop in downtown Cairo sipping coffee. The former border guard happens to see him and is overwhelmed with curiosity. He wants to know how Mullah Nasruddin had become so wealthy in only four years. So introduces himself and says, "Mullah, I have retired myself and have no interest in persecuting you I just want to know how you became so wealthy in such a short time. What were you doing for those four years?"

Mullah pauses for a moment and then replies, "I was smuggling donkeys."

Sometimes the most obvious facts in our lives are the very things we fail to see. These are the facts that we might call fundamental or self-evident truths that we miss because they are too close to us. From this analogy, we can see there is something missing in our Western notion of healing. What is this missing ingredient? It is *consciousness or awareness*. It is this consciousness, or life principle, which if expanded could be called *theocentric* medicine and posits a direct relationship between spirituality and our health. Since meditation and prayer are two of the most important disciplines by which we can develop spiritually, their connection to our understanding of healing is critical.

Three decades ago, when I began my meditation practice, I was often viewed as out of the mainstream and or belonging to a foreign Eastern cult. Today, with over two hundred studies done on the practice of meditation or the connection between spirituality

and health, the tables have turned almost 180 degrees.¹ Wherever I go people are practicing meditation as a means to improve their health and overall well being.

As a result of these numerous studies, we know that meditation and prayer are positive and successful forms of treatment for a variety of ailments including heart disease, strokes, chronic pain, stress reduction, hypertension, anxiety, depression, and even cancer. In the field of occupational stress management, meditation is considered the most effective technique in reducing stress at work.² In a world struggling to find more effective ways to deal with pain, suffering and disease the possibilities inherent in the practice of meditation **cannot be over looked** any longer. It is time to consider meditation as an effective *healing science* within the context of our Western notion of medicine.

Why has this transition been so difficult to make? Because it implies a radical paradigm shift in the way we understand healing. Today most people in the healing professions will accept without argument that the human being has two aspects-- a body and a mind. We recognize that these two systems are connected and interrelated and their proper functioning creates both psychological and physical health. We have a significant body of research that has explored the impact of the mind on the body, and vice versa. What we forget is that only forty years ago, the notion that the mind could affect the body was radical new territory. Today most health practitioners accept this without question.

Today another shift is taking place before our very eyes. This view holds that there is a third component to the human being, which we call *consciousness*. It is this consciousness (the life principle), which animates and enlivens the previous two components and which is responsible for the healthy functioning of the entire system. This new paradigm holds that human beings are made up of three components--body, mind, and consciousness, and their relative importance lies in this same ascending order.

The **old model** of the human being made famous by the 17th century philosopher Renee Descartes said, "I think therefore I am." The new paradigm says that this is radically wrong. We are more than thinking entities. **The new model says, "I am**

¹ Michael Murphy, and Steven Donavon, *Contemporary Meditation Research; A Summary of the Field with A Bibliography of 926 entrees*. (The Esalen Transformation Project, San Francisco Cal, 1985).

² Murphy R. Lawrence, "Stress Management in Work Settings; A Critical Review of the Health Effects." *American Journal of Health Promotion*, vol. ii, no. 2. Nov./Dec. 1996, p. 132

conscious therefore I am." Awareness is different than thinking. We are conscious entities. From this perspective, all dis-ease results from the *breaking way of our individual self-awareness from the greater Consciousness Whole."* We have become spiritual "amputees," in need of an infusion of consciousness. How is this accomplished? Through the *inversion of the attention within itself*, or meditation.

A Definition of Meditation:

By the term *meditation*, we are referring to a variety of practices within many different religious and spiritual traditions. In the Christian tradition, it has been referred to as *prayer with attention, centering prayer* and *unceasing prayer* and in the Islamic Sufi Tradition as *dhikr and mushahada*. The Buddhists have referred to it as silent meditation, *vipasana*, and *dzogchen*, in Hinduism as *dhyana*, and in Judaism as the practice of *hitbodedhut*.

Meditation can be defined as an inversion of the attention through the process of concentration on our own essential Self. When attention is freed from both the body and bodily functions and the mind is freed from its various processes including, memory, discrimination, perception and ego ³ --the Self comes to know itself as Pure Consciousness. From birth until this present moment, our attention has been directed outward through the five organs of sense perception and we have forgotten our true nature. We suffer from the ultimate identity crisis. **We do not know who we are.** By shifting the attention inward, consciousness becomes liberated and discovers its innate self-luminous, self-energizing and self-revitalizing essence.

The essence of this new model suggests **that the health of the body and mind both depend upon the health of one's consciousness.** And the total health of our consciousness depends upon not only the practice of meditation and prayer, but also our faith, spiritual beliefs, religious fellowship, thinking patterns and the way we interact with others.⁴

Part III. The Six Components of Meditation:

³ Later in this article we can further define these mental processes in more lay terms. For now, they represent the full mental functions or operations of our mind.

⁴ Levin, Jeff, *God, Faith, and Healing*, (John Wiley and Son, 2001) pg. 4.

Right Practice

In studying meditation as a whole, we see certain universal elements that form the basis of almost all meditation practices. Each of these individual components can play a significant role in the journey toward individual healing and wholeness.

The term *right practice* implies that we must begin our investigation within the human body. The point of concentration is not outside us but on the Self or Consciousness within us. In effect, we are the subject of our own investigation. The human body is the laboratory where we begin. Our search begins with a shift from external observable phenomena to internal subjective, but also observable phenomena viewed through internal subtle senses.

There is an interesting story told in the East about a wise man who had lost his keys. He spent many hours searching all over his property but not found them. Finally, his wife came out of the house to help him. She inquired "Well dear, where do you last remember seeing your keys? He replied, "I last remember seeing them downstairs in the basement." She then replied, "Why then are you looking for them out here in the front lawn? Her husband replied forcefully, "Well there is more light outside." This story points to the futility of seeking spiritual truth in objective phenomena. After all, where is the scientific evidence that science alone can provide answers to all of life's questions? The search for health as well as spirituality begins within us.

Withdrawal of Sensory Awareness

The second element of meditation is called *pratyahara* in the Hindu tradition and literally translates as the withdrawal of the sense perception from the objects of the world. To illustrate this process more clearly we divide the functioning of the human body into two types of systems. The first system has been identified in Western medicine as the involuntary, sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. These systems are responsible for the basic autonomic or involuntary functions of the human body including, elimination, procreation, digestion, respiration, and circulation and the growing of hair and nails.

The second system is the sensory system. This system is responsible for the functioning of our five organs of perception, sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. In

contrast to the involuntary system, we have significant control over these sense organs. When we exercise control over our attention, we can, to a large degree, direct how we use them. There is a story of the inventor Thomas Edison who was working on solving a difficult math problem in his study. During his deliberations, a marching band went by his study window. Later, a friend came by and asked him if he had enjoyed the marching band. He said, "What band? I did not hear anything."

If we generalize, we could say that it is our attention, or consciousness, which enlivens our sense organs. At present our attention is diffused throughout the body at a microscopic and cellular level and pulled by the various sense organs to various sense objects. In the meditative state, it is withdrawn and concentrated at a single point within the body known as the *seat of the soul or consciousness or third eye*. In effect, the meditator ceases to be influenced by outer stimuli.

To help assist the aspirant in accomplishing the withdrawal process most meditation traditions provide a variety of preliminary practices or transitional exercises. These help transition our awareness mentally from associations in the world into new spiritual dimensions. These can be divided into two kinds --physical and mental. Some of the physical practices include hatha yoga, sacred dance, chanting, use of music and sound, visual aids including yantras, tefilin, or prayer carpets. In terms of mental preliminary exercises, some of these include reciting and reading of scripture, ceremonial prayer, and a variety of internal rites and rituals.

Both kinds of practices assist in separating our consciousness from our mind and its various processes. These include a) memory or recollection of past events, b) cognition, or awareness of what we perceive, c) discrimination, or our reasoning faculty, and d) ego or our sense of who we are based on our thoughts, words, and deeds. By taking our attention off the mind, it ceases to function. **In effect, the mind is not conscious, but a vehicle through which our awareness works.**

One of the first studies done on meditation was by the Harvard physician, Dr. Herbert Benson. In his best selling book *The Relaxation Response*, he studied the effectiveness of meditation techniques to reduce stress in the body. He discovered that these techniques bring on "bodily changes that decrease heart rate, lower metabolism, decrease the rate of

breathing, and bring the body back into what is probably a healthier balance."⁵ One of the most interesting features that these meditation techniques produce is an increase in alpha waves. These slower moving brain waves depicted in electroencephalograph (EEG) readings "increase in intensity and frequency during the practice of meditation but are not commonly found in sleep." They are, according to Dr. Jeff Levin, all linked to "rapid learning, stress reduction, lessened pain and symptoms, increased memory, enhanced creativity, personal growth and mind expansion, and interestingly, mystical experiences."⁶ In the last 30 years, since his study, there has been a significant amount of research into how meditation affects various metabolic functions as well as different kinds of illnesses. They indicate these various practices have a powerful effect on reducing stress, chronic pain, and increase contentment, inner peace and happiness. More recently, Dr. Davidson at the University of Madison has shown that meditation shifts the activity of the brain from a stressful "fight or flight" response to one of acceptance by actually reorienting the activity in the brain from the right hemisphere to the left. These meditation techniques de-habituate the mind from conditioned and reactive patterns by realigning it along new and more healthy pathways of awareness.

Ethical Conduct and the Nature of the Mind

The third component of the meditation practice is traditionally known as moral or ethical conduct. In Judaism, this would include the 10 commandments of Moses, in Christianity the 10 beatitudes of Christ, in Buddhism the 8-fold path, in Hinduism the yamas and niyamas, in Islam, *Sharia* or *Adab* (good manners). What all these various ethical codes imply is that we cannot achieve higher states of consciousness unless we first become better human beings. As my Master once said, "an ethical life is a stepping stone to spirituality."

Continual negative thinking, or what Harvard scientist Joan Boryshenko called the "dirty tricks department of the mind" can become embedded or leave effects on the body causing disease and sickness. These include negative personal beliefs, social beliefs

⁵ Dr. Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response*, (Avon Books, NYC 1975).

⁶ Jeff Levin, *God Faith and Healing*, (John Wiley and Sons 2001.) p. 165-166.

("shoulds"), insistence on being right, rationalizing, disillusionment and despair.⁷ The purpose behind living an ethical life is, in a sense, to heal the heart of its wounds and destructive habits. If the "heart" is not "healed" or made "whole" it cannot withstand the luminosity of its own inner nature. In order for gold to be useable, it must be purified of all foreign elements likewise until the heart is completely purified it cannot ascend spiritually. Rumi one of the greatest poets and mystics of all time said, "We have to forsake one thousand half loves in order to bring one whole heart home." The soul is a conscious entity and therefore attachment to anything other than consciousness only brings suffering and disease in the end. Tarthang Tulku a Buddhist teacher tells us that when "positive or joyous feelings and attitudes pass through each organ and circulate throughout our whole system our physical and chemical energies are transformed and balanced."

In a recent study done by Wenneberg, Schneider, Walton MacLean it was shown that the expression of anger was correlated to increased platelet aggregation (blood coagulation). Since increased platelet aggregation can lead to blood clotting, it can be a direct link to coronary heart disease. We can assume then that there is a direct connection between anger /hostility and heart failure.⁸

Akbar was a wise Mogul King in India. He had many ministers who advised him on a variety of subjects but one minister named Birbal was his preeminent favorite. One day Birbal was instructing Akbar on the power of thought. He told the Emperor that thought was more powerful than even words or deeds. Akbar remained skeptical and wanted some visible proof. Birbal suggested they conduct a small experiment. He instructed the King to stand on a nearby hill and watch for the first person to come over the hilltop. He then further instructed "As this man approaches I want you to think of hurting him in the most violent way. When the man approaches we will ask him what he has been thinking." As the man approached Akbar began to think evil thoughts of the man. When the man arrived Akbar greeted him and said, "Listen, you will be forgiven for whatever you say, but please answer my question completely honestly." " When you saw my face what were you thinking?"

⁷ Joan Borysenko, *Minding the body, Mending the Mind*, (Bantam Books, Toronto 1987, pg.11)

⁸ Wenneberg, Schneider, Walton MacLean *Behavior Medicine*, 1997 Winter; 22(4): 174-7)

"Forgive me great King, but when I saw your face I wanted to beat you up.

Birbal turned to Akbar and said, " Never underestimate the power of thought."

Each of us thinks hundreds of thoughts many of them negative. These thought forms effect everyone, whether we are aware of it or not. It is for this reason that all the great wisdom traditions agree that if we seek true healing and true health we must exercise conscious control over our minds. From the perspective of this healing model, it is only when we can see ourselves honestly, accurately, and openly, that we can respond compassionately and appropriately. In essence, as Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, once remarked "awareness per se-- by and of itself --can be curative."⁹ When we understand this, we become ever mindful of our thought content. The great Indian Spiritual teacher Guru Nanak summed up the essence of this reality when he said, "Victory over the mind is victory over the world."

Concentration and the Use of Mantra (Subliminal Repetition)

The fourth component of the meditation journey is the use of a *mantra* (repetition of sacred names) as a means to develop deeper states of concentration. In the Hindu and Buddhist tradition, it is known as *mantra*, in the Sufi tradition as *Dhikr* and in the Christian traditions as a *litany*. The role and purpose of a mantra is to assist the aspirant in stilling his or her mind through the constant repetition of various names of God or sound vibrations. By constantly repeating the words either mentally or aloud, the mind becomes engaged and is unable to create new thoughts. Since the mind, as we have seen, is always in a state of agitation mystics use its innate tendency toward continuous thinking to the aspirant's own advantage.

There is a wonderful Hindu story about a saint named Tukaram, which may illustrate how a mantra works. One day while discoursing on the power of a mantra, he said, "Mantra is the means to know ourselves, mantra can take us to God. Mantra is all powerful, mantra is the Highest Self." He went on in this fashion for some time. Finally, one gentleman still unconvinced stood up and confronted the Swami. "Sir, with all due respect, what is the proof of what you say? After all, how can a few simple words take one to God?

⁹ Roger Walsh and Francis Vaughn, *Paths Beyond Ego, The Transpersonal Vision*, (Jeremy Tarcher Putnam, NYC, 1993) p.51.

You say mantra can do this, mantra can do that but this is all nonsense. Give me some practical demonstration."

Tukuram replied, "You know you are nothing but a filthy scoundrel, a dirty rotten good for nothing thief. A heap of garbage, bringing disgrace and ignorance wherever you go." The gentleman became increasingly angrier. Finally, he exploded and said, "Who are you to call me anything. You don't even know me. You call yourself a saint but what kind of a saint abuses, and condemns others."

Suddenly Tukuram became completely still. Then with perfect equanimity replied, "My dear friend, if a few words of anger can cause such a violent reaction in you in a matter of minutes, imagine what the thought of God might do if you were to repeat it ceaselessly throughout the day."

Thought has a tremendous power to affect our consciousness. Through the use of a mantra we can begin to consciously control our thoughts, and direct our thinking in more positive and uplifting ways. Its value as a curative treatment can have widespread use in the field of both medicine and psychology. Studies show that positive thinking can promote health. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale in his famous book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, revolutionized the way we think about the effect of our thoughts. The real work of the practice is to remain *fully conscious* throughout the day. The greater **our awareness** during the day the better our meditation. More recently, John Kabat Zinn found in another study conducted with Richard Davidson that people who practiced meditation increased their anti-body levels in their body. The better their meditation, the healthier their immune system. Consciousness and health are connected. The more conscious we become the healthier we are.

Contemplation

Contemplation has been defined as a stage in the meditation journey in which as a result of continued concentration there grows a continuous flow of perception, called *dhyān*. In the practice of *dhyān*, the attention is **fixed** on the *seat of consciousness*, *third eye* or *Anja chakra*, located between the two eyebrows and behind the eyes. When contemplation reaches its zenith, the aspirant develops one-pointed and unswerving concentration on the object of concentration to such an extent that he/she loses himself in

the higher luminous reality. **In essence, the seer becomes a Self-conscious entity.**

At this stage, the mind comes under the conscious control of the aspirant and he/she experiences profound new states of bliss, halcyon calm and certainty of knowledge. Mental maladies like fear, doubt, agitation, depression, anger, and self-assertiveness disappear and gradually give rise to fearlessness, confidence, firmness, and evenness of temper.

There is a story about a young farm boy who began to seek the meaning and purpose of life. His mother, who was a wise soul, encouraged him to seek God in solitude and meditation. Each day after completing his duties on the farm he would go off into the woods and sit in meditation for several hours. Days and weeks passed by and gradually he became restless and discontented again. He complained to his mother that he wasn't making any progress and asked for her sagely advice. She told him she had heard of a wise spiritual teacher who might be able to help him further.

Heeding his mother advice, he set off. When he arrived at the ashram of the teacher, he resumed meditating under his guidance. Each day the students would sit for an hour and then listen to the teacher's illuminating words. This routine continued for several weeks but again he found he was not making any progress in his meditation. One day, feeling dejected he decided to confide in his teacher. He told him he could not concentrate and his mind wandered everywhere. He was perplexed. His teacher asked him what did he love most in the entire world? The young man replied that he dearly loved a cow whom he used to milk everyday back at his farm. The teacher then replied, "Son, when you sit for meditation instead of repeating your mantra as a point of concentration please think of your cow." The next day after finishing the discourse all the students retired to their small rooms and began to sit for the usual hour. After the hour had elapsed, they emerged one by one everyone except the young farm boy. Many hours passed and students became concerned. They went to the teacher who was a man of inner vision but pretended ignorance. He knocked on the door ordering the boy to come out. "I know your are in there, come out right now." After several attempts, a loud "moo" sound was heard. Once again, the teacher called out, "Come out right now or we will come in to get you." Finally, a faint voice was heard, "I can't. My horns won 't fit through the doorway."

This humorous story points to the results of intense contemplation. The young farm

boy had merged his own identity with that of the cow. How was this feat accomplished? Through the power of intense love. My Master once said, "the secret to successful meditation is one pointed concentration which is a by product of love." While this story may seem odd, it is at the heart of the human experience. The more we become attuned to the greater consciousness, the more we feel these "apparent" boundaries disappear. The notion that my identity begins and ends with my physical body and your identity begins and ends with your physical body is a belief, which, has no basis in higher states of awareness. All of this has been brilliantly summed up in the words of Gary Zukav, in his book, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters; An Overview of the New Physics*, "there is no here or there. We live in a non local universe"¹⁰ The great Vedic masters expressed this view as the universal vision of the "All in the One and One in the All."

Samadhi, Fana, or Union

This last phase of the meditation journey thought of as the culmination of the journey has had relatively little research done. Most of what we know about these advanced states come from various scriptures and oral traditions which describe the gradual development of *dhyan* until it culminates in *samadhi*. According to my own spiritual teacher Sant Kirpal Singh Ji Maharaj, samadhi occurs when the "the contemplator or meditator loses all thought of himself and the mind becomes *dhya-rupa* the very form of his thought. In this state the aspirant is not conscious of any external object save of consciousness itself, a state of all bliss and or perfect happiness."¹¹

These advanced levels of expanded or cosmic consciousness lead to a perfect healing of the body, mind, and spirit. Further, at these very high levels, the conscious life force is capable of transmitting profound healing energies to others at the physical, mental, and spiritual levels. ***The effect of this we might call healing through radiation.*** How do we explain them? The answer given by great adepts is that ***consciousness itself curative.*** When an aspirant reaches the higher states of awareness he/she becomes a conduit for the divine storehouse of all health, energy and wisdom.

¹⁰ Zukav, Gary, *The Danicng Wu Li Masters; An Overview of the New Physics*; (Toronto Bantum Books; pg. 302.)

¹¹ Kirpal Singh, *The Crown of Life*, (Sawan Kirpal Publications, fourth edition, Bowling Green, Virginia 1980,) p. 74.

There is a wonderful story in the Tibetan tradition, which illustrates this essential principle. In the early 1950's the Chinese entered Tibet and destroyed thousands of monasteries and killed hundreds of thousands monks and lay people. They would go into the monasteries and kill hundreds without a thought for their life. There was one Chinese warrior who was known for his skillful use of his sword.

He could cut off the head of someone with a quick flick of the wrist. During the ravaging of one monastery, he had killed hundreds. He killed without mercy or concern for life. As he approached, they fled down the hallways but no one escaped. Finally, he entered a large room where to his surprise, an elderly monk remained seated in half lotus position unmoved and unperturbed by the horrendous killings going on all around him. The arrogant Chinese warrior approached him and was about to kill him but suddenly hesitated. Something prevented him from striking his head off. He looked down at the elder monk who was deeply peaceful, unmoved and radiating a profound inner compassion and love. He said, "Don't you know who I am? I could sever your head in a single second with a flick of my wrist."

The elder monk remained unmoved, and fearless replied, " Don't you know who I am. I can sit here without fear, without loathing and without blinking an eye while you strike my head off." At that moment, the Chinese warrior had a profound realization. He recognized a divine power and unconditional love coming from this simple Tibetan monk. He realized he was in the presence of greatness. At that moment, he bowed down and prostrated himself. He placed his head at his feet and then a cry for help emanated from the depths of his being. " Please show me heaven and hell." The elder monk looked at him all knowingly and replied, " *Hell*, my friend, was when you came in here filled with arrogance, pride and revenge with no thought of the hundreds of lives you had taken, with no recognition of the pain and suffering you have caused hundreds of others. *Heaven* was when you realized the spark of divinity within another soul, and your own pride and ego. And from humility understood for the first time that you too are a spark of this great consciousness."

The ultimate healing occurs when we are united back to our source. Strictly speaking our present state is an abnormality. Dis--ease of the body or mind exists only in the context of spiritual fragmentation and isolation. **It is only by reconnecting to our**

essential nature as "consciousness" that true health of the body, mind, and can be realized.