



In meditative mood

Description

Being in a prison cell for a long period frees the mind of external factors and aids serious introspection. In a letter to his wife, Nelson Mandela recommended 15 minutes of meditation each day before going to sleep. Winnie was also in prison at the time. Twenty seven years in gaol, 40 days and nights in the desert, a significant journey – these are occasions for radical cognitive and emotional transformation, and meditation on life, place and everything.

Meditation is a popular theme on websites, eclipsing prayer, cooking and politics on Google searches. In the 1990s before the web went commercial, I recall “meditation” was prominent within all those alternative lifestyle pages.

Meditation is an interesting term that has the potential to facilitate comparison between, if not unite, a diverse range of disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, phenomenology, religion, music, computer gaming and architecture. Here’s how.



Sustained and relaxed focus of attention

A helpful journal article by a group of neuroscientists (HÃ¶lzl et al) highlights two key conditions of the meditative state

- Concentrating attention on a chosen object
- Letting yourself be affected by whatever enters your awareness, but refraining from reacting

Simplifying further, we could say meditation is the skilful practice of focussing intently on something (a task, an object, a concept, part of the body), and doing so in a state of near complete relaxation. Why is this a skill? Concentration and relaxation don't necessarily go together. The office worker concentrating intensively on a task is probably solving a problem, in a climate of urgency and anxiety, a necessary condition that can't be sustained for long periods without rest and restoration. Neither does relaxation necessarily support concentration. Relaxation lapses into lack of concentration, drowsiness and sometimes sleep.

A natural condition

Drawing on the insights of colleagues in environmental psychology I elaborated on the notion of [soft fascination](#) in another post. There's no guarantee, but there's evidence that being in a "natural" environment provides greater opportunity to focus attention in a relaxed manner, particularly as we indulge our innate fascination with the things of nature - hence the claim for the restorative benefits of being outside in parkland and the countryside.



Neural imaging seems to provide access to this kind of condition. One of the signs of an increased meditative state is an increase in the *alpha* band of neural frequencies (8 – 12 Hz). So it can be picked up with [EEG](#).

The engagement-relaxation combination has also been popularised through the concept of *flow*: the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter – according to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (p.4).

Musical flow

Karlheinz Stockhausen describes a condition common amongst musicians: “The moment I start playing I’m gone, and I am the sounds and I am the process, and you can’t ask me I can’t give you an answer – what has happened. When it’s over, then I fall back, like from a session of laughing gas, into thinking and becoming aware of my environment.”

So any task, including work, can exhibit qualities similar to a meditative state, to the extent that it doesn’t seem like work.

This “flow” is a common experience in conversation. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer: “A fundamental conversation is never one that we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turnings and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led.” (345).

Letting be

Then there’s Heidegger’s description of *Gelassenheit*, a journey towards the state of *letting-be*, discussed in a previous [post](#) in relation to the wanderer’s attitude as she stumbles across a wild rose, without asking why it’s there. Heidegger also describes this as a condition of *calm composure*, an abrogation of the need to find [causes](#) for everything – i.e. to be always solving problems,

analysing and explaining.

In his earlier books Heidegger wrote about *availableness*, indicating that the condition Iâ??ve been describing as a meditative state is not something additional to or unusual in human experience. In fact itâ??s our starting point, a condition of being in the world where there is after all no distinction between the human subject and the object world available for our contemplation. Itâ??s when thereâ??s a problem, a breakdown, that objects come into being for us. Thereâ??s something here about hammers and other equipment, which Iâ??ve looked at in a previous [post](#).

Itâ??s also about [engagement](#), and what audiences sometimes experience, or computer game players who forget the time, or forget to eat ([addiction](#)). Itâ??s a desirable condition, but I suppose itâ??s one we donâ??t want to be in all the time.



Notes

- The Stockhausen quote is from a book by Jonathan Cott, page 39.
- To find out how many times a word like â??meditationâ?• appears in a page title in a Google search you type â??allintitle: meditationâ?• into the search field. Meditation yields 26.9 million hits, prayer 7.5 million, spirit 4.5 million, and religion 3 million. â??Engagementâ?• is too ambiguous as a search term, but yields 2.5 million title hits. Sport and sex rate higher of course.
- HÄ¶lzel et al actually identify 4 aspects of meditation: 1. Attention regulation; 2. Body awareness; 3. Emotion regulation, including a. Reappraisal b. Exposure, extinction, and reconsolidation; and 4. Change in perspective on the self.
- See magazine article on flow by Dianne Schilling: [You need to get into the flow: Concentration at its best](#). *Forbes*.
- Also see [Meditation on a blunt instrument](#), [The brain in the city](#), [Are you aware of your brain](#), [Heidegger on technology](#), [Bauhaus geek](#), [Why ask](#), [What buildings want](#).

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