The times we live in are challenging us in many ways. We have snail mail, voice mail, and email. We have TiVo, iPods, and C-SPAN. The news is unrelenting, the pace of our days exhausting, and the feast of opportunities seemingly endless—no matter how full we already feel. Given all the complexities, where do we find refuge? One increasingly popular answer is meditation, the practice of simply stopping long enough to watch our breath, clear our minds, calm our nervous systems, and attend to balancing our life.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, famed for introducing mindfulness meditation to American society, suggests that the cultivation of “inner technologies” may be more useful than any external technology designed to better our lives. Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche reminds us that eliminating frantic, negative states of mind and cultivating serene, positive ones transform our experience, promoting the healing of our entire being.

The practice of meditation in the West is an imported product of Asian cultures. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it became a central part of European Renaissance culture and occult Christianity through esoteric mystery schools. In the New World, some of the early settlers practiced ascetic forms of meditation. By the mid-nineteenth century, New England Transcendentalists were integrating ideas about yoga and meditation into their literary and philosophical works. Formal training in Asian meditation techniques did not emerge in the United States until 1893, when Swami Vivekananda began teaching them as follow-up to his participation at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. During the 1950s and 1960s, meditation became a principal focus of the countercultural movement, when thousands of young people took up Asian spiritual practices in the wake of the psychedelic revolution.

FROM SUBJECTIVE TO OBJECTIVE

Today meditation has found a place in many sectors of Western society. From meditation cushions and hi-tech laboratories to boardrooms, hospitals, schools, and prisons, meditation is capturing our imagination and changing our behavior. A useful approach to understanding the diverse perspectives on meditation and how each reveals an aspect of consciousness is the Integral framework developed by social theorist Ken Wilber.

In Wilber’s model, we see that there are subjective, objective, and intersubjective aspects of contemplative practice. At its most direct level, meditation involves an understanding of consciousness as direct experience. This emphasis on inner awareness is very different from the physical–materialism approach that dominates our scientific worldview. As Buddhist scholar and teacher Alan Wallace, PhD, points out, it carries its own assumptions and methods for exploring consciousness.

This emphasis on subjective experience, so clear in the world’s spiritual traditions, has found an objective counterpart in the tools of modern science. Efforts to study the impact of meditation on biology and psychology have been underway for nearly five decades (see IONS’ book and online bibliography The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation by Michael Murphy and Steven Donovan). Using advanced brain-imaging techniques, the neuroscience revolution (accompanied by a generation of researchers who have personally used meditation practices) is leading to a new understanding of the impact of meditation on the brain and central nervous system. And in the process, we are finding a blend of subjective and objective dimensions of consciousness as they come under the analytical focus of science.

Some unusual collaborations have been established...
between spiritual teachers and Western scientists seeking to develop a science of meditation. The field of Transcendental Meditation (TM), for example, based on the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, has led to a host of studies that have examined the health benefits of daily meditation practices. Recently, the Dalai Lama has teamed up with Richard Davidson, PhD, director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin, to see if Buddhist meditation can help to control destructive emotions. In partnership with Jon Kabat-Zinn, they found that mindfulness training in novices (both medical patients and corporate executives) led to less stress, greater motivation, and an increase in positive emotions. More extreme examples of positive mood regulation were found in experienced meditators—specialists with at least three years of solitary meditation practice. While such dedication may not be realistic for the average person, work with these meditation adepts allows us to understand the degree to which we can change minds, brains, and bodies through contemplative practices.

In fact, the medicalization of meditation may be the way in for many advocates who are seeking to move contemplative practices further into the mainstream. A recent review of mind-body therapies, including meditation, by psychologist John Astin, PhD, found that they can be effective for a wide array of health-related problems. The now classic work on the “relaxation response” by Herb Benson, MD, (originally sponsored by IONS more than 20 years ago) brought practices of Transcendental Meditation into an easily accessible formula: Find a quiet environment, a relaxed position, and focus on the slow repetition of a sound or word. These steps appear to decrease heart rate and blood pressure and increase breathing volume. Benson believes that meditation activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which quiets the nerves. Twenty minutes of practice twice a day appears to produce a thermostatic effect, allowing the stressed nervous system to self-regulate.

Margaret Kemeny, PhD, a professor of behavioral medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, is now leading a study to test the immunological benefits of meditation and emotional-regulation strategy training on 120 nurses and teachers. The goal of this work is to design and test a curriculum drawing from Buddhist contemplative practices and Western psychological research that teaches people how to deal with destructive emotions. The project, sponsored by the Mind and Life Institute, seeks to help individuals in modern society develop skills with which to manifest greater emotional awareness and intelligence in dealing with their own negative emotions and to develop greater empathy for the suffering of others. Worthwhile goals, indeed!

Just as meditation is being studied through the objective lens of science, it is now finding its way into the realm of social application. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, for example, seeks to use contemplative awareness to assist individuals and groups to identify the root causes of social problems and to find creative solutions. In Wilber’s Integral language, this is the realm of intersubjectivity, in which meditation becomes part of a shared experience that aims to better society. In a similar vein, a number of programs have sprung up that use contemplative practices in prisons, where meditation skills are taught to prisoners and guards alike (see “The Yoga of Redemption” by Shift editor Matthew Gilbert in the April 2005 issue of Spirituality & Health magazine). IONS researcher Cassandra
Vieten, PhD, has teamed up with the head of the Petaluma, California, Homeless Shelter to bring a mindfulness program to the homeless. The goal of the “At Home Within” program is to provide participants with inner skills that may help them as they seek to reintegrate into society.

**MEDITATION: TRANSFORMATION**

As we seek an integral perspective, it is fair that we find the right balance among the different approaches of these inner technologies. The rich traditions and cultural practices in which meditation and contemplative practices are embedded are not easily distilled to simple steps for managing our busy lives. As Dean Ornish, MD, writes in his chapter for *Consciousness and Healing: Integral Approaches to Mind Body Medicine*, “… ancient swamis and yogis, rabbis and priests, nuns and monks didn’t develop mind-body techniques to get cholesterol down… or perform better at board meetings. Their techniques are tools for transformation and transcendence…”

While transformation results in changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the actual process does not involve changing these things directly but instead requires a change in perspective—altering one’s core assumptions about the nature of reality. By turning our attention to our inner experience and recognizing the limits of a lifestyle that values material gain over personal and collective good, we begin to live a more balanced life.

[I presented a version of this article at the 2006 Toward a Science of Consciousness Conference held last April in Tucson. In the next issue of *Shift*, we will summarize the major insights from that conference and report on the many studies of prayer and healing that have come out this year—what they said, what it all means, and how future research will be affected.]

*Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, PhD*
*Vice-President for Research and Education*

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