

## Meditation? Never Mind (1618 words)

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Mark Twain quipped, “Life consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that is forever blowing through one’s head.” His insightful comment underlines the truth that much (most?) of our experience is superimposed on the endless stream of consciousness—or more accurately—stream of *unconscious* thoughts, beliefs, memories, and fantasies when we are not attending and focusing upon some plan, objective or captivated by a setting sun at the beach. When we are not attentive, we daydream, fantasize, and reminiscence—often in surreal combinations. Our mental universe is composed of endless images and ideas associated with brain wave states from delta to gamma.

It is often helpful to explain a concept by what it is not, by using contrasts and opposites, i.e. night vs. day, hot vs. cold, addiction vs. recovery.

I begin by describing what meditation is not, and then explain what it is. When I have led lectures to clients on attentiveness/meditation, I used the following to introduce meditation on a display wall board. I have them fill in each as best as they can, then complete the list:

THE PAST	THE PRESENT	THE FUTURE
mind (memory)	no mind, awake	mind (imagination)
then and there	here and now	when and where
recollection	awareness/mysticism	daydreams, fantasy
dreams	sensory attentiveness	intuition? dreams?
(accurate?) recall	prayer-meditation	probability (?)
resentment, guilt	emotional sensation	worry, anxiety
trauma, grief	stillness, silence	fear, dread

How often do we shuttle between the past and the future? How often are we actually in the present? A maxim in many treatment centers reminds us that “regret of yesterday and fear of tomorrow are the twin thieves that steal away today.” In understanding our three “time zones” of past, future, and present, we can at least exclude what meditation is not.

First, the past. René Descartes is renowned for his philosophical statement “Cogito ergo sum,” I think, therefore I am. The deeper truth should be “I *remember*, therefore I am.” The tragedy of Alzheimer’s and other severely brain damaged people who have memory loss and even annihilation is loss of uniqueness. Their identities vanish and they exist much like babies:

they experience pure perception of stimuli in a perpetual “here and now” Zen state. They may not recognize loved ones who visit them. In a heartbreaking sense they cease to exist because they no longer have a past. Our “self” is merely autobiographical memory: I am my past because I have a past that I remember. This is the point of the column under THE PAST. It can almost be stated “I am memory.”

For those fortunate to have had a healthy, nurturing, and life affirming past, they have abundant pleasant memories to reflect upon. Many of our clients have experienced and endured abuse and neglect or trauma (and combinations thereof), so their past is tragic and even miserable. An incest or sexual abuse survivor knows this: sexual touch ignites those loathsome sensations called kinesthetic memory. A primary therapeutic challenge is to facilitate clients to face their past, share it in a safe therapeutic milieu, and then let it go and function in a healthy and productive present. While “I am memory,” the paradox is “I am not my past.”

In working at Addiction Recovery Care Association (ARCA), a residential treatment center, years ago I treated a man addicted to alcohol and cannabis. After detox he participated in therapeutic groups. He self-medicated much of his past with substances, because he was an ambulance driver and endured countless grisly scenes. He was diagnosed with PTSD as he had vivid, spontaneous flashbacks: at times he saw, heard, smelled, and felt fatal traffic or homicide experiences. PTSD is like being in a mental time machine. Thus, after he “flashbacked” about one horrific and gruesome time, we walked around the perimeter of ARCA for nearly an hour. Finally he dried tears and was visibly relieved. I said,

“All of that was nothing but a memory. It didn’t happen here as we walk. It was only a memory. Say that out loud.” He did, “This is only a memory.” Years later I saw him and he said that statement was the turning point in his life.

In group, I have asked “Are you shaped by your past or your future?” Our clients (and ourselves!) have to make peace with the past, and then move on to today and a hopeful future.

Next, what is the future? If, as group begins, I ask “What will happen at 12:00 noon?” This tends to puzzle them until some says “We leave and get lunch.” Then, “How do you know this?” More bewilderment ensues unless someone says “That’s what happened last week.” I point out that the future is simply memory-based imagination. The “future” is a mental construction based on prediction, probability and expectation. The members imagined group would end at noon based on past patterns. In a positive vein, the future can be hopeful and

optimistically anticipated. But, with many clients, their future is profuse with fear, worry and dread. Accordingly, the future is mental, solely a construction of mind.

Lastly, what is the present? What does this have to do with meditation? A slogan is posted on many Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous walls: “Live for today” and “A day at a time.” Another saying is “Yesterday is history; tomorrow is mystery; today is a gift. That’s why it is called the present.” To summarize, yesterday is memory; tomorrow is imagination. So, what is left? Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Not mind.

When mind stops, the present begins. There is proximity between awareness, attentiveness, and meditation. Attentiveness occurs as the eternal storms of images are momentarily calmed, neurobabble is gagged, and time stands still. When thought stops, awareness arises. Still minds run deepest. In meditation, the intent is to reduce external and internal stimuli and distractions, and to be attentive to the object of focus. A standard aim is to allow one to relax, become calm, and quiet the mind. Mindfulness is a contemporary mantra; mindlessness is more accurate. As in the columns above, THE PRESENT explains “the eternal moment” is opposed to the past and the future. Awareness is the key. (The brain wave frequency would be theta, a medication goal of extreme relaxation bordering on light sleep.)

Awareness is being attentive, alert, and practicing “meditation of the moment” helps this quest.

There are volumes of books explaining and guiding the art of meditation, far beyond the scope of this article. I shall conclude by describing six sensory ways that can at least set the stage for practicing meditation, the quest to silence the mind into mindlessness. Progressive relaxation would preface the following.

**Visual:** stare at a candle, cross, icon or other religious symbol, Twelve-Step Triangle, stained-glass window, fish tank, flower or other nature scene, and the like. Some find it better to close the eyes and imagine a scene using guided imagery. I teach clients to recall or imagine a nature scene (mountain, field, brook, or ocean) and have them visualize what they imagine and have them fill in details: “What do you see? Hear? Smell? Feel on your skin?” Then they can practice this at home.

**Sound:** listen to breathing, soothing music, chants or other sacred music, recordings of natural sounds, a ticking clock, birds in the morning or crickets in the evening, and so forth. (This can be an adjunct for visual meditation.) Closing eyes may reduce visual distraction but

some clients bombarded by imagery prefer a visual focus. I have clients stare at some spot or object (except a clock!) on a wall, unblinking as long as possible.

**Spoken:** this involves chanting, speaking, or whispering aloud or silently Scripture verses, Twelve-Step slogans, The Serenity Prayer, “Peace” and so forth. This form has been practiced for eons with Jews and Christians, as well as in Eastern religions. “Om” or aum is a Hindu word pronounced and maintained by a humming or droning sound. In any case, this should be done slowly. The intent is to “slow motion” neurobabble and fantasy.

**Smell:** a meditative mood can be supplemented with aromatic candles, flowers, simmering spice bags filled with potpourri, scented candles or pine oil fragrance. These can augment other modalities.

**Touch:** Some find tactile methods aids meditation by using a rosary or prayer beads to enhance concentration. Other can fondle a soft sponge ball in syncopation with “chanting.” A hand object adds to connect meditation with a touchable object so later the “anchor” object stimulates meditation.

**Taste:** mindfully tasting chocolate, raisons, or orange slices is yet another modality to explore.

**Motion:** for those with AD(H)D, PAW or other afflictions impeding stillness, one may find walking to be useful in emptying and stilling minds. Try “mindfulness strolling.” Others may knit, draw, sing, paint, color etc.

Whatever sensory modality is used or combined, in meditation one intends to empty the storm of thoughts forever blowing ripples across the mind. Yet emptying the mind is essential—and equally daunting! One of the great lessons is this teaches how unruly the mind is. Prayer and meditation warriors throughout the eons have admitted to and consoled disciples and seekers, that meditation and contemplative prayer is very difficult! Our restless bodies yearn to fidget and be pacified, and our unconscious mental energies want to erupt in frivolous thought or irrelevant reverie. Our television and video remotes are symbolic of our boisterous minds, which strive to change mental channel after channel. We develop “remote” minds obsessed with switching.

I realize how noisy and loud our clients’ lives are, like a speaker icon on 100%! Silence is (really!) deafening.

So, to conclude, meditation is truly mindless. It’s one of those Zen paradoxes that mindfulness leads to mindlessness.

Never mind.