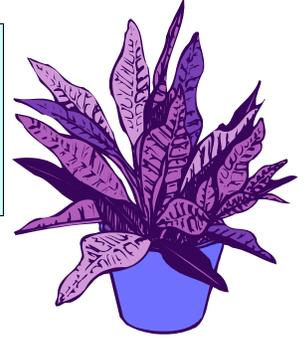


MEDITATION IS NOT THE FINAL ANSWER



By Jon Burras

Meditation has been around for a very long time. For thousands of years now men and women have sat silently observing their breath and attuning with their inner experience. From monasteries to temples across the globe meditation has become institutionalized amongst many cultures as the fundamental pathway to end suffering and attain higher states of consciousness. The practice of meditation continues to be passed down from one generation to the next, from institution to institution, and from authority figure to pupil. Seemingly birthed in our primal instincts, meditation seems to be as natural for humans as procreation and digestion.

But is meditation really natural and have human beings always been practicing this “age-old” pursuit? Does meditation deliver what it promises? Is meditation actually doing more harm than good?

The story of meditation is really the story of the development of our brain. Our evolution has changed dramatically in the last five thousand years, especially in the development of our brain. It is at this time that we began to shift to a predominately left-brain interpretation of our world. The left-brain is primarily responsible for our rational, orderly, and logical thinking. It is at this time that written alphabets began to emerge. Words and philosophy began to take center stage. We began to shift from a nature-based species into a head based people.

Meditation occurs in your head. It is almost entirely a left-brain pursuit. It is not necessarily a sensory or emotional experience. It is a logic-based activity. In the course of our search for our selves we have slipped into our heads and have lost our primary relationship

with what is natural. Meditation has become one of the behaviors that has been at the forefront of this movement away from nature.

Meditation is different from person to person and from institution to institution. But the common thread that holds all meditation practice together is the same. We sit still with a straight spine and focus on something, our breath, a mantra, or even the flicker of a flame. While engaging in this behavior our goal is to achieve a calm mind and “higher states of consciousness.”

Meditation is based on a very old magical belief, perhaps three to five thousand years old. This belief states, “Calmness is the ideal state of consciousness.” For thousands of years our spiritual teachers, religious educators, and authority figures have been guiding us to embrace this belief. Buddha, Ghandi, and Yogananda are a few such figures. In fact, Yogananda writes in his book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, “Calmness is the ideal state in which we should experience all of life’s events.”

This belief has become the cornerstone of profound mistakes made in regards to the behavior of meditation. Calmness is not the ideal state. Centeredness is not the euphoric tonic passed down to us through our relationship with nature. We were never born to be calm all of the time. This is the fundamental lie perpetrated through many generations.

Human beings are part of the natural cycle on the planet Earth. This means that we follow the same rules that apply to nature, because we are all a part of nature. This was once our common destiny, honoring the natural cycle, and living close to nature. We lived this way and continued to evolve up to a few thousand years ago. Then a shift occurred. Our left-brain began to take over and dominate other aspects of ourselves.

The left-brain is responsible for our intellect and rational thought. We can analyze and scrutinize with this part of our brain. The left-brain is also afraid of anything that is not information based. The left-brain attempts to eliminate uncomfortable emotions or sensations. The left-brain is also responsible for our addictions, looking for something to numb out any source of pain.

The left-brain began to grow. In part, our rapid advancement in technology and alphabets came directly from the advancements in the left-brain. But the left-brain also believes it is beyond nature. This part of our brain feels superior, or better than nature. It does not have to follow all the rules of nature because it can use intellect to survive.

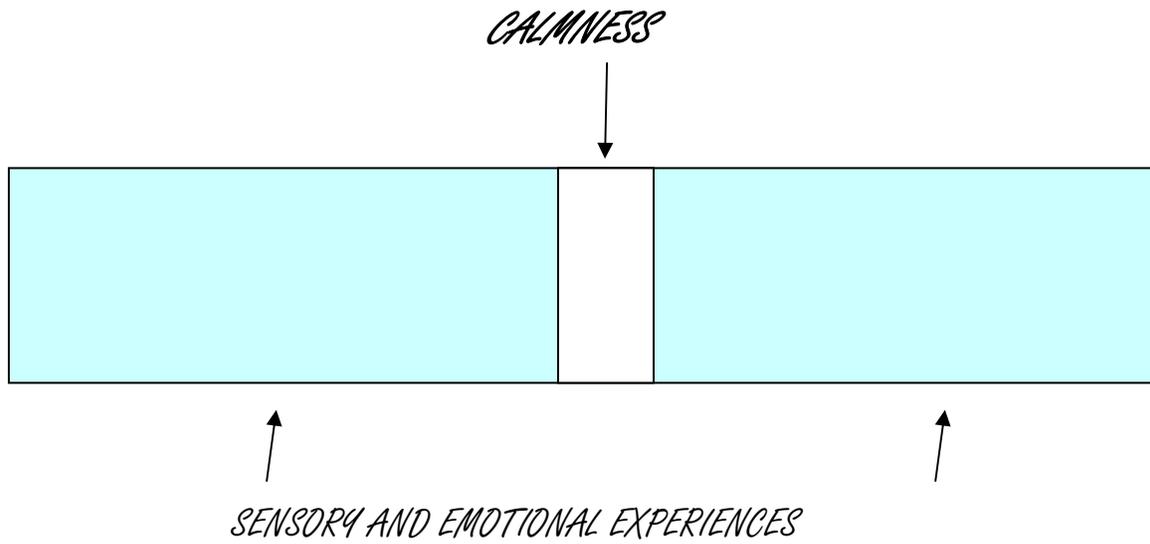
Nature has a rhythm and flow to it. Calmness is not the ideal state in nature. Yes, there are many times when there is calmness. A beautiful sunset is one example. But nature delivers an ongoing stream of power messages, none of which are calm. Nature creates earthquakes and floods, tornadoes and tidal waves. Ice storms and droughts are nature's fury. Monsoons and lightning bolts are anything but calm.

No, nature is not always calm. In fact, a good deal of time, nature is displaying a remarkable sense of power and release of energy. Animals and young children are not always calm and centered either. A wild lion will sit beneath a tree to find shade and rest. It certainly knows how to be calm when it needs to be. But when aroused by nearby prey it will spring into action. Quick and darting movements are the norm. Glaring of teeth and torn muscles of its prey reveal this powerful and explosive act of nature.

A young baby will cry when it is hungry or scared. A scream of excitement lights up the room when joy runs through the young child's heart. While sleeping in her mother's arms a certain calmness might lull one to sleep. But in the midst of the night a blood-curling scream jolts one awake to check on what is the matter. Babies are not always calm either because they are still following the rules of nature.

But as we age we are taught to repress what is natural and hold ourselves rigid inside. Strong emotions are not acceptable, even if nature is the one who gave them to us. In fact our left-brain may even believe that emotions are a disease to be destroyed and intellect and calmness are only what matters.

Calmness is not the ideal state to achieve. Yes, Buddha was wrong. So was Ghandi. Yogananda also made this classic left-brain mistake. Only when we follow the rules of nature and stop allowing our left-brain to dominate will we begin to change this. The ideal state to seek is not calmness or centeredness. The ideal state is one in which we honor our relationship with nature. This state is what is called "flow".



When we are calm all of the time we end up missing a good deal of our own lives. Being in the center all of the time limits us to our choices of expression. The more centered we try to become the farther we remove ourselves from our truth. We certainly may want calmness to be included in our assortment of emotions but not all of the time. When we seek a full degree of expression, “flow”, we are in present with what we are experiencing in that moment, just like nature.

Nature does not present us with a “calm” tornado or a “soft” monsoon. No, nature releases energy in whichever manner is needed to continue to balance our earthly cycle. When we continue to lie to ourselves we seek calmness to cover up other strong emotions or sensations. When we seek “flow” in our lives we feel and experience that which we are experiencing in the moment.

We in the Western world have been castigated for our world of addictions. We seem so weak by worldly standards. Alcohol and drugs are our best friends. Busyness and sugar cravings drive us throughout the day. We use our external addictions to numb out the feelings and sensations that we will not allow ourselves to feel.

But an addiction can be anything from an idea to a behavior. You do not have to be addicted to putting something in your mouth to be addicted. Addictions are an object, behavior,

person, thought, or emotion used to numb out an uncomfortable emotion or sensation. We in the West have become accustomed to external addictions, because they are available.

But all human beings are subject to addictions. The East, from where meditation derived, is no different. If Western cultures are addicted to mostly external addictions then Eastern cultures are addicted to mostly internal addictions.

Meditation is a behavior used to create a specific state of consciousness called calmness. There is nothing wrong with this. We all could use some more calmness in our lives. But when calmness becomes your desired state of consciousness *all of the time* you may seek out this altered state whenever a strong feeling or sensation arises. You then become addicted to meditation or calmness as a way to not feel. You become addicted to your internal state as a way to numb out.

Eastern thought has blamed our thoughts as the source of our conflicts. But it is not our thoughts that are the problem. We have established beliefs that treat our emotions as diseases. When this happens thoughts are used as a drug in order to numb out the feelings that cannot be expressed. Eliminating our thoughts, or focusing on one single thought does very little to address the beliefs about why we hold onto our emotions..

Meditation by itself is not the problem. The problem lies in the fact that the left-brain wants the meditative state to be the ideal state, going so far to insist that this is what nature wants for us. This is simply not true. For the most part, meditation has taught generations of people how to be numb with internal experiences. Meditation often becomes a popular behavior to manipulate a state of consciousness. We then become addicted to this state of consciousness as a way to not feel.

Our states of consciousness can be our drugs of choice. We do not have to put anything in our mouths to be addicted. Many times, our thinking process becomes our primary addictive choice. Anger, sadness, and bliss can become states of consciousness that are used to numb out other parts of our lives that we do not want to experience. The meditative state is no different. While centeredness and calmness can have a place in our lives when we seek this state of consciousness on a continual basis we then are using our own inner experiences to get high.

Yet, there is no help for meditation addicts. You can attend a 12-step meeting for alcoholics in almost any city of the world any day or hour of the week. But where are the recovery groups for meditation addicts? Addictions are about not wanting to feel. Meditation

by itself is not evil. Only when it is used to enter into an alter state because one does not want to feel a strong nature based feeling or sensation does meditation bring one farther away from our natural self.

Meditation is about being alert. The posture of meditation suggests rigidity in the spine and constant alertness. There is a need to focus and stay in control. This alertness tends to draw one into a constant state of **Fight or Flight**, or Stress Response. The biggest fear in life now becomes falling off center. Meditation is about holding on and focusing. Relaxation, the opposite of stress, is about letting go and not having to stay alert. If you are constantly focused on your breath then you most likely are not relaxed.

Calmness is not relaxation.

Calmness is a state or condition that mainly occurs within the head. Relaxation is a full body experience. Calmness is a state where we might end up at times. It is a place of introspection and learning to listen to our inner dialog. Calmness can be a place of learning and gaining wisdom from our intuitive voice. **But calmness is not relaxation.** Relaxation occurs when one does not have to be focused or alert. Sitting upright in a meditative pose is not conducive to this. Relaxation occurs when our Parasympathetic Nervous System is activated. This draws our physiology into a state of slowing down. Not having to be alert to a real external threat, (like a charging bear), or even an imaginary threat, (like our own inner philosophies which become very attached to), becomes the goal when seeking relaxation.

For instance, our Stress Response, the Sympathetic Nervous System, is activated when we perceive danger, either real or imagined. Most often our dangers are imaginary. These dangers are thoughts or beliefs that help to create our Stress Response in our extremely developed left-brain. If we are afraid of not having enough time throughout our day this belief could be enough to trigger our stress response. Fearing being imperfect in our meditation could be enough to trigger a Stress Response. Our own beliefs, most often, help to create a Stress Response, and keep us out of a state of relaxation. We become hyper-alert to our own philosophies.

Meditation can lead one into a state of relaxation, a whole nervous system response of feeling safe. But so could shopping or playing cards. For most people though, meditation ends

up becoming a ritual of repression. Instead of feeling the feelings and sensations arising focusing on the breath or a mantra become the behaviors used to numb out these feelings.

Relaxation is a whole body response about letting go.

Stress is about holding on. While seated in a crossed legged position focusing on one particular thing- the breath, a flicker of a candle- might bring one most often into a state of calmness- a head trip- but seldom is this experience one of relaxation or letting go.

The posture of meditation is about uprightness and control. Relaxation is about surrendering to the weight of gravity, collapsing and unwinding. The rational mind fears relaxation. Relaxation means letting go of control. It is not safe for the left-brain to lose control so it is very difficult to relax. Meditation just reinforces this fear of relaxation and of being able to let go.

Letting go occurs throughout our entire body. This is an energetic experience. Every emotion has a posture associated with it. Our muscles are used to express emotion or to repress emotion. While seated in a meditative pose and observing one's anger does not allow the expression of emotion through the muscular system. Instead muscles are used to hold back the expression of emotion. This is called repression.

Grief requires a collapse into a ball. Anger or rage requires the whole body, including the arms and legs, to release stores of energy outward. A 2-year-old child, following the laws of nature, will have a temper tantrum. His whole body is involved. Nobody had to teach him how to do this. He is following the laws of nature. This is a release of emotional energy. Analyzing or observing our feelings and sensation from a place of calmness rarely releases this strong energy that wants to move us.

In a natural world, energy is released when and where is necessary, from a mudslide to a volcanic eruption. In a left-brain dominated world, energy is not necessarily released but remains stored within the body as one analyzes his experiences. He becomes the watcher. He observes the feeling but seldom actually experiences them.

Centeredness becomes like a self-imposed prison at times. We forget how to have a full and complete expression of emotion. A loved one suddenly dies in a car crash and we head to

our meditation cushion to observe our feelings. A person living close to nature would not sit still in such a time of deep emotional release. He would grieve with his whole body. He would be angry with his arms and legs. He would shout. He would curl up into a ball and cry with his whole body until there were no more tears. A nature-based person, not dominated by his left-brain, would allow this natural energy to pass through him. Our losses need to be grieved. Whether these losses are mild or severe it does not matter. Grieving does not occur with a straight spine and a controlled breath.

As meditation techniques were emerging within the Eastern world some five thousand years ago so was the development of writing and analytical thinking. Buddha, one of the first initiators of the meditation system, was also a product of the emerging left-brain culture. This culture was beginning to leave the natural world and find refuge in matters of the mind. This world began to use the mind as a tool to repress the natural energy that flows through us all. There is an uncommon parallel between meditation and left-brain behavior. It would appear that those drawn to meditation as a normal practice in one's life are also drawn to reading and writing. Why is this? The reason is simple. Both meditation and reading are feeding the left-brain. The left-brain world favors being in control and rationalizing all the time. Living close to nature allows us to loose control when it is necessary.

The Eastern world has categorized our mind as the "monkey mind". This derogatory phrase is used to attempt to numb out what happens in the mind. But the mind can become our greatest teacher if we were to listen to it. If we were to listen to our fear of being out of control or our fear of failure and grieve this belief in a present and alert state we would begin to heal the source of our stress- our false beliefs about ourselves.

The left-brain is not all bad. Meditation can be a beginning step in learning how to have a supportive dialog with ourselves. Many of us were trained to have a shaming and critical inner dialog. We are mean to ourselves. We are angry at ourselves. In fact, for some of us, we treat ourselves worse than any friend we could ever hope to have.

Look at how we first learned to walk. We scooted on our belly. We crawled for a while. We staggered. Then we finally made it upright onto our own two legs. Meditation can be like this. It is a beginning step in learning how to dialog with ourselves. Unfortunately, most people do not let go of meditation after they have learned how to dialog with themselves and continue to crawl around for the rest of their lives. They never make it to full upright status. Meditation

can be an important first step to recover your thoughts, but for most people meditation becomes their addiction to prevent them from feeling.

Healing happens when we can let go. Holding on and remaining focused and alert isn't going to guide us into our healing place. Meditation, while a useful beginning step for some people, is not the ultimate answer. Unfortunately years of left-brain thinking have tried to convince us so. Flow is the natural order of nature. Maybe it is time to let go of Buddha and allow ourselves to be a real human being, based in the natural flow of nature. Nature will tell us the truth if we only had the courage to get out of our head and listen with our whole body.

Jon Burras is a certified yoga therapist and certified Bodymind therapist. He is also a champion for the rights of self-empowerment and believes in letting nature be the strongest guide.