The Psychology of Meditation
Research and Practice

Edited by
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Chapter 1

The practice of meditation

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Introduction

Blessed (or cursed) with self-awareness and consciousness, humans are faced with the simple, stunning reality of our existence: With a planet teeming with life in a universe vaster than our imaginations can encompass. And we are faced with the miracle of our individual births and the ever-present inevitability of our deaths. We can contemplate the history of our species, responsible for the destruction of most large mammalian species and countless others besides, and now threatening the viability of the ecosystem that sustains us. And we busy ourselves, in the context of all this, with politics, economics, social media, soap operas, and newspapers; with our neighbors’ transgressions and our plans for TV viewing; with football teams and holiday destinations; with fashion choices and religious wars. Busy humans, exercising huge influence on this planet, and busily preoccupied with our busy stuff—with our desire to increase our pleasure and reduce our pain and vaguely aware that we are not quite getting it right, either individually or collectively. And working hard to avoid confronting the fact that we may be getting it very wrong indeed.

All of this experience is mediated through our minds—actually through our bodies and minds as a single system—but how we understand, cope with, make sense of, come to terms or fail to come to terms with our existence and experiences is through the functioning of our minds. To truly appreciate our situation, our predicaments, our paths forward, to more directly engage with experience and existence, therefore, we also need to understand and perhaps better nurture the functioning of our minds.

The practice of meditation is a way of coming to experience more fully our moment-by-moment existence by encountering the mind directly. Meditation involves increasing awareness of the body (sensations), emotions, thoughts, the mind, and mental qualities (e.g., turgid, clear, focused). Through practice, the aim is for this awareness to be increasingly non-reactive though more acute to events and experiences—the sound of a bird, a shout in the distance, a sensation of minor physical discomfort, an angry thought, a worry about an unfinished task, a desire, a fundamental fear. It offers a means of opening to or connecting...
with all experience, whether positive, negative, or neutral, in a (relatively) unfiltered, unprocessed way. It offers the ability, with practice, to enable the development of awareness of awareness itself. The aim is also to reduce suffering as a consequence of this greater openness, through reduced reactivity to experience and increasing well-being (Germer et al. 2005; Hogan 2014; Woodruff et al. 2014). There is a wealth of experience and knowledge of meditation that stretches back thousands of years.

In this chapter, we will consider the practice of meditation in different religious contexts, in human history, across cultures, and in literature. The chapter describes the growth of research in psychology into meditation and charts the huge rise in interest in “mindfulness” over the last 15 to 20 years. And the chapter will offer a way of understanding meditation and mindfulness as overlapping and distinct approaches, before concluding with a brief description of the subsequent contents of the book.

Meditation may be defined as an exercise in which the individual turns attention or awareness to dwell upon a single object, concept, sound, image, or experience, with the intention of gaining greater spiritual or experiential and existential insight, or of achieving improved psychological well-being (West 1987). And to move from definitional concept to experience, the reader may try the simple breathing meditation, described in Box 1.1.

**Box 1.1 Openness and contentment in meditation**

Sit quietly in an upright position in a place where you are unlikely to be disturbed.

Close your eyes and then become aware of the sensation of your whole body, letting go of any obvious tightness or tension.

Enjoy the sensation of your body being still and sit quietly like this for about half a minute.

Now let your attention go to your breathing—perhaps where your stomach moves with your breath, or where your chest rises and falls with each breath, or in the windpipe, or in your nostrils, or at the point where the breath enters and leaves the nostrils. It doesn’t matter where.

And then each time you breathe out, say the word “one” silently to yourself.

You don’t have to concentrate hard on the breath or repeating the word “one.” You don’t have to try to think the word clearly at all times to the exclusion of everything else.
Continue the meditation in this way for a quarter of an hour, remembering that you don’t have to achieve some deep level of meditation or relaxation. The key is to have an attitude of openness and contentment with the practice.

From time to time there will be thoughts that distract you from the sensation of your breathing and repeating the word “one” on the out-breath. Thoughts are a key part of the practice rather than mistakes or something to be strenuously resisted.

Treat thoughts (or noises) as you would treat clouds drifting across the blue sky. You don’t hold on to them and you don’t push them away either. You just watch them come and go and, when you become aware that you have drifted away from dwelling on the sensation of breathing, very gently and easily return your attention to the breathing.

Not with some sharp self-remonstration but in a gentle, open, contented way, accepting the fact that you had drifted away on a succession of thoughts and then comfortably moving very smoothly back to watching your breathing.

Remember to take it easily, quietly, and simply. And with an attitude of openness and contentment.

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**Varieties of meditation practices**

Traditionally meditation has been practiced to achieve a direct experiential knowledge of an absolute such as God, Being, Oneness, Buddha nature—each of these labels being a product of a religious or personal belief system. In the last 60 years, large numbers of people in Europe and North America have learned and practiced meditation, many of them with a quite different purpose in mind: To relieve distress or improve psychological well-being.

By what methods do people seek these differing outcomes? One of the more common forms of meditation involves repeating a sound (sometimes called a “mantra”) either silently or aloud, and the meditator is taught to focus attention on the sound, not favoring other thoughts, external stimuli, and desires. The sound or mantra may be chosen by the meditation teacher as being particularly suitable or powerful for the individual; it may be the name or attribute of a god (Krishna, Ram), or it may be the name of a revered teacher (other examples are “so-hum,” “om,” “she-am”). The degree of focus or concentration on the mantra varies according to teachers, schools, and systems. In some the meditator is urged almost to grit the teeth and strenuously push away thoughts and sensations that
intrude during meditation. But most practitioners are taught to develop a more relaxed awareness, neither driving thoughts nor sensations away, but not holding on to them either. Rather, the idea is to persistently and easily return attention to the central focus (Hewitt 1978).

Objects of meditation can also be visual such as a candle flame, a picture of a teacher or “guru,” or meaningful visual symbols such as the Christian cross or the Judaic star. Even movement can be used as a focus of meditation; the repetitive touching of the tips of the four fingers with the thumb or the simple act of walking are both movements used as a focus for attention in meditation. There are meditation practices that focus on our impermanence and death; others that focus on transmitting compassion to our loved ones, to enemies, to our communities, to all sentient beings, and to all beings in the universe. There are practices that involve visualizing oneself as a revered god or teacher such as Krishna, Buddha, or Ganesh. And in Zen Buddhism, one practice is “just sitting” or shikantaza in the meditation hall and experiencing all that arises in an accepting and attentive way. The practitioner is urged to be diligent in maintaining awareness and curiosity in order to learn about the nature of the mind and, thereby, the nature of existence.

In the last 20 years there has also been an exponential growth in the use of “mindfulness” techniques in which the meditator may attempt to let the attention dwell on “all that is here and now” in his or her environment and consciousness (Ie, Ngnoumen, and Langer 2014a,b). We will return to discuss mindfulness later in this chapter and it is addressed by many of the contributors later in the volume. And, as we review historical and cross-cultural practices of meditation, still further varieties of meditation practice are revealed.

**Meditation across cultures and through history**

Meditation has been practiced in various forms for at least 2500 years and probably for very much longer. It is striking that these practices have been sustained for so long and across many different cultures. Curious too is how elaborate methods from one culture resemble techniques in other cultures. Native Americans practiced a form of meditation similar to the shikantaza of Japan. In Botswana, the people of the Kung Zhu/twasi practice a form of ritual dancing that they believe activates an energy (n/um) located at the base of the spine and which produces an ecstasy experience (Katz 1973, 1999). According to Hindu philosophy and yoga teachings there are subtle psychic sense organs and a particular force called the Kundalini located at the base of the spine. In Kundalini yoga, the meditator focuses attention on this energy source and, through concentration, arouses this energy. The energy is then believed to travel up the spine
through six centers or chakras, evoking at each stage a higher state of consciousness. Eventually it reaches the seventh chakra (the crown chakra) and the meditator achieves a state of perfect enlightenment.

Many groups on the African continent have practiced ritual dancing coupled with chanting to produce an altered state of consciousness. In shamanism, a holy person (the shaman) intones a sacred chant to achieve trances (Benson 1975) that offer insights and enable healing; it is widely practiced in North and South America, Indonesia, Siberia, and Japan. Freuchen (1959) describes how the Polar Inuit people in Greenland would sit facing a large soft stone and, using a small hard hand stone, continuously carve a circle in the large stone for periods stretching to days, to produce a spiritual trance state (for descriptions of more meditation practices see Benson et al. 1974; Goleman 1977; Hewitt 1978; Ornstein 1972; White 1974).

However, meditation techniques are not confined to the religions of the East or to those of simpler societies; meditation has long been part of Christianity. St Augustine (AD 350–430) wrote of a method of contemplating that he used to:

... pass even beyond this power of mine which is called memory; yea I will pass beyond it, that I might approach unto thee, O sweet light (Butler 1922).

Another example of Christian meditation comes from an anonymously written fourteenth-century work called The Cloud of Unknowing (Progoff 1969). The author writes that the way to attain union with God is to beat down thoughts through the repetition of a single-syllable word such as “God” or “love”:

Clasp this word tightly in your heart so that it never leaves it no matter what may happen. This word shall be your shield and your spear whether you ride in peace or in war. With this word you shall beat upon the cloud and the darkness, which are above you. With this word you shall strike down thoughts of every kind and drive them beneath the cloud of forgetting. After that, if any thoughts should press upon you... answer him with this word only and with no other words.

Fray Francisco de Osuna, a tenth-century monk, writing in The Third Spiritual Alphabet, describes an exercise very similar to Buddhist techniques:

Keep (your eyes) fixed steadily on the ground, like men who are forgetful and, as it were, out of themselves, who stand immovable, wrapt in thought... it is better... to keep our gaze fixed on the ground, on some places where there is little to look at so there may be less to stir our fancy and our imagination. Thus, even in a crowd you may be deeply recollected by keeping your gaze bent, fixed on one place. The smaller and darker the place, the more limited your view will be and the less will your heart be distracted (Osuna 1931).

Among the earliest Christians, the Desert Fathers practiced silently repeating the “kyrie eleison” to help them achieve a state called “quies”—a state of rest.
where “nowhereness and nomindness” purified the soul. They sustained this silent repetition throughout their daily lives “until it became as spontaneous and instinctive as their breathing” (Merton 1960). In the fifth century AD, Hesychius gave instruction in the “Prayer of the Heart,” the practice of which was intended to provide a “sure knowledge of God, the Incomprehensible” (French 1968). The instructions are indistinguishable in their mechanics from many practices we call meditation:

> Sit down alone and in silence. Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently, and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. Carry your mind, i.e. your thoughts, from your head to your heart. As you breathe out say “Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” Say it moving your lips gently or say it in your mind. Try to put all other thoughts aside. Be calm, be patient and repeat the process very frequently (French 1968).

In the Judaic religion, it is common to repeat a simple prayer accompanied by swaying movements in order to bring exaltation. There are practices involving mental focusing on body posture and techniques of concentration on magic seals. In the Chandogya upanishad of Hinduism, devotees are urged to “reverence meditation.” In the Sutrakritanga sutra, Jains are taught that “he whose soul is purified by meditating is compared to a ship in water. Like a ship reaching the shore, he gets beyond misery.”

In the Sufi tradition, Al-Ghazali describes the practice of Dhikr:

> . . . as he sits in solitude, let him not cease saying continuously with his tongue, “Allah, Allah” keeping his thought on it. At last he will reach a state where the motion of his tongue will cease, and it will seem as though the word flowed from it. Let him persevere in this until all trace of motion is removed from his tongue, and he finds his heart persevering in the thought. Let him still persevere until the form of the word, its letters and shape, is removed from his hear, and there remains the idea alone, as though clinging to his heart, inseparable from it (Nicholson 1914, p. 48).

It is clear that meditation practices are or have been widely used in all the world’s major religions over many centuries.

What evidence is there of meditation practice outside of established religions? In an exploration of mysticism in English literature, Spurgeon (1970) explored the writings of Bronte, Wordsworth, and Tennyson to illustrate her theme. Her evidence suggests that meditation experiences have been seen as significant by many outside the religious and mystical traditions. Wordsworth believed a passive attitude, beyond the intellect and desires and above petty disputes, would enable one to reach a “central peace subsisting for ever at the heart of endless agitation.” Such practice would lead to:

> . . . that serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on
Until the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul;
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy
We see into the life of things.

Tennyson would mentally repeat his name continually to encourage experience of the "unity of all things, the reality of the unseen, and the persistence of life." Lines from The Ancient Sage illustrate his experience:

... more than once when I
Sat all alone, revolving in myself
The word that is the symbol of myself
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed
And passed into the nameless, as a cloud
Melts into heaven...

No doubt many experience something of such states, perhaps sitting on a hilltop on a summer’s day, savoring the stillness of the hills and trees, or perhaps in other moments of deep peace and relaxation. Meditation, when practiced regularly, is a way of more easily evoking feelings of equanimity, wholeness, intuitive understanding, and a sense of connection with the external world.

In Zen Buddhism, the practice of shikantaza—simply a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens to be here and now—is proposed to lead to a vivid sensation of "nondifference" between oneself and the external world, between the mind and its contents—the various sounds, sights, and other impressions of the surrounding environment (Watts 1957).

In the Rinzai Zen school, the meditator is asked to hold in his or her mind an illogical question ("koan") such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or "What did my face look like before I was born?" or "What am I?" As a result of persistently interrogating the question, the individual (it is claimed) will eventually achieve a sudden and intuitive understanding—“One seeks and seeks, but cannot find. One then gives up, and the answer comes by itself” (Watts 1957).

Questions, dances, candle flames, movements, sitting quietly, secret sounds, repetition—can all these be subsumed under the same heading of meditation techniques, or is there a danger of categorizing together quite dissimilar behaviors? Naranjo (1974, p. 19) proposed that all these practices have a common element:

Just as we do not see the stars in daylight, but only in the absence of the sun, we may never taste the subtle essence of meditation in the daylight of ordinary activity in all its
complexity. That essence may be revealed when we have suspended everything else but US, our presence, our attitude, beyond any activity or the lack of it. Against the background of the simplicity required by the exercise, we may become aware of ourselves and all that we bring to the situation, and we may begin to grasp experientially the question of attitude.

**Why do we practice meditation?**

Do people share fundamentally similar objectives in their persistence with meditation practice or do those from different traditions have unique aims? Interviews with those practicing meditation suggest a variety of reasons (often unclear) but with one underlying theme: that people generally seek a clearer understanding of existence or closer connection to the spiritual, and that the increasing clarity and connection help in the experience of daily living (West 1986, 1987). Here are some explanations for why they meditate offered by long-term meditators from a variety of different traditions:

- It's my central belief, the heart of me. I feel I should honour that part of me . . all of it leads up to the purest expression of me.
- I enjoy meditation because physically it feels good and it's interesting in terms of the insight that I get into myself and the more I can watch all this stuff going on and accept it, the more I can reveal myself to others.
- It's the heart of life . . . It makes life whole . . . you can make it take in the whole day or everybody you know or everything you have to do. It has the sense of pulling everything together, so it's a real centre.
- I meditate because it calms me down and I see it as the only real hope to get rid of suffering by gaining complete control over the mind so that eventually your thoughts, feelings and actions are totally positive.
- It's a way of being in touch with the Universe.
- Meditation provides me with space. It's a time of caring for myself, free from demands and needs and a time of being peacefully alone and still to allow my pure and perfect self to open more and more.

(West 1987, p. 11)

To what extent is there a consensus of objectives amongst the many traditions that encourage the practice of meditation? Goleman (he of emotional intelligence fame!) argued that there is a common objective hidden in the differing folds of customs, language, and symbols (Goleman 1977). In the Hindu Bhakti tradition it is believed that love for the deity, which is expressed in regular meditation on the name of the god, changes to a transcendent love:

' . . . the devotee loses all sense of decorum and moves about the world unattached . . .
His heart melts through love as he habitually chants the name of his beloved lord . . .'

(*Srimad Bhagavata*)
Eventually, beyond this state, the devotee will arrive at a point where he or she perceives the divine in everything and everyone:

The devotee need no longer observe any special forms or symbols for worship. He worships in his heart, the world having become his altar (Goleman 1977).

In the Jewish Kabbalah, it is believed that there are multiple levels of reality with corresponding levels of consciousness. Most of us are at the lowest levels and live very mechanical lives of habit and routine with little awareness of our existence. Through meditation, according to the Kabbalist view, we first become disillusioned with the mechanical games of life, and then begin to break free from the bondage of our egos. The ultimate goal along the path of the Kabbalist is "devakut," in which the seeker’s soul becomes one with God. At this point, the Kabbalist is now a supernatural saint who has equanimity, indifference to praise and blame, a sense of being alone with God, and the gift of prophesy. All of his or her behavior is directed to serving God’s purpose not the ego; there is a union between the individual and the essence of existence (Halevi 1976).

In Christian Hesychasm and other Christian mystic traditions, meditation was practiced to enable “the old superficial self to be purged away and (permit) the gradual emergence of the true, secret self in which the Believer and Christ were ‘one spirit’” (Merton 1960). St Isaac describes the enlightened Christian as one who:

. . . has reached the summit of all virtues, and has become the abode of the Holy Spirit . . . when the Holy Spirit comes to live in a man, he never ceases to pray, for then the Holy Spirit constantly prays in him (Kadloubovsky and Palmer 1969).

In the Sufi tradition of Islam, meditation is a central practice in the attempt to reach a state called fana or “passing away in God.” According to Sufi doctrine, our lives are a thin illusion of habitual reactions, imprisonment by desires, and endless suffering (almost identical in content to Buddhist teachings). We are asleep but we do not know it. Through regular practice of meditation and remembrance of God we can achieve an increased absorption in God. The goal of Sufi meditation or “zikr” is to overcome the mind’s waywardness and random play, and to achieve one-pointedness on God, so that God pervades the mind’s activity.

Perhaps there is an echo across these different paths of a merging or submerging of the self in some absolute. A similar notion exists at the heart of the teaching of the Transcendental Meditation organization. Through this form of meditation, the meditator can achieve the experience of pure Being, devoid of content, thoughts, specific sensations, memories, reactions; one experiences simply what it is to be (Yogi 1995). With regular practice the meditator will achieve “cosmic consciousness,” in which state, awareness of pure Being permeates all of his or her activities during waking, sleeping, and dreaming. In this
state of permanent pure awareness, the individual is free from desire and needs for personal gain. He or she acts spontaneously, in accordance with a divine cosmic purpose as an instrument of God. Beyond this, at the highest states of consciousness, the meditator experiences all things without illusion and experiences a complete unity with God and all creation.

Goleman (1977) concluded that there are commonalities both of method and of objectives across these disparate traditions and approaches. He sees the need to retrain attention during meditation as the “single invariant ingredient in the recipe for altering consciousness of every meditation system. At their end the distinction between meditation avenues melts.” Although each path uses different names, Goleman (1977, pp. 117–18) believes that they “… propose the same basic formula in an alchemy of the self: the diffusion of the effects of meditation into the meditator’s waking, dreaming and sleep states . . . As the states produced by his meditation meld with his waking activity, the awakened state ripens. When it reaches full maturity, it lastingly changes his consciousness, transforming his experience of himself and of his universe.”

So far we have examined what meditation is, how it is practiced, and what the purpose of meditation is in the various traditions. Now we pause to see how psychologists have understood and categorized these practices.

**Typologies of meditation**

Naranjo (in Naranjo and Ornstein 1971) distinguished between three types of meditation called respectively the Way of Forms, the Expressive Way, and the Negative Way. The Way of Forms includes meditation upon external symbols and objects such as candle flames, mandalas, koans, questions, and mantras. Naranjo calls this the way of concentration, absorption, union, outer-directed, and Apollonian meditation. One example of concentrative meditation is Ramana Maharshi’s method of meditating upon the question “Who am I?” There is a focusing of attention and a centeredness on the question (which could be substituted by a mandala, flame, lotus flower, mantra, or focus on breathing).

The Expressive Way includes those meditations that involve receptivity to the contents and processes of consciousness. In this type the meditator “dwells upon the form that springs from his own spontaneity, until he may eventually find that in his own soul lies hidden the source of all traditions” (quoted in Naranjo and Ornstein 1971). Naranjo describes the Expressive Way as the way of freedom, transparency, surrender, inner-directed, and as the Dionysian way. It involves letting go of control and being open to inner voices, feelings, and intuitions. Naranjo suggests that the best illustration is to be found in shamanism—“Not only is shamanism in general a mysticism of possession, but the shaman’s trance
is usually content-oriented . . . He is one who has attained communication with the supernatural and may act as a mediator between spirits or gods and man, making the desires of each known to each other” (quoted in Naranjo and Ornstein 1971, p. 97).

Finally, there is the Negative Way—involving elimination, detachment, emptiness, centering. The meditator puts effort into moving away from all objects and not identifying with anything perceived:

By departing from the known he thus allows for the unknown, by excluding the irrelevant he opens himself up to the relevant, and by dis-identifying from his current self concept, he may go into a conceptual awakening of his true nature (quoted in Naranjo and Ornstein 1971, p. 29).

In this approach the aim is to withdraw attention from both external perceptions and internal experience “to cultivate a detachment toward psychological acting in general” (Naranjo 1974, p. 29). Thus, a good example of the Negative Way is vipassana meditation, a Buddhist approach involving “bare attention.” In this method the meditator merely registers sense impressions, feelings, and mental states without reacting to them by deed, speech, or mental comment:

By cultivating a receptive state of mind, which is the first stage in the process of perception, bare attention cleans the mind and prepares the mind for subsequent mental processes (Naranjo and Ornstein 1971).

Ornstein (1972) describes two major types of meditation—concentrative and “opening-up” meditations. The first type he sees as developing one-pointedness of mind and gives as an example the technique of Zen breath counting. This involves counting the breaths from one to ten and then repeating the process. When the count is lost the meditator returns to one and begins again. He sees the “opening-up” exercises not as attempting to isolate the practitioner from ordinary life processes but rather as involving those processes in the training of consciousness. Thus the Zen practice of shikantaza or “just sitting” is an exemplar of this type of meditation. Watts (1957, p. 175) describes it as:

. . . not therefore, sitting with a blank mind which excludes all the impressions of the inner and outer senses. It is not “concentration” in the usual sense of restricting the attention to a single sense object, such as a point of light or the tip of one’s nose. It is simply a quiet awareness, without comment, of whatever happens to be here and now. This awareness is attended by the most vivid sensation of “non-difference” between oneself and the external world, between the mind and its contents—the various sounds, sights and other impressions of the surrounding environment. Naturally this sensation does not arise by trying to acquire it.

Shapiro (1982) describes three major attentional strategies—a focus on a whole field (wide-angle lens attention), a focus on a specific object within a field
(zoom-lens attention), and a shifting back and forth between the two. The first type would include mindfulness techniques such as “just sitting.” Another example would be vipassana, which Ross (1981, p. 159) describes as the central practice of Buddhism:

. . . the continual effort to at first note and later to just be one with the immediacy of one’s situation; to break the adhesive of one’s constant train of conceptual thought about past, present and future; and to bring oneself with clarity to the touch and consciousness of the present. The practice of mindfulness greatly deepens the power of concentration and the ability to stay with one’s life situation.

Zoom-lens attention is what both Ornstein and Naranjo call concentrative meditation but the third type, shifting back and forth, is a novel category quite different from Naranjo’s, and includes passive concentrative techniques such as transcendental meditation (TM). It is argued that in TM there is both concentration and mindfulness and that with increasing adeptness, mindfulness becomes more dominant (Brown and Engler 1980; Welwood 1982).

Goleman (1977) distinguishes two paths of meditation, essentially the same as those identified by Ornstein; he calls them the paths of concentration and insight. Not only are the meditation types different, he argues, but the experiences along the paths of meditation practice will be quite distinct too. On the path of concentration the meditator will develop deeper and deeper absorption and one-pointedness, going through eight “jhanas” (full absorptions) to achieve a final state “so subtle that it cannot be said whether it is or not” (p. 19). The path of insight involves developing deeper mindfulness and insight through stages of “pseudonirvana,” realization, and effortless insight to nirvana, in which state the meditator “will have utterly given up the potential for impure acts” (p. 32).

And confronting all of these is Krishnamurti (1987), who held that all techniques are an obstacle to the unfettered, unblemished experience of existing here and now. Meditation systems with mantras, techniques, teachings, traditions, and stipulations simply lead us to exchange one illusion for another. He argued that we are in a constant state of mental conflict as a result of making comparisons between what is and what should be. Consequently, we hide away in a construction of daily habits, mechanical repetition, dreams of the future, and memories; we do not live in the present moment. Krishnamurti urged the development of a kind of opening-up meditation—“choiceless awareness”—a clear and direct perception of experience now, without imposing names, preconceptions, and habitual perceptions upon our experience. It is only by watching the contents of consciousness that we can perceive the ways of our minds and begin to understand experience directly and not through symbols created by our intellects (Krishnamurti 1987). Freed from conditioned habits of perception.
and cognition one can be free of the self and therefore free to love. This leads to a state of aloneness beyond loneliness and an ability to attend without motive; thus one can live in the world with clarity and reason (Coleman 1971).

Krishnamurti’s approach is mirrored to some extent by the huge increase in interest in what has come to be called mindfulness—this increase in interest can be seen as a revolution in interest in meditation and has taken place over the course of the last 15 years.

The “mindfulness” revolution

“Whether you walk, stand, sit, lie down, or sleep, whether you stretch or bend your limbs, whether you look around, whether you put on your clothes, whether you talk or keep silent, whether you eat or drink—even whether you answer the call of nature—in these and other activities you should be fully aware and mindful of the act performed at the moment. That is to say, that you should live in the present moment, in the present action.”

(Rahula 1959)

Mindfulness as a concept is not new, as the quotation from Rahula reveals. However, the explosion of interest in mindfulness, to the point where it is now such a well-known concept, very much is. Formal definitions include “moment by moment awareness” (Germer et al. 2005); “paying attention with purpose, non-judgmentally, and while in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn 2005); and “the bringing of one’s awareness to current experience through observing and attending to the changing field of thoughts, feelings and sensations from moment to moment” (Bishop et al. 2004).

The growth in interest in mindfulness arose from clinical applications, led particularly by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990, 1994, 2003), who saw it as a practice to promote full awareness of the present moment with the intention of embodying an orientation of calm and equanimity. At the same time another stream of mindfulness research in psychology was flowing, and not springing from a meditation source. The work of Ellen Langer contrasted mindfulness and choice with mindlessness, and prescribed actively drawing novel distinctions in our experience of the world by being in the present moment, staying open to novelty, maintaining alertness to distinctions, nurturing sensitivity to different contexts, and developing awareness of multiple perspectives (Ie et al 2014a). This less well known concept of mindfulness involves a heightened sense of awareness through maintaining an open awareness of novel information and forming new categories out of one’s experience.

Here we focus on the concept of mindfulness springing from the meditative traditions—the more widely known approach and most germane to the content of this book. Kabat-Zinn initially defined this as “placing one’s attention and awareness in the present moment with an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance”
(Kabat-Zinn et al. 1985). Research by Kabat-Zinn and others suggested that mindfulness practice could be helpful for those experiencing chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn 1982), major depression (Teasdale et al. 2000), anxiety (Kabat-Zinn et al. 1992), and substance abuse (Bowen et al. 2006; Brewer et al. 2009). This mindful practice has four elements:

1. **Awareness**—of all possible experiences such as sensations in the body, thoughts, emotions, sights, and sounds. It might include awareness of what otherwise would be behaviors we would not normally be aware of, such as intergroup bias: “I am having thoughts and reactions to this person because I know this person is a Muslim and I would not normally be aware of reacting automatically in this way.”

2. **Sustained attention**—this involves gently but firmly bringing attention back to the current moment; reducing rumination; reducing anxious thoughts about the future; and bringing attention back to the here and now.

3. **Focus on the present moment**—rather than becoming immersed or lost in thoughts about the past, the future, plans, and preoccupations.

4. **Non-judgmental acceptance**—this involves not making judgments about experience; not labeling or reacting to experience in the current moment as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, but instead allowing experiences to arise without blocking, controlling, changing, or avoiding them.

Mindfulness practice has since been applied in a wide range of clinical settings—in therapy (McCracken 2014), anxiety (Woodruff et al. 2014), post-traumatic stress disorder (Wahbeh 2014), chronic illness (Phillips and Pagnini 2014), eating disorders (Kristeller and Epel 2014), pregnancy (Zilcha-Mano 2014), women’s sexual dysfunction (Brotto and Smith 2014), and, of course, stress (Crum and Lyddy 2014).

Meditation versus mindfulness—what is the difference then? It is clear from our review of meditation practices across cultures and history that mindfulness has long been a practice in many different traditions. And part of mindfulness practice in modern settings is having times of formal practice of mindfulness—time sitting and focusing on the breath, the body, sensations, or awareness, as well as mindfulness of experience through the day. So meditation and mindfulness overlap. Many meditation practices, if not all, involve mindfulness—awareness, sustained attention, focus on the present moment, and non-judgmental acceptance.

Therefore, when we try to distinguish between meditation and mindfulness we are distinguishing between the water flowing at overlapping stretches of the same stream. Yes, mindfulness practice is very much about developing awareness of each moment throughout the day, but the purpose of sitting meditation is also to increase the meditator’s awareness of the moment (or God, love,
compassion, or whatever). Mindfulness practiced in clinical settings is secular rather than spiritual in orientation, so there is that difference.

However, the reality is that meditation and mindfulness are simply different names for overlapping concepts and practices. Meditation refers mostly (but far from exclusively) to sitting in formal meditation practice, silent and still. Mindfulness mostly refers to maintaining awareness moment by moment in daily living (but this is usually only possible through the regular practice of sitting meditation). They are fundamentally interwoven concepts.

In this book, the contributors will use the terms they choose and make clear what practice they are describing, regardless of the name they choose (meditation or mindfulness).

This book

Part 1 of the book explores meditation as a process informed by cognitive, Buddhist, empirical, and philosophical perspectives. Chapter 2 by Martine Batcheelor, who for many years led a life as a Buddhist nun in South Korea and now lives and teaches in France, focuses on what happens when we meditate. She proposes that meditation involves two fundamental processes—concentration and enquiry. Through an exploration of these processes, informed by the insights of Buddhist teachers over the centuries, we can understand how meditation practice changes our experience and our relationship with the world we find ourselves in, both the physical and human environments. The chapter offers profound insights into our condition and how meditation can help us through these twin processes of concentration and enquiry.

Guy Claxton has brought together his long experience as a practitioner of meditation, a writer on Buddhism, and a leading cognitive psychologist in the UK to explore, in Chapter 3, the subtle but powerful processes that occur during meditation. From the perspective of the new science of “embodied cognition,” he explores two processes he calls “unfurling” and “welling up.” Through the identification of these subtle processes, he explains how meditation comes to offer us more accurate perceptions of our inner and outer worlds, and how we achieve greater congruence of action and experiences, enhanced creativity, and the recovery of core values to guide our living and being.

James Carmody offers another perspective in Chapter 4 on our understanding of meditation in the context of human evolution and development. He provides a clear and parsimonious description of meditation processes and links this to psychological distress. The adaptations for survival and safety that served us well for millennia are no longer appropriate and lead to chronic unease or dissatisfaction. He shows how meditation practice can change this but does so
in a way that is demystifying, offering conceptual coherence rather than mystical ambiguity. He concludes by alerting the reader to the potential dangers in the discourse of some meditative traditions in inuring us to our socio-political contexts.

Lorilai Bernacki, Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Colorado at Boulder (USA), provides in Chapter 5 a review of the emergence of meditation in Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The role of meditation becomes clear in these traditions as a fundamental component of the philosophical understanding of the self and of subjectivity. She provides a phenomenological account (an account based on subjective experience) from the perspective of these disciplines. Noting that the interpretations of effects of meditation vary across traditions, she alerts us to the need to be aware of the filters that philosophy and doctrine place on meditation experience. She explores in some depth the sense of wonder evoked by meditation in a Tantric context.

Part 2 explores therapeutic and clinical applications of meditation and mindfulness practice. In Chapter 6, Lynn Waelde, Professor of Psychology at Palo Alto University and Consulting Professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, and her colleague Jason Thompson examine the use of meditation and mindfulness with clinical populations. They describe how the rationale for the application of mindfulness in clinical populations has been based on the rationale that the development of cognitive processes of attention and equanimity can have important therapeutic applications. The chapter reviews research on the clinical applications of mindfulness and explains the methodological challenges involved, before identifying the importance of future research to help us identify when to use and when to avoid the use of mindfulness and meditation practices with clinical populations.

Vidyamala Burch has spent 20 years managing her pain through using meditation and mindfulness. She set up Breathworks in 2001 to ensure the learning from research on meditation and pain management and her own experience could be communicated to others. Chapter 7 explores the physiology of pain and the psychological burden before showing how meditation and mind/heart training can help. The chapter reviews relevant research and provides a description of the approach used by Breathworks—Mindfulness Based Pain Management—to manage pain.

The application of meditation in another therapeutic context is addressed in Chapter 8 by Sarah Bowen, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Pacific University, Oregon, and her colleagues. They describe the use of meditation in the “cyclical trappings and anguish caused by addictive behaviors.” Their chapter addresses the nature of addiction and the role of mindfulness and meditation in
addictive behaviors. They review the use of mindfulness-based relapse prevention, acceptance and commitment therapy, and dialectical behavior therapy, and present encouraging evidence for the effects of these meditation and mindfulness-based approaches in the treatment of drug addiction, eating disorders, and smoking.

In Chapter 9, Linda Carlson, Enbridge Research Chair in Psychosocial Oncology at the University of Calgary, Canada, provides a review of research on meditation training for people living with a variety of chronic medical conditions, including cancer, chronic pain conditions, fibromyalgia, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome, HIV/AIDS, rheumatoid arthritis, and organ transplant. The chapter describes the challenges of living with chronic or life-threatening illnesses and explores why meditation and mindfulness-based interventions might help. The chapter then reviews key research studies and concludes that mindfulness-based interventions hold real promise for relieving suffering amongst those with chronic diseases.

The final chapter in Part 2, by Antonino Raffone, offers a neuroscience perspective on meditation. Antonino is Associate Professor of Psychology at the Sapienza University of Rome and, in Chapter 10, he provides an overview of the neural correlates of meditation. He shows how emerging research on neuroplasticity (the hitherto ill-understood capacity of the brain to continually adapt over the life-span) helps us to understand how meditation practice changes brain functioning, consciousness, and awareness. This reinforces research findings suggesting structural changes in human experience as a result of meditation practice. He distinguishes between focused attention types of meditation and “opening up” meditation and shows that there are distinct neurophysiological processes associated with each, with consequent implications for our understanding of the effects of these different styles of meditation.

Part 3 explores the application of meditation in the workplace and in school. Bond and colleagues in Chapter 11 discuss how acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) conceptualizes mindfulness and show how ACT can be used to promote mental health and behavioral effectiveness at work. They focus on the key construct in ACT of psychological flexibility, which results from mindfulness. The chapter reviews research on the influence of ACT on employee mental health, innovativeness, emotional burnout, and attitudes toward client groups. The chapter describes in detail the approach the authors use to enhance well-being at work using ACT and, in particular, mindfulness.

Chapter 12 by Katherine Weare, Emeritus Professor at the School of Education, University of Southampton in the UK, describes how meditation and mindfulness are being deployed in school settings. In this chapter, she explains the major growth of interest in the use of mindfulness for children and young
people and explores ways in which mindfulness is developing in interventions for children and adults in education in the UK and internationally. The chapter assesses the evidence base for mindfulness practice in schools and describes associated impacts and outcomes in relation to mental health problems, well-being, and learning. The chapter suggests a long-term vision of mindfulness at the heart of a whole school approach to the education of both the hearts and minds of young people.

Part 4 offers two sets of conclusions. In Chapter 13, Peter Sedlmeyer and colleagues from the Technische Universität of Chemnitz, Germany, review research on the psychology of meditation. They conclude that though great progress has been made and results in many domains are very positive in indicating beneficial effects of meditation practice, future research must offer more powerful insights. They propose that research should be more comprehensive in approach rather than narrow and fractionated; that there is great value in adopting Eastern philosophical and spiritual perspectives to guide research designs; and that there is great value in researchers co-designing research with those people who have considerable experience of practicing meditation and of using single case study designs to study such people. Finally, in Chapter 14, I offer insights based on a synthesis of the core messages to emerge from this volume and assess the extent to which we, as contributors, have answered these questions:

- What is meditation and how can we understand this practice or experience from a psychological perspective?
- What are the key psychological processes involved in shaping experience and outcomes from meditation practice?
- What does the research evidence tell us are the potential therapeutic/clinical applications of meditation?
- How might meditation be more broadly applied in society to the benefit of human communities?
- What can we conclude overall in terms of our understanding of meditation from research and practice to date?
- And where next for those seeking to understand meditation and mindfulness?

Before we begin the journey of discovery in relation to these questions, one other aspect of the book is worthy of the reader’s attention. All of the contributors have practiced meditation—some of them for more than 40 years—and they offer a considerable amount of experience of practice of many different methods and traditions. Each has written a brief account of their own experience with meditation, offering a fascinating glimpse of the range of experiences
and meanings they have derived. This book therefore contains the main content of chapters on meditation research and practice, an account of the contributors’ own experience, and an implicit body of knowledge based on the many years of practice in aggregate of those who have contributed to the book.

Personal Meditation Journey

When a friend talked of learning meditation in my first year at university, my reaction was immediate and unequivocally positive. The idea of focusing on and exploring the mind in order to find peace was compelling. I was instructed and told my mantra by a TM instructor in rooms above a butcher’s shop in Pimlico, London in 1971. Two years later, my undergraduate psychology research dissertation focused on skin resistance during meditation and comparison conditions. I completed a Ph.D. on the psychology of meditation in 1977, publishing a number of research papers over subsequent years. The practice of meditation was an anchor in my troubled seas during those years when I went from student to coal miner to university researcher and father. I practiced with varying regularity out of both a faith in the practice and because the “still completeness” of the meditation was both refuge and stability.

There was an enriching shift in 1984. A group of psychologists with a shared interest in Buddhism and meditation formed, including John Crook and David Fontana (sadly, both have died), Guy Claxton (a dear friend since), and Sue Blackmore (a leading consciousness explorer in the UK). We met regularly for weekend retreats in John’s primitive farmhouse, Maen Llwyd, in wild mid-Wales—now a center for Western Chan Fellowship, which follows John’s teachings. There I began to practice zazen (“just sitting”) for hours, relishing the clear simplicity and directness of the practice. This pure awareness sitting remains the mainstay of my practice.

The group staged a wonderful conference on Eastern Approaches to Mind and Self in 1986 at the University of Wales, attended by both inspirational academics and teachers from a variety of meditative traditions. And the following year, I edited, and Oxford University Press published, *The Psychology of Meditation*—the precursor to this volume.

Over the following three years, I attended diverse retreats at Tibetan Buddhist centers in the UK and France. In a time of personal turbulence, the practice again provided both challenge and refuge.

For the next 20 years, I practiced meditation with varying degrees of commitment over the course of a busy career, rich family life, and extensive travelling. Meditation is now core to my days. And for the last eight years, I have practiced more regularly, for an hour or more a day. Sometimes this is in separate sittings of 30 or 40 minutes, and sometimes sitting by
the pond in my garden for an hour at a time. I sit in meditation on train journeys and on flights—both valuable opportunities to practice without taking time away from others. I have occasionally augmented my meditation practice with what Buddhists call Tonglen or with mettā bhāvanā; both practices of developing compassion for self and others that develop new dimensions to relationships with others and also with myself. Just sitting to cultivate a pure awareness of nowness is the content of my practice at present, along with a gently growing mindfulness, unforced, in daily life of the breadth and immediacy of our existence. Gradually, my awareness has become clearer—of my wild mind, the wayward and depleting journeys of thoughts, of the drive to plan continually, of circular concerns with impression management, and of the constant impulse to entertain the mind.

And awareness of awareness itself has subtly changed the hue of mind and experience. Gradually, ever so slightly, more and more, changing the experience of mind and of awareness. Clearer, lighter, peaceful, contented, tender, and more and more open. And gradually, slightly, but more and more, changing my need to grasp at social approval, to continually find ways to entertain the mind, to judge others, to feel angry, to fuel fear, to pursue success and to be depleted rather than enriched by moments. Awareness of thoughts, impulses, and the underlying rationale for them has become clearer. And the ability to focus in an uncontrived way on the present moment has become stronger, simpler, more stable, and easier. I have experienced too a growing sense of huge privilege in life. Gratitude for the many benefits, opportunities, friends, family, and life itself has deepened considerably.

Having the capacity and the knowledge to practice meditation and to strengthen my practice each day is a precious gift. And I am deeply curious to discover where the journey goes—its landscapes, way stations, and new vistas (editing this book is a station on that journey too). This meditation journey has no destination—the journey is the destination.

Acknowledgment


References


