

Meditation

ATTRACTION OF MEDITATION

Why are so many people, young and old, attracted to meditation? What are the physiological changes? What are the subjective changes? Are there any potential problems?

There seem to be several reasons why Eastern techniques in general, and meditation in particular, have become so attractive to Americans. At a sociocultural level, many individuals are looking for alternatives to the fast-paced, competitive life-style of our technological, industrialized society. Many young people are looking for ways to develop less stressful life-styles which place a greater emphasis on creativity and inner peace.

Meditation is one such technique. The research literature is quite convincing that physiological changes associated with meditation can bring about this state of relaxation. These changes include a decreased oxygen consumption, reduced heart rate, and decreased blood pressure. The sum of these and other changes have been referred to as a hypometabolic state. This state is one of quiescence and relaxation.

In addition to the physiological changes associated with meditation, there are also often strong subjective changes; what may be referred to as a meditative altered state of consciousness. These altered states have been referred to in the East as *nirvana*, *samadhi*, or *kensho*. Often they involve feelings and experiences which are difficult to describe, but which include a new sense of harmony and oneness with oneself and with other people and with the world. This is one reason why individuals have suggested meditation may be an alternative to the "drug culture," giving individuals nonpharmacological ways to reduce stress and attain a "natural high."

Thus, meditation can induce both psychological and physiological changes which cause it to be a positive experience for individuals.

There are two issues to which individuals should be sensitive, however. First, meditation should not be considered a general panacea. Research suggests that it does not work equally well for all individuals. As with any kind of self-control strategy, some negative reactions have been reported. These include boredom, confusion, restlessness, withdrawal.

A second area for concern is the attempt in meditation to let go of thoughts and images: to develop a nonrational way of understanding the world. Although this is potentially very positive, it may be misused if the meditator believes there should be a complete rejection of the Western, rational approach. With rejection of rationality, certain individuals may become susceptible to gullibility, "blind obedience," and the joining of "cults" in which they do not keep their own sense of personal responsibility.

Thus, in summary, meditation practiced with a sense of personal responsibility and commitment can be a very useful and valuable technique. It can teach individuals a way to balance the overemphasis in our culture on rational and intellectual understanding; it can provide a nonpharmacological approach to stress and tension management; and it can potentially give the individual a new, more harmonious understanding of himself and his relationship to others.

References

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