

Can Meditation Be Bad for You?

by Mary Garden

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Back in 1979, when I was living in Pune, India, as a starry-eyed devotee of the infamous guru Bhagwan Rajneesh, something happened that has disturbed me to this day. A man who had just come down from Kathmandu after completing a thirty-day Tibetan Buddhist meditation course killed himself. I had met him the night before, and we'd had coffee together. I don't remember what we spoke about, but he was friendly and didn't appear distressed. But the next day he climbed to the top of the multi-storied Blue Diamond Hotel and leapt off.

The Bhagwan, at his first lecture after the man's suicide, tried to reassure us by saying the man had already reincarnated as a more enlightened soul. But I was quite upset and remember thinking how strange it was that someone should kill himself after a meditation course. Isn't meditation something you do to get--at the very least--peace of mind? I wondered whether he might have had a mental illness and perhaps shouldn't have taken the course in the first place. Even if he had, shouldn't the meditation have helped? It didn't occur to me that the meditation itself might have caused a mental imbalance that tipped him over the edge--that meditation could be dangerous for some people. Has such a notion ever appeared in the mainstream media, let alone the myriad New Age magazines?

Since the 1970s, meditation has become increasingly popular in the West and is promoted as a



Mary Garden and
Bhagwan Rajneesh in 1979

way to reduce stress, bring about relaxation, and even manage depression. It's now being used in classrooms, prisons, and hospitals. Here in Australia, meditation groups and teachers have popped up like mushrooms: hundreds head off to the free (donation only) ten-day Vipassana courses, or sit and meditate with groups such as the Brahma Kumaris or Sahaja Yoga. There is a general assumption and belief that meditation is a secular technique and is good for everyone.

The most common types of meditation taught include sitting still and concentrating on the breath, silently repeating a sound (mantra) or visualizing an image. What is often overlooked is that these Eastern meditation techniques were never meant to be methods to reduce stress and bring about relaxation. They are essentially spiritual tools, designed to apparently "cleanse" the mind of impurities and disturbances so as to attain so-called enlightenment--a concept as nebulous as God.

In the Hindu scripture *The Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna:

Sitting and concentrating the mind on a single object, controlling the thoughts and the activities of the senses, let the yogi practice meditation for self-purification . . . by always keeping the mind fixed on the Self, the yogi whose mind is subdued attains peace of the Supreme nirvana by uniting with Me.

And Sri Lankan-born K. Sri Dhammananda, who before his death in 2006 was the foremost Theravada Buddhist monk in Malaysia and Singapore, wrote: "No one can attain Nibbana [nirvana] or salvation without developing the mind through meditation. Meditation is a gentle way of conquering the defilements which pollute the mind."

What is interesting is that Buddhist and Hindu teachers, even the Dalai Lama, have occasionally pointed out the potential hazards of meditation. Dhammananda warned:

The practice of meditation has been abused by people. They want immediate and quick results, just as they expect quick returns for everything they do in daily

life . . . the mind must be brought under control in slow degrees and one should not try to reach for the higher states without proper training. We have heard of over-enthusiastic young men and women literally going out of their minds because they adopted the wrong attitudes towards meditation.

Dr. Lorin Roche, a meditation teacher, says a major problem arises from the way meditators interpret Buddhist and Hindu teachings. He points out that meditation techniques that encourage detachment from the world were intended only for monks and nuns. He has spent thirty years doing interviews with people who meditate regularly and says many were depressed. He says they have tried to detach themselves from their desires, their loves, and their passion. "Depression is a natural result of loss, and if you internalize teachings that poison you against the world, then of course you will become depressed."

The Dalai Lama has said that Eastern forms of meditation have to be handled carefully: "Westerners who proceed too quickly to deep meditation should learn more about Eastern traditions and get better training than they usually do. Otherwise, certain physical or mental difficulties appear."

I don't remember any such warnings when I began meditating, and probably wouldn't have taken much notice if there were. Along with fellow seekers, I regarded any negative experiences as healing or just clearing out bad karma.

I meditated a lot in the 1970s and thought I was superior to those who didn't. Thankfully I didn't have a breakdown (though sometimes I was surely "out of my mind"). I had all sorts of bizarre and strange experiences and in the early days often felt bliss and ecstasy. There were a few occasions where I felt as though I was "one with the universe", and I once began hallucinating that the trees outside were vibrating with white light, convinced I could hear the sacred Om sound booming through the Himalayan night.

In addition to Hindu meditations--which involved mumbling mantras of various kinds (I even spent time with the Hare Krishnas in Vrindaban where I used a 108-beaded mala to chant "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare ." throughout the day)--I also attended five ten-day Buddhist Vipassana retreats. The teacher was S. N. Goenka. His organization now leads retreats worldwide and they are by far the most popular meditation courses offered. They involve sitting for up to fourteen hours a day, watching the breath and sensations in the body and trying to become detached. The aim (apart from enlightenment) is equanimity. Blissful feelings have to be disregarded, along with feelings of physical discomfort--even excruciating agony--that may arise from prolonged sitting. Meditators are not allowed to talk, write, or read. There is no evening meal, just a cup of herbal tea.

When I finally gave up on seeking enlightenment in the late 1970s and returned to worldly life, I also gave up meditating--except for the occasional sitting still for a few minutes here and there, watching my breath in the Vipassana way. However, over the years I would beat myself up about my laziness: "You should meditate," my inner critic would harp. "Every day, for at least half an hour." But why? I now ask. Did it really do me any good? I manage my life perfectly well without it. If I want peace and relaxation, I have a massage, or soak in a hot bath or swim twenty laps at the local pool. Or I go for a long leisurely walk. Or I just sit in a chair and do nothing. Is meditation really as beneficial as its proponents claim?

Arthur Chappell, a former devotee of Guru Maharaj (also known as Prem Rawat), points out that meditation starves the mind of stimulus (sensory deprivation) and he wonders whether desensitizing the mind to stimuli may actually "affect one's ability to react properly with the level of fear, love, and other emotions required in any given social situation." Chappell says minds can atrophy--just like limbs do--if they aren't used for a wide range of purposes:

Many meditation practitioners have complained of difficulty doing simple arithmetic and remembering names of close friends after prolonged meditation. The effect is rather like that of Newspeak's obliteration of the English language in George Orwell's 1984.

In recent years neuroscientists have been examining the effects of meditation on the brain. Professor Richard Davidson of Wisconsin, a long-term Buddhist meditator himself, claims that meditation can "change neural states in circuits that may be important for compassionate behavior and attentional and emotional regulation." However, other scientists argue that Davidson's claims are unsubstantiated and that his studies have serious flaws ranging from experimental design to conclusions. Dr. Nancy Hayes, a neurobiologist at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Jersey, says that Davidson and his supporters promote research before it has been replicated. And what is really interesting, but never highlighted, is that Davidson himself points out that, for psychologists using meditation to treat their patients, "Meditation is not going to be good for all patients with emotional disorders and it may even be bad for certain types of patients."

Dr. Solomon Snyder, head of neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University, warns that during meditation the brain releases serotonin. This may help those with mild depression but too much serotonin can cause, in some, a paradoxical relaxation-induced anxiety. Instead of relaxing during meditation, these people become distressed and may even have panic attacks. Snyder says that in some cases of schizophrenia, meditation can launch a person straight into psychosis.

And what about all those good feelings one can experience in meditation? Is there another explanation, for example, for that transcendental feeling of being one with the universe?

Dr. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania scanned the brains of long-term practitioners of Buddhism while they were meditating and compared them with images taken when they were not. Newberg saw that blood flow to the posterior superior parietal lobe decreased during meditation. This area of the brain determines the boundaries of one's body in relation to the environment and allows us to navigate a complex three-dimensional world without bumping into things. "We know that the posterior superior parietal lobe plays that particular role because there are patients with damage in this same region who literally cannot move around without falling," Newberg reports. "They'll miss the chair they intended to sit on, and generally have a fuzzy understanding of where their body ends and the rest of the universe begins." He says that when people have spiritual experiences and feel they become one with the universe and lose their sense of self, it may be because of what is happening in that area of the brain. "If you block that area, you lose that boundary between the self and the rest of the world." Were the Buddhist meditators merely experiencing an odd side effect of submitting their brains to unusual conditions?

Dr. Michael Persinger, a professor of neuroscience at the Laurentian University in Canada, studied 1,018 meditators in 1993 and found that meditation can bring on symptoms of complex partial epilepsy such as visual abnormalities, hearing voices, feeling vibrations, or experiencing automatic behaviors such as narcolepsy. Note that epileptic patients who suffer from seizures in the temporal lobes have auditory or visual hallucinations, which they often interpret as mystical experiences. Some are convinced that they conversed with God.

In recent years Persinger set out to investigate so-called "mystical" experiences under controlled laboratory conditions. He got volunteers to wear a helmet fitted with a set of magnets through which he ran a weak electromagnetic signal. Persinger found that the magnetically induced seizures in the temporal lobes generate the same sort of hallucinations and mystical experiences reported by epileptic patients. Four in five people, he says, report a "mystical experience, the feeling that there is a sentient being or entity standing behind or near" them. Some weep, some feel God has touched them, others become frightened and talk of demons and evil spirits. "That's in the laboratory," Persinger notes, referring to subjects' knowledge of a controlled environment. "How much more intense might these experiences be if they happened late at night, or in a pew in a mosque or synagogue?"

Does this indicate that so-called mystical experiences may be caused by seizures, by a temporary malfunction of the brain circuitry triggered by abnormal conditions such as sensory deprivation or decreased blood flow to the parietal lobe? Is that what happened to me?

In addition to the neuroscientists' findings, there is anecdotal evidence that shouldn't be overlooked. Clearly there are potential dangers with long meditation retreats, particularly for beginners.

Christopher Titmuss, a former Buddhist monk who now lives in England, holds yearly Vipassana meditation retreats in Bodh Gaya, India. He reports that occasionally people go through very traumatic experiences and require round the clock support, the use of strong drugs, or even hospitalization. "Others may experience a short-lived terror of the mind utterly out of control, a temporary fear of going mad," he notes. "Or an alienation from conventional reality that makes it difficult for consciousness to recover without active intervention." But Titmuss claims it isn't the meditation that causes such behavior: "The function of meditation, as the Buddha points out, is to act as a mirror to what is."

On a Goenka Vipassana discussion board called tribe.net, a participant named Tristan writes:

I wish I could say wonderful things about my experience but I can't. I stayed the full ten days, many of them filled with incredible hallucinations, from being inside an egg, to being a bird-like animal with broken wings, to following tunnels through my brain, to feeling completely connected to the universe. No problem, I told myself, it's just sensation. I'm perfectly safe. On the last day of the retreat, listening to the last lecture, I let out a huge scream and fell down.

Tristan says he became psychotic and ended up in a psychiatric hospital for several weeks.

With Goenka's courses there have been a number of failed suicide attempts in India, including one that resulted in a broken spine and another in which the survivor suffered a ruptured lung and a fractured skull. Researchers at Goenka's headquarters at Igatpuri looked at cases concerning nine persons who'd harmed themselves after a course, and they found all had either practiced other forms of meditation, used healing techniques, or used drugs prior to doing a course. They consequently attributed the serious mental disturbances following the retreat not as side effects of the meditation technique, but to the practice or use of these other things.

But a woman who recently contacted me said her son did a Vipassana course in January in New Zealand, found it to be a very positive experience that produced many good feelings of love and so forth, but that within a few days of his return he'd had a "psychotic episode." He was committed to a mental hospital where he responded well to medication and is now on antidepressants. Her son had no history of mental instability, nor was there any such history in the family. He had never tried meditation before nor had he taken drugs.

Geoffrey Dawson, a Sydney-based Zen meditation teacher and psychotherapist, has come across twenty people who had mentally distressing experiences as a result of attending courses at the Goenka Vipassana Retreat Center in Blackheath (located in the Blue Mountains of Australia). Dawson says these meditators became fragmented rather than integrated and their experiences included panic attacks, depressive episodes, or both that in most cases persisted months after the retreat ended. There were also some manic episodes, one of which later became diagnosed and treated as a bipolar disorder. Dawson was also contacted by a woman whose daughter had been to a retreat. Her friends and family noticed she became withdrawn and obsessive afterwards. Her psychological condition deteriorated and some months later she became psychotic. Within eighteen months she was hospitalized and committed suicide.

Dawson maintains it is of utmost importance to give people a gradual introduction to meditation retreats, something that is lacking in Goenka's [and others] approach. Dawson is highly selective about who can do his retreats. He starts people on regular daily meditation along with one group meditation per week, then introduces them to one or two day retreats and gradually introduces them to a longer retreat.

Dawson suggests that "if a gradual approach to meditation retreats is adopted, supportive processes are put in place during retreats, and follow-up care is provided," while it's not guaranteed participants won't have adverse experiences, "it can certainly help prevent and minimize the development of mental disorders."

Colorado-based clinical psychologist Dr. Lois Vanderkooi, who has written on meditation-related psychosis, points out that screening is important when intensive meditation is involved and suggests that it can be done easily with a questionnaire that asks about psychiatric history.

Questionnaires are now used for Goenka's retreats. He says retreats aren't recommended for people with serious psychiatric disorders as it is unrealistic to expect that Vipassana will cure or alleviate mental problems. Application forms have questions such as, "Do you have, or have you ever had, any mental health problems such as significant depression or anxiety, panic attacks, manic depression, schizophrenia?" There is also a question, "Have you had any previous experience with meditation techniques, therapies, or healing practices?" This particular question allows Goenka to screen out people who practice a spiritual therapy called Reiki. He says there were many cases around the world where mixing Reiki and Vipassana meditation harmed Reiki practitioners to the extent that some of them became mentally imbalanced. Goenka argues that such practices "attempt to alter reality by means of calling on some external force or autosuggestion (such as self-hypnosis). This prevents the practitioner from observing the truth as it is."

But are questionnaires enough? They can hardly screen those people who have undiagnosed psychiatric disorders. They also rely on people telling the truth. People may feel reluctant to fill them out honestly in case they are barred from participating in a retreat. The Icarus Project, a web community supporting those with mental illnesses, regards questionnaires as "arbitrary, intrusive, and discriminatory" and claims that retreat applicants "simply hide their psychiatric history on the application to avoid stigmatization." They also write that people with schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, or bipolar disorder have not only completed meditation retreats, but discovered that meditation is a valuable recovery tool.

Richard, a former meditator who gave only his first name, offers the following observations:

Those who play the "mental illness" defense card seem to have a vested interest in Eastern philosophy. Meditation appears to create mental imbalance by messing with the brain's chemistry. For all we know, the mentally ill might be better equipped to deal with such alterations since they're used to them. In other words, the mental illness defense doesn't appear to be based on fact, but as a knee-jerk excuse for why we see negative occurrences related to meditation--"he or she was crazy to begin with, it wasn't the meditation, it was their problem."

If one isn't after enlightenment or spiritual experiences, then I can't help thinking that exercise may be better for physical and mental well being than meditation. I just love my morning swims in the local pool.

After my Indian odyssey and my return to worldly life in 1979, I've found being back in the world not such a bad thing after all. I no longer regard the world as a place from which to escape or detach myself. My mind is no longer something to conquer or to cleanse of impurities. In fact, my life is immeasurably richer without meditation, as was that of India's great poet Rabindranath Tagore, exemplified in his poem "Against Meditative Knowledge":

Those who wish to sit, shut their eyes,
and meditate to know if the world's true or lies,
may do so. It's their choice. But I meanwhile
with hungry eyes that can't be satisfied
shall take a look at the world in broad daylight. (1896)

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