

Suffering: Is Meditation Cure or Cause?
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One Meditation

Richard Jewell



Welcome to this monthly meditation email and thanks for being here! Please consider passing this on to others who might find it helpful. Subjects range from modern to ancient, Western to Eastern, and scientific to spiritual. I began meditating in 1962 and have a couple of graduate degrees in religions and another in literature. I celebrate what you experience. I would like to share with you what I've learned about similarities in many different practices. If you miss an issue, please check your spam/junk email folder and mark me as a safe sender. You can find previous issues at my website, below, in Meditation. - Richard

Suffering: Is Meditation Cure or Cause?

My early years of meditating brought me both good and difficult results. Psychologists and scientists now tell us that meditation and the form of it called mindfulness are not panaceas for all ills. Rather, psychologists report, 5-25% of people—estimates vary—experience what are called adverse effects.

What are adverse effects?

Science Daily lists examples. They include anxiety and panic, re-experiencing of past traumas, dissociation from reality, and trouble managing work or social obligations (“Scientists Uncover Meditation’s Hidden Side Effects,” 2025). Others add depression.

Psychologist Nicholas Van Dam, of the University of Melbourne Contemplative Studies Centre, and his coauthors discovered that a majority of 886 typical meditators experienced at least one adverse effect (“Incidence and Predictors of Meditation-Related Unusual Experiences,...” *Clinical Psychological Science*, 2025). However, they also found “meditation experience was not robustly associated with AEs [Adverse Events].” Van Dam told *Science Daily*, “Our conclusions are not that people should be terrified, or...not try meditation...”

The same problem may occur in psychotherapy. Linden and Schermuly-Haupt surveyed scientific literature on the subject and found in *World Psychiatry* “an emerging consensus that unwanted events should be expected in about 5 to 20% of psychotherapy patients...” (“Definition, assessment and rate of psychotherapy side effects,” 2014).

What do mystic traditions say?

No major religion offers a free pass to happiness from meditation or mindfulness. Buddha and Hindu yoga teach eight steps—the Eightfold Path and Eight-Limbed Yoga—to break through problems. China’s Taoism and *I Ching* offer many suggestions to counter obstacles. Jews, early Christians, and Islamic Sufis have used singing, dancing, and going into nature to heal.

Dealing with adverse effects

Here are some common suggestions in scientific, psychological, and meditation literature:

1. Stop using sitting (passive) practices if they cause too much low-energy depression or memories of trauma.
2. Psychologists often recommend exercise to heal adverse effects. Mindful exercise becomes a type of meditation.
3. Substance abuse may cause a higher rate of adverse effects from meditation (Van Dam et al.).
4. Use of psychedelics is not associated with adverse effects in meditation (Van Dam et al.).
5. Depend on doctors, not just meditation, for medical problems.
6. According to Lienhard and Schmid-Fetzer in *Simple Exercises to Stimulate the Vagus Nerve*, when using mindfulness, avoid “trying to evaluate or alter” physical feelings. Just observe them (p. 250).
7. You may need “20 to 30 minutes per day...to make changes that are sustainable” (p. 29), whether in sitting or mindful exercise (Lienhard and Schmid-Fetzer).
8. Tradition and research suggest that 20-30 min. of chanting or simple long breaths—8+ seconds (exhale-inhale total)—can create more calmness in agitated adverse events (Nestor, *Breath*, p. 104; Komori, *Mental Illness Journal*, 2018).
9. Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (*Anger*) and cell scientist Bruce Lipton (*Biology of Belief*) suggest transforming negative energies into positive ones through mindful activities.
10. Approach highly unusual or rare practices cautiously. They can cause stronger effects for good or bad.
11. Most traditions recommend working with an experienced leader, group, or highly-respected writings.

12. Worldwide surveys by Gallup and Pew say practices incorporating love are the most common.

13. Most religions also recommend mindful practices of physical labor, mindful eating, and mindful ethical acts.

14. Experiment! What makes you feel better? From the many types of meditation/mindfulness, experienced practitioners may use more than one each day.

Regarding adverse effects, meditation can be both a cure and a cause. Psychological or spiritual growth is a hike across one's inner landscape or a climb up a mountain. The trail continues through successes and obstacles, both before and after we discover the awareness at the center of our being.

Peace, Strength, Joy

Richard Jewell

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Previous monthly issues (starting Jan. 2025): See *Meditation* in website, above.

Recently (two months ago): The “Goddess” of Judaism and Christianity

Last month: Meditation Movements—Kriyas, Quakes, and Shakes

Next month: Meditation's Opposing Neighborhoods

What is meditation? (1) *Science says it is a conscious calming of the body and mind.* (2) *Experienced practitioners often define it as aware attention for the purpose of inner growth. Using these two meanings, the word meditation covers most major spiritual practices—including, says the Mayo Clinic, mindfulness. All such outer forms are linked by having in common similar purposes and practical results.*

– One Meditation #1, Jan. 2025

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