

# Ommm... aargh!

Meditation and mindfulness have a dark side that should not be ignored, say psychologists **Miguel Farias** and **Catherine Wikholm**

TWITCHING, trembling, panic, disorientation, hallucinations, terror, depression, mania and psychotic breakdown – these are some of the reported effects of meditation. Surprised? We were too.

Techniques such as transcendental meditation and mindfulness are promoted as ways of quieting the mind, alleviating pain and anxiety, and even transforming you into a happier and more compassionate person: natural cure-alls without adverse effects. But happiness and de-stressing were not what meditation techniques, with their Buddhist and Hindu roots, were originally developed for. The purpose of meditation was much more radical: to challenge and rupture the idea of who you are, shaking one's sense of self to the core so you realise there is "nothing there" (Buddhism) or no real differentiation between you and the rest of the universe (Hinduism). So perhaps it is not so surprising that these practices have downsides.

## Blissful or distressful

Take mindfulness, a technique in which you try to develop a state of "bare awareness" by focusing on what you are feeling and thinking in the present moment. Such meditation for 20 minutes a day is likely to provoke mild changes in self-perception. While practising this, you usually feel more aware of your breathing, body and thoughts. Now imagine going on a meditation retreat and trying to extend your focus on the flow of awareness for six or more hours a day.

This might feel blissful for some as everyday concerns dissipate, but for others the outcome will be emotional distress, hallucinations or perhaps even ending up in a psychiatric ward. David Shapiro of the University of California, Irvine, found that 7 per cent of people on meditation retreats experienced profoundly adverse effects, including panic and

depression. Experience appears to make no difference – experts and naive meditators are equally likely to be affected.

This may all sound counter-intuitive given the many studies published every year on the benefits of meditation, such as last month's report in *The Lancet* that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy could be an alternative to antidepressants for preventing a relapse of depression. Perhaps secular models of meditation such as MBCT are safer than more spiritual types. But even so, we are no closer to understanding the specific part of this therapy that provides the benefit. Is it meditation itself or the cognitive education that comes with the therapy?

And not everyone agrees about the therapeutic merits of meditation. Albert Ellis, one of the founders of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), spoke critically of the use of meditation in therapy and argued that it should be used only as a "thought-distracting" or "relaxing" technique. He explained that, like tranquillisers, "it may have both good and bad effects – especially, the harmful result of encouraging people to look away from some of their central problems, and to refrain from disputing their disturbance-creating beliefs".

Another key figure in the development of CBT, Arnold Lazarus, argued that meditation was not for everyone and reported that some of his patients had serious disturbances after practising it.

As we scrutinised evidence on the effects of meditation and mindfulness for our book *The Buddha Pill: Can meditation change you?*, we realised that media reports were heavily biased: findings of moderate positive effects were inflated, whereas non-significant and negative findings went unreported. The most rigorous study so far on the results of mindfulness therapy for recurrent depression, conducted by Mark Williams of the University of Oxford, failed to find any main effects:

## PROFILE

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## The path to enlightenment may be unexpectedly bumpy

overall, people were as likely to become depressed again whether they had MBCT or not (except if they had suffered trauma as a child). Another study found that practising mindfulness for 20 minutes a day resulted in higher levels of biological stress, as measured by the hormone cortisol (despite lower reported levels of subjective stress) than for those in the non-meditation group. Neither finding made the headlines.





Why would meditation make you feel more stressed? There are various reasons. Trying to focus your awareness on what you are feeling and thinking can be a demanding cognitive exercise. Another reason that is less well known is that when you meditate “the scum rises to the surface”. These are the words of Swami Ambikananda Saraswati, a charismatic meditation teacher and translator of Hindu sacred texts who we interviewed for our book.

She confided that most meditation teachers know about this, but don’t like to discuss the intrusive thoughts and feelings – such as sexual, sad, fearful or violent ones – that may arise rather abruptly when you meditate.

The reason why this aspect of meditation has been neglected is not a secret. Ideas about meditation as a panacea and a straightforward tool for positive transformation have been around for a long time. But in the early 1970s,

when the first papers were published on the effects of transcendental meditation in prestigious journals such as *Science*, the hope that meditation might easily transform the individual and the world started to permeate mainstream culture. The “science of mindfulness” movement that emerged with the popularisation of MBCT and mindfulness-based stress reduction across health services, schools and universities has reinforced these hopes and helped propagate a one-sided, idyllic image of meditation.

Not everyone has bought into this mantra of positivity. Historians and religious-studies scholars have identified a relationship between meditation and violence. Torkel Brekke of the University of Oslo in Norway, who edited a book on Buddhism and violence, describes Buddhist texts that explain how individuals who have become enlightened

## “Meditating can produce powerful effects, but not all of these are beneficial”

through meditative practice may act amorally if their actions are undertaken in a detached state of mind. Rather than being exceptional, the association between meditation and detached killing became the norm in Japan during the second world war.

The historian and Zen priest Brian Victoria writes how the training of Japanese soldiers included the use of meditation techniques to ensure that the soldier lost his sense of self and “became” the very order he received. This is not a modern phenomenon. Takuan, a famous Zen master from the 1600s, wrote that “[t]he uplifted sword has no will of its own, it is all of emptiness... The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, and so is the one who wields the sword”.

Meditating can produce powerful effects on the mind, but not all of these are beneficial or peace-generating. The practice has become a multimillion-pound industry, marketed as if it were the new aspirin – a kind of Buddha pill without religious beliefs or unforeseen side effects.

Despite popular opinion, meditation is not a panacea. The truth is that most of us, including scientists, have beliefs about meditation that are often naive, and have turned a blind eye to its potential dark side. We need to change this. People who try meditation and mindfulness should be aware of the whole range of effects associated with these techniques and how they work differently for each of us. **n**

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