



White Paper



Mahāsāra School of Meditation

Meditation is an Essential Life Skill

Multitasking is Not Our Friend

As the Internet continues to feed us endless amounts of information, the need to simultaneously manage multiple data points has led to some interesting discoveries. Research from major universities shows that multitasking has been known to reduce clarity of thought, diminish cognitive capacity, and physically thin out certain areas of the brain. Heavy multitaskers were shown to perform worse in whatever tasks they were given.¹

The reason why multitasking is so damaging is not hard to understand. Put simply, the need to keep our attention moving from one thing to another disrupts the mind's natural balance and ability to process information. If we think about it, the words "peace", "calmness", and even "contentment" imply a certain degree of stillness. When the mind is able to focus on one thing, it grows calm and steady by definition. On the other hand, chronic fragmented attention leads to negative emotions and restlessness, not to mention the high levels of stress that have become so common we almost take them for granted.

In this light, work itself is not the challenge but an office culture that overwhelms us with endless bytes of information, forcing us to jump from one thing to another almost without pause. This leads to shallow thinking

¹ Research from Stanford University. See <http://www.talentsmart.com/articles/Multitasking-Damages-Your-Brain-and-Your-Career,-New-Studies-Suggest-2102500909-p-1.html>

and an inability to experience our deeper selves. The link between information overload, stress, burnout, and depression is well established.²

Meditation is an Essential Life Skill

Since our work environment is not going to magically return to a time before email, social media, and text messaging, we need to find a way to reclaim our mind's natural balance by learning how to hold our attention on one thing for longer periods of time. Since it's not plausible to do this at work, we need a proven method that we can use at home to counteract the heavy demands placed on our mind. Steadiness of mind produces three important effects: first, focused attention greatly reduces the number of random thoughts passing through our mind, since it allows us to remain in the present moment instead of being dragged along by the thought-stream. When we stay in the present, we don't have time to worry about the past or the future, which immediately makes us feel more content. Second, with fewer thoughts clouding the mind, the thoughts that do come up are sharper and clearer. Third, and most importantly, as we reduce the number of thoughts we become more aware of the underlying consciousness that is the source of all thought - and the big discovery is that this consciousness is felt as deep peace and bliss. That

² Ruff, Joseph (2002). Information Overload: Cases, Symptoms, and Solutions. Learning Innovations Laboratories, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

is, our natural sense of presence is felt as deeply peaceful when it's not covered by a thick veil of thoughts.

One of life's secrets is that the mind is more content when it thinks fewer thoughts, which as mentioned happens when we are able to rest in the present moment. Less brooding over the past or worrying about the future allows the mind to relax, which in turn improves our cognitive functioning and emotional wellbeing. That's why some of our best ideas or creative breakthroughs occur when we are in the shower or enjoying a quiet walk. The more our mind relaxes, the better it functions - a point not lost on Albert Einstein.³ In this sense, training the mind to hold its attention on one thing is a precursor to deep relaxation, a fact understood by meditators for thousands of years.

So how can we develop a calm and steady mind in the midst of our busy lives? A popular strategy is to mute the phone and schedule the writing and answering of emails to a specific time. While helpful, time management strategies are not enough, since there will be many days when we are unable to control the flow of competing demands on our attention. Moreover, the constant pull from attention-dividing tasks carries on unabated even after we leave the office. Research shows that we check our cellphones over

³ Einstein's exact quote is: "the monotony and solitude of a quiet life stimulates the creative mind."

150 times a day.⁴ We eat in front of the TV or while browsing online. All this has become perfectly normal, even as we fail to understand the consequences of not allowing our minds to reduce the number of things it attends to at any given moment. Thankfully, we can regain much of our mental equilibrium by tapping into a tool that is extremely powerful and completely natural to the mind.

Benefits of Meditation

In recent years science has made major progress in confirming what meditators have known all along: that the benefits of a daily meditation practice are overwhelmingly positive. To date, there have been thousands of studies that establish the profound benefits that meditation provides.⁵ Here are just a few of those benefits:

- Reduced stress, anxiety, depression, and anger
- Significant drop in risks for heart disease and stroke
- Improved sleep
- Clearer thinking and decision-making
- Increased emotional stability
- Improved metabolism
- Stronger immune and nervous system
- Greater contentment

⁴ Source: <http://www.kpcb.com/blog/2013-internet-trends>.

⁵ The NCCIH-NIH is an excellent resource for clinical studies on meditation. A list of leading studies is found at <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation/overview.htm>.

- Improved productivity
- Formation of new grey matter in the brain

In-depth analysis of the aforementioned clinical studies would run for many pages, yet the constant stream of articles and blogs on meditation makes it clear that something important is being discovered. That said, if meditation is so wonderful, why is it that most of us don't meditate? The simple truth is that we've never experienced its vast potential because no one ever taught us how to do it. Not knowing how to meditate denies us the ability to appreciate the benefits of practice. Even worse, for many years Western culture saw meditation as a fringe activity for people at the edges of society. The value of physical exercise, on the other hand, is taught to us at an early age and continually reinforced. So while meditation is as natural to the mind as exercise is to the body, people are only now beginning to grasp the true depth of its power.

The Mindfulness Revolution

Mindfulness meditation as we know it today originates from the Satipatthāna Sutta, a part of the early Pali canon of Buddhist scripture revered by the Theravāda branch of Buddhism. *Vipassanā*, a Pali word that is commonly translated as "insight," has become one of the most popular forms of meditation in the West. That's because the practice is routinely presented in a way that strips it from its original Buddhist context, transforming it into a secular practice

that appeals to scientific minds. In that form it's widely taught in schools, universities, corporations, and hospitals as a powerful relaxation and stress reduction technique devoid of any spiritual connotations.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leading teacher in the Western Mindfulness movement, defines the practice as follows: "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment."⁶ To better understand how Mindfulness works, we'll focus on two aspects of its practice: detached witnessing and remaining aware that we are watching.

Detached Witnessing

After settling into a comfortable posture, we begin our meditation by becoming aware of everything we are cognizing. We notice how our body feels, the noises in the room, our breath, and so forth. At this most basic level, Mindfulness meditation teaches the practitioner to observe objects of perception with a detached mind. "Detached mind" means looking at whatever stands before the mind's attention without getting involved to any degree. The meditator does not cling to, reject, pass judgment, or in any way identify with whatever the mind is seeing or

⁶ Kabat-Zinn, Jon. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10, 144–156. doi:10.1093/clipsy/bpg016.

feeling. We simply acknowledge all cognitions without reacting in any way. This includes pains in our body. If, for example, our knee hurts, we simply note the pain without trying to change it. In this mode of practice, multiple objects are cognized at the same time. By simply watching everything from a distance, we begin the process of letting go of our involvement with those objects.

Alternatively, we might choose to focus on a single object such as a part of our body or our breath. In fact, anything can serve as an object of contemplation, but for beginners the breath, body, feelings, and mental formations (thoughts, volition, intellect) serve as the primary targets of attention.

Remaining Aware That We Are Watching

Along with learning how to witness objects with a detached mind, we need to remain aware that we are watching. In other words, we have to notice that we are noticing. This is important because without the effort to remain aware that we are watching, our conscious mind is easily dragged back into our stream of thoughts, feelings, and sensations, which causes us to return to our ordinary state of mind. For this reason, the practice of remaining aware that we are watching is what is actually meant by the word “mindfulness.”

At this point we might wonder what we stand to gain by observing objects or experiences with a detached mind and remaining aware

that we are watching. Part of the answer is that being aware that we are watching allows us to establish a gap between what we are observing and ourselves. This gap is a crucial first step in allowing us to regain a deep sense of calm, since it helps prevent us from identifying with and being affected by any object or experience passing before our mind.

As our meditation deepens with practice, we begin to gain mastery over our thoughts, emotions, and actions. In other words, the separation of our identity from an object of perception is what allows us to gain control over that object. For example, if we realize that we are not our thoughts, we won't be compelled to act upon them. Since thoughts are the seeds of desires and aversions, experiencing that we are not our thoughts allows us to control desires and aversions. Likewise, if we realize that we are not our feelings and emotions, especially those of the negative kind, we won't be weighed down by them. Such a realization allows us to avoid unconscious reactions to external stimuli, allowing us to protect the natural balance and peace that are innate to the mind.

After we emerge from meditation, we return to our normal, busy lives, but the imprint of stillness generated by focusing our attention on a single object such as the breath carries strongly into our day. With daily practice we discover that we are able to ignore much of the “noise” and focus more easily on one thing at a time, along with being able to remain unaffected (or less affected) by the

triggers that cause us stress. In short, we notice a growing sense of inner peace and contentment as our consciousness stops identifying with everything it perceives.

What makes Mahāsāra Meditation Different?

Mahāsāra meditation operates on many of the same principles as Mindfulness but takes the meditation one step further. Mahāsāra meditation defines meditation as “the gentle effort to rest in our own innate awareness.”⁷ Instead of just observing objects of perception with a detached mind, which is a good first step, we go deeper by gently learning how to let go of all objects of perception and turn our attention inward so that our primary target of focus is awareness itself. Since resting attention directly on our sense of being is a subtle practice, Mahāsāra meditation relies on three pillars of practice: developing a nuanced conceptual foundation, developing the right technique, and developing the right inner feeling. Guided meditation exercises are only used to help develop right understanding, while the core meditation technique is given in stages. In other words, Mahāsāra meditation is not based on talking or guided meditations that are readily found online or in apps. Instead, the core meditation is oriented toward absorption into silent awareness

⁷ Pelenur, Andres (2016). *The Essence of Meditation: Advanced Practices for New and Experienced Meditators*. Toronto: Mahasara School of Meditation.

using mantra repetition as a primary aid.

Because the method is subtle, the core practice of Mahāsāra meditation is best taught in stages, which is why the school’s *Meditation Foundation* seminar is divided into two hours per day over three days (although a streamlined 2-hour one-day version can also be given).

Students are encouraged to set up a daily practice at home since our ability to “strengthen awareness” unfolds gradually. In Mahāsāra Meditation, the practice is not taught as a magic silver bullet or panacea for all of life’s challenges or difficult circumstances. The limits of meditation are discussed, with the understanding that meditation is simply another tool, albeit an essential one, that we should add to our arsenal of life-enhancing strategies. In this way the school avoids setting up unreasonable expectations that are impossible to attain.

Meditation in the Workplace

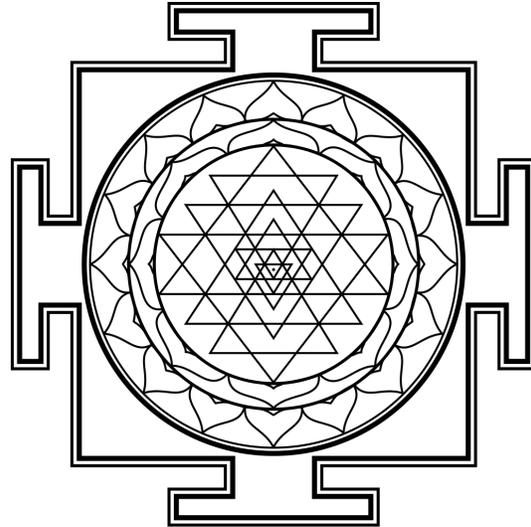
Access to meditation instruction used to require visits to monastic environments or far-off trips to Asia. Moreover, learning the core teachings usually entailed ideological commitments to Buddhist or Hindu traditions. To be clear, for many the rich Hindu and Buddhist cultures are part of the allure of learning how to meditate, but for others adopting a new religion is a non-starter, not to mention those who are atheist or agnostic. The Mindfulness movement has opened the possibility

for everyone to learn how to meditate regardless of their philosophical background. Even so, in the early years Mindfulness meditation in an institutional setting was primarily relegated to patients under the care of psychologists or psychiatrists, and meditation was misconceived as a therapy for those who were ill and not as an essential life-skill for all individuals. Thankfully, those perceptions have long disappeared.

Today, HR Professionals recognize the value of adding meditation instruction to their wellness programs. The wealth of clinical studies now gives corporations solid evidence to justify hiring meditation teachers to lead workshops, seminars, or to participate in kick-off retreats. Meditation has been around for thousands of years and is mentioned in the Upanishads as far back as the 7th century BCE. For the first time, corporations are in the unique position to be able to offer their employees this life-transforming skill without the need for them to step out of the office.

“Meditation is the gentle effort we make to rest in our own innate awareness.”

—Andres Pelenur



Sri Yantra: a symbol for creation as a manifestation of consciousness.

About the Mahāsāra School of Meditation

महासार Mahāsāra = strong, valuable, precious

The Mahāsāra School of Meditation's corporate training seminars are designed to enable public, private, and governmental organizations to include effective meditation instruction in their wellness and social responsibility programs.

Mahāsāra Meditation is accessible to everyone. No prior studies or experience is needed to learn how to meditate with great results. The corporate training seminar is secular in its teaching and is suitable for all individuals regardless of their philosophical, religious, or spiritual views.

Comments on this paper?

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About Andres Pelenur

Andres Pelenur has been meditating and studying yogic scriptures for over twenty years. He is the founder of the Mahāsāra School of Meditation and a disciple of the meditation master Swami Nityananda of Ganeshpuri (1897–1961). Andres is also the author of *The Essence of Meditation: Advanced Practices for New and Experienced Meditators*. He received training in multiple yogic disciplines at numerous ashrams in India and the United States. Andres holds a BA in English from McGill University and a JD from the University of Toronto, Faculty of Law. He is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese.

Andres Pelenur is also a Founding Partner of Borders Law Firm. He is also an attorney-at-law in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. From 2004 to 2015, Andres served as the Managing Partner of Borders Law Firm.



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