

Transcendental Meditation - A Personal Perspective

by Nicholas Mysticus

It's taken me a while to get round to writing this essay, which I've intended to set down for some months. I thought the time was probably right when I reached a particularly significant anniversary recently, which marked the passage of several decades since I started practicing transcendental meditation. (I'll use the usual abbreviation of TM from now on.)

I learned TM quite soon after leaving university, on the encouragement of my partner, who was still at university and who had herself decided to give it a try on seeing some local publicity. I had long been interested in what might be broadly described as "mysticism" – I had been brought up in a Calvinist religious context, and while at university I had become more and more interested in the more "mystical" aspects of religion, as an antidote to the fundamentalism and narrow scripturalism I had come to reject as inappropriate to my needs and unrepresentative of what you might call my "spiritual experience".

What I want to do here is say a little about what the TM practice actually is, the benefits I feel I have gained from it, and to challenge what I consider some of the unhelpful distortions and misrepresentations which have come to surround TM.

What Is TM?

This meditation has been a regular part of my daily routine for so long that it's not easy to step back from it and attempt a quick explanation of its nature.

It is a simple form of meditation which has its origins in the North Indian yoga tradition – indeed, it could well be regarded as a form of "mental yoga". In meditating, we seek to establish some mental quietness, which can be very restful and restorative. We do this by allowing the mind to centre on a simple repeated sound. The sound is repeated mentally, not vocally, so that you might almost describe it as the memory of a sound. We have no interest at all in any meaning which might attach to the sound, since centring the mind on this sound is intended to ease the mind away from the constant rush of thoughts which normally fill it. rather than concentrating the thoughts on some particular concept.

Naturally, it is easy to become distracted and find oneself reverting to the

thoughts and ideas which have been occupying the mind before meditation, but when this happens, we simply call to mind the fact that we want to meditate, and return our attention to the meaningless sound. Its repetition helps the mind become more and more stilled and the body more and more relaxed, and it becomes possible to experience periods of a delightful mental silence.

After practicing this simple mental discipline for 20 minutes or so, we end by simply ceasing to think the meaningless sound which we have been using to quieten the mind, and take a couple of minutes simply sitting and resting, before opening the eyes and returning with a sense of renewal and a more peaceful mind to normal activity. We generally do this twice a day – once in the morning and then again at the beginning of the evening.

So What Does This Achieve?

During meditation, the mind can become quieter, and the body fall into a more restful state, with breathing slower and more shallow than usual. This has the effect of creating the sensation of profound rest, and often any anxious or preoccupying thoughts which were present before meditation can be eased considerably.

With repeated practice, the technique gradually gets the mind and body into more restful and less stressful habits of behaviour, and this acts to make great improvements in one's quality of life. A range of different benefits are possible, depending on the individual practitioner and the circumstances of that person before starting to meditate, but my own experience has included the ability to be less easily taken by surprise or made anxious, greater clarity and purposefulness of thought, and the ability to make more effective and fruitful decisions in every area of life.

Put simply, I would recommend this meditation as being very likely to produce significant improvements in your quality of life. The specific improvements you will see, and the speed with which these will make themselves felt, will vary from person to person.

Some Specific Benefits from My Own Experience

Before I mention some of the benefits I feel have arising from my meditation practice, a couple of caveats are in order. First, benefits from meditation are

often different in intensity from day to day – it often requires some specific adjustments to one's way of life so that stressful activities and experiences are minimised to ensure that they are available on a more constant basis. Second, it's sometimes possible to feel that you aren't really getting much benefit from meditation at all: this may be due to an inability to compare one's mental state today in full detail from that state a year ago, or it may be due to disturbing events which impinge on one's life making it difficult to obtain much from one's meditation other than perhaps some easing of the anxiety directly caused by such events.

That said, let me give a few examples of improvements to my mental wellbeing which I feel have stemmed from the practice of meditation.

Dealing with anxiety. Over the years, my ability to work through situations which give rise to anxiety has certainly improved. This doesn't mean I never suffer from anxiety – quite the contrary: I have gone through episodes of quite severe anxiety on several occasions, but they don't last; I find myself more inclined to take specific action to deal with the sources of the anxiety, and this action is generally effective. The only issue seems to be how long I am prepared to leave things before acting, and it's this interval which really dictates the intensity of the anxious mental experience. At least this is more under my control,

Contentment. I have become more and more able to take pleasure in small things: the simple daily domestic routines, walking along my street, or perhaps a routine local journey. I have developed a deep affection for the place where I live with my partner. My primary relationship has become more and more emotionally nourishing and satisfying, and there is a constant underlying delight in just being in the same room together. These feelings could be summed up in the word "contentment". Once again, there are times when this breaks down, but it has always come back again eventually so far. Contentment, of course, doesn't mean being prepared to put up with whatever your current circumstances are; I believe instead that it means learning to find delight in the minor everyday things of life.

Appreciating my surroundings. I have gradually achieved a more and more pleasurable appreciation of my environment, whether this be the city or the countryside. I think in particular an innocent enjoyment and sense of beauty in natural surroundings has gradually developed – even things like the shapes of

trees or the quality of light in woodland or in open fields have become the subjects of spontaneous enjoyment.

Increased enjoyment of music. I've always been a music lover, and music of one kind or another has been my constant companion for most of my life. With the passage of time, however, I've come to enjoy music more and more, to the extent that listening to some pieces can be an all-encompassing experience of the sheerest beauty. Small musical phrases or rhythms can often raise a smile and generate a deep internal delight all on their own.

Excellent sleep. While the warm presence of my delightful partner is no doubt a factor, it is also the case that the quality of my sleep is almost always excellent. Certainly, some disturbing life event can give me a less pleasant night, but in the absence of any specific cause, I usually sleep very well and benefit from a deep sense of refreshment on waking up. I'm aware that very many people find it hard to get to sleep, and experience interrupted nights, and I'm very appreciative of the fact that I don't experience these problems. Improved sleep is often mentioned as one of the most common benefits of meditation, and I have certainly found this borne out on my own experience.

Creativity. One of the most salient benefits I've gained from meditation has been the enhancement of my various creative projects. Not only have I felt able to devote more energy and dedication to these, it's also the case that I've been able to carry through some quite long projects to a successful end – software development projects, pieces of writing, a mathematics textbook, electronic music projects and many more. I have also noticed that on the many occasions when I felt I had bitten off more than I could chew, solutions to intractable problems have sometimes popped into my head unbidden in quiet moments – cases of the unconscious mind solving the problem and then presenting me with the solution, perhaps. Very useful, whatever the explanation.

Clearer thinking. With meditation, my ability to think to some purpose, or to reason out solutions to problems seems to have improved, as has the intellectual pleasure I take in ideas. Certainly, it's possible to argue that this might have happened without meditation, as a result of the accumulation of experience, but it doesn't seem to be everyone's experience. I do rather wish I'd learnt to meditate before going to university: I went back for a post-graduate year some months after starting meditation, and I found it altogether easier and more satisfying than my undergraduate experience.

Improved social interactions. From the first weeks after I began meditating, I noticed that my social interactions were becoming more natural and enjoyable, less forced and stagey, and consequently much more satisfying. At my best, I seem to feel spontaneous goodwill towards many of the people I meet – or if the encounter is one of a more negative kind, such as a business customer who hasn't paid their bill, I generally feel quite confident enough to stand my ground and not be put off my guard by bluster, lies or false excuses.

Better health. With the exception of a small number of accidents or unavoidable infections, my health has on the whole been quite satisfactory. Despite suffering from an eye condition which has hung over me for much of my life (and it has proved possible to handle that to my satisfaction, despite the occasional shock), I don't seem to have fallen prey to the any of the more serious health problems which often beset men as they grow older. And on the occasions when I have been affected by health problems, I seem to have been able to recover very well, over a greater or lesser period of time.

Most important to me has been the ability to make changes to my life on several occasions when my current situation became clearly unsatisfactory. Some writers say that feelings of dissatisfaction are a sign of progress in meditation; I believe this to be true – and if the progress is real, then along with the dissatisfaction comes a determination to change the circumstances which cause it. One without the other would clearly not be a great benefit; in my experience, the two have always arrived together. Note that this doesn't make the feelings of dissatisfaction any easier when they arise – instead, it means they can act as a (possibly somewhat harsh) kind of nudge into a more fruitful direction.

On a few occasions, this dissatisfaction has manifested itself as a kind of self-disgust, or a very critical view of some of my past actions. As I indicated above, this should act as a nudge towards changing these actions in the future – in other words, what should arise from these feelings is a determination to be a better person in one sense or another in the future.

It might, of course, be argued that many of these perceived benefits might have been felt simply through advancing age and its accompanying “mellowing” effect, or perhaps the quality people call “maturity”. (This is not a concept which has ever endeared itself to me, since it is so often used in a contrastive sense to something called “immaturity” – these apparent opposites and the

boundary between them seem completely arbitrary, chosen only to serve the particular argument which uses them.) You can decide for yourself whether this is a credible cause in the case of each and every area of benefit I've listed above. It's my own feeling, however, that the benefits I've mentioned have at the very least been amplified and made more obvious to my perception as a result of meditation, and so I think it's fair to describe them as improvements gained through meditation.

It's Not Always Plain Sailing

Since meditation significantly quietens the kind of brain activity we describe as "conscious" activity, it may come as no surprise to find that its practice can stir up material which is usually "unconscious". This can give rise to a number of intense experiences during and after meditation, including strong emotions or vivid thoughts, images and narratives which make themselves felt (not unlike those we experience sometimes while passing into sleep at night), although some people find them more disturbing, leading to irritability and sudden swings of mood in daily life outside of the meditation practice.

First, of course, many meditation disciplines insist that the phenomena of meditation itself are unimportant, and should be disregarded: instead, one should simply return without making an effort over it to the technique which you were taught, and I believe in all essentials TM is no exception.

However, in the context of contemporary life, which can be quite arbitrarily unpleasant and generate a lot of anxiety, the kind of experiences I've hinted at above can be disagreeable, inconvenient or even really upsetting. The TM tradition has an extensive narrative which groups many such experiences under the heading of "stress release", but this kind of talk on its own can often seem non-specific and unhelpful. In a more concrete sense, there are many adjustments you can make to your meditation practice if you obtain undesirable experiences from it, including increasing your resting time following meditation, shortening the duration of your meditations temporarily, or introducing a brief session of yoga postures and *pranayama* breathing exercises before meditation.

The best advice for avoiding poor results from TM is first to learn from a trained teacher, who has techniques to help you get the best start, and then to stay in touch with your teacher, so that you can easily consult him or her in case

of future difficulties.

Some Criticisms I Would Like to Offer

There are several aspects of the TM movement which I don't altogether care for. This doesn't, of course, prevent me from gaining benefit and enjoyment from practicing TM – as with any movement, spiritual, political or otherwise, it's important to take what you want and leave the rest. I'll take a little space here to mention a few of my gripes, so that you can see that it's possible to meditate for decades without giving assent to anything you find unconvincing.

Supernaturalism. When talking to some meditators, or to those who have become heavily involved in the TM movement, you may hear a host of vaguely supernatural and slightly wacky statements relating to meditation, how it works and what it does. None of this need be taken to heart. I have tried above to sketch out a purely functional and psychological view of meditation and its effects, and there are many people working to create and refine such an explanation. I must say that I would prefer it if exponents of TM were to keep to the science and leave off the malarkey. TM is *something to do*, not something to believe.

Metanarratives. Associated with this last point is my distrust of attempts to blend together a heap of material from ancient Indian texts – everything from the *Bhagavad Gita* to the altogether more ancient Vedas – and create from it in an inappropriate spirit of literalism a huge edifice of poorly thought out and very vaguely stated propositions in an attempt to provide perspectives on all aspects of human life. It is my firm view that practicing TM does not entail the adoption of a particular worldview, and does not necessarily lead to any such adoption.

The purpose of learning meditation is not to spend all your time thinking about meditation and looking for some vague general philosophy to emerge from it: instead, it is to improve your own particular life and enable you to do the things you already do more effectively and successfully – or to be more able to change them if this becomes necessary. The thing is to meditate and then go and engage in your practical activities, not to spend your whole life thinking about or talking about meditation or only engaging with fellow meditators.

As one of my old TM teachers once advised me, you should treat anything

anyone tells you about meditation or topics associated with it in the light of your own experience. Once again, most of the stuff I've referred to here you can take or leave. A good deal of it, I generally leave.

TM makes you a better businessman. (Yes, it is usually “businessman”, isn't it?) There is a particularly dispiriting strand in the various promotions of TM you will encounter where it is suggested that you can be a more successful chief executive (or salesman, of personnel manager or whatever) by meditating. Examples of various “successful” people who meditate are then paraded in support of the contention. In my own view, meditation will quite probably make you a better person – but as a consequence, it's unlikely to make you a better asshole. Indeed, carrying on some of these “business” occupations may well be incompatible with the effects of meditation and you may decide to do something more productive with your life than simply grub about greedily for more money at others' expense – what you need is *enough* money to do what you want, not more and more and more regardless. (For the sake of transparency, I speak as someone who ran a business for almost thirty years while meditating: it was fun for a while, and we certainly didn't exploit anyone, but I eventually began to feel that I was misusing the effects of meditation, and so I retired early to concentrate on more creative work instead.)

Associated with this kind of narrative can be an unhealthy adulation for people described as “celebrities” who happen to practice meditation, and a n inappropriate admiration of what is known as “material success”. This tendency sometimes reminds me of those who call themselves Buddhists and devote considerable time to chanting with a view to obtaining material benefits, or those who call themselves Christians and believe that God's blessings will automatically include financial prosperity. The primary effects of a meditation practice are on the mind alone, and anything else you get out of meditation will have its origins in improved mental functioning.

The Natural Law Party. Some years ago, the TM movement in the UK set up a kind of “political party” and put up candidates in elections all over the country. This rather disappointed and irritated me at the time, since it seemed an abuse of our electoral process to gain cheap publicity for the TM movement. The kind of publicity it produced was, however, not altogether favourable due to some silly claims and misrepresentations (see below). Our UK electoral system is a pretty feeble mechanism for influencing government as it is, but it's the only chance we have of making any difference by casting our vote, and it only happens

every few years at most. Using it in this rather silly way simply to bring your movement into the public eye was a very bad idea, and I feel it brought the TM movement into disrepute. Rather than seem in any way credible, the movement looked more like the Monster Raving Loony Party than anything else.

Some misrepresentations. Over the years, the TM movement has rather misrepresented some of its offerings, and this has served to give the very idea of meditation a poor reputation. The particular instances which most concern me are related to an advanced TM practice known as the “*siddhis*”. This practice uses the mental repetition of a series of words or phrases denoting intentions immediately after finishing meditation: the object is to create subtle habits of mind through these repeated autosuggestions in order to develop or enhance certain desirable personal characteristics in the meditator. It’s an attempt to apply the practice of *samyama* as described in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, an ancient Indian text on yoga. Now, I haven’t myself been taught these “*siddhis*”, but I have researched them fairly thoroughly and spoken to many practitioners. Additionally, there are internet sites dealing with lesser-known yoga practices which can give you a flavour of what this practice is about.

I have no doubt that the practice is very beneficial, and many practitioners report very pleasurable experiences when practicing the “*siddhis*”. However, I have one slight niggle: the last of the series of intentions used by practitioners concerns the development of “lightness”, be that metaphorical or physical, and it is accompanied by a physical activity which involves bouncing up and down on a padded mat while sitting cross-legged. People report some quite blissful experiences while doing this, and I’m sure that – if for no other reason that that – it is of great benefit. However, this bouncing up and down is described by the TM movement as “Yogic flying” – or even simply “flying” - and is promoted as a way to develop the talent of self-levitation. Practitioners even talk amongst themselves about “flying” when they really mean this “lightness” activity. Let’s be clear: no-one flies. I’ll say it again: nobody who uses this technique actually does anything which could be described as “flying”. I’m sure it’s a beneficial and hugely pleasurable activity, but perhaps it should be called something like “practicing lightness”. That would be much more descriptive and informative – not to mention honest.

One other rather unwelcome consequence of the offering of the “*siddhis*” has been the emergence of a kind of unspoken elitism among meditators, with the unfortunate (and inappropriate) consequence that a mere meditator who has not

learned the “*siddhis*” can be made to feel something of a second-class citizen. This is quite disgraceful when one considers that those involved are meant to be practicing a discipline meant for self-improvement, where this kind of pridefulness should not be an option.

One final word on this. People who practice the “*siddhis*” are known in TM circles as “*siddhas*”. I’m afraid I do find this a little bit objectionable. The word “*siddha*” in the Indian tradition from which it’s drawn means “perfected being”, and the word is wholly inappropriate to describe someone who has only learned a simple *samyama* technique. This is why I’ve stuck to the term “practitioner” throughout the preceding discussion.

What TM is Not

I’d like to conclude by giving my opinion on a number of suggestions which have been made over the years about TM which I think are both factually false and misleading in the impression they give.

First, TM is not a religion (nor does it have any kind of cultic qualities, for that matter). As I pointed out earlier in this essay, it’s something to do, not something to believe. You can be a believer in more or less any religious tradition and still benefit from meditating: indeed, for a spiritually-minded person, the benefits of meditation might be expected to be particularly useful in enabling you to practise your religion more effectively.

There have been a number of religion-motivated objectors to TM who suggest that amounts to “Hinduism”. Well, no. No, it doesn’t. It may have its origins in the Indian brahmanic tradition, but as taught currently, it can be practised without assenting to any belief system whatsoever, or for that matter adopting a particular “worldview”. By way of analogy, you can practise yoga quite happily and beneficially without turning into a Hindu – whatever form that transformation might take (and TM can be legitimately described as simply another yoga practice in addition to the physical postures or the breathing exercises of *pranayama*). Furthermore, you can enjoy bagels or gefilte fish and take Saturdays off without finding yourself becoming Jewish, and you can practice compassion and believe that desire can be harmful without embracing Buddhism. My point is that it is quite possible to apply a cultural product originating from within the context of a religion without assenting to the propositions of that religion – adhering to a religion is a deliberate choice, not

the accidental result of spending twenty minutes twice a day practicing a simple technique of mental hygiene.

There are, of course, some people who even object to physical yoga, including those who cite the specious reason that it practice will expose you to the influence of “demons”. I leave you to decide how much credence to give an argument which involves “demons” (and such people rarely have a very coherent theory of “demons” to back up their assertions), but one might ask whether these people also object to forms of exercise such as Pilates, which seem to use some of the elements of yoga postures. And what about aerobics, or even t’ai-chi? Are we to avoid these “demonic” practices as well?

Some religionists have also objected that the *mantra* – the meaningless sound which we repeat mentally as part of the meditation process – may be the name of a Hindu god. Leaving aside the point that I’m not sure what difference this would make, since we don’t seek to take a meaning from the *mantra*, this is simply not true. The *mantras* which are given when meditators learn, allocated according to gender and age, are known as “seed *mantras*”, which have historically been used for meditation not because they have any meaning, but because of the qualities of their sounds and the concomitant mental effects of reflecting on these sounds. I could enter into a long discussion of the kind of sounds which a seed *mantra* should usefully possess, and the particular effects on the mind of long practice with them, but it ought to be enough to point out that it’s the sound, not any meaning, which matters with a *mantra*. The famous *mantra* “OM”, for example (not used in TM, incidentally) is not as far as I know the name of any deity, Hindu or otherwise.

Some Concluding Suggestions

To conclude, I would happily recommend TNM to anyone interested in improving their mental well-being and making their life better. I believe it’s important to learn from a trained teacher – the TM movement has developed a very effective teaching procedure, which works well and is tried and tested. In the UK, you may also like to investigate the Meditation Trust, a group of TM teachers independent of the original movement, where the prices charged for teaching are lower than those charged by the TM movement.

When you learn to meditate, your teacher will recite (or rather, intone in a traditional Indian manner) a song of thanks addressed to the Indian teacher

considered as the originator of this meditation technique. This should be considered as no big deal, and certainly not as a religious ritual: it's simply a traditional form of acknowledgement, and so far from being harmful or objectionable, is in fact rather charming. It should certainly not be thought of as at all off-putting, or allowed to stand in the way of your learning meditation. There are many articles on the internet which attempt to blow this engaging few moments out of all proportion, and suggest that it requires you to participate in an alien religious ceremony. Complete rubbish.

Once you have learned to meditate, it's very beneficial to keep in touch with your teacher in case you need help, advice or encouragement further down the line. You can – and should - ignore any aspects of the TM movement which you find unappetising, and simply practice regularly and gain the very real benefits available from a sustained meditation practice. When it comes to most of the elaborations and accretions which have come to cluster around TM-promoting organisations, I offer this simple advice which ought to be applied to any “spiritual” narrative: take what you want and leave the rest.