

SCIENTIFIC SPIRITUALISM: A SERIES OF BRIEF DISCUSSIONS

II: FURTHER EXPLORATION OF THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR MEDITATION

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BACKGROUND

The previous paper in this series presented strong arguments for focusing on the scientific aspect of the revelation of the Spirit, in our efforts to promote the messages of the movement, and it summarised some of the research that currently exists on meditation.

It is worth pointing out that, in such short pieces as these, a completely rigorous evaluation of the entire subject is not possible. It is the intention of these works to provide a brief but relevant selection of the research as it is pertinent and useful to Spiritualists, in explaining the biological effects of spiritual practices, and their potential benefits to the individual.

Scientific Spiritualism I identified some of the observed effects that meditation has on brain function, in addition to clinical trial data supporting the health benefits of meditation. These effects are far-ranging and so justify further exploration.

PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS: TRIAL DATA ON CLINICAL POPULATIONS

- **Cancer:** Improvements in immune function (e.g. Tumour Necrosis Factor, Interleukin-4; Carlson et al 2003); reduced blood pressure and stress-related hormones (Carlson et al 2007); improved quality of life (Nidich et al 2009). Changes have also been noted in tumour growth within the laboratory setting (Yu et al 2003).
- **Cardiovascular Disease:** Improvements in blood pressure and cholesterol levels (Walton et al 2004); reduced all-cause mortality (Schneider et al 2005); improvements in blood pressure, reduction in blood pressure medication and decrease in angina symptoms (Barnes & Orme-Johnson 2012).
- **Pain:** Reduced chronic pain (McCracken et al 2007); altered anticipation and perception of pain (Brown & Jones 2010); lower sensitivity to pain and related changes to brain anatomy (Grant et al 2010).

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS: TRIAL DATA ON CLINICAL POPULATIONS

- **Cancer:** reductions in stress and enhanced coping (Ott et al 2006); reduced anxiety & depression and increased spiritual wellbeing (Ando et al 2009); improved mood, reduced anger, increased vigour and reduced fatigue (Hoffman et al 2012).
- **Cardiovascular Disease:** Reduced depression and improved fatigue (Zeidan et al 2010); reduced anger (Schneider et al 2012); improved cognition and reduced stress (Lazaridou et al 2013).

CLINICAL TRIAL DATA ON THE GENERAL PUBLIC

- Improved mood, reduced stress & anxiety – better effect with more practice (Lane et al 2007); improvements in depression, anxiety and stress (Schreiner & Malcolm 2008); improved social connectedness for people living with learning disabilities (Hutcherson et al 2008); cultivation of creativity, improvement in information processing and attention, empathic response and stress resilience (Shapiro et al 2008).

QUALITATIVE DATA

The nature of qualitative research is different to that of the clinical trials that you may be familiar with. Instead of focusing on measurement and quantification, this type of research prioritises peoples' thoughts, feelings and perceptions. How people experience and feel about their lives is what is sought after. This type of research is primarily based in the data that is collected from conducting interviews and focus groups, analysing participants' responses.

In their study, MacKenzie et al (2006) identified several themes emerging from participants' data, who were cancer patients: opening to change, self-control, personal growth and spirituality. Dobkin (2008) found that participants felt that life was more meaningful following their introduction to meditation, supporting the theory that meditation can help people to perceive their lives in a new way.

Exploring the effect of meditation in secondary school students, (Rosaeon & Benn 2006) reported an increased state of general awareness, improved skills in emotional intelligence, and improved academic performance. Meditation can have its side effects however; for example, Lomas et al (2014) notes that many find it a difficult skill

to master and, sometimes, people can be faced with memories or feelings that are difficult to manage. This should be considered part of the process of engaging with and freeing oneself of previous experiences.

CONCLUSION

The scientific research on meditation strongly supports the positive effects that it can have on the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of health. It also demonstrates some of the biological processes that are associated with meditating. Meditation can affect medical outcomes but also improves the way that an individual engages with the world.

Mediumship aside, the evidence confirms the health benefits that meditation can have for anyone. Improvements in mental wellbeing are likely related to further appreciation of spirituality in its wider sense.

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