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IT'S A GRAY AREA: To a mind that is still

By **JAMES P. GRAY**

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The Taiwanese author Chang Tsu once said "To a mind that is still, the whole world surrenders." The best way to obtain a still mind is through meditation. But, although most of us have heard about it, what exactly is meditation?

It's a complicated question. The best definition is that the art of meditation is the practice of learning to contemplate, ponder, focus and reflect on one's thoughts, with the understanding that our thoughts ultimately influence our decisions. But true meditation is actually the opposite of thinking. Instead, through mental discipline, it transports the "thinking mind" into a deeper state of awareness.

Meditation is a part of many of the world's great religions. This includes the rich Western history of St. Ignatius Loyola, with his Spiritual Exercises, meditations, prayers and other mental practices, and San Juan de la Cruz and Saint Teresa de Jesus, with their work about the soul looking for the perfect union with God. And it also includes the Eastern history with its inherent involvement with Hinduism and Buddhism.

But meditation is not innately religious. Mostly, the Eastern approaches have also been used in martial arts, psychotherapy and other forms of counseling. More importantly, millions around the world use it effectively in their private lives.

There are at least five major and different types of Eastern meditation techniques. One of them is Mantra Meditation, or a branch of it called Transcendental Meditation, which is what my wife regularly and I sporadically practice. This involves the conscious repetition with the eyes closed of a mantra or word that is chosen by an instructor and is gentle to the mind. The constant repetition of this mantra word facilitates the removal of other sounds and thoughts from the practitioner's mind. But it is repeated silently and is not to be confused with a religious chant.

Trataka Meditation is accomplished by a steady gaze or concentration upon one particular object, such as an icon, a picture of a restful scene, or the flame of a candle. This is used by many religious systems, and it is also an established yoga technique that sometimes takes the practitioners to the highest level of meditation.

Chakra Meditation is often used for the development of the self; Vipassana Meditation seeks an insight or process of self-observation; and Raja Yoga Meditation elevates the practitioners to reach for a "oneness" that will allow them to give up all worldly pleasures and devote all of their energies to the spiritual awakening of fellow beings.

The non-religious and practical benefits of meditation are numerous. Many people find that setting aside 15 to 20 minutes a day silently to meditate allows them to switch off their worries, develop a detachment from the minutia of their everyday lives, and be better able to keep things in perspective.

Not only does the reflection of meditation bring an inner peace, but it also allows people to spend time with themselves and focus upon the present moment. It can also be used to reduce stress, control thoughts, improve concentration, spontaneity and creativity, and take people beyond simply being free of disease to a condition of obtaining a more peaceful existence. And many people go further and discover a truer life purpose.

Most people report that the beauty of meditation cannot be expressed in words; that it can only be experienced. But it does require instruction and perseverance. I have used it in attempts to gain insights for some of these columns, as well as in other areas that are important to me in my life.

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Meditation is adaptable to teenagers as they negotiate their way into adulthood. In fact, it was used in violence-prone and racially charged Hunter's Point Middle School in Southern San Francisco — for students and teachers alike. Grades went up, and violence and discipline problems went down.

It is also tailor-made for people who are incarcerated. What other people are facing so many frustrations about their lives with so few resources to deal with them and have so much idle time on their hands? Accordingly, this is a perfect opportunity for prisoners. And, when prisoners learn to meditate, their level of aggression toward each other and their guards has been found to go down. For those reasons, more prisons are now encouraging classes on meditation to be conducted in their facilities.

I am not really competent to take anyone beyond this elementary discussion. There are many postures for sitting and techniques for breathing, focusing and chanting during meditation that are well beyond my level of expertise. In fact, some advanced practitioners have disciplined their bodies so completely that they are actually able to breathe in through one nostril and breathe out through the other. But if you are interested in learning more about meditation, I recommend you use the Internet, the Yellow Pages, or even word of mouth to find a competent instructor who fits your needs.

Meditation is an inexpensive but multifaceted technique that does not compete with religious beliefs, but which can be used effectively to transport most of us into a restful alertness that can result in a fuller, calmer, and more insightful, productive, and meaningful life. Or to put it into a different perspective, think of it this way: Anything that has been around for more than 5,000 years must have something special going for it. Try it, and I think that you will agree.



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