

Sunday Review

The Morality of Meditation

Gray Matter

By DAVID DeSTENO JULY 5, 2013

MEDITATION is fast becoming a fashionable tool for improving your mind. With mounting scientific evidence that the practice can enhance creativity, memory and scores on standardized intelligence tests, interest in its practical benefits is growing. A number of “mindfulness” training programs, like that developed by the engineer Chade-Meng Tan at Google, and conferences like Wisdom 2.0 for business and tech leaders, promise attendees insight into how meditation can be used to augment individual performance, leadership and productivity.

This is all well and good, but if you stop to think about it, there’s a bit of a disconnect between the (perfectly commendable) pursuit of these benefits and the purpose for which meditation was originally intended. Gaining competitive advantage on exams and increasing creativity in business weren’t of the utmost concern to Buddha and other early meditation teachers. As Buddha himself said, “I teach one thing and one only: that is, suffering and the end of suffering.” For Buddha, as for many modern spiritual leaders, the goal of meditation was as simple as that. The heightened control of the mind that meditation offers was supposed to help its practitioners see the world in a new and more compassionate way, allowing them to break free from the categorizations (us/them, self/other) that commonly divide people from one another.

But does meditation work as promised? Is its originally intended effect — the reduction of suffering — empirically demonstrable?

To put the question to the test, my lab, led in this work by the psychologist Paul Condon, joined with the neuroscientist Gaëlle Desbordes and the Buddhist lama Willa Miller to conduct an experiment whose publication is forthcoming in the journal *Psychological Science*. We recruited 39 people from the Boston area who were willing to take part in an eight-week course on meditation (and who had never taken any such course before). We then randomly assigned 20 of them to take part in weekly meditation classes, which also required them to practice at home using guided recordings. The remaining 19 were told that they had been placed on a waiting list for a future course.

After the eight-week period of instruction, we invited the participants to the lab for an experiment that purported to examine their memory, attention and related cognitive abilities. But as you might anticipate, what actually interested us was whether those who had been meditating would exhibit greater compassion in the face of suffering. To find out, we staged a situation designed to test the participants' behavior before they were aware that the experiment had begun.

WHEN a participant entered the waiting area for our lab, he (or she) found three chairs, two of which were already occupied. Naturally, he sat in the remaining chair. As he waited, a fourth person, using crutches and wearing a boot for a broken foot, entered the room and audibly sighed in pain as she leaned uncomfortably against a wall. The other two people in the room — who, like the woman on crutches, secretly worked for us — ignored the woman, thus confronting the participant with a moral quandary. Would he act compassionately, giving up his chair for her, or selfishly ignore her plight?

The results were striking. Although only 16 percent of the nonmeditators gave up their seats — an admittedly disheartening fact — the proportion rose to 50 percent among those who had meditated. This increase is impressive not solely because it occurred after only eight weeks of meditation, but also because it did so within the context of a situation known to inhibit considerate behavior: witnessing

others ignoring a person in distress — what psychologists call the bystander effect — reduces the odds that any single individual will help. Nonetheless, the meditation increased the compassionate response threefold.

Although we don't yet know why meditation has this effect, one of two explanations seems likely. The first rests on meditation's documented ability to enhance attention, which might in turn increase the odds of noticing someone in pain (as opposed to being lost in one's own thoughts). My favored explanation, though, derives from a different aspect of meditation: its ability to foster a view that all beings are interconnected. The psychologist Piercarlo Valdesolo and I have found that any marker of affiliation between two people, even something as subtle as tapping their hands together in synchrony, causes them to feel more compassion for each other when distressed. The increased compassion of meditators, then, might stem directly from meditation's ability to dissolve the artificial social distinctions — ethnicity, religion, ideology and the like — that divide us.

Supporting this view, recent findings by the neuroscientists Helen Weng, Richard Davidson and colleagues confirm that even relatively brief training in meditative techniques can alter neural functioning in brain areas associated with empathic understanding of others' distress — areas whose responsiveness is also modulated by a person's degree of felt associations with others.

So take heart. The next time you meditate, know that you're not just benefiting yourself, you're also benefiting your neighbors, community members and as-yet-unknown strangers by increasing the odds that you'll feel their pain when the time comes, and act to lessen it as well.

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