

Notes on
MEDITATION



by
Allan Armstrong ODP

Preface

Notes on Meditation is one of a series of books describing the life and work of the Order of Dionysis and Paul, a religious order of men and women committed to following the contemplative life whilst living in the secular world. The mission of the Order of Dionysis and Paul is to assist those who seek to enter the ‘Presence of God’ by instructing them in the spiritual disciplines of Prayer and Meditation.

The bulk of the material contained within this small volume is concerned with important biological and psychodynamic factors that stand as obstacles in the way of being effective in meditation, and provides simple methods and techniques that enable the student to recognise, understand and overcome such obstacles and harness the extraordinary powers of the mind and soul.

This book is designed and set out as a series of modules that may be undertaken either by an individual, or used in a group setting, and requires no further knowledge than is contained within each module. The work is self-explanatory and easy to engage with, however, it should be recognised that the information given herein consists of notes only and does not pretend in any way to be definitive.

The exercises contained herein are not in themselves objectives but the means by which effective meditation may be achieved. They are essentially a beginning, a beginning

Notes on Meditation ©

of a journey of self-knowledge and should be approached as such; simply reading the text will not give the ability to meditate effectively. Those committed enough to work their way through these modules, who are sufficiently motivated to return again and again to the exercises set out therein, to engage with them and to study them in depth, will achieve great things in the field of the inner life.

Allan Armstrong ODP
Bristol 2011

Introductory Notes

1. The word ‘Meditation’ has been in circulation for ever, so it would seem, but the question remains, what is meditation? Not so difficult a question to answer one might think, but popular opinion has become confused if not divided over this question. It clearly means different things to different people, although this has not always been the case.
2. Over the course of the last forty years or so the term ‘meditation’ has come to mean two distinct things. On the one hand there is the traditional concept of meditation being an exercise in mind control directed towards self-knowledge and spiritual evolution, and on the other hand there is the modern concept of meditation being a therapeutic exercise in deep relaxation and active imagination directed towards inducing a sense of well-being, employed more often than not as an antidote to the stresses of modern living.
3. One side associates meditation with oriental religions and philosophies, where the archetypal image that presents itself to the imagination is of a Buddhist monk or Indian sadhu sitting cross-legged on a cushion or low wooden stool, eyes closed and breathing slowly; possibly chanting or repeating a mantra. The other side associates meditation with relaxation and creative visualisation, where a typical image that presents itself is of a person relaxing in a comfortable

Notes on Meditation ©

reclining chair, listening to ambient music and or a gentle voice describing an ‘ideal’ environment wherein the student allows the mind to wander

4. In recent times the most popular methods of meditation that have taken root in the modern world are themselves products of the imagination of that world. They are essentially guided imaginings deriving more from a syncretic blend of Spiritualism, Yoga, Buddhism and Shamanism, to name but a few, than from any school of traditional meditation, oriental or otherwise.

5. Most of the methods used are not derived from the ancient world, or from the Far East, but emerged in Europe and its colonies, originating in the ideas and practices employed by nineteenth and early twentieth-century esoteric schools such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. This particular order is significant in that it became the archetypal model for the formation of a host of esoteric orders and movements, most of which were deeply involved with the magical aspects of Western esotericism – especially with astral projection and all that such implies: and it implies a great deal where modern ideas about meditation are concerned.

6. Looking back a little further, it is possible to see how in the nineteenth century the emergence of these schools was an inevitable and natural expression of the interest in Hermetic and Rosicrucian thought and philosophy that emerged in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe. These schools

Introductory Notes ©

were not only a focus for the theoretical, but also for the practical workings of Western esotericism.

7. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the resurgence of a form of ancestor worship in the form of Spiritualism, and the latter half of that century saw the emergence of the Theosophical Society, a movement that sought to create a universal religion based upon oriental religious ideas such as those fostered in Buddhism. This point is particularly significant because it was through the activities of this society that Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, became so accessible to popular culture in the West.

8. The high point of the Theosophical Society was during the 1920's and 1930's. However, as was the case for many social movements of that time, the society's growth and development was impeded by the drama of the Second World War. Curiously, as the world began its slow recovery from the effects of that dreadful war public interest in the Theosophical Society began to fade. A paradoxical if not ironic turn of events because it was at this time that popular interest in Hindu systems of yoga and meditation, nurtured by the Theosophical Society, began to grow in popularity.

9. Shamanism, on the other hand, did not emerge in popular Western culture until the late twentieth century, and then only in a romanticised form: its popularity, perhaps, being due to its association with chemically induced states of mind conducive to 'astral projection' and 'channelling'; subjects that

Notes on Meditation ©

have either fascinated or horrified humanity from the earliest times. Exploring significant or interesting environments or worlds through the realm of the imagination is not a new thing; it has been around a long time but the emphasis on it is certainly a modern phenomenon.

10. Another significant contribution to the guided imagination approach has come from the various psychodynamic processes that surfaced, particularly in America, from the mid-twentieth century onward. Although deeply influenced by the materialism of analytical psychology and behaviourism, and invariably defined in the psychological language of Freud, Jung and their successors, they are often to be found at the heart of many modern systems of spirituality and self-development.

11. Another dimension in modern thinking about meditation is the concept of 'endorphins'. These are small, protein molecules produced by cells in the body that work to relieve pain with sedative receptors found in the brain, spinal cord and nerve endings. They come in several forms and are many times more powerful than any pharmaceutical analgesic. Endorphins are understood to relieve pain, to enhance the immune system and to reduce stress but, more significantly, especially from the point of view of this discussion, they induce an enhanced feeling of well-being.

12. There are several methods known to stimulate the body's production of endorphins including acupuncture,

Introductory Notes ©

shiatsu, massage, creative visualisation and a variety of relaxation techniques. Many of these methods are now promoted under the banner of meditation. Consequently, in the popular culture of the Western world, meditation has become synonymous with the practice of guided imagining directed towards evoking an experience of bliss and well-being. Nevertheless, as valuable as such tools may be, especially in a therapeutic sense, they have little in common with the objectives and disciplines of traditional meditation. The natural ‘high’ that may occur in traditional meditation, however welcome, is not in itself the main objective but a by-product of the main endeavour, which is invariably self-knowledge and or union with God.

13. To understand what traditional meditation actually is one must be prepared to peel away the many layers of preconceptions surrounding it in the modern world. A common theme in the secular world is that like all things in our civilisation the art of meditation has evolved in line with our growing understanding of the world – that we have outgrown the traditional approach with all of its outmoded religious connotations – and that the old must give way to the new.

14. Alternatively, we may recognise that traditional meditation is an ancient method of self-enquiry conceived and designed to engage with the underlying reality of existence, a reality that is eternal and changeless and thus beyond biological need or the ambitions of society.

Notes on Meditation ©

15. This traditional perspective may be a radical point of view in modern terms, however, it should be noted that from a traditional and classical point of view meditation has long been understood to be a private and introspective discipline of applied thought whereby, in a chemical free state of deep relaxation, the faculties of the mind are concentrated upon a given theme or subject. In short, traditional meditation is mind control through thinking about a given subject.

16. In the precincts of the sanctuary, wherein traditional meditation evolved, the subject matter to be meditated upon was usually, although not always, derived from sacred texts. Thus in Buddhism the theme was generally taken from the various writings that constitute the Dharma and the life of the Buddha. In Vedanta the theme would be drawn from the Vedas or the Upanishads, and in the Christian world the theme would usually be drawn from the Scriptures and the life of Christ.

17. The simple act of thinking deeply about a given subject constitutes the core discipline of traditional meditation. The mind does not necessarily have to be focussed upon religious or spiritual themes but it should be noted that the discipline of traditional meditation did evolve within the precincts of the sanctuary and has been nurtured therein for as long any one can tell. In those environs meditating, or thinking deeply about spiritual themes, establishes the context for the student to engage with the fundamental questions of existence, such as, 'Who am I?' and 'What is the purpose of life?' It begins as an exercise in reasoning, but gradually becomes an inward

Introductory Notes ©

journey of self-knowledge where reason, being inadequate for the task, is displaced by intuition. It is a discipline that is initially difficult to learn, but once learnt has surprising and often sublime results.

18. An interesting feature of the sacred texts of the world is that they have many levels of meaning embedded within them. From the earliest times symbols, metaphors and allegories were widely employed by those who created these texts. Such devices may not serve those who choose to look at them as literal or mythical accounts of the distant past but, for those who approach them with an open mind, symbols, metaphors and allegories often serve as keys to the spiritual wisdom and understanding contained therein. Spiritual teachings are often presented in the form of stories or myths; indeed, the Bible may be seen as a collection of such stories, stories that many accept as true historical accounts.

19. Whether historically true or not the sacred texts do conceal great spiritual truths that were clearly thought too profound for the spiritually naïve and many subtleties were employed in maintaining and safeguarding them; their composition being designed in such a way that they could be discussed and interpreted on different levels, depending on the level of understanding of the student, each giving a different or deeper insight to the story.

20. Philo Judaeus, who lived in the Egyptian city of Alexandria during the first century AD, wrote extensively about the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. Much

Notes on Meditation ©

later, Moses de Leon, who lived during the late thirteenth century, likened the Scriptures to a nut with a shell of literal meaning on the outside and an essential or mystical meaning within. He summed up his understanding of this in the word 'PARDeS', which means Garden or Paradise – alluding to an illumined mind. The word is a cipher concealing an esoteric understanding of existence. Each consonant of this word refers to a method of extrapolating meaning; thus P represents the literal meaning; R represents the allegorical meaning, particularly in the moral sense; D represents the metaphorical meaning, particularly in the symbolic sense, and S stands for the mystical meaning. Arthur Edward Waite, a celebrated English mystic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describing the same thing, said that P equals the literal, R the symbolic, D the allegorical, and finally S equals the mystical sense.

21. Over the centuries many different systems of traditional meditation have emerged, many of which are based on the premise that the discursive activities of the mind may be brought to a standstill by focussing the attention on one subject to the exclusion of all others, thereby revealing the true and permanent reality underpinning all things.

22. Although this premise is essentially true, a common mistake is made by some of those engaging in traditional meditation in assuming that one should avoid trying to think when meditating, but trying not to think is like trying not to breathe, almost impossible. The truth is, and it is a truth that

Introductory Notes ©

has long been understood in the precincts of the sanctuary, that there is a point in the cycle of meditation when the discursive activities of the mind pause or cease, an event that may be facilitated by focussing the attention on one subject; but it is a place one arrives at, not a place one starts from.

23. To focus on the breath is a means of stilling the biochemistry of the body, thereby slowing down the mental and emotional activity of the mind. It is the first stage of meditation and has been universally employed in this manner for as long as any can tell. To concentrate the mind on a significant concept or idea is the second stage, although both may be initiated simultaneously.

24. In the schools wherein spiritual development is the primary objective the focal point of concentration is usually the Scriptures, to which the wandering attention is always returned. However, this activity, no matter how rewarding it may be in terms of inspiration, is not the ultimate objective; meditation is not an endless path of cerebral activity, nor is it an endless state of emptiness.

25. Like all things in the natural world there is a cycle of activity which the traditional schools have come to understand and to which they adhere. That natural cycle, most obvious in the rotation of the seasons, consists of directing the mind towards a single activity that results, eventually, in a form of realisation culminating in a period of profound stillness.

Notes on Meditation ©

26. Meditation is not in itself the objective but a means of achieving the objective. For those who persevere on this path the discipline of meditation leads the student into the exalted and sublime state of Contemplation, wherein the mysteries of existence are slowly revealed to the maturing student. This is the main objective of traditional meditation.
27. The term ‘meditation’ has then, in recent times, come to signify two different undertakings. The first is traditional meditation, which is a method of mind control that from the earliest times has been directed towards self-knowledge and spiritual insight.
28. The second is a modern concept of meditation, which is a therapeutic method with many variations that is directed towards inducing a sense of well-being as an antidote to the stresses of modern living, focussing upon the use of the imagination as a means of inducing the desired effect.
29. The modern concept of meditation is also applied in certain schools in the development of psychic abilities and skills, such as astral projection and clairvoyance. As such it no longer falls under the heading of meditation and arguably should go by a different name as it has little in common with meditation in general.
30. This is not to criticise such undertakings. I cannot speak for such schools as I am not privy to their councils, and by the same token I cannot speak against them. Nevertheless I do

Introductory Notes ©

think it important to make a distinction between them and their very different objectives from traditional and modern therapeutic methods.

31. Traditional meditation, with its focus on mind control and self-knowledge, is fundamentally different from the majority of modern meditational systems which are therapeutic in nature and focussed upon creative imagination, and both of these differ from the psychically dynamic processes presented in certain schools as meditation.

32. If there is any confusion in making a distinction between them it must inevitably rest in the fact that although they all share certain ideas and processes in common, the objectives and the application of such processes vary greatly.

33. Consequently, the student who seeks union with the Divine will be better served following the path of traditional meditation in whatever school they are led to. Alternatively, the student who is looking for respite from the stresses and strains of the world will be better served undertaking a modern method involving creative imagination etc. Those who are called to the magical arts will inevitably gravitate to the school most suitable to their temperament.

It remains for me to say that the following pages contain information and exercises that may be useful to students interested in all of the aforementioned types of meditation.

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress

Anyone seeking to become proficient in the art of meditation must initially acquire two basic skills, first in relaxation, because effective meditation requires a stable biological platform, and second in concentration, because it is through concentration that we overcome the transient activities of our mind. Not an easy task, but not unachievable; indeed for most of us, achieving a state of relaxation stable enough for the practice of meditation would be greatly improved if we were to understand the impact that everyday tension and stress has upon the chemistry of the body and how we think. The following notes are included to hopefully assist in this objective.

Tension & Stress

At a molecular level matter exists in a natural and fluid state of tension that is established upon electromagnetic forces of attraction and repulsion. When the tension changes the effect can be intensely powerful, that is to say, stressful. In terms of human experience stress is usually associated with an increase rather than a decrease in tension, and certain situations are commonly understood to increase tension and produce stress, for example:

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress ©

- The death of someone close
- Divorce or separation
- Moving home
- Work insecurity
- Financial insecurity
- Health problems
- Increase in responsibilities
- Domestic strife
- Poor performance at work
- Child care issues

The Fight/Flight Mechanism

Our ability to survive is based upon our ability to respond to real or imagined threats. Our response to threatening situations is usually either to fight or run away, to deal with them or run away, and is consequently known as the fight/flight mechanism; it is our instinctive response to danger. This mechanism is governed by the hypothalamus, which is a controlling gland in the centre of our brain. It is the primary link between the endocrinal glandular system and the autonomic nervous system. It directs the ‘fight or flight’ response to danger via the autonomic nervous system.

The Autonomic Nervous System

The autonomic nervous system consists of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic nervous system serves the fight/flight mechanism. It is the physiological base of our ability to respond and adapt to stimulation – either pain or pleasure. It controls the upper

Notes on Meditation ©

limits of physiological activity, generating a state of arousal and activity that initiates movement concerned with survival. Some of its functions include stopping digestion, opening the airways of the lungs and increasing heart rate and blood pressure.

The parasympathetic nervous system is the counterbalance to the sympathetic nervous system. It controls the lower limits of physiological activity and is responsible for maintaining and conserving the body's resources. It regulates physiological maintenance, including processes such as cell growth, digestion, relaxation and sleep. Some of the functions of this system include the storage of vital resources, promoting digestion, the distribution of nutrients, the constriction of bronchi and the slowing of respiration and the decrease of heart rate and blood pressure.

Recognising how this subtle mechanism works is fundamental to our understanding of stress because it is a mechanism that is involved with every part of our life. The trigger for this mechanism is the presence of certain hormones in our system, some of which stimulate the sympathetic

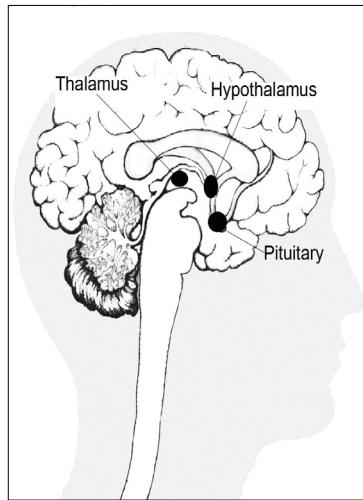


Fig. 1 Hypothalamus

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress ©

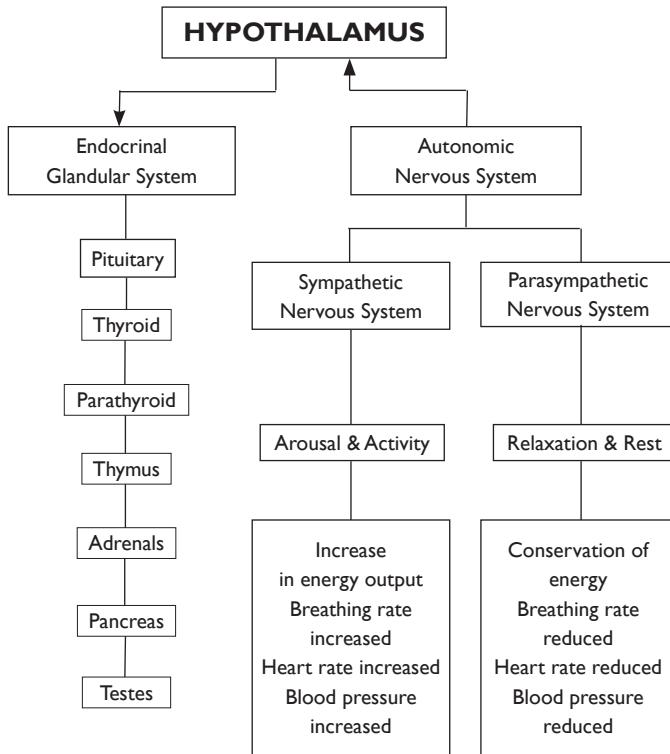


Fig. 2 Endocrinial & Autonomic Nervous Systems

Notes on Meditation ©

nervous system to arouse the body, and others, which stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system to relax the body. Hormones are chemicals that transfer information and instructions between cells, controlling the function of various organs, and regulating metabolism, which is the process of converting food into energy. Unlike information sent via the nervous system, which is transmitted very quickly and has an immediate and short-term effect, hormones generally act more slowly and their affects are felt over a longer period of time. It is the endocrinal glandular system that produces most of these hormones, and it is the hypothalamus that controls the endocrines by emitting chemicals that either stimulate or suppress hormone secretions from the pituitary gland.

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress ©

Endocrine Glands

The pineal, pituitary, thyroid, parathyroid, thymus, adrenals, pancreas and testes (ovaries or gonads) comprise the endocrine system. The hypothalamus is a gland in the brain that functions as the command centre that controls the endocrine system through the pituitary, which directs the other endocrinial glands. The pineal produces both serotonin, which plays a fundamental role in stabilising mood, and melatonin, which is central to the sleep/wake cycle (circadian cycle). The thymus is the central control organ for the immune system; the thyroid regulates the body's metabolism and the parathyroid controls the amount of calcium and phosphate in the bloodstream. The pancreas secretes insulin, which regulates the level of sugar in the bloodstream, and the gonads regulate sexual development, ovulation, and growth of sex organs. All play an essential role in maintaining good health, and are the subject of a great deal of very interesting scientific enquiry; however, it is one particular function of the adrenal glands that concerns us. The adrenal glands produce adrenaline and cortisol; these are hormones which arouse the body to respond to unexpected events and emergencies; speeding up our heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to the muscles. Pupils dilate to improve vision, and the liver releases stored glucose to increase the body's energy. These physical changes prepare us to handle not only the occasional dangers we may encounter, but also many of the pressures we may meet in our daily life.

Notes on Meditation ©

Notes on Hormones

Hormones are made by specialized glands or tissues, the majority of which are produced by the glands of the endocrine system. These glands produce and secrete hormones directly into the bloodstream. Not all hormones are produced by endocrine glands. Some are produced by the mucous membranes of the small intestine, stimulating the secretion of digestive juices. Hormones are also produced in the placenta, an organ formed during pregnancy, to regulate aspects of foetal development.

Most hormones are released directly into the bloodstream, where they circulate throughout the body in very low concentrations. Hormones significantly affect the activity of every cell in the body. They influence mental acuity, physical agility, body build and stature. For example, growth hormone is a hormone produced by the pituitary gland. It regulates growth by stimulating the formation of bone and the uptake of amino acids, molecules vital to building muscle and other tissue. Sex hormones regulate the development of sexual organs, sexual behaviour, reproduction, and pregnancy. Hormones also regulate blood pressure and other involuntary body functions.

Hormones are important in regulating metabolism. For example thyroxin, a hormone secreted by the thyroid gland, regulates body metabolism. Glucagon and insulin, secreted in the pancreas, control the levels of glucose in the blood and the availability of energy for the muscles. A number of hormones, including insulin, glucagon, cortisol, growth hormone, adrenaline (epinephrine) and noradrenaline

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress ©

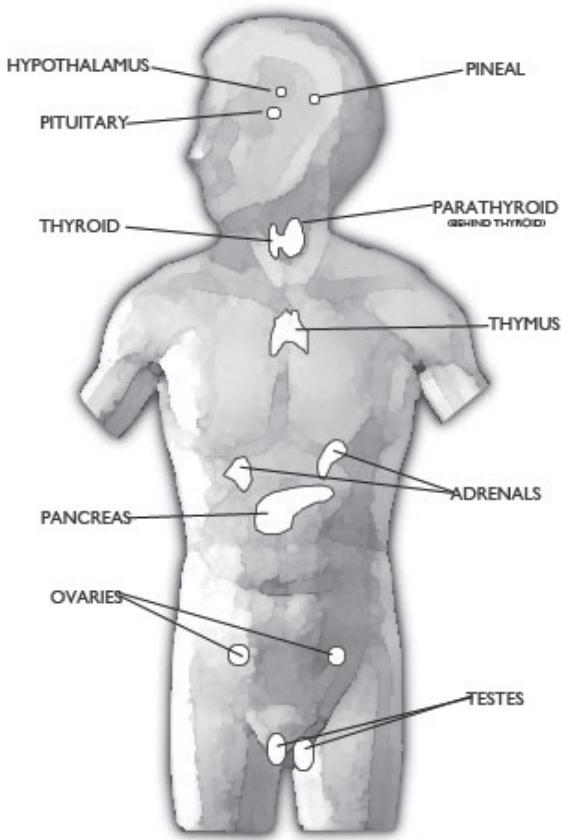


Fig. 3 Endocrinial Glands

Notes on Meditation ©

(norepinephrine) maintain glucose levels in the blood. Insulin lowers the blood glucose whilst all the other hormones raise it. A protein called somatostatin blocks the release of insulin, glucagon and growth hormone, while another hormone, gastric inhibitory polypeptide, enhances insulin release in response to glucose absorption. This complex system permits blood glucose concentration to remain within a very narrow range, despite external conditions that may vary to extremes.

Noradrenaline and adrenaline, secreted by the adrenal medulla, affect the peripheral sympathetic nervous system: heart, blood vessels, gut, lungs, bladder and genitalia. Along with cortisol they are central to the activity of the sympathetic nervous system and the fight/flight mechanism. Noradrenaline is understood to affect mood, promoting alertness and producing changes associated with aggression and hostile behaviour. Adrenaline is associated with anxiety.

Serotonin is involved in the transmission of nerve impulses, which increases mood. It is naturally produced in the pineal gland, which produces higher levels during the summer months than in the winter months. It is involved in the control of appetite, sleep, memory and learning, temperature regulation, cardiovascular function, muscle contraction, endocrine regulation and depression. Low levels of serotonin make us vulnerable to depression, anxiety, apathy, fear, low self-esteem, insomnia and fatigue. Levels are effectively increased by antidepressants such as fluoxetine (Prozac, for example).

Endorphins are morphine like hormones synthesised by the hypothalamus and secreted into the bloodstream by the

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress ©

pituitary gland. Four different types of endorphin are produced in the body: Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Sigma. They behave similarly to opiates, and are strongly analgesic, stimulating an overall sense of well-being. Besides functioning as pain regulators, endorphins are also involved with physiological processes including euphoric feelings, appetite modulation and the release of sex hormones. The release of endorphins also lowers blood pressure a major indicator in heart disease.

Melatonin is a hormone produced by the pineal gland from the amino acid tryptophan. The release of melatonin is increased by darkness and reduced by light. Levels of melatonin in the blood are highest prior to bedtime. Melatonin possesses antioxidant properties. Although the most important role of melatonin is probably the circulation of sleep-wake cycle, it also has an important role in the management of metabolism, reproduction, appetite, muscular coordination and balance, and of the immune system in fighting off diseases triggered by bacteria, viruses, chemical pollutants and excessive free radical activity

Thyroxine (T4) and triiodothyronine (T3) are hormones produced by the thyroid gland, which is situated just below the larynx. The thyroid gland produces the hormones T3 and T4 by combining iodine and an amino acid called tyrosine. Both T3 and T4 are essential to the control of metabolism (the conversion of oxygen and calories to energy). Every cell in the body depends upon these hormones for the regulation of their metabolism. Problems with the thyroid occur when the gland doesn't supply the proper amount of hormones needed by the body. If the thyroid is overactive, it releases

Notes on Meditation ©

too much thyroid hormone into the bloodstream, resulting in hyperthyroidism, a condition that causes the body to use up energy more quickly than it should, increasing metabolism. An underactive thyroid produces too little thyroid hormone, resulting in hypothyroidism, a condition that causes the body to use energy more slowly than it needs, reducing metabolism.

Parathormone is a hormone produced by the parathyroid glands, usually found in the neck situated on the posterior surface of the thyroid gland. The main function of the parathyroid glands is to maintain calcium levels in the body, so that the nervous and muscular systems can function properly. When blood calcium levels drop below a certain point the parathyroid releases hormone into the blood. The parathyroid hormone also contributes to the control of calcium and phosphorus homeostasis. It also increases gastrointestinal calcium absorption by activating vitamin D, and promotes calcium uptake by the kidneys.

Note:

The above information about hormones is clearly far from complete. What we do know about them is proving to be the tip of the iceberg. New information about hormones and their role in our lives is continually emerging. It is therefore important for students to keep themselves up to date with new developments.

Anxiety/Stress

The term anxiety is often used to describe a subjective experience of a state of being that is often expressed emotionally (tears, aggressive and reactive outbursts etc.) but rarely articulated beyond vague generalisations. On the other hand, the term ‘worry’ can usually be related to a specific issue. Yet the difference between anxiety and worry is only a question of focus. It could be argued that anxiety is a negative anticipation of possible events and worry is a negative anticipation of an expected event or events; the chemistry is the same in either case. Heightened anxiety levels indicate an increase in the activity of the Fight/Flight mechanism. Thus, rumours of imminent redundancies at work may be interpreted as a threat to the security and well-being of our life-style and family, indeed the very thought of the implications may ramp up the activity of the sympathetic nervous system and generate a state of anxiety. When there is no immediate threat to deal with, as may well be the case with rumours, the chemistry of the F/F mechanism (sympathetic nervous system) is given no form of expression that might indicate closure, resulting in a build-up of symptoms (listed below), thus increasing tension and anxiety. This is a major contributor to stress and if prolonged or unresolved will result in a decrease in general performance and a range of debilitating and potentially life-threatening illnesses and diseases.

Notes on Meditation ©

Physical Symptoms of the F/F Mechanism

1. Hormones such as adrenaline are pumped into the blood
2. Metabolism increases
3. The heartbeat is increased to carry extra oxygen to cells
4. Breathing becomes rapid and shallow
5. The liver releases sugar into the blood
6. Reduction of blood flow to digestive organs, hands and feet
7. Blood flow to the brain and major muscles increased
8. The senses are heightened, particularly the eyes which dilate to allow more light to enter
9. Muscles tense ready for movement
10. Diarrhoea/constipation

Anxiety is therefore a barometer of the activity of the F/F mechanism. It is something we commonly perceive by feeling; how we feel influences what we think, and what we think influences our feelings. Consequently, if the thought is negatively charged, such as the redundancy example given above might be, then the fight/flight mechanism will engage and our feelings will be full of anxiety, which will reinforce our interpretation of the thought itself; thereby establishing a vicious cycle. Recognising this cyclic process is the first step in identifying and thereafter acknowledging anxiety. Once recognised it is possible to modify the cycle, either to take the negative charge out of it or even to give it a positive charge through thinking positively.

Positive Thinking

Our interpretation of an event or a situation will be generally based upon our past experience. Habitually imagining worst-case scenarios induces anxiety states that inevitably lead to stress and the inability to make the most of a situation, because when we are stressed, we not only feel threatened by an event or situation, but we also believe that we are not able to deal with the perceived threat. Thus in many ways history repeats itself.

That every situation has the potential for change is a matter of fact. Yet change does not have to be negative or destructive, we can adapt. Rather than dwelling on the possible negative outcomes of any given situation or event, inviting them to happen as it were, we can develop the habit of seeking and dwelling on the possible positive outcomes of any situation – seeking the good in all things. One method is to imagine different ‘good’ solutions, looking for the best possible outcome that may arise from any situation, and then, to reflect upon what would be required of us to bring it about. Thus, in the context of any situation we may develop a plan of action that is constructive and beneficial, rather than stewing in a sea of anxiety.

Such ‘positive’ thinking is not only motivating and empowering; it forms the basis of creative rational thought and a healthy imagination. Imagination is a very powerful tool to which we all have access. It is something we use continually, whether we are conscious of it or not. Imagination is not merely a process of visualisation but an internal form of story telling, a multifaceted form of ‘what if’. More often

Notes on Meditation ©

than not we engage in reactive imagining; responding to life's situations according to habit and conditioning. Nevertheless, we can develop our imagination to serve us positively and creatively, thereby enhancing our lives. It is out of such 'positive' thinking that a true 'can do' attitude arises. Yet, no matter how wonderful such benefits might be, the most important benefit is that by using the imagination 'positively' we may usefully affect the underlying biology of the F/F mechanism; particularly when used in conjunction with breath control.

Breath Control

In our society much of our recreational time is devoted to using the sympathetic nervous system, in 'exercise' through sport and athletics as a means of achieving some form of relaxation. It is only natural that we should approach meditation with the same mindset. However, as many people have discovered, when they engage in meditation they quickly find themselves physically uncomfortable and their minds more active than normal; this because they are in a sympathetic nervous system mode, and because we devote so much time to functioning in this mode it should come as no surprise that we know so little about how to achieve an effective level of relaxation.

Rapid/Shallow Breathing

One of the most notable features in the sympathetic nervous system, and of a state of anxiety in general, is rapid and or shallow breathing. In contrast, one of the main characteristics

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress ©

of the parasympathetic nervous system is a slowing down and deepening of the breathing. Alternatively, learning to work with the parasympathetic nervous system, to develop it as a coping mechanism in our everyday activities, should be considered as an evolutionary quantum leap. It is not difficult to engage with. The key to activating it is simply a process of consciously managing one's breathing, learning to slow it down and deepen it, and combining it with the imagination to develop a method of relaxation.

Managing the rate and depth of breathing is a key factor in controlling the autonomic nervous system and the endocrines. There is nothing new in this; breath control has been central to meditation for millennia. The following technique (Module 2) is an old tried-and-tested method for developing and strengthening the parasympathetic nervous system

Brain Wave Patterns

The presence of brain waves was discovered in the early 1920s by a German scientist called Hans Berger. He recognised that the Beta wave registered when mental activity was predominant and the Alpha wave when a state of passivity was predominant. Since his time two more brain wave patterns have been recognised: Theta and Delta. Theta waves register just before sleep and Delta during sleep.

There are four major brain-wave patterns: Beta, Alpha, Theta and Delta. The electrical signals of these brain waves are measured as shown in Fig. 4.

Notes on Meditation ©

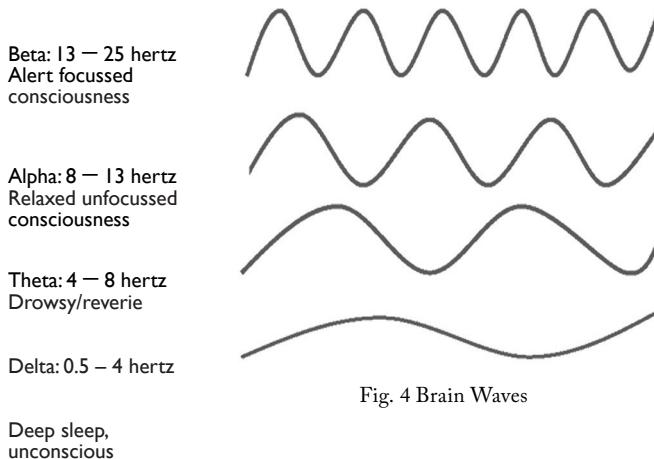


Fig. 4 Brain Waves

Normal consciousness fluctuates between the Beta and Alpha State – between a relatively alert and relaxed state (13 – 15 hertz).

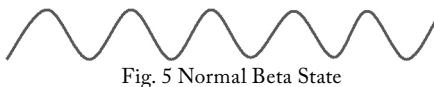


Fig. 5 Normal Beta State

Stress is indicated when our attention is maintained (through worry and anxiety for example) for prolonged periods in the Beta state, particularly at the higher end of its

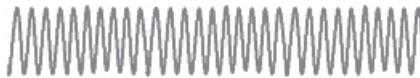


Fig. 6 Heightened Beta State

range (20 – 25 hertz).

The increase in frequency clearly indicates that the body is not functioning within normal levels but in an intensified

Module 1 – The Chemistry of Stress ©

state of readiness, in anticipation of an imminent emergency action (fight/flight). It is a state that consumes a great deal of the body's resources and will rapidly undermine our ability to function, even under normal circumstances. Alternatively, when our attention is maintained in the alpha state we are likely to fall asleep. However, it must be remembered that there is only one wave vibrating at different frequencies.

Summary

Everyone experiences anxiety, tension and to some degree stress and most of the time it is not a problem and we cope relatively well. The issue we are seeking to address is not that we suffer from stress, although it is a subject worth exploring, rather it is the comprehension of the chemistry of anxiety and stress that must be our objective. It is important to recognise how it influences our consciousness, because only when we can see to what extent it is involved in our lives are we able to begin the process of disentangling the chemist from the chemistry.

Without the understanding that comes with the knowledge of this chemistry all our efforts will be in vain, and the best we can hope to achieve is an endorphin rush – a temporary modification of the chemistry of anxiety – a feel good factor for the moment. Alternatively, it is possible to develop another coping mechanism that is not based upon the dynamic fight/flight mechanism of the sympathetic nervous system but the gentle yet powerful mechanism of the parasympathetic nervous system. It is to this end that the following relaxation exercises are devised.

Module 2 – The Mechanics of Meditation

Relaxation

Because relaxation is the first step towards becoming proficient in meditation it is important that the basic skills of relaxation are mastered, the key to which, especially at the beginning, lies in the regulation of the breath. It is through the breath that effective control can be established over the tensions within both the body and the mind. It is indeed the fulcrum upon which effective meditation rests; hence the beginning of meditation is the beginning of a new attitude to breathing.

Breathing Exercise 1

The purpose of this exercise is to regulate the breathing, and to slow the breathing rate down to about 8 – 10 breaths a minute, thereby promoting parasympathetic nervous system activity.

The success of the relaxation technique outlined below depends upon gentle rhythmic breathing. The method of rhythmic breathing is as follows:

Module 2 – The Mechanics of Meditation ©

Inhale gently through the nostrils: the breath must be full but not strained

Hold the breath for a moment

Exhale gently through the nostrils, emptying the lungs completely

Hold the breath for a moment

Allow the breath to flow gently and easily – it will soon find its own level – force nothing.

One whole cycle includes: inhale, hold, exhale, hold.

Environment

1. Allow yourself sufficient time free from commitments to engage in this subject without haste.
2. Wear loose comfortable clothing.
3. Choose a place that is clean and free from disturbance i.e. people, telephones, noisy traffic etc.
4. Sit in a firm but comfortable chair, ensuring that the spine is straight and that the head is balanced comfortably, without leaning too far forward or backward.
5. Alternatively, lie down on the floor.

Notes on Meditation ©

Relaxation Exercise 1

The purpose of this exercise is to develop a physiological mechanism that is linked to the parasympathetic nervous system process.

Step 1

Sit comfortably in a firm but comfortable chair, ensuring that the spine is straight and that the head is balanced comfortably, without leaning too far forward or backward. Commence the above breathing exercise until the breath is flowing gently and easily.

Step 2

Once established, focus your attention upon your feet, tense them, then relax them, and imagine all of the muscles of your feet loosening and becoming limp. Take your time, co-ordinate this, and all subsequent steps, with two or three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 3

Focus your attention upon your ankles, tense them, then relax them and imagine the muscles in your ankles loosening and becoming limp.

Step 4

Focus your attention upon your calves, tense them, then relax them and imagine the muscles in your calves loosening and becoming limp.

Module 2 – The Mechanics of Meditation ©

Step 5

Focus your attention upon your knees and thighs, tense them, then relax them and imagine the muscles in them loosening and becoming limp.

Step 6

Focus your attention upon your lower abdomen, tense the muscles thereabouts, then relax them and imagine all of the muscles therein loosening and becoming limp.

Step 7

Focus your attention upon the muscles around your solar plexus, tense them, then relax them and imagine all of these muscles loosening and becoming limp.

Step 8

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your back, tense them, then relax them and imagine them loosening and becoming limp.

Step 9

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your chest, tense them, then relax them and imagine all of them loosening and becoming limp.

Notes on Meditation ©

Step 10

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your fingers and arms, tense them, then relax them and imagine all of them loosening and becoming limp.

Step 11

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your neck, tense them, then relax them and imagine all of the muscles of the neck loosening and becoming limp.

Step 12

Focus your attention upon the muscles on and around your head, tense them, then relax them and imagine them loosening and becoming limp.

Step 13

Focus your attention upon the muscles around your eyes, tense them, then relax them and imagine them loosening and becoming limp.

Step 14

Focus your attention on the muscles of your face and jaw, tense them, then relax them and imagine them loosening and becoming limp.

Module 2 – The Mechanics of Meditation ©

Step 15

Focus your attention on the tongue, tense it, then relax it and imagine it loosening and becoming limp.

Step 16

Now focus your attention upon your whole body, take note of how you feel and observe the influence that the ebb and flow of your breath has upon your overall condition. Allow the rhythm of your breathing to deepen the feeling of relaxation in your muscles.

Used together the above techniques reduce both central nervous system activity and brainwave activity (from Beta to Alpha).

Breathing Exercise 2

This exercise is an extension of the first. It is designed to reduce the breathing rate to approx. 4 breaths per minute and deepen your relaxation.

Inhale gently through the nostrils, whilst mentally counting one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand.

Hold the breath for about the same length of time as the inhalation whilst mentally counting one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand.

Notes on Meditation ©

Exhale gently through the nostrils, emptying the lungs completely whilst mentally counting one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand.

Hold the breath for about the same length of time as the exhalation whilst mentally counting one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand.

As in Exercise 1, allow the breath to flow gently and easily – it will soon find its own level – force nothing. One whole cycle includes; inhale, hold, exhale, hold, and takes roughly 16 seconds.

Relaxation Exercise 2

The purpose of this exercise is to reduce muscular tension to the bare minimum.

Step 1

As before, sit comfortably in a firm seat, ensuring that the spine is straight and that the head is balanced comfortably, without leaning too far forward or backward. Commence the above breathing exercise until the breath is flowing gently and easily.

Step 2

Once established, focus your attention upon your feet; on the in-breath focus all of your attention upon your feet and ankles and imagine all the vital energy withdrawing from

Module 2 – The Mechanics of Meditation ©

your feet and ankles into your calves. On the out-breath imagine your feet and ankles letting go of all muscle tone. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 3

Focus your attention upon your legs; on the in-breath focus all of your attention upon your legs and mentally withdraw all vital energy from them into your lower abdomen. On the out-breath imagine your legs letting go of all muscle tone. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 4

Focus your attention upon your lower abdomen; on the in-breath mentally withdraw all vital energy from it into your solar plexus. On the out-breath imagine letting go of all muscle tone in your lower abdomen. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 5

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your back; on the in-breath mentally withdraw all vital energy from them into your solar plexus. On the out-breath imagine letting go of all muscle tone in your back. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 6

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your hands; on the in-breath mentally withdraw all vital energy from them

Notes on Meditation ©

into your arms. On the out-breath imagine letting go of all muscle tone in your arms. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 7

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your arms; on the in-breath mentally withdraw all vital energy from them into your solar plexus. On the out-breath imagine letting go of all muscle tone in your arms. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 8

Focus your attention on the muscles of your face; jaw and tongue, on the in-breath mentally withdraw all vital energy from them into your solar plexus. On the out-breath imagine letting go of all muscle tone in face, jaw and tongue. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise.

Step 9

Focus your attention upon the muscles of your neck; on the in-breath mentally withdraw all vital energy from them into your solar plexus. On the out-breath imagine letting go of all muscle tone in your neck. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise

Module 2 – The Mechanics of Meditation ©

Step 10

Now focus your attention upon your whole body; on the in-breath mentally withdraw all vital energy from the body into your solar plexus. On the out-breath imagine letting go of all muscle tone in your body. Do this for three cycles of the breathing exercise. Take note of how you feel and observe the influence that the ebb and flow of your breath has upon your overall condition. Allow the rhythm of your breathing to deepen the feeling of relaxation in your muscles. Allow any everyday worry or concern that you may have to fade away with exhalation of your breath. Imagine them dissipating as your relaxation deepens – enjoy the experience.

• • •

When the two exercises above are combined effectively, they bring about a profound state of relaxation (reducing the brainwave frequency from Alpha to Theta). **THEREFORE, THIS EXERCISE SHOULD NOT EXCEED 15 MINUTES' DURATION.** After a few minutes spent practising this exercise you should allow your breathing to find its own level and rate!

Notes on Meditation ©

Notes

All of the foregoing exercises are relaxation exercises only; they are not in themselves meditation. They can and should be developed as skill that may be used as life-skills in general.

Neck

When working with Relaxation Exercise 1 (step 11) take a little time to stretch the neck by putting your chin on your chest and tipping the head forward.

Eyes & Vision

Normal vision is object-focussed. This means that we ‘see’, more often than not, by focussing our attention on an object; our eyes skip from one object to another. If we are in a tricky situation we tend to concentrate our vision on the area that is giving us the problem. However, when we close our eyes, in bed for instance, our eyes normally go out of focus and we drift into sleep. This mechanism acts as a switch or trigger to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, so when we relax our eyes by defocussing them we increase our ability to relax considerably.

It is a simple exercise. First, place the forefinger of each hand about six inches in front of your eyes. Now move the fingers away from the centre and around your head towards the ears. There is a point where the finger disappears from sight; this is the perimeter or periphery of your field of vision. Now close your eyes and do not focus on anything. Second, examine your field of vision from the perimeters, observe everything simultaneously; look at the field not at what’s in

Module 2 – The Mechanics of Meditation ©

or on it. You can do this with your eyes open or closed. It is a technique that has been utilised in various disciplines for generations.

Tongue & Jaw

Speech is the main organ of communication. The tongue and jaw are ever ready for action, thus it should come as no surprise that they have a direct relationship to the sympathetic nervous system. Consciously relaxing them releases the tension contained in the jaw like the energy in a coiled spring and will greatly benefit the relaxation process.

Hands & Fingers

Like the tongue and jaw, the hands are directly influenced by the sympathetic nervous system. They are the power-tools that we use to modify our environment, and like the tongue and jaw they can be reservoirs of a great deal of tension. (Try and relax whilst maintaining clenched fists.) Consciously relaxing the hands, finger by finger, releases tension throughout the body, thereby improving the relaxation process.

Module 3 – Concentrating the Mind

Visualisation

The purpose of the following exercises is to identify and develop the image-making faculty. From a practical perspective, it must be assumed that the student has no image-making ability.

All of the following exercises are designed to be cultivated in the relaxed state outlined in Module 2. Work with one exercise per session.

Geometric Forms

Imagine a tiny dot of light in space. Imagine this dot expanding until it forms a large circle. Now imagine this circle as a sphere; explore it.

Imagine a tiny dot of light in space oscillating up and down, forming a line. Imagine this line spinning on a central axis forming a circle. Imagine this circle stabilising; explore it.

Find any spherical object, study it, and then create a mental image of it. Explore this image with the mind's eye, looking at it from every angle (this makes particular sense if the object has a design on it).

Module 3 – Concentrating the Mind ©

Find or make:

A three-dimensional triangle (a tetrahedron); study it, then make a mental image of it. Explore the geometry of the image with the mind's eye, looking at it from every angle.

A small cube; study it, then create a mental image of it. Explore the geometry of this image with the mind's eye, looking at it from every angle. (This includes looking at it from within.)

Natural Forms

Acquire a simple natural form such as a leaf or a stone; gaze at it steadily, explore its shape, its colour, its size, its feel, smell etc. After you have explored it sufficiently, close your eyes and imagine it; open your eyes again, and compare the mental impression with the physical object. This exercise is well worth repeating several times a day for a week or two, using different forms to develop the image-making faculty.

Select a number of simple natural objects and study them, then imagine each object whilst looking at a blank sheet of paper, then take a pencil and draw each object in turn. As before compare with the originals.

Select an object with texture, explore it, and then create a mental image or impression of it. As before compare with the original.

Notes on Meditation ©

Using any musical instrument, strike a note, explore it until satisfied, then form a mental image or impression of the note, then strike it again and compare the note with your impression or image.

Choose something with a specific odour, explore it, then form a mental impression of the odour. Return to the original and compare with your impression.

Select a verse from a poem or a short paragraph from a book. Memorise the selected text and reflect upon it. Note what images and other sensory impressions emerge into your field of awareness.

Manufactured Forms

Acquire any simple manufactured object and study it as described above. Close your eyes and imagine it, explore its underlying geometry, and where feasible see the natural form that may have been the inspiration for its design. Open your eyes and compare your mental impression with the physical object.

Memory

The purpose of the following exercises is to develop the faculty of recall, of remembering past experiences. Work with one exercise per session.

Module 3 – Concentrating the Mind ©

People

Think of:

Someone you know, imagine him/her standing or sitting before you. Examine the form, the colour of hair, eyes, skin tone, clothing, gestures etc. Look at it from different viewpoints.

Two or more people that you know. Imagine them standing or sitting before you. Explore their forms and (however trivial they may seem) note the differences.

Someone you don't know but may have encountered within the past 24 hours, perhaps on a bus, at work or in a shop. Imagine them standing or sitting before you. Explore the image and note the thoughts and speculations that emerge.

Places

Think of:

A particular interior that you like, it may be your favourite room, or a place you have visited, perhaps whilst on holiday. Imagine that place and explore it with your mind's eye. Note the underlying geometry, the colours, the objects involved and their significance. Explore the site from different angles.

A rural spot that you like. It may be a quiet beach or forest glade or a panoramic viewpoint. Imagine that place and explore it with your mind's eye. Look at it from different viewpoints noting the aspects that make it interesting.

Notes on Meditation ©

A civic scene that is reasonably well known to you. It may be a classic piece of architecture, a statue, an old village high street or village green. It might even be a busy street or motorway. As before, imagine that place and explore it with your mind's eye, noting the things that make it unique. Again, explore it from different angles.

Events

Think of:

A happy event that is personal to yourself. Recall that event, what it was about and why you were happy. Imagine the location and who if any was present. Note the differences in those present, their mood, attitude, clothing, what they were doing etc. Explore the event, look at it from different angles and reflect on why it was so meaningful.

A seasonal event that you experienced, a warm spring picnic, a balmy summer sunset, a walk in the woods on a crisp autumn day or perhaps the first snowfall of winter. Recall the event; imagine the location, and who was present. Explore this event and look at it from different angles and reflect on your experience of it.

A social or national event that has meaning for you. Perhaps it was the collapse of the Berlin Wall, a sports triumph or maybe a great party. Recall the event, imagine the location and who was present. Explore this event and look at it from different angles reflecting on why it was so significant.

Module 3 – Concentrating the Mind ©

Conceptualisation

The purpose of the following exercises is to identify and develop the thinking faculty, not analyse what we think. Work with one exercise per session. For many students the ability to comprehend an idea (archetype) in the raw is initially beyond their grasp. Often the comprehension of the ‘Idea’ comes in the later stages of ‘concept’ or ‘proposition’.

Idea

Archetype or pattern as distinguished from its manifest form.
(An idea represents the universal nature of a thing stripped of all individuating notes.)

- e.g. A drinking vessel
- A cutting tool

Concept

A notion concerning an idea, (a representation through which we are able to know an object).

- e.g. A cup is a drinking vessel
- A knife is a cutting tool

Proposition

A proposal or an assertion: in logic a proposition:

- e.g. A small cup made of bone china is a teacup
- A knife is a small cutting instrument

Notes on Meditation ©

Projection

There are many systems that may be used effectively in the following exercise. However, be mindful that the Tradition has its own system.

Objectives

Establishing a clear intention.

- Desire (What do I want?)
- Motive (Why do I want?)
- Purpose (How do I achieve it?)

Modelling

Developing a conceptual representation of objective.

Defining:

- Purpose
- Function
- Design
- Material requirements

Planning

The process of giving the conceptual representation a form

- Priorities [needs analysis]
- Models [defining relationships, what it might look like]
- Mind maps [exploring connections and problem solving]

Module 3 – Concentrating the Mind ©

Brainstorming & Mind Maps

Brainstorming and mind maps are valuable tools for organising thoughts and ideas. Used in conjunction or individually they are very useful for making sense out of what may appear at first to be disparate and or disjointed impressions acquired in our meditations. They can also provide a means of selecting and ordering initial ideas from the dense and inscrutable texts that from time to time form the subject matter of our meditations.

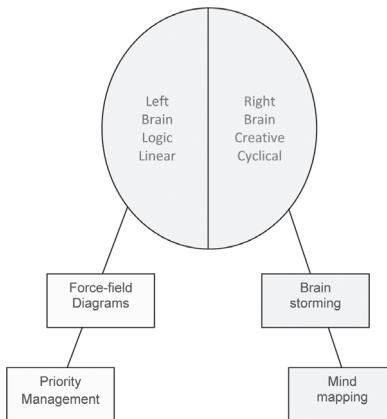


Fig. 7 Left & Right Brain Modes

Fig. 7 outlines what is embodied in this module. It alludes to a world of human endeavour that has many disciplines and many skilled exponents, particularly in the realms of education and business. It is easy to lose yourself in this area as there are many enticing avenues full of interest, with many tools to play with; a few of which are used in this module. However, although limited, what follows is sufficient for the purpose of enabling effective meditation.

Notes on Meditation ©

Force-field analysis outlines the positive [pros] and negative [cons] elements of an issue.

The issue...!	
+ Positive (pro's)	- Negative (cons)

Fig. 8 Force-field Analysis

Priority Management Matrix

[A useful tool, first popularised by Stephen Covey¹, for prioritising needs and allocating time according to need.]

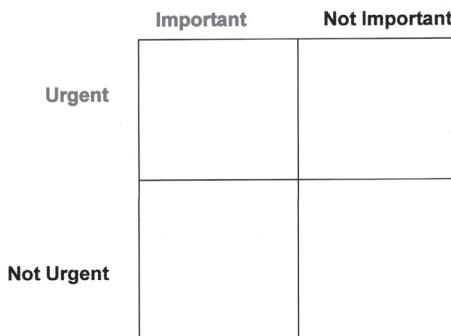


Fig. 9 Priority Management Matrix

1 *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey, Freepress, London, 1989.

Module 3 – Concentrating the Mind ©

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a ‘free-association’ method of exploring an idea or discovering a solution to a problem. It works by focussing on the idea or problem, and then deliberately coming up with as many connections or solutions as possible (plausible or otherwise) and by exploring all ideas that emerge as far as one can.

Although brainstorming may appear at first to be alien to the spirit of meditation the principles of this exercise may be quickly assimilated and employed as an interior process of exploring ideas, especially ideas that have emerged in the form of inspiration. Such an occurrence is not infrequent; many students have inspired insights during meditation, even though many lose sight of them or are unable to recall the nature of what took place.

During a brainstorming session (especially a group session) there must be no criticism of any thoughts and ideas that might arise, as every idea is open to as many possibilities as the imagination can muster. However, brainstorming is not simply a random activity. It needs to be structured and should follow a few simple rules. A generic process is outlined below:

1. Define (and agree) the objective
2. Establish a time limit to the exercise
3. Brainstorm ideas
4. Sort the information (e.g. mind mapping)

Notes on Meditation ©

5. Assess the results (e.g. force-field analysis)
6. Prioritise the results (priority management matrix)
7. Formulate next step

Allocate a time limit and keep the objective simple, ensuring that everyone participating understands and agrees the aim of the session. This will enable you to keep the random nature of brainstorming under control.

You will need a flip-chart or whiteboard, or some other means of recording information. This is important because brainstorming usually involves an outpouring of information that may not be obviously connected to the problem, and if it is a group activity then everyone must be able to see what is emerging. Use the tools described in Module 3, and any other tools that you find useful, such as a notebook to record the results of your endeavours.

Mind Maps

Mind mapping is a means by which we may visually represent our thoughts and ideas. It is also a means of collating the brainstorming ‘free-association’ process. As such it can be an invaluable aid to effective meditation because it is essentially a graphic technique enabling us to construct a visual representation of our thoughts and deliberations about a given subject – enabling us to establish a formal structure to interconnected thoughts.

Module 3 – Concentrating the Mind ©

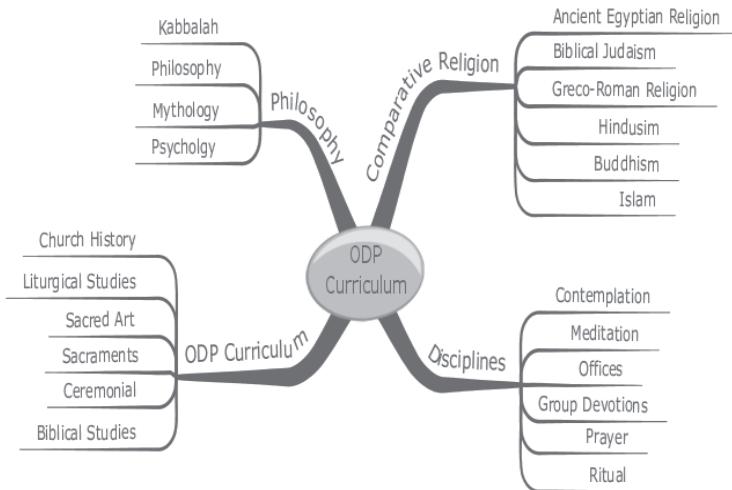


Fig. 10 ODP Curriculum Mind Map

Mind maps are simple to use and very effective tools for arranging and making sense of the data that emerges from a brainstorming session. Creating a mind map usually requires that we focus upon a central principle or idea from which all possible connections are drawn. For example, the mind map illustrated above gives a graphic representation of the Order of Dionysis and Paul Curriculum, which clearly illustrates four main areas of study and activity.

It should be noted that each of the sub-headings stemming from the four main branches illustrated in Fig. 10 could easily be expanded into many sub-branches, as it is obvious that each sub-heading is in itself an area capable of being divided into many sectors of study and research. The potential is limited only by the imagination and understanding of the student. Often the creation of such a mind map is the

Notes on Meditation ©

consolidation of emerging ideas and may be the beginning of a lengthy and fruitful course of study that may take years to complete. During this time, the general shape of the map will expand and evolve as the study progresses.

A mind map has four essential characteristics:

1. The core subject is crystallised in a central image/notion.
2. Themes derived from the core subject radiate from it as the main connecting branches.
3. Topics of lesser significance are represented as secondary branches deriving from the main connecting branches.
4. The branches form an interlinked nodal structure with the core subject forming a central axis connecting all of the main themes.

Mind mapping enables the student to arrange thoughts and ideas into a simple form, which when complete will serve as a visual aid giving a clear visual representation of what may seem at first to be a complex muddle of thought. For this reason alone developing the simple skills involved in mind mapping (following the four steps above) is well worth the time and effort involved.

As a point of interest it is worth noting that a great deal of the sacred art produced by many cultures may be considered as an exercise in mind mapping, where symbols have been used to represent key ideas instead of words.

Module 4 – Controlled Imagining

Having first established a solid foundation for meditation by developing the relaxation and concentration exercises outlined in Modules 1 to 3, it is now time to begin meditation. The oldest and simplest form of meditation consists in establishing a profound state of relaxation in which the attention is focused upon a given point such as the breath as it passes in and out of the nostrils.

Inevitably, it will not be long before the attention is led away from the breath by a procession of thoughts, images and sensations entering into the field of awareness, clamouring for attention. This unruly behaviour is common, normal, predictable and well documented. However, remembering that self-knowledge is a key feature of meditation, it is of far greater value looking at the nature of those intrusive thoughts, images and sensations than rejecting or suppressing them. This is because the quickest way of overcoming them is through understanding them, whereas rejecting or suppressing them will turn them into insurmountable obstacles that will bar any progress until dealt with appropriately. Their presence is both a sign that you are on the right path and a challenge to your entrenched egocentricity.

Although an important objective of meditation is self-knowledge, in traditional terms the ultimate objective is a detachment from all activity that we may enter into the exalted

Notes on Meditation ©

state of contemplation. This state is a natural evolution of the regular practice of meditation, a movement beginning with the activity of using the faculties of the mind culminating in non-activity and entering the ‘silence’. However, it is true to say that this state may take a considerable time to achieve.

One of the early fruits of meditation is a greater understanding of the chemistry of consciousness and the nature of experience through what is best described as ‘insight’. ‘Insight’ is a term that describes one’s ability to acquire a profound understanding of an object through the sustained concentration of the attention upon it. It is a faculty that lies beyond rational thought, indeed it is more of the nature of intuition or gnosis and it enables us to enter the hidden depths of the field of experience and understand its effect upon our consciousness. This does not require us to examine every thought, image or feeling individually; that would be a never-ending and foolish path to follow. No, it means that by observing the field of our experience we learn something of its true immaterial nature, and also, to distinguish the knower from the field of knowledge – which is the first great task of the spiritual alchemist! The following exercises are designed with this objective in mind.

Exercise 1 – Reflections on the Body I

Follow the relaxation procedure (Module 2); begin the breathing exercise until the breath is flowing gently and easily. Once established, concentrate your attention upon the physical body. Just as in the concentration exercises,

Module 4 – Controlled Imagining ©

explore the body, note everything. Ask yourself, is it merely an amorphous lump of conflicting sensations or is there more to it? What is it, and what do we know about it? What are its constituent parts? You might think it consists of cells; ask yourself then, what is a cell, what do cells do, how do they organise themselves? You might think that they organise themselves into systems; if that be true then what systems? Consider the following and meditate on their individual significance:

Skeletal system

Muscular system

Nervous system

Lymphatic system

Digestive system

Respiratory system

Endocrine system

Cardio-vascular system

Reproductive system

Renal System

Immune system

The Cell

This extraordinary micro-system is the basic building block of all of the aforementioned systems, indeed, of all life forms. The cell is a completely self-contained system separated from its environment by a selectively permeable membrane that consists of layers of phospholipids and proteins. It is selectively permeable to certain ions and organic molecules thereby controlling the movement of material in and out of the cell. The cell-membrane also controls the electric potential of the cell, indeed according to Georges Lakhovsky¹ (1869 – 1942), a Russian biologist and engineer, cells are electrical units whose underlying mechanism is the oscillating circuit from which energy is given off in the form of waves.

The interior of the cell is filled with a jelly-like substance called cytoplasm. The cell also contains its own micro-organs called organelles that function in relation to the cell in much the same manner as organs to the body. These organelles are also enclosed within their own membranes, suggesting a similar function to the cell-membrane itself. The largest of them is the nucleus, which is the control centre of the cell, within which is to be found DNA – the basic material of our genes – and RNA, which contains the coding for constructing substances such as amino acids and enzymes. For many health professionals the health of the cell is considered to be fundamental to maintaining the health of the body.

1 *The Secret of Life*, Georges Lakhovsky, William Heinemann, London, 1939.

Module 4 – Controlled Imagining ©

Exercise 2 – Reflections on the Body II

Consider the body in terms of the following: matter, form, energy. Thus:

Matter

What do we mean by the term ‘matter’?

Is the matter of the body all the same?

What effect has matter upon Self?

Form

What do we mean by the term ‘form’?

What are the different forms of the body?

What influence do these different forms have upon the Self?

Energy

What do we mean by the term ‘energy’?

Where does this energy come from?

What part does this energy play in the body?

What influence does it have upon the Self?

What is Self??

It is possible to consider this question from a:

Materialistic/mechanistic perspective

Psychological perspective

Spiritual perspective

Notes on Meditation ©

There are many views and opinions about the nature of the ‘Self’ and many of them are worth exploring, but the most important point is to arrive at a personal understanding, no matter how limited it might be. It matters little if you consider your views naïve or of no consequence, it is where you start from that is important, whereas starting from someone else’s understanding will only serve to confuse. Furthermore, it does not have to be shared with others. Therefore, arriving at a point where you have your own definition is important as it establishes a platform to operate from, a platform that will enable you to develop your own understanding.

Record your reflections in a notebook, it will be invaluable as you progress.