

THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF MEDITATION

By Michael Murphy and Steven Donovan
San Rafael, CA (230 Forbes Avenue):
Esalen Institute Study of Exceptional
Functioning, 1988, \$17.95 paper

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEDITATION

Michael A. West, Editor
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, \$65

Reviewed by Charles Tart

Many of us practice meditation as a growth discipline. The form is typically Eastern, because much of our Western meditation tradition has been lost or embedded in Western religious contexts we find ineffective. Eastern meditative traditions, although appealing, were developed in a context almost as alien as the original Western context. Will Eastern techniques work effectively for us? Only personal answers are possible. Some Eastern techniques do for some, not for others. We must understand meditation's fundamentals as well as its culturally biased aspects to adapt them effectively.

In 1969, when my *Altered States of Consciousness* was published, I argued that Western psychology should research meditation: a then current psychological dictionary got no further than defining meditation as "serious thought." To stimulate investigation, I reprinted two-thirds of the psychological research on meditation I knew of that was written in English. That may sound impressive, but it meant two of the three papers!

Psychological and physiological studies have increased greatly since 1969. The Murphy and Donovan book lists more than 1200 studies published between 1931 and 1988. I missed some in 1969, but Murphy and Donovan probably missed almost nothing. Their more than 1200 studies were taken from the Esalen Exceptional Functioning Project's data base of more than 10,000 studies on exceptional functioning and bodily transformation. This guide is a required reference for all who want to understand meditation research; we can expect more guides from this project.

The book has chapters on physiological and behavioral effects, subjective reports and the main bibliography.

Within each chapter research is reviewed by topics. In the behavioral effects chapter, for instance, we have perceptual and cognitive abilities, Rorschach test shifts, regression in the service of the ego, creativity and self-actualization, hypnotic suggestibility, anxiety, psychotherapy and addiction, sleep, and sex-role identification. Each study has a brief summary and also a full reference in the bibliography. Since an individual study may fall under categories, I wondered why the authors omitted an index. Murphy reassures me the next printing will have one.

Murphy and Donovan have deliberately not evaluated individual research studies, a legitimate strategy for a developing field when it is more important to share the possibilities than to get lost in minutiae of interpretation. Yet the quality of the published studies varies: some results should be given less weight. By contrast, the West anthology, (overpriced in the current cloth edition) is excellent in weighing and evaluating studies, while recognizing that it is early in the research game for judging them; it complements the Murphy and Donovan book. The West anthology reviews around a thousand studies, which give it a less current data base than Murphy and Donovan's.



I would like to believe that meditation research increased since 1969 because many psychologists saw the logic of studying a technique with so much potential to change a practitioner's world view; but the reality is different. Psychologists are subject to cultural biases like materialism, much as other people are. As West recognizes, research was stimulated primarily (but not exclusively) in 1970 by the publication of Keith Wallace's article, "Physiological effects of transcendental

meditation," in *Science*. Wallace reported *physiological* changes in relaxation during TM, and this "legitimized" meditation for our materialistic culture and its religion of scientism. If meditation changed the functioning of body and brain it must be *real*, no longer just a strange superstition practiced by primitives!

Thus began the main thrust of meditation research: will it reduce stress in Westerners? West's anthology shows the answer is generally yes, although *it is unclear that meditation reduces stress more than a comparable period of rest*. West and other contributors believe that stress reduction has been a side track and that the potentials of meditation to change worldviews and lifestyles are almost unresearched.

West's book has excellent evaluative chapters on physiology, methodological considerations in research, Western and Eastern theories underlying our approach to meditation, and clinical applications. It contains one of the best expositions of the basic Buddhist worldview I have seen, in Guy Claxton's chapter on Buddhist psychology. Claxton emphasizes that our personal philosophies are embedded in our style of *perceptual* construction of reality rather than in words: thus Buddhist meditation observes how the mind reacts to sensations.

I was also impressed by Patricia Carington's chapter articulating what we might call a "minimum benefit potential" of meditation for Westerners:

In modern industrialized society the pace of our lives is determined largely by economic considerations rather than by the rhythms of human life or natural growing things and there is a dearth of spontaneously occurring quiet inner space into which we can retreat for refurbishing. It is well to remember therefore that it is people who live under these conditions of modern society who make up our clinical populations. Outside of the immediate tension-reducing effects of meditation there is another service which the professional performs when introducing this quieting experience into a patient's life. . . . The average human being today seems to move from task to task with almost no time to sense his or her own 'self' and to reaffirm the basic tenet 'I exist'."

So what can meditation do for Westerners? It can reduce stress for most of us, to sit still and be quietly with ourselves for a while each day. For

some it can lead a long way toward psychological growth and "enlightenment." But it still doesn't work well for many who try it; we need extensive research on questions like which *specific* type of meditation works well with which *specific* type of person? How do psychodynamic factors like defense mechanisms detract from or distort the meditation process? For our knees and backs, do we need classical meditation postures or is a basic upright and stable posture enough? Under what circumstances, and for whom, do transference factors distort mental functioning enough that a meditator is better off without a live teacher or support group? If you're having a difficult time meditating, when is it best to push through obstacles and when to quit instead of practicing failure? And so on.

If you are a researcher, these two books can inspire you to do some of the research we desperately need. If you are a meditator, they will also help you to integrate your meditation with a general Western psychological view.

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THE PEACE MANUAL

A Guide to Personal-Political Integration

by Frank Rubinfeld

Lion-Lamb Press (678 Santa Rosa Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94707, \$7.95)

Reviewed by Eliot Macy

Our country has been forced through some very great changes in the last fifty years. The American psyche has sustained grievous wounds in the process. We have lost those feelings of sureness we used to have that we could do anything, solve any problem, do everything better, bigger and faster than anybody else, lick any enemy, and do it all with absolute certainty that our cause was just. It was never really like that, of course, but our great energy and inventiveness and ability to produce did much to give substance to the illusion that it was. More than anything else it was the war in Vietnam

that shattered our illusion. I believe the anguish the retrospective look at Vietnam is presently causing is symptomatic of the struggle many are having in trying to come to terms with this shattered illusion. It is a time consuming and painful process.

In *The Peace Manual*, Frank Rubinfeld calls attention to process, the *how* of working for peace and the way it is related to the *what*, the things done. How affects what.

There is a difference between a world of peace and a world of non-war, Rubinfeld says, and *The Peace Manual* aims at the larger task. He believes it will take more than one generation to accomplish it.

Central to the work of building a world of peace are two attitudes: first, one must recognize that the presence of nuclear weapons poses an imminent danger to all humanity; second, one must acknowledge that each individual can contribute to building peace. There are many ways of contributing. In nineteen simple and clearly written exercises, Rubinfeld shows the way.

Within all of us, he asserts, there exists a source of wisdom, healing and inspiration. It is similar to what Milton Erickson has termed the "deep self," Assagioli the "higher self," and Jung the "collective unconscious." Beginning to believe in this source is the first step on the path to internal and external peace. One reaches and makes use of this higher self by a combination of relaxation and visualization techniques, described in the exercises.

There is much wisdom, healing and inspiration in this peace manual. Anyone involved in peace work or contemplating it should keep a copy handy for quick reference, if only to inoculate himself or herself against burnout.

Actually, one does not have to be involved in peace work to benefit from this manual. Its nineteen exercises serve nicely as a regime for becoming a more evolved and integrated person. In fact, if everyone seeking therapy were to perform the exercises regularly I think a lot of us therapists would soon become redundant.

Eliot Macy, a peace activist since 1942, is also a family therapist in Martha's Vineyard and the author of "Notes Regarding the Nuclear Arms Race" (*Pilgrimage*, Jan/Feb 1987).