



Clive Simpkins

Marketing and Communication Strategist, www.imbizo.com
Co-founder and Professional Member
Professional Speakers Association of Southern Africa (PSASA)

Meditation for stress relief – Part I

Meditation is ultimately nothing more than the end-stage of a contemplation, concentration and then meditation continuum. Paramahansa Ramakrishna, an Indian saint in the 1800s, described it as being the thought-equivalent of pouring oil in a thin, unbroken stream, from one container to another. So there's a flow. Not a 'blankness' or 'emptying of the mind', which is what some people think it is, or should be.

Is it religious? It can be but needn't be. People of all religions, including Muslim Sufis, Judaic rabbis, Roman Catholic mystics, Christian saints, Buddhist and Hindu monks and nuns have all engaged in meditation of the highest order over the millennia. It may be non-religious but spiritual (which is good) or even used purely as a tool to reduce stress, calm the mind and lower the heart rate.

When we contemplate on an ordinary word, a holy word, a mantra (sacred sound syllable) or one of the many names of God – Allah, AUM, Buddha, Hashem, Hanuman, Jesus, Krishna, Love, Mother Mary, Peace, Rama, Vishnu, Ahura Mazda, etc. – our concentration deepens. When the concentration deepens, our breathing rhythm slows down and becomes more regular. This creates even more concentration. Each feeds off the other until a deep and more restful state is achieved. Neurologically, the brain or mind, instead of hopping impulsively and at random from one thought to another, often in a state of agitation, is invited (rather than compelled) to focus on fewer thoughts or indeed just one, thought or image. You can start contemplating by looking at a scenic picture, a religious icon or a candle flame, or at a spot on a blank wall. If you're a visually dominant person, this might work better than just shutting your eyes and trying to calm the mind.

Here's how the meditation process works: If a torch has an adjustable lens, you can twist the front so the beam is wide and diffuse – rather like a mind all over the place. As you turn the lens in the opposite direction, the beam will become narrower, more concentrated and more sharply focused. That's exactly what happens

in the early stages of contemplation, then into concentration which leads to meditation. The number of thoughts or stimuli is reduced and the mind will focus on fewer and less until ultimately it focuses on one. At the highest stages of meditation proper, it will merge with that one thought. So subject and object then become one. Meditator and that on which the meditation is focused, will unite, we are told by the Wise Ones.

You can quite frankly sit and repeat 'teaspoon' with some degree of focus and the same effect will occur. It's simply a question of reducing the waves and impulses in the mind to a selective and repetitive few thoughts – or optimally, one. The idea behind using a religious, holy, uplifting or sacred name is that your thoughts will be tuned to a higher intention.

The idea is not to bully the mind or drag it kicking and screaming into submission. That's functionally impossible anyhow. It's spent many years doing its own thing, so you're not going to get its co-operation, much less its compliance, overnight. Such an expectation will simply lead to disappointment. In the same way that the mind has gotten into the habit of firing off random thoughts and meandering in a chaotic fashion, so it will have to learn a new habit, through gentle repetition – in which it will ultimately do what you wish and not what it wishes. I hope that makes some sense.

I'll continue this in Part II next month.