



Supporting Information about the Meditation Group

How to Join

The Meditation Group is run on a first come, first served basis. In order to join, just ask one of our Receptionists for a group form to complete, or complete it online at the Student Counselling Centre Website. Alternatively, please email me at J.R.E.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk with the following information:

- Your name
- Your email address
- Your telephone number. (We prefer a mobile number as it is usually easier to speak with you person to person this way.)

Who is it for?

The group is for anyone interested in meditation. Meditation is practiced for many reasons but most commonly people come to the group in an attempt to learn new ways to combat stress. However, it is also a very effective for improving your health, your awareness and your capacity to think clearly and creatively. The Meditation Group offers participants experience of a large variety of relaxations, meditations and practices preparatory to meditation so, once you have been to a few sessions, you will have learnt which ones you can make best use of.

Who runs it?

James Taylor is a psychotherapist and counsellor working at the University's Student Counselling Centre. He has practiced meditation regularly since 1996 and has an ongoing interest in practices which enhance health, self-awareness and self-development. James practices Dru Yoga and Meditation, is shortly to qualify as a Dru Meditation Instructor and is a qualified Wing Chun Kung Fu instructor.

Where and when it takes place?

Every week on Thursdays 12 – 1.30 from 29th September 2011 in the group room at The Student Counselling Centre, 19 Clarendon Place (on campus). Anyone who has an appointment at 1pm is welcome to come and is free to go just before 1pm – Don't worry, it will not disturb the group ! The group operates during the Christmas and Easter vacations and for most of the summer vacation.

What happens?

Each group begins with a warm-up or activation, which is followed by an energy block release sequence or stretching or breath work & then a meditation. There is then time for sharing, feedback and discussion of your experience. You are welcome but not obliged to share your experiences! If



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you wish to discuss something one to one, I will do my best to make an appointment to meet you as soon as possible.

What should I wear?

Most people come wearing what they would do normally. It is helpful for your clothes not to be extremely tight as they can be uncomfortable to sit still in for sustained periods of time. Loose fitting trousers are helpful.

Timekeeping

Each group is run on a first-come, first-served basis so latecomers run the risk of forfeiting their place on any given day. People wishing to attend are asked to be on time so as not to delay the group's practice and to express respect for other group members. As a rule of thumb, anyone who is likely to be over 10 minutes late would be best waiting until the next week to attend a group.

The Contract between the Centre and Group Participants

This is an experiential group which means it is an opportunity for us to make use of the *experience* of being together and practicing different meditative techniques. Each person's experience will be different and valuable, so participants are expected to treat each other's experiences with respect. As it can be hard to predict what might emerge in meditation, the facilitator's role is to support the process and to ensure the group is a safe place for participants to work together.

While we contract to respect one another's experiences, the meditation group is not bound by a contract of confidentiality. Group members are encouraged to meet, practice, support and discuss meditation with one another outside the group's time, as the benefits of meditation grow in proportion to the amount of time taken to practice. However, it is worth acknowledging that meditation will not suit everyone and anyone having doubts about practice before or during a meditation course should first of all bring them up with the group facilitator. I am willing to discuss any concerns with group members individually and will make an arrangement to meet with you at a mutually agreeable time.

It will be understood that once you have received the 'Supporting Information about the Meditation Group' document, your attendance of the group constitutes an agreement to adhere to this contract and to respect the group's needs with regard to 'Timekeeping' above.

Evaluation

We wish to learn from your opinions and experience of our services, so, as with our individual counselling services, you are invited to make your opinions of the meditation group known via a voluntary evaluation form. You will be sent a copy of this via email. You can return it electronically or if you prefer to do so anonymously, you can mail your feedback to the centre at:



The Student Counselling Centre 19 Clarendon Place Leeds LS2 9JY

Should you want a freepost envelope, you can request one at Reception at the Student Counselling Centre.

Why Meditate?

To practice meditation is to attempt more than mere relaxation, however profound relaxation is one of the consequences of meditative practices. Meditation aims to achieve a clear and alert state of mind and a relaxed bodily state by focusing the mind such that thoughts are 'dropped' and we are at one with the experience *of the moment*. Meditation seeks to cultivate awareness and is thus different to those relaxed states in which the mind wanders, drifts, thinks, plans, sleeps or fantasises. All of these things may be more or less pleasant but lack the control, agency and alertness implied by focusing.

While meditation can be extremely enjoyable it can sometimes be hard to 'get into'; however the more you do it, the easier it is to get to your meditative states of mind. It richly rewards sustained effort and practice but along the way it is usual to experience distractions and frustrations! The group is a supportive place in which to work through, share and reflect upon such difficulties. This said, an increased sense of relaxation, creativity, insight, concentration, health, well being, peace of mind, mental and physical performance, present consciousness and spiritual awakening are all amongst the benefits people who meditate report emerging from their experience. What I particularly like about meditation is that once simple techniques and practices have been learnt, they can be practiced independently. So, like a therapeutic relationship, meditation practice is internalised and build upon so it is empowering and supportive of our autonomy.

Recent research performed by Dr. Vincent Giampapa, M.D., has revealed that regular deep meditation dramatically affects the production of Cortisol, DHEA, Melatonin and (H-G-H) Human Growth Hormone; hormones which relate to longevity, stress, and well-being. Giampapa suggests that cortisol accelerates aging while negatively effecting memory, learning, health and subjective well-being. Widely recognized as the "stress hormone," cortisol is produced by the adrenal glands when you are stressed. The more of it you produce, the more stressed you feel and the more vulnerable you are to disease as it depresses the functioning of your immune system. Regular meditation reduces stress responses and hence the production of cortisol.

DHEA is also a hormone produced by the adrenal glands. The production of DHEA slows down on average, once we reach our 30s and sometimes even earlier than this. The average 75 year old only has 20% of the DHEA they had when they were 25 years old. When DHEA levels are low, we're more easily affected by aging and disease whereas high DHEA levels increase immune functioning enabling the body to fight disease successfully. At the slower



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Alpha and Theta brainwave patterns produced by meditation, production of DHEA increases significantly. Meditators secrete more of the youth-related hormone DHEA as they age than non-meditators. Meditating forty-five-year-old males have an average of 23 percent more DHEA than non-meditators, and meditating females have an average of 47 percent more. This helps decrease stress, heighten memory, preserve sexual function, and control weight.

Melatonin is a hormone that helps to create restful sleep. We make less of it as we age, and since during sleep many important rejuvenating substances are created in the brain, the inability to sleep soundly can dramatically decrease the quality of your life and greatly speed up the aging process. Research has shown 75 percent of insomniacs were able to sleep normally when they meditated. Meditation creates a unique hypo-metabolic state, in which the metabolism is in an even deeper state of rest than during sleep. During sleep, oxygen consumption drops by 8 percent, but during meditation, it drops by 10 to 20 percent.

New research also reveals that Melatonin is a powerful antioxidant. In fact, it is more powerful than Vitamin E. At the slower Alpha and Theta brainwave patterns produced by meditation, production of melatonin increases significantly. One of the other hormones you release during deep meditation is human growth hormone which we make much less of as we age. Deficiencies in H-G-H contribute to the many symptoms and diseases associated with aging so by practicing meditation on a regular basis, you are taking care of your future physical, mental and spiritual health! So it is perhaps unsurprising that long-term meditators experience 80 percent less heart disease and 50 percent less cancer than non-meditators, that 34 percent of people with chronic pain significantly reduced medication when they begin meditating and that meditation is the only activity that reduces blood lactate, a marker of stress and anxiety.

Meditation need not have any religious components but meditative practices are an aspect of many of the world's faiths. The group at The Student Counselling Centre does not have any religious affiliations however if you are interested in them, such groups are available at other times in other places. E.g. The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order offer meditation classes in the Student's Union building on Wednesdays in term time.

Meditative Practice

There are many different varieties of meditative practice which will have different effects on the practitioner – and most likely some will suit a person better than others. Breath and body based meditations tend to foster self-awareness, health, memory, relaxation and bliss. They are good all round practices but can lead to excessive self-analysis. Mantras and affirmations are ideal to promote tranquillity. They are simple and flexible to do, suit people of a devotional temperament but often produce joy at the expense of clarity of



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mind. Visualisations are positive, creative and individualistic. They can tap the potential of the mind, but may lack depth. These are obviously thumbnail sketches of different practices and their pitfalls so one should not set too much store by them. They rather suggest that diverse experience is both desirable and effective and your experience at The Student Counselling Centre will include all of these different styles of practice if you attend regularly.

Meditation can be practiced lying down, while seated, or while walking. In all cases a **posture** needs to be adopted that allows deep and regular breathing and one that will not be so physically discomforting that one cannot concentrate on anything else! (The lotus position will never be for everyone but there are gentle exercises which can allow more or less anyone to achieve it in time.) You will receive guidance with about posture and deep breathing at the group.

It is always the case that the meditator will experience **distractions** from their practice, either from within themselves or from the world around them. These distractions are best viewed as opportunities to deepen practice and so when they occur, they are to be observed and acknowledged as we return our minds to our intended focus. It is important to be realistic about this and to have compassion for our fallibility which first means realising it as it comes up - Otherwise it would be extremely easy to spend all our time criticising ourselves for failing to achieve something rather than trying to achieve it. People using the group find it helpful to reflect on and discuss their experience of distractions which they have a chance to do at the end of each session.

Meditation Resources

If you go to The Student Counselling Centre's Online Resource Room you will be able to link to useful web based resources; just scroll down to 'Meditation' and have a look. I would particularly like to draw your attention to the '8 minutes to calm', 'Deep Relaxation' and 'De-stress Meditation' MP3 downloads as well as free downloads from the Wildmind web site which can assist you in your practice in between the meditation sessions at the centre.

Two of the many meditations we practice, The Mindfulness of Breathing and the Meta Bhavna or 'Loving Kindness meditation' are available to download free if you follow the links below. In order to be able to use them, you need to have Real Player on your PC, however if you do not, this is downloadable free too!

If you follow the two links below, you will arrive at pages which break the two meditations into several stages. If you place your cursor over the link for each stage that says, 'Listen to Real Audio Recording', right click and select 'Save Target As', the file will download to your computer. If you then run the files in order in Real Player, you can create the equivalent of a meditation class in



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your own room as there is someone speaking to lead you through the meditation.

<http://www.wildmind.org/mindfulness/>

<http://www.wildmind.org/metta/>

Also useful for relaxation and visualisation are the three files available at this address:

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/counselling/selfhelp/relaxation.html>

Which you can download onto an MP3 player or simply listen to through your computer.

Helpful Reading

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| Bodhipaksa (2003) | Wildmind: A Step by Step Guide to Meditation
Windhorse Publications |
| Bodian, S & (2006)
Ornish, D | Meditation for Dummies
Hobdean, Wiley. |
| Farhi, D (1996) | The breathing book, New York: Henry Holt. |
| Harrison, E (2004) | Teach yourself to Meditate Piatkus Books |
| Harvey, J (1988), | The quiet mind, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan
International Institute. |
| Hendricks, G (1995) | Conscious breathing, New York: Bantam. |
| Hirschi, G (2000) | Mudras: Yoga in your hands Boston Weiser
Books |
| Johari, H (2000) | Chakras: Energy Centres of Transformation
Rochester, Vermont Destingy Books |
| Kabbat-Zin, J(2005) | Coming to our senses, London: Piatkus. |
| Rothschild, B (2000) | The body remembers, New York: Norton. |
| Swami Rama et.al (1998) | Science of breath, Honesdale, PA, Himalayan
Institute Press. |

Some Short Meditation Practices you might like to try

Keep breathing

Equal breathing is a powerful way to feel calm fast. Breathe in for a steady count of four, pause for four, breathe out for a count of four and pause for four. Continue for about 3 minutes, keeping the pace comfortable so you don't get breathless. Don't hold your breath if you have high blood pressure, heart problems, glaucoma or think you might be pregnant.

Deep relaxation

This is often overlooked by those of us who think we're too busy to take time for ourselves, but a 10 minute relaxation is a really efficient way of de-stressing and getting energized quickly. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on the



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floor. Make sure you're comfortable and cover yourself with a blanket or jumper. Scan through your body, from your feet to your head, asking each part to relax and become heavy. Then breathe gently and calmly for a few minutes, enjoying the deep sense of rest. Finally, deepen your in-breath, feeling energy pouring into your body as you breathe in. Imagine that energy revitalizing every part of your body from the top of your head to your feet. Have a stretch and get up slowly.

Try a Mudra!

Mudras are hand gestures which quickly change the way we feel. Try the gesture of tolerance if you're feeling irritated or upset. Simply connect the tips of the thumbs together, then both the index fingers, middle, ring and little fingers to touch each other. Rest your elbows on your desk or keep them by your sides, so that the tips of the thumbs touch your heart chakra and the other fingers fan outward. Imagine that your breath is coming in from the heart centre, sending calmness and tolerance to the space around you. Continue for three minutes.

Nature nurture

A few minutes in a natural environment is a great way to de-stress. So whether it's a park, garden, mountain or river, get yourself into a green space for at least 10 minutes a day. Look at the beautiful green of the new spring leaves, listen to the sounds of birds around you and feel a sense of calmness entering your body and mind.

Rise and shine

When you wake up in the morning, completely relax your body for one minute, while you're still lying in bed. Think of 5 things you're really grateful for. Then gently sit up and wrap your duvet around you. Bring your attention to your breathing and let it get deeper without forcing it at all. Focus on your heart and feel warmth spreading through your body as you breathe. Continue for five minutes, then stretch and start your day.

Relax body and mind

Do some stretches then lie down on the floor on a firm yet comfortable surface (a soft carpet or blanket is fine). Cover yourself with a blanket so you don't get chilly. Make sure that your body is aligned in a straight line.

Starting from your feet, tense and relax each part of your body. Contract the muscles first in your feet, and then feel each of the toes relaxing as you soften the feet against the floor. Work up the body, through the legs, hips, abdomen, chest, back, neck and head. Then focus on your breathing, and each time you breathe out, let your body release tension. As you breathe in, take peace and calmness into the body. Repeat for 5 minutes.

To finish, gradually bring your awareness back to your body and feel how your body is positioned on the floor. Move your toes and fingers gently, then stretch and sit up without disturbing that wonderful feeling of relaxation!

Stress busting technique



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1. Relax for a few moments and focus on your breathing, watching the natural rhythm of each inhalation and exhalation.
 2. Imagine a situation in your life that needs healing.
 3. Create an image of that situation in front of you, as if it were on a video screen. As you breathe in, draw some of the stress of the situation into your heart and immediately send it upwards and out of the top of your head as you breathe out.
 4. Feel that above your head is a region of golden light in which you have full access to your healing potential. Imagine the stress entering this region and visualise the situation being completely healed.
 5. On an in-breath, draw this new situation into your heart and breathe it out into the scene in front of you, bringing peace and a good solution to that situation. See smiles of relief on the faces of everyone concerned.
- Repeat steps 2-5 until you feel relaxed, calm and full of joy.

Sunshine bliss

This is great for the winter blues!

On a sunny day, wrap up warmly and sit comfortably outside, whether on a chair or cross legged on the ground, facing the sun. Make sure your back is tall and upright and relax your shoulders and face.

Close your eyes and let the sunlight radiate onto your face. Imagine that each cell is absorbing the sunlight and that you are being filled with energy and positivity. You can do this meditation when it's not sunny by visualising the sun and imagining its rays shining on your face. It's a simple technique but very powerful.

Thanks for permission to share these practices go to Jane Saraswati Clapham of Dru UK who shared them originally in personal communications.

James Taylor
July 2011