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Meditate: Just Observe and Be

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Abstract: Based on the article, “Mediation” from Yuval Noah Harari’s book, *21 Lessons For 21 Century*, the author explores the significance of mediation in one’s life. He presents to us whether mediation is something to do with mysticism and religion. Meditation, according to Harari has nothing to do with religion. The present article counter argues with Harari, asserting that mediation has its origin in religion. Meditation is also very much part of Christian prayer. The author also shows that meditation is inward journey towards peace and freedom. Meditation is very much a gateway to knowing the threefold reality - God, World and Human Person.

Keywords: Mediation as Calming the Wandering Mind, Mediation as Observance, Mediation as Self-Awareness, Meditation as Awakening, through Silence to Inner Peace, Cleansing the Mind, Consciousness is a Great Mystery, Careful Observation.

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Introduction

“Blessed is the man [whose]...delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.” Psalm 1:2-3

The practice of mediation is not about suppressing thought, but surpassing it. (Davich, 2018)

One fine day a little grasshopper happened to across a monk who was meditating. He hopped his way around the motionless monk for some time. He was struck by how calm, still and peaceful the monk appeared but he was not really sure what he was doing. The grasshopper hopped here and there, back and forth, keeping his eye on the monk and slowly gaining courage to get closer and closer until finally he was almost at the monk's side.

“Hello little grasshopper” the monk said in a warm and friendly manner. “How may I help you?”

“I have been watching you for some time and would like to know what it is you are doing?”

“Meditation, little grasshopper” said the monk “we meditate to calm our wandering minds”.

“Wandering minds,” the grasshopper repeated. “What do you mean?”

“Our minds can be like that of a little grasshopper that hops from place to place, always moving, never still and calm”

“Oh”, said the little grasshopper, trying hard to be still for a moment. “I like that. I would like to try to calm my wandering mind, and my wandering legs, for that matter. Do you think I could learn?”

“Of course, little grasshopper. It’s quite simple. We start by getting comfortable, then sitting with crossed legs and our backs straight, we close our eyes.”

The little grasshopper immediately sits down and after spending a little time working out how to cross its little legs, it closes its little eyes. A few moments pass before the grasshopper opens one eye and looks up at the still and calm monk. “But what now?” he asks a little impatiently.

The monk chuckles: “Steady little grasshopper, not so fast. When we close our eyes, we watch our breath, breathing in we are truly aware we are breathing in. Breathing Out we are truly aware we are breathing out”

“OK, that sounds pretty simple”, says the little grasshopper and does as the monk says, making himself comfortable again and crossing his little legs, he slowly closes his eyes and takes a deep in breath.

A few moments pass. “Wait!” shouts the grasshopper “I think it would be better to meditate over there on that lovely grass stalk” and off he hops. He jumps onto the blade of grass and looks around in satisfaction.

“Ok I’m ready now”

The monk and the grasshopper get themselves comfortable again, the monk crosses his legs and the little grasshopper does the same, they both slowly close their eyes and take a deep in breath.

A few more moments pass. “Wait!” Shouts the grasshopper “I think it would be better to meditate over there on that lovely rock” and off he hops. He jumps onto the rock and looks around in satisfaction.

“Ok I’m ready now”

The monk and the grasshopper once again make themselves comfortable the monk crosses his legs and the little grasshopper does the same, they both slowly close their eyes and take a deep in breath.

A few more moments pass. “Wait!” shouts the grasshopper. (Tapasa, 2020)

Our mind is like that of a grasshopper we read in the story. It is never at rest except in meditation. To control this restless mind is not an easy task. It demands a hell lot of efforts. Down through the centuries people have sat in meditation to tame this unsettled mind which they call it the, *monkey mind or mind-monkey*. Meditation is more than taming the *monkey-mind* it is becoming aware of the reality that envelopes us but most importantly becoming aware of oneself. Meditation teaches us to look within us. Since childhood, we have always been encouraged to examine things outside of ourselves; the emphasis has rarely been to search within ourselves. A meditation master and scholar who teaches all over the world, confirms that the true source of our happiness and well-being cannot be found outside of us – it comes from deep within. Meditation helps us examine ourselves gradually and methodically. As we gain a deeper sense of self awareness, we stop being strangers to ourselves and naturally develop more compassion, patience and resilience. And through meditation we imbibe the threefold reality – God/Divine, World and the Human Person.

Coming in Touch with Ourselves

Through meditation we do come in touch with ourselves. Amidst this noisy world meditation helps us to really look into ourselves and know ourselves better. But this inward journey towards peace and freedom is rather a tough one as Dag Hammarskjöld, who travelled world-wide but still did not reach journey’s end in his inward exploration wrote, “The longest journey is the journey inward” (Hammarskjöld, 1985). Knowing ourselves better will lead us to loving ourselves and

others because we can truly love a person only when we know the person.

In and during meditation we just observe the reality without any judgement. Most of the time we are not aware of the things happening in and around us. We see things how we want to see them; we see things as they appear to be not as they are. When people ask the big questions of life, they usually have absolutely no interest in knowing when their breath is coming into their nostrils and when it is going out. Instead, they want to know things like what happens after you die. Yet the real enigma of life is not what happens after you die but what happens before you die. If you want to understand death, you need to understand life. To understand life, you need meditation.

Consciousness, Awakening and Self-awareness

People sometimes turn meditation into a pursuit of special experiences *viz.* of bliss and ecstasy. It is essential to remember that the aim of meditation is self-awareness, not a state of bliss that is free from problems and obstacles. If we simply seek ecstasy, and hope to avoid sorrow and suffering, then we are actually seeking the loss of ourselves. The ultimate aim of meditation is to remain grounded in self-awareness under all conditions of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, gain and loss.

In truth, consciousness is the greatest mystery in the universe, and mundane feelings of heat and itching are bit as mysterious as feelings of rapture or cosmic oneness. The origin of consciousness is one of the great unanswered questions of our time. Although science has yet to come up with a definitive explanation, it is clear that we can raise our own state of consciousness. What, then, is the best method for doing this? Meditation!

Meditation in the sense is not 'switching off the mind' it is 'switching on the mind' it is awakening. Meditation is not a mere study of the mind, nor an escape from the reality rather it is observing and becoming aware of the reality. It's a journey to the

centre of our being, a process so perfectly natural that we do not have to learn how to meditate. As of now our scientific advancement has not reached to the level of observing the ‘mind’ and its activities directly. The only mind I can directly observe is my own. Psychologists are thought to have read minds but that cannot be true. Science cannot observe the mind it can only study the brain because we can never see the mind through the microscope or a brain scanner. Microscope, Brain Scanner and powerful computer devices enable us to detect biochemical and electrical activities in the brain, but they do not give us any access to the subjective experiences associated with these activities. No one has access to another’s mind.

In the absence of modern methods to directly observe the mind, some of the tools developed by premodern cultures to study the mind is meditation. “Several ancient cultures devoted a lot of attention to the study of mind, and they relied not on collecting second-hand reports, but on training people to observe their own minds systematically. The methods they developed are bunched together under the generic term ‘meditation’. Today this term is often associated with religion and mysticism, but in principle meditation is any method for direct observation of one’s own mind...Over the millennia humans have developed hundreds of meditation techniques, which differ in their principles and effectiveness.” (Harari, 2018) One such technique of meditation, *Vipassana* meaning introspection in Pali language, is said to have been discovered in ancient India by the Buddha. The technique of *Vipassana* is based on the insight that the flow of mind is closely interlinked with body sensations. During *Vipassana* meditation the students are asked not only to observe their breath but also the body sensations. Having discussed what meditation is let us now look at the difference between science and meditation.

Science and Meditation

Science and meditation are like digging from both the ends. Meditation does not replace the studies of brain and the mind but it complements them. It's a bit like engineers excavating a tunnel through a huge mountain. Why dig from only one side? Better dig simultaneously from both ends. If the brain and the mind are indeed one and the same, the two tunnels are bound to meet. And if the brain and the mind are not the same? Then it is all the more important to dig into the mind, and not just into the brain (Harari, 2018).

Meditation does not come into conflict with scientific research. Instead, it has been another valuable tool in the scientific toolkit, especially when trying to understand the human mind. Science cannot decipher the mysteries of the mind due to lack of efficient tools. Many people, including scientists, tend to confuse the mind with the brain, but they are really very different things. The brain is matter but the mind is form. If the brain is concrete the mind is abstract. Finally, "the brain is a material network of neurons, synapses and biochemicals. While the mind is a flow of subjective experiences, such as pain, pleasure, anger and love. Some biologists assume that the brain somehow produces the mind, and that biochemical reactions in billions of neurons somehow produce experiences such as pain and love. However, so far, we have absolutely no explanation for how the mind emerges from the brain. How come when billions of neurons are firing electrical signals in a particular pattern, I feel pain, and when the neurons fire in a different pattern, I feel love? We haven't got a clue. Hence even if the mind indeed emerges from the brain, at least for now studying the mind is a different undertaking than studying the brain." (Harari, 2018)

In recent years scholars of both mind and brain have shown increasing interest in such meditation techniques, but most researchers have so far used this tool only indirectly. The typical

scientist does not actually practise meditation herself rather she invites experienced meditators to her laboratory, covers their heads with electrodes, asks them to meditate, and observes the resulting brain activities. This method can teach us many interesting things about the brain but if the aim is to understand the mind, we are missing some of the most important insights. As we have seen science too tries to decipher the human minds. In other words, it is also a 'looking into ourselves,' becoming aware of the inner life. Does meditation have anything to do with religion? Can Harari be true in saying that meditation has no religious connotation? In the following paragraph we shall discuss if meditation is helpful in the religious context.

Meditation in the Religious Context

Today meditation is practised all over the world without any reference to religious context but the techniques remain as they were thousands of years earlier. Y. N. Harari opines, "Meditation is a tool for observing the mind directly" and that it has nothing to do with religion. (Harari, 2018) But many religions indeed made extensive use of various meditation techniques. For some religion meditation is a means to achieve liberation or *Nirvana* from bondage, *Karma* or even *Samsara*.

The primary aim of meditation in Hindu terms is to attain oneness with one's soul (*atman*) and get in touch with *Brahman*, the omnipresent and almighty Hindu god, with ultimate goal being to reach the state of *Moksha* (*Nirvana* in Buddhism). Hindu scriptures describe certain postures (*yoga*) to attain a meditative state. There are numerous references of *yoga* and meditation found in ancient Indian scriptures such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Hindu meditation is called "*dhyana*." The purpose of "*dhyana*" is to become consciously aware of or investigate into one's own mind and body to know oneself. "*Dhyana*" is a Sanskrit word.

“*Dhī*” means receptacle or the mind and “*yana*” means moving or going. Dhyana means journey or movement of the mind. According to Hindu tradition, the human mind has the creative potency of God. You become what you think. (Jayaram, 2019).

The *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali (c. 200 CE) defines *Yoga* as the restraint of the fluctuations of the mind. The application of *Yoga* allows the gradual diminishment of karmic influences, referred to as seeds (*bīja*) or residues (*saṃskāra*). *Yoga* specifies five aspects of defilement that must be controlled: ignorance, egoism, attraction, repulsion, and a desire for life to continue. By following the practices of *Yoga*, including meditation, *karma* dissipates. The practitioner reshapes his or her identity, abandoning attachment to fixed behaviours. By drawing inward, one reaches deeper self-understanding and approaches a state of lucidity and purification. Numerous meditation practices can be found in the texts of *Yoga*, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. (Jayaram)

Patañjali defines *Īśvara*, sometimes referred to as a deity, as a special soul or *purusa* (spirit) who has never been tainted by the actions of *karma*. By fashioning such an ideal through the imagination, one can then strive to emulate this rarefied being. For a *Jaina*, this state of *Īśvara* is symbolized through the twenty-four great teachers (*Tīrthankāra*). For a Buddhist, Lord Buddha serves the same function. In the Hindu *bhakti* or devotional tradition, fixing one’s attention on any one of a variety of deities can result in *karmic* purification. For the Sikhs, the highest soul cannot be named and exists outside time (*akal*). However, the ten Sikh *gurus*, beginning with Guru Nanak, serve as objects of worship because of their teachings. Patañjali, through his concept of chosen deity, suggests that the meditative procedures engaged in order to purify oneself carry more significance than the actual object of one’s meditation. (Jayaram, 2019)

Buddhist concept of meditation is closely associated with the religion and philosophy of Buddhism. It is presumption of historians

that the basic idea of meditation passed to Buddhism from Hinduism, as the founder of Buddhism himself was a Hindu, before attaining *Moksha*. The Buddhist ideology and practices of meditation are preserved in ancient Buddhist texts. In Buddhism meditation is considered as part of the path towards *nirvana*. Gautama Buddha has said to have detected two important mental qualities that arise from practicing meditation. These are; serenity or tranquillity that composes and concentrates the mind and insight which enables the practitioner to explore the five aspects that constitute the sentient being, namely – matter, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. (Napier, 2019)

References of meditation are also found in Torah of Judaism. In Genesis (24: 63) we read, “(Isaac)...went out to the field one evening to meditate” As we find so many verses in regarding mediation. In Christianity meditation is used to mean a form of prayer where the believers concentrate upon the revelations of God. In the present context the focus will be made on the differences between Christian meditation, Hindu meditation and Buddhist meditation.

It is true that Christians too meditate but slightly different from the Hindu or Buddhist or from Zen meditation. Christians do not meditate to attain liberation or *nirvana* from *Karmic* bondage. Meditation in the Biblical sense is focused on thinking about the things that God would think about. The things that would be ‘worthy of praise.’ In doing this, we would fix our thoughts on the things of God’s Kingdom. When we look at the bible, meditation is not about clearing our minds. It is about filling our minds with the presence of God, His kingdom, and what a breakthrough can look like in our lives.

Christian meditation is a form of prayer in which a structured attempt is made to become aware of and reflect upon the revelations of God. Christian meditation is the process of deliberately focusing on specific thoughts (such as a Bible passage) and reflecting on their meaning in the context of the love of God. Christian meditation aims to heighten the personal relationship based on the love of God that marks Christian communion. Like anything, mindfulness can be misused. Meditation in its basic form has origins in the Bible. The Bible is necessary and helpful for the believer to concentrate and embed the doctrines, law, and testimony vital for our spirituality. However, Buddhist

Meditation is something that emerged from the established religion. We were invariably taught to look outside to know, but meditation teaches us to look within us and help us to realise that what we look for outside is actually within us. Thus, meditation is self-awareness, helps us come in touch with ourselves and the Divine.

meditation often involves mantras which edify the gods of either Buddhism or Hinduism. Meditating on and chanting a word or phrase praising or seeking a false deity is contrary to the principles of Christianity. However, meditation itself does not automatically contradict the Christian faith. We just need to make sure we approach it in a wise, biblical way. Meditation is very much part and parcel of religion especially in, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. (Heimbigner, 2020)

As we have seen meditation is very much part of the religion. Meditation has its origin in religion. In all of the religions we have discussed, the ultimate goal is to make oneself aware of the threefold reality- the God, World and Human person. While coming to know one of the three realities we come to know all the threefold reality.

a. Finding God in Silence

“Be still and know that I am God.” Psalms 46: 10

In Christian traditions monks sat in silence mediating upon the Word of God. I have been in a Benedictine Monastery in Bangalore for two years. I have seen the daily routine of a monk's life. Meditation is part and parcel of a monk's life. In the monastery where I stayed, they meditated twice in a day. Once in the morning after the *lauds* was prayed and then in the evening after the vespers was chanted. Meditating in sheer silence is a must. I remember superior of the house who they addressed as, “Abbot” would say, “It is not enough to sit in the quiet place you need to quieten your heart and mind as well.” True, God speaks to us in many different ways but He finds it easier to speak to us when we prepare to listen to Him. This is what we do in meditation we sit in silence meditating upon the Word of God and God reveals many things to individuals as he or she sits in meditation.

b. A Tranquil Mind

Under all of the mind's noise is a quiet place. By training our mind, in meditation, to be highly-conscious of just one thing — such as deep controlled breathing, great things begin to happen. The mind becomes tamer. Incessant mind chatter slows to a halt. And an incredible new mindful awareness will permeate your day-to-day activities. A tranquil mind is a recipe for a happy, full life

Mother Teresa tells us, “God cannot be found in noise and restlessness.” She then tells us, “If we really want to pray, we must first learn to listen: for in the silence of the heart God speaks.” We are reminded of the Book of First Kings where Elijah meets God in the in the “sheer silence” (1 Kings 19: 11-13). Silence is where it happens. Silence is where we learn about

ourselves. Silence is where we find God. It is through silence and meditation we find God and by coming to know the Creator we come to know ourselves better.

Conclusion

“May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord.” — Psalm 104:34

Meditation comprises a comprehensive system of purification that regardless of the particular theological context or philosophical point of view, serves to diminish negative *karma* and bring about states of equanimity. Meditation is one of the most effective ways to cleanse our mind. It is a sacred space that provides the opportunity to sit with oneself, your thoughts, your higher being, and just be – Be in the moment. In this noisy world we are never settled, we are never in the present moment we are either in the past or future, nostalgia or fantasy, experience or transcendence. Only a few people – mediators know how to tap the moment and live in the present. Through this meditation we begin to tame our mind, we become aware of ourselves and it gives a clarity for the purpose of our life.

The Governor on his travels stepped in to pay homage to the Master. “Affairs of State leave me no time for lengthy dissertations,” he said. “Could you put the essence of religion into a paragraph or two for a busy man like me?”

“I shall put it into a single word for the benefit of Your Highness.”

“Incredible! What is that unusual word?”

“Silence.”

“And what is the way to Silence?”

“Meditation.”

“And what, may I ask, is meditation?”

“Silence.” (D’Mello, 1985)

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