

In the last of our Insight series, Stephen Wright describes the many benefits of embracing a deep inner spiritual exploration

Meditation matters

Meditation is probably the oldest tradition of gaining personal insight so that we can be in the world differently. Visualisation, imagery, chanting, journeying, contemplation, prayer – these and more are words loosely used to describe meditation.

If we have a problem we are often advised to meditate on it, implying a goal-oriented sitting in silence. But meditation with a purpose is something of an oxymoron; to meditate is paradoxically to come to a place of purposelessness – simply to be, fully present and aware in the moment. Meditation can be seen as the discipline of quietening the mind using various forms of mental exercises.

Health benefits

The Latin root of the word meditation means to heal. Much research shows the positive health benefits to practitioners of meditation, such as greater intimacy with and reduced fear of other people, increased energy, greater relaxation, less susceptibility to depression, greater awareness of good diet, exercise and posture, less use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs.

There also appear to be benefits for psychological stability, lower anxiety, improved immune response, lower rates of respiration, pulse and blood pressure, improved internal locus of control and sense of being effective in the world rather than a victim of circumstance.

But it could be argued that the health gains are mere side effects to the real intent of

SUMMARY

Meditation is a healing discipline that can lead to the deepest awareness of the present moment through quieting the mind. And it can have positive physical and emotional effects.

Keywords

Meditation • Quietening the mind and body
• Mantra • Healing • Stress • Spirituality • Monkey mind • Waiting quality • Discernment

meditation; the deepening of our spirituality.

Deepening our awareness of ourselves through practices such as meditation can change the way we respond to the world and the way we respond to others – including our patients – for the better. And we could construct a good evidence-based case for using meditation far more than we do. As a meditation teacher, I am often asked to guide people under stress. But there is more to it than seeking another emotional protective to cope with the realities of modern life.

When we meditate, we learn to sit – not just physically but also get our minds to sit still as well. If you are not an experienced meditator, all you will get is what the Buddhists call ‘monkey mind’ – anything but stillness as your mind leaps from one thing to the next and gets caught up by internal and external distractions.

Self-realisation

As we learn to be still within, the stillness embraces a waiting quality in it; waiting with deep patience, without expectation and without disturbance, unattached to any outcome, simply being completely present in the moment. Thus we may be transported to something that cannot easily be put into words.

Hazrat Inayat Khan, the founder of Universal Sufism, writes: ‘There remains no part of one’s being that is hungry. There is a feeling of everlasting satisfaction in knowing something that the knower can

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never put into words. It is the knowledge that mystics call self-realisation and that is recognised by some religious-minded people as god consciousness, and by philosophical minds as cosmic consciousness' (Witteveen 1997).

Meditation can take many forms and can be learned easily, but should not be undertaken lightly, or without proper teaching, supervision and ongoing support.

As we explore the 'interior castle' as St Teresa of Avila described it, our vision of who we are and why we are here can be challenged. It can expose us to all manner of internal shadows and difficulties that may have been long buried in our psyche.

It is not for nothing that all the great spiritual traditions espouse that certain practices and support mechanisms are in place to guide people safely in personal and spiritual awakening. It can be a joyful

and blissful experience as we approach ever-deeper understanding of ourselves and perhaps relationship to god, but it can also be a time of great trial and challenge.

In general, as we deepen our exploration, the true spiritual path should be expansive, increasing our capacity to love and be compassionate to others, enabling us to be more forgiving,

centred and aware amid life's extremes. Meditation can be difficult to learn and to persevere with but the potential benefits are enormous – and it can be fun **NS**

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MEDITATION CAN CHANGE THE WAY WE RESPOND TO THE WORLD

deepening our capacity for discernment, encouraging a sense of trust and fostering the possibility that having our beliefs tested and challenged does not need to be a threatening experience.

Consider meditating when you encounter challenges in life, before or during that difficult meeting, to honour significant moments in life, or simply as a daily routine to stay ever more

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