

Meditation Workshop

Patrick Breslin

Of Immediate Benefit to Students

Here is a quick mini-meditation technique to employ right before an exam:

Find a quiet place to sit and be silent for 5 minutes.

Close your eyes and focus on your breathing.

Let your breath slow down.

Relax.

You'll be surprised how much easier the exam will go.

General Introduction

Meditation is a process of directing one's attention within the mind, using consciousness to examine and explore consciousness itself. Many people practice meditation for the following reasons:

- A. *Physical benefits:* meditation provides relaxation, reduces tension, lowers blood pressure, improves circulation, reduces lactic acid in the blood (a byproduct of stress), and in some people lowers cholesterol.
- B. *Mental/psychological benefits:* meditation provides peace of mind, improves mental focus, enhances concentration, strengthens perception, induces a feeling of centeredness, and has been clinically shown to increase brain-wave coherence, indicative of improved neurological function.
- C. *Spiritual/philosophical goals:* Meditators frequently report the experience of feeling "enlarged," or of achieving a sense of union with something greater than themselves. This tends to happen regardless of a meditator's spiritual orientation; it occurs to religiously devout individuals as well as to atheists.

Forms of Meditation

There are many different styles of meditation. Some involve movement, such as in Tai Chi, but most are sedentary, practiced while sitting. In the United States, the 2 most popular forms of meditation are (a) mantra-based meditation and (b) Vipassana, or insight, meditation.

Mantra-Based Meditation: A mantra could be described as a sound, a thought, and a vibration. This type of meditation features the silent repetition of a mantra in order to focus one's consciousness. Of the mantra-based forms of meditation, [Transcendental Meditation](#), or TM, is the most popular and has been around the longest. Another popular form is a clone of the TM program created a few years ago by [Dr. Deepak Chopra](#): "[Primordial Sound Meditation](#)." Functionally, there's little difference between the two except the fee for initial instruction: TM currently charges around \$2500 (which I find unconscionable), and PSM charges from \$275 to \$350.

Meditation based on the silent repetition of a mantra produces an enormous mental and physical calm, for reasons which are only beginning to be scientifically understood. Instructors in the TM and PSM organizations assign meditators specially selected or "customized" mantras. I personally feel that the specific selection of a mantra for an individual is unnecessary. In my experience, any sound that has no verbal meaning or conceptual connotation in one's native language would serve as a suitable mantra. An example of one of the most commonly used mantras is "Om."

Vipassana: The second most popular form of meditation in the United States, Vipassana (literally "insight") meditation, is derived from Theravada (Southeast Asian) Buddhism. There are two main forms: (1) watching the breath, and (2) "mindfulness," or silently observing not only the breath but also bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions. This latter approach promotes a viewpoint of "witnessing." It is done from the same perspective with which one watches the passing of clouds in the sky--- knowing that, just as you are not the clouds, you are also not the thoughts or emotions or breathing, but rather you are a central Witness who observes the world.

Currently the most popular form of Vipassana in the United States is marketed under the name Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

Comparing and Learning the Two

Both mantra-base meditation and insight meditation are very easy to learn. According to the available research, mantra-based meditation produces a more immediate result of reducing the effects of stress on the body and mind. Insight meditation will accomplish the same thing, but the literature on the subject suggests that it takes longer to achieve the same depth of experience and physiological benefit.

There is a certain value in learning any form of meditation from an instructor and as part of a local meditators' community. However, a person could theoretically learn the silent-repetition-mantra meditation process from a book, provided that they had the self-discipline to make a regular practice out of it. (Not many book-learners do.) Breathing meditation, or mindfulness meditation, can also be learned from books, but I wouldn't recommend it if an actual teacher is available instead. There are many instructors who teach for free or at minimal cost. Learning meditation in a group setting makes it easier to maintain a regular practice, which is important for achieving one's goals. A group setting also allows one to learn about the meditative process in a context that can be more enriching than learning it from books, even though it's helpful to become familiar with the literature on the subject.

Like exercise and proper diet, meditation works best if it's incorporated into one's life on a daily basis. If you only practice it once a week or so, you'll get very little out of it.

Meditation is customarily practiced twice daily. Once a day will provide some benefit, but twice a day produces results that are more than twice as powerful.

The Meditation Workshop

There is no charge for the meditation workshops that I teach. The meditation process that I employ involves beginning with a few minutes of breathing meditation, then easing into a mantra-based phase for 20 minutes or so, and then easing out with a few minutes of mindfulness meditation. Instruction is preceded by a lecture discussing some of the information shown above, along with a philosophical

commentary that follows below.

The workshop is usually offered during each fall and spring semester. For information on scheduled presentation dates, send me an email at Patrick.Breslin@sfcollge.edu.

A Philosophy of Identity

The following is a very simplified and elementary overview of what I regard as some of the more significant philosophical components of meditation. I include them here because many people who incorporate a regular practice of meditation into their lifestyle begin to experience a transformation in their concept of who they are. If you don't know that this may occur, it might take you off guard and possibly cause some concerns. But if you're aware that such changes take place, you can recognize them as part of the process of personal growth.

After practicing meditation for some time, people often begin to feel an enlarged sense of self, an expansion beyond the boundaries of what they have previously felt themselves to be. We might assume from this that their prior concept of personal identity, while adequate up until this point in their lives, has become incomplete and no longer serves its purpose. What constitutes their ego did not subsequently encompass the totality of who they were becoming.

What is your ego? For that matter, where is it? Where do you locate your sense of self? Conventional wisdom says that the essence of your self exists in your head. If you lose an arm or leg, your real self is still intact in your brain. For the sake of the discussion that follows, let's assume that we can make the statement, "You are what is in your head." Your ego, your sense of individuality, is situated there. But what is it?

Who Are You?

Let's look at the ways we usually define ourselves. If I ask, "Who are you?," you would respond with your name. But your name is only a label, a series of sounds and syllables. You can change your name; people do it every day. You are much more than your name.

Who, then, are you? You might answer by saying that you live at a particular address, grew up in such and such a town, attended a certain school, listen to specific styles of music, prefer certain foods, and have your own unique taste in clothing. To that I would say that those are things *about* you, *related* to you, *pertaining* to you. But where is the central *you* who experiences them?

So you might delve deeper, and say, "These people are my parents, and these are my brothers and sisters, and this is the person I'm in love with, and those people are my closest friends, and here are my neighbors, and these are my co-workers..." But you would still be describing aspects of your life, not the person who is *experiencing* your life.

When we ask questions about the world around us regarding "who, what, where, when, and why," we are grasping after an answer. We seek to lay our hands on information, objects, or people. When you focus this grasping process upon yourself by asking, "Who am I?," you try to grasp the grasper. Employed in this fashion, asking the question "Who am I?" is like trying to chew on air. It leads nowhere.

Moreover, the question divides you in half: into the person who is asking the question, and the person who will be the answer when you figure out what it is. If you ask, "Who am I?", you must then ask another question.

Who wants to know?

"Who am I?"

"Well, who wants to know?"

"And who wants to know who wants to know?"

"And who wants to know who wants to know who wants to know?"

"And who wants to know *that*?"

"And who is *asking* who wants to know that?"

"But then who am *I*?"

"Well, who wants to *know*?"

This is not just a circular play on words. It is an attempt to get to a tangible answer. This questioning approach circumvents logical analysis. It is a quest for an understanding of something which, unfortunately, transcends logic. Thusly followed, it will never lead to an answer in the usual sense. It won't bring you to your "I." Yet you know there's something inside of you. When you say "I" and "me," you know that something is there. You feel it. What is it that you feel?

What Encloses You

Consider a mime who pretends that she is encased in a box. She places her hands against the invisible walls around her, appearing to press on them. The physical stance and muscular effort she uses to demonstrate the boundaries of the box almost convince us that it exists. Another mime may participate, pressing on the box from the outside, doubling the effect of delineating the dimensions of the box.

From the time you were a tiny infant, your parents built a similar box around you. They assigned you a name, and a set of characteristics---cute, adorable, darling, cuddly. They talked to you constantly about *their* concept of *your* self. Through years of this communication, they built, and taught you to build, a tangible image of definable features that constitute "you." They attempted to construct the walls of your identity from the outside; you responded by helping to create them from the inside, sincerely playing along with the game of developing your "I." As you grew older, you added other things onto your identity image that conformed and corresponded to your age, your grade in school, your relationships, your experiences, and your accomplishments. You learned to permanently allocate a portion of your will to support and sustain your self concept that was developed through this process. What we might label mental energy, neurological impulses, or bioelectrical thought processes were focused on this project to define who you are, and they continue this function today. The image of your self which you created through psychological effort is maintained by a complex array of concepts and ideas held in place from moment to moment.

Keeping them intact requires effort, like a waiter carrying a tray at shoulder height all day long. In this case, you are carrying around your image. Just as the waiter needs to keep tension in his arm muscles to hold up the tray, you need an ongoing mental tension to carry around your ego. This becomes a habit. You have generated a lifelong identity preoccupation which involves sustaining a state of tension to support your feeling of "me." This tension is what you feel inside, as "you."

When you say "I" and "me," you sense an image which is habitually *in*-formed by part of your

mental and physical energies. Aspects of this vision manifest themselves in all manner of self-expression: the clothes you wear, the car you drive, how you communicate, how you set up your MySpace account, your webpage, your blog, your journal, how you pose for photos, what you write in your résumé,---it applies to any situation in which you describe, depict, or talk about yourself.

But these descriptions are all merely concepts and ideas. You are not concepts or ideas, any more than you are the sounds and syllables of your name. Behind all this is someone, or something, experiencing your life. How do we understand what that is?

A Larger Identity: Three Views

Here are three ways of looking at yourself in the world.

1. Consider your physical relationship to your environment. You inhale air that contains oxygen produced by the trees, grasses, and other plants outside. You exhale carbon dioxide that those plants thrive on. They create more oxygen that supports you and all other human beings and animals in the world. There is a constant interchange and connection between your body, all the world's plants, and all the world's animal life. In terms of chemistry and physics, you are more intimately connected to all forms of life on earth than you could ever be to any lover. In this sense, your body spans the planet. It would not be inaccurate to say that, viewed from this expanded context, you are all life on earth. You could look at the world outside your window and say to yourself, "All this is *me*."

2. Think about how you perceive your surroundings. Gaze at a red rose. Light of many wavelengths strikes the rose. All wavelengths but one are absorbed. One wavelength bounces away and enters your eye, activating the cone cells---the color receptors---in your retina. These carry a message to the brain that a color has been perceived. Prior experience prompts you to label that color red. But the red is not in the rose; it's in your eye and brain. All the colors you see are in your head.

Similarly, when you hear someone speak, there is not any sound between their vocal cords and your ears. There are sound waves. These compress and decompress the molecules in the air, causing them to bang up against your eardrum like ocean waves hitting the beach. Your nerves report this sensation to your brain, which recognizes the phenomenon as sound, translates it as words, and assigns meaning to them. But they, and all the sounds you hear, are in your head.

Hold a rose beneath your nose and sniff it; molecules of perfume activate olfactory sensors, which carry a message to the brain that an aroma has been perceived. But the perception occurs in your head. Place a piece of chocolate on your tongue; your taste buds send word to the brain that a tasty snack is being enjoyed. But the tasting, and the appreciation of the flavor, occur in your head. Touch an object; contact takes place at your fingertips, and nerves carry the information to the part of the brain that recognizes what you've touched. But everything you feel is in your head.

In other words:

---Everything you smell is in your head

---Everything you taste is in your head

---Everything you feel is in your head

---Everything you hear is in your head

---Everything you see is in your head

If you are what is in your head, and all of your perceptions are in your head, then look at your

surroundings and realize that *all this is you*.

3. Years ago, author D.E. Harding wrote about a unique way of seeing oneself. He suggested this: Look down at your body. You see a pair of legs terminating downwards into feet, a pair of arms terminating outwards in a pair of hands, and a shirtfront terminating upwards into something that you don't see: your own head.

From the point of view of your eyes, you never see your own head. This is a significant truism. You've seen photos, reflections, and videos, but since the day you were born you've never seen your own head. Well, so what? You know your head is there. But that's not the point. In regard to the way your eyes see yourself, you are a body on top of whose shoulders there is a void filled up with the world. Or, from a slightly shifted perspective, you see a world before you, and when you look down you see a body that this world rests upon. Harding described his experience in terms of discovering an empty hole on top of his shoulders that

"...was very much occupied. It was a vast emptiness filled, a nothing that found room for everything---room for grass, trees, shadowy distant hills, and far above them snowpeaks like a row of angular clouds riding the blue sky. [In realizing this,] I had lost a head and gained a world."(1)

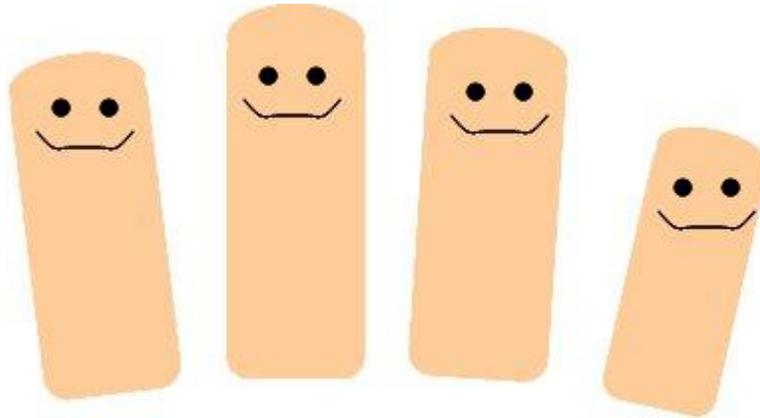
Visually, this is how your eyes and brain experience the universe. And so, again, if you are what is in your head, then look at your surroundings and realize that *all this is you*.

Unity

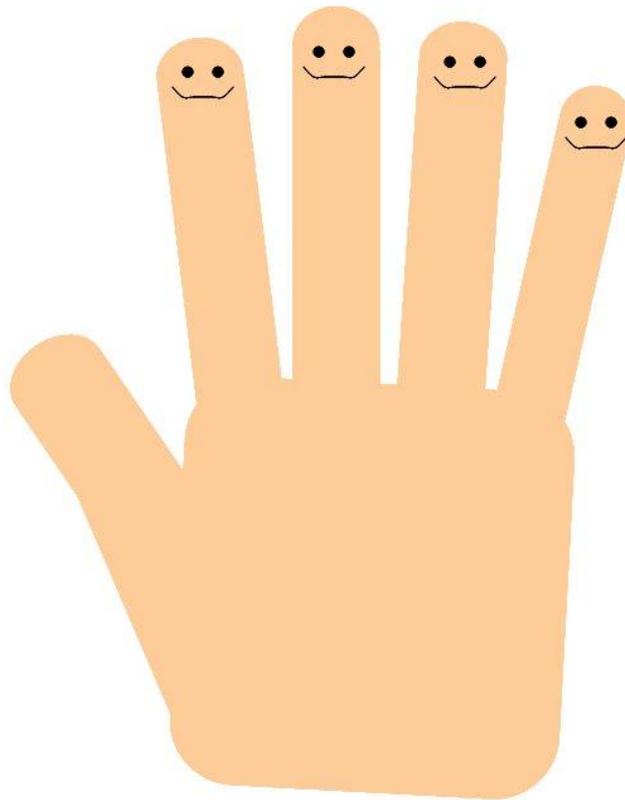
Philosopher Alan Watts spoke about the universe manifesting itself as multiple sentient beings, each one experiencing itself as an individual. To describe this process, he invented a new verb: "to I". Rhyming with "to eye" and incorporating the meaning of that term, "to I" signifies coming into being as a singular conscious perceiving entity. Watts liked to say, "The universe *I's*. It has *I'd* in me and it *I's* in you."(2)

Novelist Kurt Vonnegut made an analogous observation when he wryly wrote that as one of his characters was being born, that individual's "peephole" into the universe opened (3): someone's consciousness popped into being and peered out at its surroundings. From another point of view, the perception of a set of surroundings poured through a conduit of individuality into a localization of consciousness.

Implicit in this view is the notion of a unity of perception. The inner witness that looks out through your eyes is the same entity that peers through mine and through everyone else's. Consider this caricature:



Here are 4 individuals, clearly distinct and separate from one another. Now look at them in the context of their source:



In this example, the identity of one person is the same for them all: multiple individuals who emanate from one being. This being can be given any label you choose: Life, the Universe, Field of Consciousness, Source of Thought, Eternal Witness, Spirit, God, Brahman, Sunyata, or any other name. For the purpose of this discussion, there is no significant difference among them.

This being---and let's call it Being with a capital "B"---is who you really are. It entirely

transcends your name and individual identity. Experience of oneself as part of this larger entity often happens to people who practice meditation. Shifts in awareness that pertain to this phenomenon can occur unexpectedly.

One day a few years ago I was sitting in a restful state of meditative awareness, and the thought crossed my mind, "I feel really good here." Suddenly, the words "I" and "here" swapped meanings. "Here" became a pronoun and "I" became a location. "Here" was a sentient assertion of selfhood and self-knowing, and "I" was the spot where this self-knowing arose, defining the place where the "here-ing" of my life bloomed. More of a feeling than a thought, "here" was a proclamation of identity and existence, evoked in almost the same sense as when the teacher takes role on the first day of class and calls your name---you raise your hand and answer "here" to announce that you exist. Into this feeling I reintroduced the thought of "I," and instantly a fence seemed to spring up around the "here." It boxed me in. "I" felt like nothing so much as a limitation around the "here" of my awareness.

Philosopher Ken Wilber, in a talk titled "Involution and I Amness," offers the following fascinating summation:

"One day, God—in all His infinite omniscience, infinite omnipotence, and infinite omnipresence—becomes infinitely bored. So, understandably, He decides that He wants to play a game. Now, if you have ever tried to play a game of chess against yourself, you know that it's not very much fun at all, you really need someone else to play against. So, God has an idea. He manifests the entire Kosmos, breaking himself up into an infinite number of pieces, casting Himself out into all creation. Spirit crystallizes into Soul, which crystallizes into Mind, which further crystallizes into Life and Matter, until finally, in a magnificent Big Bang, God completely forgets who He is. It's the most impossibly perfect game of all—a game of Kosmic hide-and-seek, and the only way to win is to evolve back through matter, life, mind, soul, and Spirit, until finally we remember who we always-already are. This is the story of involution and evolution, the story of your very existence, the story of each and every moment." (4)

Meditation is part of this process of returning to the source of existence. It allows us to move beyond the "I" to the "here" of our Being, into the conscious awareness of the present moment. In its fullest sense, culminates in the unshakeable certainty that you are one with everything.

1. Harding, D.E. (1972) *On having no head: a contribution to Zen in the West*. New York: Harper & Rowe, Publishers, p.6
2. Watts, Alan (1973). *The essential lectures of Alan Watts: on death*. Videotaped lecture. Mill Valley, CA: Electronic University
3. Vonnegut, Kurt (1982). *Deadeye Dick*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., p.1
4. www.integralinstitute.org

Addendum

Ken Wilbur has created what he calls Integral Life Practice, a series of disciplines that contribute to an individual's personal growth through 4 modules: Body, Mind, Spirit, and Shadow. The meditation provided below is from the Spirit module. For more information, visit the [Integral Institute](#).

I AMness Meditation

Notice your present awareness. Notice the images and thoughts arising in your mind, the feelings and sensations arising in your body, the myriad objects arising around you in the room or environment. All of these are objects arising in your awareness.

Now think about what was in your awareness 5 minutes ago. Most of the thoughts have changed, most of the bodily sensations have changed, and most of the environment may have changed. But something has not changed. Something in you is the same now as it was 5 minutes ago. What is present now that was present 5 minutes ago?

The feeling-awareness of being itself, your most basic "I AMness" is still present. You are that ever-present I AMness. That I AMness is present now, it was present a moment ago, it was present a minute ago, it was present 5 minutes ago.

What was present 5 hours ago? I AMness. That sense of I AMness is an ongoing, self-knowing, self-recognizing, self-validating I AMness. It is present now, it was present 5 hours ago. All your thoughts have changed, all your bodily sensations have changed, your environment has also changed, at least slightly, but I AM is ever-present, radiant, open, empty, clear, spacious, transparent, free. Objects have changed, but not this formless I AMness. This obvious and present I AMness is present now as it was present 5 hours ago.

What was present 5 years ago? I AMness. So many objects have come and gone, so many feelings have come and gone, so many thoughts have come and gone, so many dramas and terrors and loves and hates have come, and stayed a while, and gone. But one thing has not come, and one thing has not gone. What is that? What is the only thing present in your awareness right now that you can remember was present 5 years ago? This timeless, ever-present feeling of I AMness is present now as it was 5 years ago.

What was present 5 centuries ago? All that is ever-present is I AMness. Every person feels this same I AMness—because it is not a body, it is not a thought, it is not an object, it is not the environment, it is not anything that can be seen, but rather is the ever-present Seer, the ongoing open and empty Witness of all that is arising, in any person, in any world, in any place, at any time, in all the worlds until the end of time, there is only and always this obvious and immediate I AMness. What else could you possibly know? What else does anybody ever know? There is only and always this radiant, self-knowing, self-feeling, self-transcending I AMness, whether present now, 5 minutes ago, 5 hours ago, 5 centuries ago.

Five millennia ago? Before Abraham was, I AM. Before the universe was, I AM. This is your

original Face, the face you had before your parents were born, the face you had before the universe was born, the Face you have had for all eternity until you decided to play this round of hide and seek, and get lost in the objects of your own creation. There is no need to pretend that you do not know or feel your own I AMness.

And with that, the game is undone. A million thoughts have come and gone, a million feelings have come and gone, a million objects have come and gone. But one thing has not come, and one thing has not gone: the great Unborn and the great Undying, which never enters or leaves the stream of time, a pure Presence above time, floating in eternity. You are this great, obvious, self-knowing, self-validating, self-liberating I AMness.

Before Abraham was, I AM. I AM is none other than Spirit in 1st-person, the ultimate, the sublime, the radiant all-creating Self of the entire Kosmos, present in you and me and us and him and her and them and all—as the I AMness that each and every one of us feels. Because in all the known universes, the overall number of I AMs is but one. Rest as I AMness always, the exact I AMness you feel right now, just as it is, which is Unborn Spirit itself shining in and as you. Assume your personal identity as well—as this or that object, or this or that self, or this and that thing—resting always in the Ground of it All, as this great and completely obvious I AMness, and get up and go on about your day, in the universe I AM created.