

Forward.com

No Crystals Needed

Even a Stuffy Suit Can Benefit From Meditation

By Jay Michaelson

Fri. May 04, 2007

What is meditation, and why is it continuing to appear in more and more synagogues long after the Kabbalah craze and other spiritual fads have faded?

As someone who has practiced meditation for many years and has now begun to teach it in Jewish settings, I've found it useful to start with what meditation isn't. First and foremost, meditation is not spirituality. "Spirituality" may take place in a synagogue; or in intimate moments with family, lovers or friends; or while playing music, or in any number of other settings and occasions, but it almost universally has something to do with having a certain kind of experience — a sense of connectedness, perhaps, or even of holiness.

Meditation, however, is less about having a certain kind of experience than about seeing any experience clearly, richly and honestly. It's not the what — it's the how. It does not require a taste for the touchy-feely, a belief in God or a suspension of healthy skepticism. Essentially, it can be verified empirically: By using one or another technique, the mind's incessant stream of thought is gradually slowed down, and as a result it both relaxes and sees things more clearly.

A simple process — but one with powerful results for many practitioners.

For example, Rabbi Rachel Cowan, executive director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which runs meditation retreats for rabbis and Jewish communal leaders, said that meditation enables her "to be less judgmental, to be optimistic, to stick through hard moments." Cowan added that alumni of her program report "greater patience, a deep sense of authenticity and therefore of courage, and a deeper appreciation of work and family."

Owen Gottlieb, a second-year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College who recently participated in a five-day meditation retreat that I co-led, put it this way: "Meditation practice provides me a calm and clarity. It can provide new awareness and discovery, and, especially important from a Jewish perspective, a pathway to being rather than doing."

Of course, these results come from weeks, months and years of hard work; it's not as simple as just sitting pacifically on a cushion. It is true that meditation can be quite relaxing, and given the stresses of contemporary life, it is one of the main reasons people begin meditating. But as Gottlieb points out, calm is only half the point. The other half is clarity: how clearly you see patterns of mind, beauty and horror in the world, and what matters to you in your life.

And that can be quite challenging.

When I went on my first extended Jewish meditation retreat, I hoped, based on my decade or so of studying mysticism, that I would have some kind of mystical experience: a sense of union with ultimate reality, an ineffable but ineluctable sense of knowing, and so on. Well, I did actually have those experiences — but not until I'd first spent several days seeing my own self-doubt, self-loathing and other aspects of my "shadow" that my very busy mind ordinarily occludes. Those were days of tears, of hard work — and of a clarity of insight that I'd never before experienced. Yes, my body felt relaxed, the food tasted especially delicious and I was moved to tears by the sight of a sunset — but I was also seeing my mind all too clearly, wrestling with demons I'd suppressed for years. This was hardly the "spiritual narcotic" that one rabbi scolded me about when he heard I'd started meditating.

Finally, when those much-hoped-for experiences did arrive, it wasn't because of magic or narcotic, but because my mind had slowed down enough to notice them. As I sometimes describe it to my students, it's as if life is a radio station that you're trying to tune into, and meditation helps turn down the static.

In my experience, this is all very rational stuff. It makes sense, it requires no belief system, and it does not require any taste or talent for spirituality. It's even been scientifically measured: Recent studies by University of Wisconsin professor Richard Davidson and others have shown how meditation improves brain function, ability to handle stress and so on. Why, then, does meditation sometimes get lumped in with chanting, angels and the ephemera of the New Age?

First, there is that label — spirituality. In the Jewish world in particular, there's an expectation that meditation is part of the "spiritual path," which itself must have something to do with Kabbalah, God, angels, the afterlife and the whole elaborate belief system of the Jewish religion. Perhaps this expectation is because many of the same people who teach meditation — myself included — also teach these other things and at organizations with names like the Institute for Jewish Spirituality or the Elat Chayyim Center for Jewish Spirituality. Or perhaps it's because it's taught at the same places (community centers, retreat centers, night classes at synagogues, etc.) and to the same "spiritual" people who make rational, secular folks uncomfortable.

Outside the Jewish world, however, this conjunction is less common. For example, at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Mass., which teaches "insight" meditation in the Buddhist mode, there is no "spirituality" in the usual sense, as well as no associations with God, dogma or

faith. Perhaps for these reasons, the crowd is usually made up of professionals, academics and folks more likely to be holding a cell phone than a crystal. While many are doubtless there as part of a religious/spiritual quest, many others are there simply to become more aware, more compassionate and more wise, or to gain ways of working with pain and suffering. Of course, this is itself a spiritual quest — but not in the way that spirituality is commonly understood.

Then there is the matter of Jewish meditation itself.

Jewish meditation developed as part of the Jewish religion, and the techniques that it uses to quiet the mind are grounded in Jewish religious concepts: contemplation of God, permutation of Hebrew letters and so on. Obviously, it does have a particular religious end in mind: a relationship with the Divine. This “Divine” may be defined quite differently from the conventional Western God: In many kabbalistic texts, it is the Infinite, which by definition is omnipresent, filling every atom of creation, not the Old Man in the Sky who writes in the Book of Life — but it’s still more religious than merely “seeing clearly.” So it’s natural that many people associate meditation with these religious concepts.

Third and finally, meditation is sometimes thought of as spirituality, ironically because it does, in fact, lead to the sorts of mystical experiences one reads about in books. This is one reason there are now meditation classes in mainline Reform and Conservative synagogues, and why, as I go to visit them on my book tour, I hear people say over and over again that they’ve started meditating: Because, unlike so much of religion, it actually delivers the goods. Cowan said that meditation provided her “a deeper connection with God than ever before.” Gottlieb called meditation “extremely valuable to Jewish spiritual development.” So perhaps meditation is thought of as spirituality because it does what spirituality is supposed to do: provide experiences of holiness, intimacy and love.

Of course, whether these experiences are really of God is more difficult to say. Certainly, if you’re predisposed to think so, you will likely have an experience that self-fulfills your expectations. This is one reason many Jewish meditation teachers today actually prefer to combine Buddhist meditation techniques with Jewish practice rather than rely solely on the Jewish ones. The Buddhist techniques are more transparent — they just say, “Focus on your breath, and see what happens.” They’re also more systematic: Jewish meditation is marginal to Judaism, but insight meditation is fundamental to certain forms of Buddhism, and as a result it has been carefully considered, in a systematic way, for centuries. Not so the Jewish practices, which are scattered across many texts and rarely explain exactly how they work.

In terms of opening the doors to a wider audience, as Cowan noted, another advantage of the Buddhist approach is that it “requires no Hebrew, no dealing with Jewish hurts and angers, and no theology.”

Cultural importation, however, does come at a price. Many attendees at “Jewish” meditation retreats become upset when they learn that the technologies have been imported from elsewhere. And there are contextual differences between Judaism and Buddhism that impact how one practices meditation. For example, when one is swept up by a delicious awe and gratitude for the abundance of creation, should one simply

“note the sensation” — or rejoice?

Shoshana Cooper, who teaches meditation with her husband, Rabbi David Cooper, thinks that within a few decades, Buddhist-derived meditation will be as unremarkable as Hindu-derived yoga. “Thirty years ago, yoga was for the weirdos, the hippies and the drug addicts,” she says. “Now, we don’t give it a second thought. Why? Because it works, and we are practical people.”

And just as no one thinks that she is practicing Hinduism when taking a yoga class, Cooper says, meditation practices generally thought of as Buddhist will eventually become simply... meditation. Think about it: Would you go to a yoga class at your local gym if you thought it required a New Age sensibility, a Hindu ascetic practice or a belief in Krishna?

In any event, Gottlieb said, Buddhist-derived “techniques of awareness and insight do not contradict Jewish theological principles nor require Buddhist adherence,” and thus “do not cause me any cognitive dissonance as a committed and practicing Jew.”

Because meditation has changed my life for the better, because it has made me happier, more ethical and more appreciative of daily blessings — and because it has done so without any sacrifice of my intellectual or emotional integrity — I am heartened by the meditation groups popping up at mainstream synagogues and Jewish community centers (although meditating every day is actually much harder than setting aside a week once a year; on a retreat, momentum builds and meditation gets quieter, deeper and easier). And I look forward to the day when the benefits that Davidson’s team has measured accrue not just to monks and nuns but also to moms and dads. After all, with life lasting as short as it does, doesn’t each day deserve to be seen as clearly and richly as possible?

Fri. May 04, 2007

Post a Comment:

Your Name: **(Required)**

Your Email Address: **(Required)**

Post Your Comment

The Forward welcomes reader comments in order to promote thoughtful discussion on issues of importance to the Jewish community. In the interest of maintaining a civil forum, the Forward requires that all commenters be appropriately respectful toward our writers, other commenters and the subjects of the articles. Vigorous debate and reasoned critique are welcome; name-calling and personal invective are not. While we generally do not seek to edit or actively moderate comments, the Forward reserves the right to remove comments for any reason.

Comments

Stan said:

Michaelson's article is worthy of being in the file of critiques of "Abrahamic religions"...though he does not give Myth its due (other than a brief sentence) for those ..like myself...who could not abide "Faith" without it. You might not have read his take on meditation (No Crystals Needed ...May 4, '07) ... to which you probably would resonate. (Do you still allot time for meditation..as I recall you did in the past?) Thank you for the forwards...all. Chag Sameach.

 Sun. Sep 30, 2007

John Brown said:


For me , meditation is no more than a "formal" method for performing what the minds does naturally. It is simply a way to train the mind to calm down more completely so as to perceive what one is actually feeling and thinking. Surely, this is not a religious or irreligious practice. Any activity that contributes to clearer thinking should not be discouraged. The mere fact that meditation is associated with certain religious practices is not an adoption of that religion, if one choses to practice meditation. This fact should be obvious. In fact, it is a lack of clear thinking and common sense, to draw such conclusions. Moreover, mystical aspect of Judaism indicate many meditative practice, to achieve the same end. I believe dialog, rather that criticism, is a more enlightened approach to this issue. I suspect dialog is a fundamental principle of Judaism, and should be employed in order to arrive a true understanding of this practice. Any practice that enhances self-knowledge can only facilitate ones religious understanding. Moreover, religion is an evolutionary process. How much has Judaism evolved over the centuries? Meditation is not evil, ignorance and certitude; resulting from an inability to dispassionately consider something different, though not evil, is certainly reactionary, if not unenlightened.

 Fri. Nov 09, 2007

drbcohn said:

I respectfully submit, you sound confused a bit. Davening is meditation. It does not resemble buddhism or anything else. They teach mystical Judaism all yeshivas

kollels, and it always has been a part of Judaism. Mediation is on the ineffable. You know there are systems in Judaism of deep mysticism. The problem is people don't want to develop the context to acquire it. They want it now.

 Fri. Jan 11, 2008

John Powell said:

Meditation is a useful tool for a harried mind to fall back on. Meditation, in its modern mechanical sense, has nothing to do with spirituality. Spirituality is not touchy feely, at least not in my experience. Spirituality is recognition of presence. It is achieved through hard work and prayer. I would even offer that meditation short circuits the path to spirituality by making the mind "feel good" before it has any right to. And besides, since when does davening and spirituality make you feel "good". I rather think they reveal the real terror in the world around us and teach us how to stand at the edge of the terror without flinching in the face of the assume.

 Fri. Apr 04, 2008
