

Effects & Hindrances of Meditation

By Dr. Tan Kheng Khoo



Immediate Effects

(1) Accumulation of saliva: This phenomenon happens to many people. What one has to do is to merely swallow the saliva mindfully, whilst not paying attention to the breadth. Immediately after this, one comes back to the breadth again. Thoughts are again being consciously pushed away, whilst concentrating on the air striking at the nostril during inhalation and exhalation

(2) Numbness and pain in the limbs: Again this is quite a common complaint. At first, one should try to tolerate the pain or numbness as long as possible. Later, as these effects become more intolerable and affect one's meditation, then one may stretch out one's legs until the numbness or pain is considerably reduced. After that, one may resume the semi-lotus position again. However if one is sitting on an armchair, then there is no grounds for such complaints.

(3) Restlessness of Mind and Body: These effects are more difficult to overcome. In this instance, one should physically try to relax the body: tense the whole body and then relax it again. After this, concentrate harder on the breathing, it is only with time and experience that one can go deeper into theta wave, access concentration, so that bliss may arise to eliminate restlessness and worry.

(4) Weightlessness or lightness: This phenomenon needs no remedy at all. It merely indicates that one is progressing in one's meditation. However, there may come a time when one may be deluded to think that one is "levitating" upwards whilst breathing in and downwards whilst breathing out. This is not the case: one merely has to open one's eyes to see the truth of the matter. The opposite of heaviness is a little more disconcerting to the meditator. The student will feel that the arms are as heavy as metal bars, and at times as though the whole body has assumed giant proportions. Again, this is another form of delusion, known as Maya or Makyo. Here again if one is bothered by it, then one may remedy it merely by opening one's eyes. And this will stop the feeling of heaviness immediately.

(5) Warmth: This effect is almost universal. As one relaxes in meditation, one's blood vessels dilate. The dilatation of the blood vessels has the same effect as drinking wine. The whole body warms up, and some people could even get very hot to the extent of perspiring profusely. The danger now is not to catch a cold when you finish with your meditation. Clothe yourself adequately before you go to sleep, if it is your sleeping time.

(6) Cold: Very, very rarely an individual may feel colder when meditating. This is very unusual. However it does happen. You either ignore it or put something light to cover yourself or wear a cardigan when you meditate.

(7) Itchiness: Sometimes, it feels as if insects are crawling all over you. You just have to open your eyes to know that there isn't. Try and stand the itch: you either concentrate on the area or ignore it. If it becomes so unbearable, then scratch it, and return to your meditation proper. The itch or 'insects' is due to the hairs standing up at the beginning of rapture (this is called Piti in pali)

(8) Smoothness and Roughness: In Samatha (one-pointed concentration), there may be some jerkiness while you are sitting. Sometimes the body tends to sway from side to side or forward and backward. Sometimes the body twirls around continuously. All these movements are due to one's internal tension being too wound up (i.e. one's tension due to stress is quite overwhelming), whilst the physical body is rather relaxed during meditation. This internal/external conflict causes these repetitive movements. There is nothing you can do about it: just let it be until one day your stress and tension are reduced sufficiently that these movements will stop on their own.

(9) Involuntary movements: These are very structured gestures or mudras that look like traditional dances with hand movements. Occasionally, the student will stand up and dance! This is due to Kriya energy being activated by the meditation teacher (who is called Sadguru). The student sometimes become frighten, but actually it is quite harmless. The student may stop the Kriya mudras if she wills it, but when she does that her meditation becomes less deep. However, if she does not stop them she cannot arrive at stillness, which is a prerequisite to a successful meditation.

(10) Nimittas---visions and dreams: When we go deeper into theta wave, we tend to have dreamlets and visions. These are like television movies, in which we can only watch the sequence of events, but we cannot change the events or characters in the dreams. However, we can stop the show completely and nothing else. The visions are scenes of splendor or horror, or we may see Buddha, Jesus or Allah. Whatever it is, it is an illusion. The Japanese Zen practitioners call this Makyo (hallucination). What shall we do about it? We watch it and ignore it. Do not take it seriously.

(11) Freshness of Mind: Some meditators will find that their minds are totally fresh after meditation. This is because they have managed to clear all the intellectual rubbish while practising one-pointed concentration. This freshness will in turn prevent sleep later on, and insomnia will ensue. What is the remedy? Meditate longer so that one goes deeper into theta or even delta wave. If the meditator is not sufficiently skilled to do that, then one should meditate only in the mornings.

(12) Drowsiness: If one goes deeper into theta wave, one of the features in this state is drowsiness. This is much more frequent than freshness. The problem now is 'how to keep awake'. The first step is to be more alert and aware, and not to be so concentrated. If this fails then one should get up and wash one's face with cold water. Another method is to open one's eyes partially or fully. Whatever it is this, meditator would surely enjoy a good night's sleep.

(13) Fear: This phenomenon is not uncommon, especially when one is meditating in the dark. Sometimes, one is fearful of spirits or ghosts appearing. One is also fearful of spirit possession. Another great fear is that one may go insane. Sometimes one is fearful of falling into a dark hole. Sometimes these fears are reinforced by hallucinatory visions of ogres, monsters and states of hell. All these illusions are constructed by the mind. There is absolutely nothing to fear. One merely has to open one's eyes.

(14) Crying: This is not due to sadness. It is more often than not a result of rapture. Rapture has many manifestations that will be discussed later. In this instance the tears are bitter sweet. There is a rapturous sensation going through the body at the same time. Normally there is much peace at the end of this meditation session.

(15) Bliss: This is another feature of deep theta wave: in fact it is a constant component of the absorption (Jhana) state. The more one clears one's mind of thoughts, the more bliss will result. As nature abhors a vacuum, emptiness of thoughts is quickly replaced by bliss.

(16) Bright Light: This is a very rare occurrence. Most of the time it is Makyo (hallucination). Again to test its validity, one merely opens one's eyes. If it is Makyo, the light will instantly disappear. However if the Bright Light still persists, the whole room will be lit by it, and every one else should be able to enjoy it. This would signify one of the greatest bestowal of the Divine, and everybody would be in tears of joy and happiness. However, most times this happens only to one person when he is alone. It must be accepted with great

humility, otherwise it will not happen again!

(17) Five Gradations of Rapture (Happiness): As one goes down in Samatha meditation, one will experience the phenomenon of rapture (Piti). Rapture occurs in increasing intensity as one goes deeper into one-pointed concentration (Samatha). These grades are named as such:

- (i) Minor: a shiver like raising the hairs on the body (goose flesh). It is the same effect as if one has suddenly seen a ghost. The itch and 'insects' crawling are due to this minor rapture.
- (ii) Momentary: flashes of lightning occurring at different moments all over the body.
- (iii) Showering: breaks over the body again and again like waves on the seashore.
- (iv) Uplifting: extreme lightness as a physical sensation as well as a mental uplift.

This 'floating in air' sensation may lead to "bouncing" (1st or 2nd Jhana).

(v) Pervading: whole body is completely pervaded, like a filled bladder or like a rock cavern inundated by a tidal wave (2nd Jhana)

Rapture is one of the five Jhanic factors that will be discussed later. The other four factors are:

- (1) Applied thought
- (2) Sustained thought
- (3) Bliss
- (4) One-pointedness

Long Term Effects of Meditation

Effects on physical body

(1) Healthier: One's resistance to disease is increased. That means when colleagues fall sick, one can destroy the same germs or viruses in one's own body due to the increased immunity developed from our daily meditation. Similarly, as cancer cells are popping up in our bodies everyday the meditators can also eradicate these malignant cells as they arise. Conversely, stress reduces our immunity and it may be so reduced that the cancer cells takeover, and start to form a primary colony in the body. The danger of cancer is that it is wild and unruly, and will grow incessantly to the detriment of the healthy body.

(2) Memory and Concentration: The meditator having achieved good concentration, has also a much better memory. He is now less tense and has an increased capacity to handle stress. He appears also to have increased energy with greater physical agility. He is able to sleep better, and the incidence of insomnia is greatly reduced. There is less tension headaches, and irritability. Aches and pains of the body begin to diminish. As mind-body co-ordination greatly improves, the meditator works more efficiently.

(3) Personality: He is now friendlier, and has a more attractive personality. He has more time for others, and is more tolerant of other religions. He is now able to deal with emergency situations without panic. Although he is more patient, he is more charismatic. He is also more sensitive to other people's moods and feelings. Additionally, he is able to take losses and bereavement much better. This adds up to an increased ability to let go: to be less greedy and more charitable.

(4) Psychosomatic illnesses: Conditions such as asthma, neurodermatitis and gastrointestinal problems (e.g. irritable bowel syndrome) begin to disappear as one continues to meditate. Weight is normalised. High blood pressure is also reduced.

Mental-emotional effects

After at least six months, one would notice that there is a reduction of anxiety neurosis and nervousness. Depression disappears completely. There are no longer feelings of inadequacy. Being much calmer than before, irritability has also more or less disappeared. On the positive side there is more self-esteem. The meditator can now solve problems better, because his mind is not cluttered with anxiety and unnecessary information. As one's thoughts become more orderly, one's thinking is much more organised, thus increasing one's creativity and productivity.

Spiritual well-being

Meditation tends to make us a better Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. Our affiliations to our religions are strengthened. It also tends to foster trust with a greater capacity for intimate contact. One develops more compassion for our fellow human beings, and there is also a greater capacity for unconditional love, which means that the meditator does not expect any gratitude or thanks. There is an increased satisfaction at work and at home, and consequently we develop inner wholeness. We now know that life is meaningful. Of course, the greatest achievement would be our ability to let go: to have less greed, hatred, pride and selfishness. These four foibles when considerably reduced will affect our spiritual well-being tremendously.

Hindrances (Obstacles)

There are five primary hindrances to all types of meditation and our spiritual path. These are:

(1) Sensual Desire: These are desires or cravings emanating from our six sense organs: they are the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin and mind. Of course, when you are sitting in meditation, the mind will give you the most obstacles.

- (2) Ill-will: Irritation, anger, hatred, envy, jealousy and depression. These negative traits will hamper one's meditation, as peace of mind cannot be obtained.
- (3) Sloth and Torpor: As one is more experienced in meditation one can go deeper into theta wave or access concentration. In this state, drowsiness is experienced and the tendency to fall asleep is overwhelming. The remedy here is to be more aware, using mindfulness to keep awake. If you have a very tiring day, then the evening meditation tends to be sloppy. If you are truly earnest about having a fruitful meditation, then get up and wash your face with cold water. Then continue your meditation with your eyes open.
- (4) Restlessness and Worry: Here the restlessness could be of the body or of the mind. If it is of the body, then one could do some form of exercises or hatha yoga to squeeze out the excess physical energy out of the body. If it is of the mind, then one should concentrate more at the object of meditation.
- (5) Skeptical Doubt: The main doubt here is that it is impossible to meditate, no matter how hard one tries. It is not true. Everybody can meditate. You must have patience, and a suitable meditation subject must be chosen. Persistence is the key word, but one must not be stressed by the attempt.

These five hindrances can also be eradicated or counteracted by the five Jhanic factors:

- (1) One-pointed concentration eradicates lust.
- (2) Rapture abolishes ill will.
- (3) Applied thought extinguishes sloth and torpor.
- (4) Bliss eliminates agitation and worry.
- (5) Sustained Thought suppresses doubt and uncertainty.

