# 23 An Introduction to Meditation

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*This in-class activity presents both an introduction to meditation and a method of interfacing something often considered "mystical," subjective, and religious with the rigors of psychological science. One critical demand is that the location of the activity be free from distraction for 15 minutes continuously. The exercise could enable students to experience and understand through self-reflection and report. Additional information can be obtained with the recording of changes in simple physiological functions. This activity is appropriate for classes in introductory psychology, abnormal psychology, states of consciousness, stress and coping, or any class where meditation is a topic. It involves all students and requires about 30 to 45 minutes of class time, depending on the length of discussion allowed.*

## Concept

In any introductory psychology course, students often arrive with preconceived notions about psychology. They often believe that the discipline involves the study of interesting phenomena, such as meditation. However, the integration of science with such topics often is considered a foreign concept. In many respects, this situation reflects the problem and the allure of psychology for the relatively naïve student.

Lectures on altered states of consciousness not only create a great deal of interest but also a significant degree of misunderstanding, especially when discussing more esoteric topics such as meditation. Students have heard about meditation and relaxation from numerous popular sources and thus may have formed some preconceived notions about the topic. This exercise is designed to help students develop a more accurate understanding of altered states of consciousness and of meditation in particular. In addition, it helps to bridge the gap between those things that the students consider curious and interesting and those things that psychologists consider measurable and scientific. Further, it introduces the student to the concept that a topic viable to psychology could have its roots in Eastern spirituality or religious tradition.

## Materials Needed

The basic requirement is a classroom or similar room, free from distraction. In addition, an easy-to-read time piece, preferably with a second hand, is necessary. Students will need paper and pencil.

## Instructions

To begin you should explain basic meditation and relaxation strategies to the students. Several simple videos are available through the Web sites that are listed below. A clear understanding of the purposes of meditation is necessary to dispel myths, misconceptions, or fears that students may have. A few words about the potential benefits of these practices would also be helpful. This could focus especially on the use of meditation as a stress reliever and as an alternative health practice. In essence, the focus should be to remove the spiritual and mystical aspects of meditation and replace them with a pragmatic, scientific, and health perspective. At the same time, the experiential and personal perspective should also be considered.

Give students the option simply to sit quietly with their eyes closed if they do not wish to participate in the activity. After you have answered their questions, begin the exercise by asking students to write down three things:

1. Breathing rate (number of breaths in 60 seconds).
2. Heart rate (number of pulses in 60 seconds).
3. A brief paragraph of how they are feeling and thinking at that particular moment.

Explain that you will be providing a series of simple instructions that they must follow carefully. Turn off the room lights and make sure the room is free from distractions for the next 10 to 15 minutes. Instruct the students to sit erect in a comfortable posture, with their hands on the desk or lap, legs uncrossed, and feet on the ground. After students are in a relaxed position, ask them to take at least 30 seconds (if not longer) to slowly close their eyes. Once they have closed their eyes, they can slowly count to 10 before engaging in the meditation process. Encourage them to focus on whatever thoughts come into their minds, but to begin letting go of these thoughts; they should "entertain these thoughts briefly but let them go easily." At this point, tell students to clear their minds and to focus on their breathing. Say the following out loud: "Each breath should come from your abdomen; if possible, breathe through your nostrils. Inhale, let the air in, hold it, let it out slowly. Go ahead and continue this for the next 10 or so minutes. I will alert you once the time is up." After approximately 1 minute of breathing only, tell the students to try to experience a feeling of quietness.

As the students begin to breathe rhythmically, ask them to repeat the word *One (or OM, the more traditional word)* to themselves in an effortless and passive manner. Once they have initiated this pattern, encourage them to briefly entertain new thoughts or ideas that come into their minds, but to always return to breathing and repeating the word *One.* After 10 minutes of this exercise, ask them to stop repeating the word *One* and to focus only on their breathing. Allow up to one minute to slowly begin focusing just on the breathing itself. Give the students about 30 to 60 seconds of this reorientation period before asking them to slowly open their eyes and sit quietly for a moment. Then ask them to take their pulse and respiration rates again and to write a brief paragraph about how they feel now.

## Discussion

You should elicit general comments, positive and negative, about the exercise from the class. Next, have the students chart the pulse and respiration data to determine whether any physiological effects were noted. To ensure confidentiality, students can submit pre- and postmeditation data for both of the measures. Descriptive statistics, including a distribution graph, could be the basis of student discussion.

Discussion could involve focusing on both the interesting aspects of meditation as well as the scientific aspects. For the naïve students, psychological topics have been previously considered interesting but not scientific. The integration of what students consider interesting and what they consider scientific is one way to engage the student in appreciating the science of the mind.

## References and Suggested Reading

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Shapiro, D. H., & Walsh, R. N. (1984). *Meditation: Classical and contemporary perspectives.* New York: Aldine.

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**Suggested Web Sites**

http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/meditation/HQ01070 (Mayo Clinic's informative introduction with instructions)

http://www.nccam.nih/gov/health/meditation (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine's overview of meditation)

http://www.noetic.org/research (Institute for Noetic Sciences' Research & Education page, featuring an extended electronic bibliography, arranged by author and topic)

http://www.smmr.de/en/journal (*Journal for Meditation and Meditation Research*)

http://www.tm.org (Transcendental Meditation Program's official Web site)