

# Meditation as Medication

Its health benefits in the healing process: mindfulness;  
a powerful therapeutic tool of mind-body medicine

by Paul Epstein, ND



There is an ever growing body of evidence pointing to the role of the mind and the healing power of the mind in the treatment of illness. Mind-body approaches such as guided imagery, meditation and relaxation, stress counseling, among others, are becoming more and more widespread as the scientific studies mount indicating that mind-body techniques may not only improve the quality of life for those facing a serious illness, but can also affect the course of the disease itself and actually promote healing as well. These therapies are increasingly gaining more interest and respect from researchers and clinicians in major medical institutions, universities and hospitals in the United States and around the world.

## Historical Perspectives

In particular the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn Ph.D. and his mindfulness based stress reduction program is gaining popularity and positive reknown, as it becomes increasingly integrated into the practice of medicine in a variety of health care settings, from hospitals to private clinics. However, before going directly into greater depth on the practice of mindfulness meditation, and its health

benefits, as well as the work of Dr. Kabat-Zinn, what follows are some basic scientific and historical perspectives and background information on the whole field of mind-body medicine. Thus providing a broader context from which to explore meditation as a powerful therapeutic tool in the healing process. "Non physical treatments like meditation have been shown to be effective in controlled scientific studies for depression, anxiety, high blood pressure, skin diseases, cardiac pain, insomnia, diabetes, ulcers, colds, fever, asthma, arthritis and alcoholism." Dr. Anne Harrington, a Historian of Science at Harvard University.

## The Body of Evidence

The body of evidence has been built over the past 30 years. Areas of scientific research, investigation and study include the physiological aspects of the mind-body connection and the science of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI). There has also been epidemiological research, which explores stress, attitudes, beliefs, emotions and other psychological factors and their connection to and effects on certain illnesses such as cancer and heart disease. And finally, there are clinical research studies testing the effectiveness of applying various mind-body approaches and techniques in the treatment, prevention and healing of specific symptoms and conditions.

All this interest and research has followed in the footsteps of the important development of the science called PNI mentioned above. This emerging and evolving medical science serves as the scientific foundation for the growing field of mind-body medicine and is known as psychoneuroimmunology. Psycho for mind, neuro for the nervous and hormonal systems, and immunology for the immune system. Major contributions to the development of PNI came from the scientific studies of researchers Ader and Cohen at the University of Rochester School of Medicine in the mid 1970's. In experiments with white rats they inadvertently discovered that their immune systems had "learned" a specific conditioned reaction. In their experiment rats were receiving a combination of a drug lowering the immune response (immunosuppressant) and a sweet drink (containing saccharin), but when saccharin alone was readministered to the rats' drinking water, they unexpectedly once again exhibited immunosuppression effects, this time it was without the immunosuppressive drug. Control animals did not show this conditioned response. Thus, coupling a sweet drink with an immunosuppressive drug, evoked the immunosuppressive response of the drug (suppression of T cells and increased susceptibility to disease), even after the drug itself was removed and only the sweet drink was given. It was classical conditioning similar to Pavlov's famous experiments with dogs. They had developed a learned association between the taste of the sweet drink, and the suppression of their immune systems as they continued to get sick and die just with the sweet drink. That could only have occurred via a brain/nervous system and immune system connection/communication/interaction, which had

been previously thought to be non-existent. The only place where learning could happen was the brain. The brain and the immune system were supposed to function separately! In the scientists' subsequent experiments they were able to confirm and further demonstrate that the immune system could indeed be conditioned, it could learn.

It did not function in isolation and there were connections to the brain and the nervous system. Ader states "PNI studies confirm that the immune system does not function completely autonomously." These initial findings opened the door to greater interest and studies of the mind-body connection and communication, its physiological mechanisms, how the mind and emotions may affect health, the stress response and relaxation response and more.

Later experiments suggest that uncontrollable stress can suppress immune function and decrease natural resistance to cancers and tumor growth. Professor Antonovsky from Beer Shiva University in Israel found that a sense of control or "coherence" as he termed it, could strengthen one's resistance to stressful situations. It is now accepted scientific knowledge that increased incidence and severity of illness occurs following stressful life events. More recent studies are showing the connection and association of stress, a weakened immune system and feelings of helplessness with cancer and depression. Studies also show the connection between hostility and loneliness and heart disease.

Increasingly, the results of these studies have practical and therapeutic implications. This has led us to the present time, where greater emphasis is being placed on continued investigation

and application of the role of the mind and the role of mind-body therapies plays in the treatment and healing of a wide range of medical disorders, and where possible their effects on specific diseases.

"Mind and body are inextricably linked, and their second-by-second interaction exerts a profound influence upon health and illness, life and death. Attitudes, beliefs and emotional states ranging from love and compassion to fear and anger can trigger chain reactions that affect blood chemistry, heart rate, and the activity of every cell and organ system in the body—from the stomach and gastrointestinal tract to the immune system.", states Kenneth Pelletier, Ph.D, a pioneer in the field, and senior clinical fellow at the Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention at the Stanford University School of Medicine, and author of the book "Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer". His studies and teachings also focus on how the mind-body connection can be harnessed to help people stay well or recover from illness.

One such innovative and pioneering health professional harnessing and using the mind-body connection, and a prominent leader in the forefront in the areas of clinical practice, research and teaching of mind-body medicine today is Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. He is the director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, where he is also an associate professor of medicine, and he has authored numerous books including "Wherever You Go, There You Are, Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life". His clinical mind-body work involves the integration and therapeutic application of the practice of mindfulness meditation in medicine and

health care in the facing and healing pain, stress and illness. Dr. Zinn derived and adapted this form of meditation for mind-body healing from a unique and ancient Buddhist tradition and practice known as vipassana. At his stress clinic, patients with a wide range of health problems (ranging from heart disease, cancer, skin disorders, insomnia, menstrual disorders, and chronic pain, irritable bowel to colitis, backache, headaches, diabetes, ulcers, chronic fatigue, asthma, arthritis and anxiety as well as other stress related condition conditions) practice mindfulness meditation as part of their overall treatment plan. Those who practice on a regular daily basis, report a lessening of the effects of the stresses in their life, as well as a reduction and relief of their medical symptoms.

At the Medical Center and his Stress Reduction Clinic, Dr. Zinn has treated over six thousand patients (referred by their physicians who were skeptical at first and later learned to appreciate the benefits of mindfulness), trained hundreds of health professionals, and conducted many scientific studies and controlled experiments. Among the studies conducted at his Stress Reduction Clinic, was a clinical experiment he led in collaboration with the departments of dermatology and behavioral medicine, involving 23 patients suffering from a skin disease known as psoriasis. In psoriasis, the skin cells rate of growth is increased producing scaly itchy patches. Many factors can affect and influence the course, extent and severity of the disease and its accompanying recognizable symptoms, including emotional stress. Conventional treatment usually involves the use of ultraviolet light (UVL), phototherapy, to slow down the growth of the skin cells producing the psoriasis.

A large number of UVL treatments is often required for the complete clearing of the scaly patches during an exacerbation of symptoms. In Zinn's study the 23 people with psoriasis were divided into two separate groups. He was looking at the question of whether the mind can be shown to have a direct effect on a well-recognized and definable healing end point, in this case the clearing of these scaly patches of skin. One group of thirteen used UVL treatments together with practicing mindfulness meditation. The other group of ten, as a control, used UVL treatments only. Over a twelve week period of therapy in the experiment, those in the meditation group had their skin patches clear up more rapidly. And at the conclusion of the experimental treatment period, ten of the thirteen in the meditation group had clear skin, while just two of the ten receiving phototherapy alone were free of their scaly patches completely. Thus, the rate of healing was affected in a positive way, by the addition of meditation as a therapeutic tool. This simple and scientifically controlled clinical study, just one small example out of many, demonstrates, illustrates and points to the potential and powerful effect the mind and meditation practice can have on the healing process and as well the course and symptoms of disease. Many such studies and experiments have been and continue to be conducted, all serving to increase and reinforce our understanding, knowledge and trust of the mind-body connection, and how to harness its therapeutic power, meditation as medication, as an integral component of overall treatment plans.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's work has evolved on the heels of many other outstanding and dedicated professionals. From the pioneering and popularized work of such

notables in Mind-Body Medicine such as Dr. Bernie Siegel, cancer surgeon and author of "Love, Medicine, and Miracles", and Dr. O. Carl Simonton, oncologist and author of "Getting Well Again", and Dr. Herbert Benson, Professor at Harvard University School of Medicine and author of "The Relaxation Response" and "Timeless Healing", and Norman Cousins author of "Anatomy of an Illness" and "Biology of Hope", we are pointed to the healing power of the mind and heart. Speaking of the heart, included in the above list is also Dr. Dean Ornish and his research and clinical practice with heart disease patients, he has authored the book "Reversing Heart Disease", his program is based on a comprehensive approach involving diet, love and meditation.

What is mindfulness meditation (as practiced clinically by patients at Dr. Zinn's Stress Reduction Program) (and offered here in Israel at the Israel center for Mind-Body Medicine) and what are its benefits?

Sit quietly in silence and stillness, comfortable and relaxed and yet alert, begin observing your breathing process with the mind's awareness using a gentle and kind and careful attention, as you follow the sensations of the natural rhythm and flow of the air entering the body as you breath, either at the nostrils as the air goes in and out, or at the abdomen and chest as it rises and falls. These are the beginning basic instructions of mindfulness sitting meditation, one part of the practice of mindfulness, an approach that helps people who practice to face, and cope and heal one's stress, pain and chronic illness, as well as enhance their quality of life. Mindfulness is similar to other forms of meditation practice in its ability to induce deep states of relaxation, in

itself a powerful support to health and healing. It does not involve focusing on a phrase, sound or prayer to keep out unwanted thoughts and feelings. Rather the practice develops to teach us how to open directly to the full range of human experience as it arises and passes away, moment to moment. Helping us learn to live each moment of our lives, even the painful ones, fully with a welcoming mind and heart. Sensations in the body, thoughts in the mind, and feelings in the heart.

The Insight Meditation Center in Barre Massachusetts, a major retreat center in the West for the intensive practice and study of mindfulness (also known as insight and vipassana which stems from the Buddhist tradition and is 2500 or so years old) defines the practice as " a simple and direct practice..the moment to moment observation of the mind-body process through a calm and focused awareness. Learning to observe experiences from a place of stillness enables one to relate to life with less fear and clinging. Seeing life as a constantly changing process, one begins to accept pleasure and pain, fear and joy, and all aspects of life with increasing equanimity and balance. As insight deepens, wisdom and compassion arise. Mindfulness meditation is a way of seeing clearly the totality of one's being and experiences. "The practice is also reflected in the sayings "Serenity is not freedom from the storm, it is peace amid the storm," and "The journey of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in seeing with new eyes" which express the potential and power of mindfulness to cultivate inner peace and serenity and new perspectives and views of our life, both of which can be life transforming and healing in its cumulative effects.

Meditation helps people learn to deal with stress more effectively and to activate, mobilize and utilize their inner healing resources and capabilities as evidence and research shows in all the mind-body studies. Mindfulness can be helpful if we are experiencing health problems and serious illness, as well as if we are struggling to deal with difficult and stressful life circumstances, again, or also to improve our general quality and outlook on life regardless of our situation. It is a wonderful complement to and component of any other medical treatment and a wide range of medical diagnoses.

An important part of the therapeutic value and approach involved in meditation practice as medication, is that the person/patient becomes a responsible participant in their treatment and in so doing is actively and consciously engaged in their healing process. Making a commitment to meditate regularly enhances the intention and sustains the effort to get well. One need have no prior knowledge or experience to begin to practice, only a beginner's mind, and a willingness to learn and a commitment to practice regularly is all that is required. Regular practice helps us develop patience as we open to see clearly what's really happening in our lives, once we finally ready willing and able to stop and look and listen inside, the essence of meditation and mind-body medicine. As meditation can generate deep states of relaxation and inner peace, both very pleasant and healing feelings, it makes practice seem easier at times. However, mindfulness is about more than just a technique causing pleasant relaxed feelings, it is a way of relating to, seeing, feeling, and being with our experience just as it is. Sometimes, as it is, is also very unpleasant feelings. Ultimately it can teach us to face and

open to all of life's challenges and experiences, "the good, the bad and the ugly", the pleasant and the unpleasant, the painful and the joyful, the happiness and the sadness, all that life has to offer, in sickness and in health, in life and in death. The inner balance of mind cultivated and developed by consistent practice of mindfulness meditation allows us to face all of life's situations with greater, clarity, wisdom, compassion, understanding. We can then live our life and respond to life from the depths of this inner awareness, peace and balance, natural human qualities, ready and waiting to be tapped and realized and lived. We respond to life instead of being caught in the traps of our persistent and conditioned knee-jerk reactions to the stresses of our life.

Imagine what the streets, and roads and highways of Israel would be like if more people drove their cars with mindfulness, awareness, patience, a kind and careful attention, from a place of peace and inner balance inside, able to respond from that place and not react with frustration and "road rage" and conditioned patterns when they are stuck in traffic, not react with anger and hostility to the unconscious driver that cuts them off, and not to react impatiently with constant horn-honking to the car that stops in front of them momentarily, this alone could transform improve the quality of each of our individual and collective lives. All it takes is a little mindfulness. Imagine being able to respond to the other difficulties and challenges of life from this place of inner stillness.

Therapeutically, this ability and quality cultivated by mindfulness directed to pain and stress and illness, helps us to face, and cope and heal more effectively. We learn to face, accept and even

welcome our tension, our physical pain, our fears, anxieties, our shame, our wounds, our shadow, our anger ...whenever they are present, just is we welcome and open to our joy, our love, and our happiness. Facing things in this way by acknowledging and being with our experience just as it is, shifts our perspectives and relationship to our reality, and helps to transform our experience of it. We get less caught up in, stuck in, identified with whatever comes up in our experience, we have the space and awareness to respond and make choices from a place of mindfulness. By observing our thoughts and emotions and mind states as they arise and giving them the space to be, without automatic unconscious conditioned reactions, as if you took a step back from them, we see them more clearly, gaining insights and free to choose wise and compassionate responses and ways of being that do not perpetuate our old stucknesses. The important aspect of mindfulness is not what's happening, it is the quality of awareness we bring to each moment of experience, kindness, care, patience, non-judgement, and acknowledging acceptance. We observe whatever comes up in the present moment. Acceptance means opening to and living life more fully. Thinking of our minds and hearts as the ocean or the sky, and our thoughts and feelings as waves or clouds, as a famous yogi once said, "We can't stop the waves but we can learn to surf." This is the spirit of mindfulness.

Dr. Stephen Fulder, teacher of insight (vipassana, mindfulness) meditation in Israel, and author of 12 books on alternative and complementary medicine, will be co-teaching (with the author of this article Dr. Epstein) a year long systematic and intensive course in meditation. I asked him how

mindfulness practice helps in our life. He states "Many of us find ourselves packing our lives so full that we feel it is all rather pointless and mechanical, at times, not to also say very stressful. We lose touch with ourselves, becoming a "human doing" rather than being a "human being". We may carry with us a heavy bag of unsolved physical, mental or emotional problems. In insight meditation we stop and begin a deep meeting with ourselves. It is a journey back home, to a place of truth and integration from which we can heal ourselves and inspire our lives. There is no need to believe in any credo or new set of concepts about life. We have too many of them already. Rather it is to bring freshness and freedom to who we are at this moment. It does not require a change of direction-our family relations, religious worship, work and activities can stay the same, but become less habitually conditioned and stressful. Instead we can discover and experience a true lightness of being." In conclusion, mindfulness meditation practice can help us mobilize our inner resources for self healing. Therapeutically it increases our ability to relax, let go and let be. It helps to deal more effectively with stressful situations. It can teach us to cope better with pain. It can reduce both the physical and psychological symptoms of illness. It supports us to relate to life with less fear and clinging. And can provide us with increased equanimity, balance and serenity.

A famous Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Nhatat HanH says in his teachings on the practice of mindfulness "The Present Moment." "The present moment is where life can be found, and if you don't arrive there, you miss your appointment with life. You don't have to run any more. breathing in we say, "I have arrived." Breathing out we say, "I am home." This is a very strong practice, a very deep practice." A very healing practice.

Paul Epstein, ND, Naturopathic Physician, Co-Director, Israel Center for Mind-Body Medicine, practices, studies and teaches mindfulness meditation and integrates it in his life and work. He leads courses, workshops and retreats for the public and trainings for health professionals. He is coordinating plans for a conference in Israel on meditation and healing in medicine and psychotherapy.

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