

Cultivating Loving-Kindness: A Two-Stage Model  
for the Effects of Meditation on Compassion, Altruism and Spirituality

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“On our inbreath, we should concentrate on receiving life from God. That inbreath is life sustaining. On our outbreath we should give everything we have back to the universe. Our outbreath may be the last we ever take, and, at the end of our life, we want to make sure we have given everything we have back to the world. “

Jewish meditation, Verman & Shapiro, p. 107.

Meditation or contemplative practice, whether within Judeo-Christian or Eastern traditions, is strongly associated with engagement of spiritual growth. This paper explores the role of meditative practice in cultivating experiences of loving kindness and compassion, and addresses an apparent paradox. Meditation is often associated with solitary retreat, if not preoccupation with one’s own concerns. How, then, does such a practice promote compassion for others? This paper proposes a two-stage model: the first stage involves awareness of habitual reactions and disengagement from this usual preoccupation with the self -- with self-reinforcing, self-defeating, or self-indulgent behaviors and reactions. However, compassion also requires engagement or connection with the other. Therefore, this model suggests that a second step in developing compassion or altruism via meditation involves a focused engagement with a universal human capacity for empathy and love. As Batson proposes for the empathy-altruism hypothesis (2002), this model assumes that capacity for self-protection and capacity for compassion are separable human functions. As the self is transcended, the mind may be opened more to the possibility of full engagement with others. Whether this happens automatically or requires encouragement or direction is the question engaged here.

This paper will explore the role of meditative practice in cultivating experiences of loving kindness and compassion, and will address several related questions: what is the relationship between cultivation of compassion and cultivation of other types of meditation effects, such as relaxation or behavior change? Are meditative techniques universal tools for developing

capacity for compassion? What are the underlying mechanisms for this engagement to occur? How does the cultivation of 'self' associated with contemplative practice transform into cultivation of relationship with others? Can meditation practice be utilized as a research tool for exploring the process of cultivation of compassionate being and action? First, it is necessary to consider the process of meditation itself before returning to the role it may play in cultivating empathy, compassion and altruistic behavior.

### The Process of Meditation

Meditation as an attentional process. Across the meditative traditions, there are common elements. These include a particular way of focusing attention, generally the use of repetition, and a non-judgmental rather than analytic thought process. Shapiro (1982) defines meditation as “a family of techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a nonanalytical way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ruminating thought.” (p. 268). Two types of meditation practice are generally identified (Goleman, 1988): concentrative meditation, such as the *mantra* meditations (note: the word *mantra* simply means a repeated sound or word in Sanskrit), and insight or mindfulness meditation.

In the concentrative traditions, the focus of attention is on a particular object, frequently a word, *mantra*, phrase or prayer. The rhythm of the breath is also often used. In the concentrative traditions the goal is to maintain focus as much as possible on the particular object of attention. When attention wanders, as it naturally does, the instruction is to return it to the breath or back to original object of focus. In the mindfulness traditions, attention is purposefully kept open, attending to whatever enters the field of awareness, but without usual analytic engagement or “thinking about” the object of awareness. The object of attention may be an emotion, a physical feeling, an image, an external object, or again simply the breath, but there is more flexibility in the object of awareness than in concentrative meditation. Vipassana practice, a variant of mindfulness meditation, often uses the breath as a way to re-engage the attention, should it become caught up with analytic thinking, yet the primary instruction is to simply be fully attentive, without judgment, of what arises into the field of attention.

A third type of meditation might be considered focused or directed meditations, in which the content carries significance and is intended to engage a particular aspect of self, but in a mindful, rather than analytic or judgmental way. In traditional meditation practices, this may be a particular chant, the symbolic mandala of Tibetan tantric practices, a Zen koan, or physical sensations experienced in Yogic postures. In contemporary practice, focusing on pain, on other physical sensations such as hunger or stress, or on interpersonal connectedness, might be used, with the specific goal in mind of first increasing awareness and then modifying the nature of cognitive or emotional response to these experiences. Although concentrative techniques are sometimes considered a necessary foundation for use of mindfulness techniques, and possibly directed meditations, contemporary practice is more flexible. While learning simple concentrative techniques may facilitate mindfulness or directed techniques, the basic elements of all three approaches can be easily learned by most people within a few weeks – or even days -- of practice. However, integrating them into daily life and being able to draw on them to create more enduring or substantial effects generally requires substantial experience and practice of months, if not years.

Meditation traditions may utilize primarily on one or another type of practice (concentrative, mindfulness or directed) but most combine elements of all three. For example, Transcendental Meditation (TM) is usually considered a *mantra* meditation, in which a word is repeated continuously on the breath, but it de-emphasizes a sustained effortful concentration that accompanies some other concentrative traditions. In Judaism repetitive prayer and movement remains a central aspect of Hasidism. The Jesus prayer of the Hesychastic Christian Catholic tradition, a repetitive prayer meditation, is undergoing a revival under the direction of Father Keating of the Benedictine Order (Keating, 2002). This Christian centering prayer can be considered a type of *mantra* meditation. In Christian traditions, the seclusion of Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days or his period of seclusion at Gethsemene just as he knew he would be arrested, provides a model for the value of reflection, of simply listening for the voice of guidance. The Buddha, trained in the Yogic traditions of extended and isolated meditation, had

his awakening while seated under the Bodhi tree after sitting for a single night. In the Buddhist traditions, one variant of Vipassana or insight meditation is 'loving kindness' meditation (Kornfield, 1993). These are focused meditations directed toward cultivating experiences of compassion, joy, equanimity, and a sense of love and connectedness with others.

Mindfulness meditation lends itself somewhat more flexibly to use of directed meditation, as the object of awareness can be flexibly assigned or chosen. However, even concentrative meditations can – and are done – in a particular context; for example, practicing TM as a relaxation tool may establish different expectations than practicing it as a path to spiritual development.

The Neuropsychology of Meditation. Regardless of whether the meditative process involves concentrative techniques or mindfulness techniques, a fundamental goal is to train the mind to disengage from usual modes of thinking, attention, and reaction to the objects of consciousness. As our knowledge of basic operations of attention, experience and neurological processing grows, several fundamental aspects of neuropsychological functioning are becoming better understood. Our brain is designed to be constantly scanning our environment, both external and internal. Meaning is constructed based largely on past experience. Our minds are designed to respond first to experiences construed either as threats or danger, or as sources of gratification and reward. These associations are highly conditionable. Responses, whether physiological, emotional or behavioral, occur within milliseconds. Much of our response to our environment includes applying meaning well before experience reaches consciousness. While much of the brain functions at a preconscious or unconscious level, once experience enters consciousness, further cascades of response, interpretation and reaction occur. Much of this process we share with lower organisms in order to meet basic survival needs. While responding at this level is necessary to learning and daily functioning, it is also often “self” centered and self-protective.

We also share with some lower organisms other processes that appear less immediate to survival needs and more characteristic of general adaptation, including empathy, affiliation

and social processing. As evidence is suggesting (Preston & De Waal, 2002; Lewis et al., 2000) empathy may be hardwired into virtually all mammals as a process necessary for caring for the young. However, in contrast to lower mammals, we have much higher developed levels of symbolic knowledge, as expressed in language and complex learning and planning capacities, represented by tremendously complex levels of cortical development. We draw on these capacities for adaptive functioning, development of intellectual knowledge, and our capacity for self-judgment. We also have built into us the qualities that are even more uniquely human: the capacity for creativity, for spiritual experience, for altruistic behavior, and for whatever it is we refer to as “wisdom”. These capacities may involve – or even require – a suspension of the engagement of the mind in the lower level processes, both at the survival level (i.e., meeting immediate self-protective or self-gratifying needs) and even at the adaptive level (i.e., analysis, symbolic representation, everyday social discourse).

#### Understanding Meditation Effects

Since the 1960s hundreds of empirical studies have been carried out on the range of effects of meditation (Murphy, Donovan & Taylor, 1999; Shapiro, 1982). Meditation is widely recognized as a tool to attain a variety of goals: physical relaxation (Benson, 1975); reduction in anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, Massion, Kristeller et al., 1992; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998) and depression (Teasdale et al., 2000; 2002); changes in addictive patterns (O’Connell & Alexander, 1994) and improvement in behavioral self-regulation (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999). Ironically, only a very few studies have examined the impact of meditative practice on the traditional goals of practice: cultivation of spiritual well-being, love and compassion. Some very early work (Brosse, 1954) on experimental investigations of altruism in Yogic practices has been virtually ignored. One of the challenging questions in understanding meditation is why such a relatively simple attentional process as meditation, as described above, should have the wide range of effects that have been identified in both the traditional literature and in the contemporary psychological literature.

Common to a number of these effects is the process of increasing awareness of conditioned responses and then learning to disengage from the conditioned reactions. Awareness has been posited as the key to promoting both psychological and physiological self-regulation (Schwartz, 1975; 1979). Meditation practice involves training the mind to engage material that enters consciousness in a distinctly different way. Whether by use of a mantra or by “watching” the content of consciousness rather than getting caught up in the reactions to the content, a number of shifts occur. As illustrated in Figure 1, even a limited amount of basic meditation practice may heighten awareness of habitual patterns of experiencing and then may facilitate the disengagement from habitual patterns of reacting. Often there is a feeling of relaxation because the conscious mind is no longer responding with fear or from unfulfilled desires. There may also be an increased sense of well-being, particularly as anxiety-driven cognitions or physiological reactions are suspended. Behavioral regulation may occur as drives to either avoid or to indulge are weakened. Finally, a sense of centering within the self may evolve. Superficial levels of identity may drop away, or a fuller sense of integration may emerge. In Austin’s words (1999), as a function of meditative practice, “Nerve cells have been liberated from much of their usual irrelevant synaptic clutter.” (p. 658).

After this “liberation” occurs, what follows? How can meditation then be used to cultivate particular types of self-growth or regulation? While it is possible that certain effects, such as relaxation or treatment of anxiety, may occur spontaneously with basic meditation practice, other effects either require or are greatly facilitated by directing attention toward particular aspects of functioning. For example, in the ground-breaking work carried out by Teasdale and his colleagues (2000; 2002) with individuals with a history of major depression, the standard mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program developed by Kabat-Zinn (1990) was augmented with components specific to depression, through directions to become aware of depressive-type thinking, to become mindful of when such thoughts come into the mind, and to mindfully disengage habitual reactions to these type of self-defeating thoughts. Significant decreases in the recurrence of subsequent depressive episodes followed. In our work with

individuals with compulsive eating problems (Kristeller & Hallett, 1999), we have also adapted the MBSR program and added guided meditations that form a substantial part of the experience. Much of the meditation practice is focused on becoming mindfully more aware of the experience of taste, hunger, feelings of fullness, and food choices. Even individuals who have been trained previously in general meditation practice reported that it is this specific focus that helped them shift their relationship to food and eating.

Self-Centered or Centered Self? Before continuing on to consider the effect of meditation on development of empathy, compassion and altruism, let us consider the counter-point to these goals. How is it that a practice that appears inherently 'self-focused' can cultivate the opposite? Is the 'self' that is accessed during meditation practice a centered self? ... or merely self-centered? Although meditative practice can be viewed as a tool for cultivating compassion, in fact it is often associated with solitary retreat, if not preoccupation with one's own concerns (as in the pejorative term "naval gazing"). Early psychoanalytic interpretations of meditation effects focused on the solipsistic elements of meditation practice: the meditator as hermit; as deviant; as a self-absorbed ascetic who engaged community only to meet the barest personal needs. Meditation was seen as promoting regression, allowing the person to return to the figurative "womb". Offered as examples were those individuals who did appear to be escaping social responsibility or for whom meditative practice, far from freeing the mind from suffering, appeared to plunge it into chaos (such as may infrequently occur when meditation releases memories of past trauma).

A clear counter-point to interpretation of meditative effects as pathologically self-absorbed was the conceptualization of meditation as a potent path toward self-growth and self-actualization, stimulated by Jung (1937/1992) and then by Maslow's work (1994). A review of the literature on meditation and self-actualization (Alexander, 1991) identified 46 studies that in general supported the value of meditative practice for development of self-actualization. Within models of self-actualization, a shift from self-preoccupation to concern for others is considered a natural progression along stages of self-development. Yet the questions still remain: how does



self-actualization come about? How does it link to development of empathy? Is it spontaneous or a function of length of time of practice, or a function of maturation (at least in some individuals)? Alternatively, is this shift a function of cultivation of particular aspects of motivation or goals? All meditative spiritual traditions emphasize that the extended goal of contemplative practice is an opening of the heart, a heightening of compassion, a preparation for loving and caring more deeply for others. But how is it that this occurs?

Research background. As noted above, there has been surprisingly little systematic investigation of the impact of meditative practice on experiences of empathy or compassion. In 1970, Lesh explored the effect of four weeks of Zazen training on 16 master's-level student therapists. They were compared to a waiting-list comparison group and a group of students who expressed no interest in the meditation. Empathy was measured by the accuracy of responses to assessing emotions expressed by a videotaped client. Empathic ability at baseline was related to level of self-actualization (as measured by Shostram's Personal Orientation Inventory (Shostram, 1966)) and to openness to experience, which also increased significantly in the Zazen group. Only the Zazen group showed increases in empathy at followup and the changes were greater in those with less capacity for empathy at baseline.

A very recent study (Carson, in press) has explored the effect of mindfulness meditation in combination with guided meditation on relationship enhancement in married couples. James Carson, a clinical psychologist, has a background of extensive work in various meditative traditions. Forty-four couples were randomly assigned to either a waiting-list control or to an intervention program based on mindfulness meditation practice. The couples were in generally well-adjusted relationships and had been married on average for 11 years. The program consisted of eight 2-hour sessions and one full day retreat. In addition to components modeled on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program established by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Full Catastrophe Living, 1990), a number of elements related to enhancing the relationship were added, including loving-kindness meditations (Kornfield, 1993) (see below for an example), partner yoga exercises, focused application of mindfulness to relationship issues, and group

discussions of these experiences. In contrast to the waiting list group, who showed no meaningful change, the program significantly improved the quality of connectedness, including relatedness to and acceptance of the partner. Spirituality, as measured by the INSPIRT (Kass et al, 1991) also improved significantly. Furthermore, the level of improvement was correlated with the amount of practice of meditation individuals reported.

A qualitative study of Japanese Zen monks (cited in Austin, 1999) found that those monks had characteristics similar to the characteristics of a group of Americans chosen on the basis of having been identified as highly altruistic individuals. The Zen monks were described as being capable of swift action, showing lack of fear, simplicity, stability, selfless compassion, and a high capacity for change. The altruistic Americans (Colby & Damon, 1992) showed “an unhesitating will to act, a disavowal of fear and doubt, and a simplicity of moral response, ... great capacity for change and growth...” (p. 694), and, of course, exemplary altruism.

These research studies employ very different methods but each of them illustrates an association between meditation practice and cultivation of empathy, compassion, and altruism. The studies by Lesh and by Carson are important because they show changes that occur relatively quickly in novice meditators; however, in both studies, the value placed on cultivating empathy was made explicit as part of the goals of participation in the meditation process. For Zen monks, the cultivation of compassion is a fundamental aspect of Buddhism. However, none of these studies can address the question as to whether changes in empathy or compassion would have appeared spontaneously as simply part of the process of the practice of meditation.

A Two-Stage Model. Figure 2 illustrates a two-stage model of meditation effects that is proposed for understanding how meditation practice may augment empathy, compassion and altruism. As noted above, the initial stage involves first awareness of habitual patterns and responses, followed by de-conditioning or dis-engagement from usual daily pre-occupation with self-reinforcing, self-defeating, or self-indulgent behaviors and reactions. The nature of the goals toward self is shifted from self-protective or self-centered. This is done by practicing a shift in how the self is experienced, and is consistent with Post’s (2003) conceptualization of altruism of

involving transcendence of the self. However, compassion and altruism also require engagement or connection with the other. Therefore, it is proposed that a second step in developing these qualities via meditation requires a focused engagement with one's own capacity for empathy, compassion and altruistic behavior. It is proposed that all components are necessary for an enduring and consistent engagement of compassionate experience and behavior as a function of meditative practice.

Basic meditative practices for cultivation of compassionate love, or *metta* in Sanskrit, have a long tradition. A widely used loving kindness practice (Levine, 1979; Monaghan & Derrick, 1999; Bodian, 1999) starts with engaging compassion towards the self, with the repetition of short phrases while in a meditative state:

May I be free from suffering.

May I find my joy.

May I be filled with love.

May I be at peace.

These phrases are then repeated, but with the focus shifted to others – first to a benefactor, then a good friend, then a neutral person, then someone with whom we experience interpersonal difficulties, or even an enemy, and finally to all beings in the world. Beginning with extending compassion toward the self is considered essential for two reasons; first, it engages a sense of inner awareness of those feelings or experiences most likely to block expression of compassion, especially anger; secondly, it cultivates awareness of inner resources to deal with such feelings. The first is important because otherwise the self may spring back to quickly into a protective mode; the second is important because cultivating the experience of compassion toward the self provides a foundation for extending that sense of love out to others. As is often said, “God is love” – and therefore connecting with the sense of love in ourselves may be the essence of connecting to what is spiritual within the self.

In our work with individuals with eating disorders (Kristeller & Hallett, 1999), we include a forgiveness meditation late in the eight week treatment. At this point, most individuals have

made dramatic shifts in their relationship to food, reporting that they are now able to discriminate between physical hunger and emotional hunger, and find that they can savor even favorite foods within losing control. The forgiveness meditation begins with asking them to forgive themselves for not taking care of their body, for the harsh judgments they have made of themselves, for using food to comfort themselves. This is a very, powerful emotional meditative experience, and for many, it shifts, without our direction, toward forgiveness toward others. For one woman, it shifted toward forgiveness toward an abusive father – and husband. When she came in the following week, she said that she had finally let go of 30 years of anger – and of the need to cover that anger with eating uncontrollably in the middle of the night.

Meditative practice is neither necessary nor sufficient for either compassion toward self – or toward others -- to occur, but it may be that meditation, by systematically providing a tool to suspend engagement in usual thought processes and hence suspension of self-judgment, carries unique value in promoting empathy and compassion. The traditional literature associating meditative practice with spiritual growth suggests that meditation then can provide a particularly powerful means to actively cultivate universal capacities for love and connectedness.

Future directions. Understanding the dynamics between sense of self, selfishness, selflessness and compassion may be furthered by research on meditation. Meditative exercises could be combined with the experimental paradigms suggested by Batson (2002) that have been productive in exploring empathy and altruism. Relatively little focus to date has been paid to systematically evaluating this aspect of the meditative experience. However, it is relatively easy to manipulate the content of focused meditations to evaluate the degree to which guided directions of various content may promote altruistic feelings or altruistic behavior. The coupling of meditative or contemplative experience with social psychology laboratory research methods could easily provide answers to whether the disengagement from everyday preoccupations in itself promotes re-engagement with others or whether explicit cultivation of altruistic motivation is necessary. Meditation, rather than being construed as only an esoteric or religious practice,

can be considered a powerful means of shifting one's relationship to one's own mind, of uncoupling conditioned reactions that may have outlived their time and value, and opening the mind to qualities of experience that create new meaning, wisdom, and love.

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Figure 1: Effects of Basic Meditation Practice

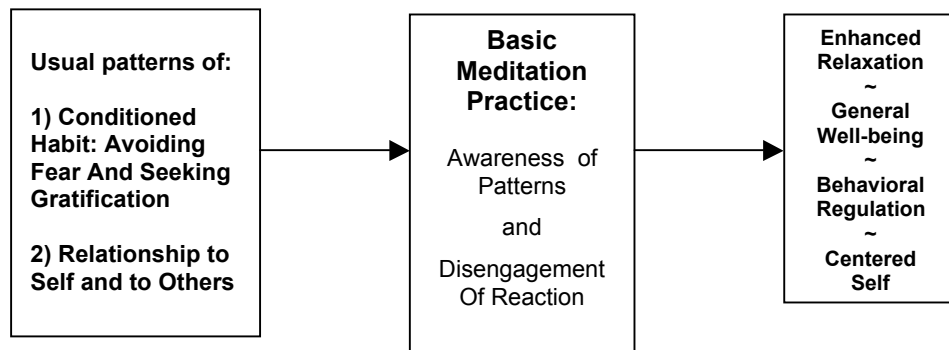
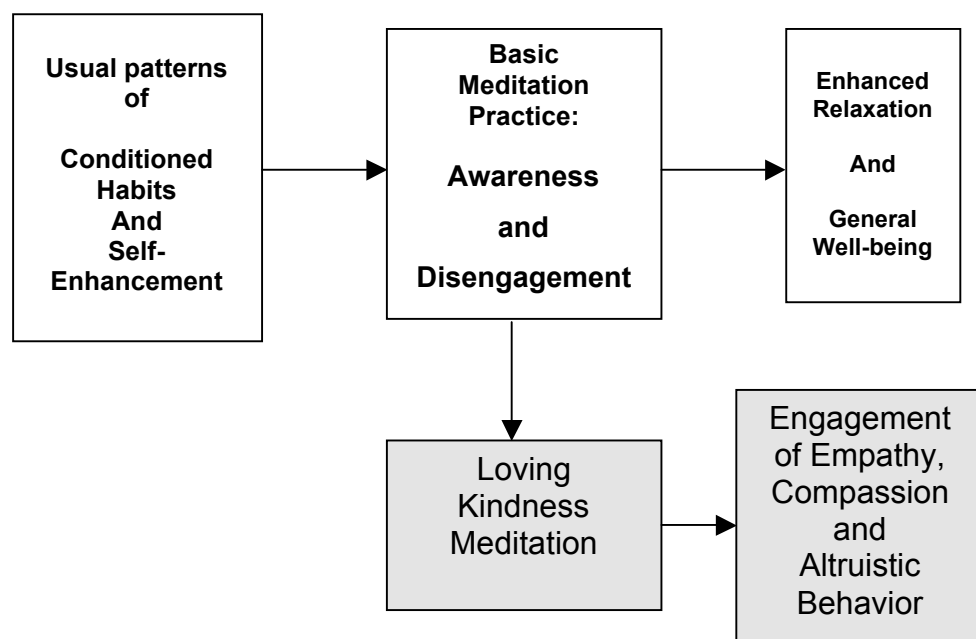


Figure 2: Effects of Basic Meditation Practice Combined with Loving Kindness Meditation



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