

## **The Unsuspected \$1 Billion Dollar Industry**

Yoga class. It seems so peaceful right? A quiet room. The scent of eucalyptus wafting through the air. All thoughts of the daily rigor being washed away. And the best part: the guided meditation that ends the class on a high note. After the class, the relaxed feeling melts away on the drive home. Swarms of traffic hinder my path, my credit card statement is due, a twelve page paper I haven't started is due in a week, yet tomorrow I have to work my minimum wage plus tips job as a waitress for ten hours in order to pay for my gym membership where the yoga class was located and the yoga pants I bought for \$120.00 on my credit card, that ironically is due the night of my yoga class. In the mass culture of America, often people forget that an expensive yoga class will not calm their soul. The mass culture forgets that it is not necessary to buy \$100 yoga pants in order to attain happiness and live a stress free life.

If anything, this perception of meditation and relaxation is wrong, and something brought about by an industry whose main goal is to use you for your money. Meditation has become something of the pop culture and a trend that boasts wealth and exclusivity, when in reality, meditation can be a simple practice that has incredible health benefits. These benefits have been proved by science and are fundamentally biological and should be used everyday, whether one is wearing unreasonably expensive yoga pants or not.

## **The Meditation Industry**

In 2012, Americans alone spent \$30.2 billion dollars out of pocket on complementary health approaches (“Americans Spent...”). This includes anything from “herbal supplements, meditation, chiropractic, and yoga” (“Americans Spent...”). This is significant because not only do people spend money on meditation instruction, but a whole range of other accessories to try to induce even more relaxation or provide more health benefits. Not to say that this is wrong or bad, but to make the point that people can and will make money off of meditation and other complementary medicine. Meditation itself is a one billion dollar industry (Jacobs). When surveyed on how adults in the U.S. use complementary health, only 8% used meditation, 9.5% used yoga, and 8.4% used chiropractic medicine (Black LI). This goes to show that 8% of Americans alone make up the \$1 billion dollar meditation industry. The study also showed that as the socioeconomic status of a family went up, so did their spending on complementary medicine (“Americans Spent...”). This elucidates the fact that the expensive clothing, yoga classes, and herbal teas are perceived as exclusive to the rich people of America. It seems as if only the wealthy can achieve health through meditation, or that meditation will only truly work if you have money.

This concept is entirely false, due to the fact that meditation is purely biological. The simple practice can be done without a class or any instruction, and even five minutes of mindful meditation can provide the basic health benefits that an expensive meditation tutorial will provide. Furthermore, meditation has been

used throughout history, before the mass culture of America grabbed it and made it trendy.

### **History of Meditation**

The thought of meditation is often accompanied by images of Buddha, or aged monks sitting in ancient temples, practicing the arts of meditation and yoga. It is not entirely wrong that these images come to mind. Meditation is an extremely old practice, whose origins date back to 5,000 years ago (“History of Meditation...”). In fact, meditation was practiced long before it gained popularity amidst the Buddhist religion. The first documented meditation practice was in 1,500 BCE in the Vedas of India (“History of Meditation...”). Around the same time, China was also developing meditation practices. The Buddhist religion accepted meditation around 600 BCE, and the Bhagavad Gita, “an epic poem that describes the practice of yoga, meditation, and spirituality, was written around 400 BCE” (“History of Meditation...”). In 20 BCE, meditation moved west and was documented in the Greek texts, but was not accepted by Christianity. Meditation continued to spread to the west and books on mindfulness and consciousness were translated and published in English, and became more popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, in the 1960s, Transcendental Meditation and Hatha yoga was popularized. In the west, meditation has always been more about “self-improvement and stress reduction” (“History of Meditation...”). It is ultimately considered a valuable healing practice; however, it is also perceived as a hard practice, or a lengthy and unachievable state of mind (“History of Meditation...”). This is why meditation became a booming industry. Various technologies promise to put you in

a stress free state of mind, if you pay for them of course, and buying the correct yoga pants, yoga mat, detox tea, and eucalyptus insense can only enhance this experience. In America, meditation has become an industry that sells to the mass culture, but in all reality, the root of mediation is strong and beneficial, and not as hard as to achieve as one might believe.

### **Types of Meditation**

In a formal light, meditation comes in numerous forms, and there are countless ways to practice meditation. The most common form is sitting meditation, where one sits with their hands open to the universe. This type of meditation can happen at any point in the day, and even if utilized for just five minutes, a more relaxed and focused sense of self can be achieved. Although this is the easiest form of meditation, other forms of meditation are also significant and meaningful. In the following paragraphs, Mindfulness meditation, Vipassana and Zen meditation, as well as Loving/Kindness meditation and their benefits will be discussed.

The next step to sitting meditation is Mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is the most popular type of meditation in the west, originating from the Buddhist religion and entertaining a simple philosophy. Sitting meditation can be a part of this practice, and it is generally easy to find free, guided tutorials of this practice on the internet (Eisler). This type of meditation is simple, and encourages the mind to focus on the positive aspects of life. If any type of meditation should be used daily, it would be this one. It is simple and costs next to nothing. Using mindfulness meditation is the easiest way to avoid the stressful and costly meditation industry and to use meditation for its actual health benefits.

Once one becomes familiar with this type of meditation, the next step is utilizing the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction meditation method. With practice, meditation and the accompanying mind-set becomes easier and easier to attain, and deeper and more challenging practices can be attempted, each bearing more fruit of labor than the last. If the goal is self-improvement, then progressive meditation is the key to a better self.

Vipassana meditation is a meditation practice that involves seeing “things as they really are” (Eisler). Vipassana encourages the subject to focus on their breath, and to take daily events as they come, each time returning back to the inner self and calming with breath (Eisler). Zen is yet another form of meditation that focuses on breath, however this time the breath is focused to the belly and not the nose, as in Vipassana meditation (Eisler). These meditation forms are more challenging than mindfulness meditation, and are usually done through instruction or a class of some sort. Yoga nidra can fit into this meditation category where the body is the focus of relaxation.

The meditation industry thrives on these practices, because people believe that to meditate it must come in this form whether they go to a class or purchase a tutorial. The myth of the pop culture involves buying expensive yoga pants, attending exclusive and expensive meditation or yoga classes, and feeling more zen for having done so. In all reality, practice and meditation development can result in feeling zen. Taking a class is okay, but feeling more stressed because your yoga pants are too expensive is absurd.

Loving/kindness meditation is also a fruitful practice that can bring up self-esteem, reduce negative self-criticism, and ultimately improve or provide higher quality relationships (Eisler). The Declaration of Alma Ata states that health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Declaration of Alma Ata, 1). If mindfulness meditation fulfills the mental aspect of the definition, and Vipassana/Zen/Yoga fulfills the physical aspect of the definition, then loving/kindness meditation fulfills the final aspect of social wellbeing and health. Loving/kindness does not require a class or yoga pants, it is a priceless mindset that teaches unconditional friendliness and love. Not many people know that this practice is considered a part of meditation. The best part is that this is a free and self-fulfilling practice that brings incredible outcomes. This practice comes from the heart and conveys limitless social rewards. If anything will improve a person, it is carrying love in the heart and soul.

Thus, the endless ways to practice meditation allow a person to attain the ultimate definition of health. It is more than just something that someone should spend money on or make money off of, it is crucial for everyday health and wellness.

### **So, Why Meditate?**

Meditation impacts a person's whole life, and goes beyond the fifteen minutes one might sit and meditate. Not only does fifteen to twenty minutes of sitting and relaxing make you feel better, but the relaxed and harmonious state of mind that is a result of meditation is meant to be carried on throughout the day. The lessons and discipline one gains through meditation can be used when talking with friends, family, coworkers, and even strangers (“Why Meditate?”). Appreciating the

little things goes a long way; however, this appreciation does not come naturally, and dates back to nomadic times. Chopra calls this the “negativity bias,” and its origin can be traced back thousands of years. It would have been a waste of time for our ancestors to stop and smell the roses while hunting for food, which means that noticing the positive and practicing it is not innate (Why Meditate?). This is where meditation helps the modern day human to appreciate life and obtain the health benefits that this practice has to offer. Ironically, this is also where the meditation industry convinces people that meditation is hard and an exclusive practice.

The obvious health benefit of meditation is that it helps to reduce stress and provide relaxation. The human body is in a constant state of fight-or-flight response. With everything happening in the world, it is important that the body is ready to react quickly and correctly. This causes stress and tension to build up in the body (Why Meditate?). Meditation is proven to “dissipate accumulated stress and cultivate a state of restful alertness “ so that our bodies are not constantly in a fight-or-flight response mode (“Why Meditate?”). The deep state of rest caused by meditation has also been shown to arouse neurotransmitters, for example dopamine. This triggered release of dopamine and other neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, has been linked to a reduction in depression, anxiety, and insomnia (“Why Meditate?”).

The brain benefits immensely from meditation. The practice of meditation improves the plasticity of the brain, in turn increasing the brain’s memory, learning, and self-awareness functions (“Why meditate?”) Moreover, meditation has been proven to help treat neurodegenerative disease. Increased memory function and

awareness have been linked to cognitive improvement in neurodegenerative diseases (Newberg et al.). More specifically, “meditation practice and increased mindfulness appear to be related to improved attentional functions and cognitive flexibility” (Newberg et al.). In short, the improvements in these cognitive aspects are more or less related to meditation’s ability to increase brain plasticity, which could be capable of restructuring the brain, allowing new parts of the brain to make up for the lack of function in the disease ridden parts of the brain. Re-structuring the brain through meditation points to a future of alternative treatment that could lead to a cure for neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s.

### **The Science of Meditation**

Meditation is not just an industry to make money off of, it is a biological science that leads to real health benefits. A study out of the University of Oregon sought out to prove that meditation is indeed biological. They genetically engineered mice with a special protein in the brain that would oscillate when exposed to light. The light pattern the mice were exposed to would create oscillations that would be the same as the oscillations that occur in the anterior cingulate cortex of the meditator’s brain (Netburn). Overall, “tests revealed that mice that were exposed to the same patterns exhibited by human meditators were more relaxed than those that did not get the “meditation” treatment” (Netburn). This experiment proves the low-level of biology that is capable of providing real health benefits through meditation.

### **Call to Action**

Meditation is simple. The biological health benefits provided by the practice are boundless, and happen because the affects naturally occur in the simplest cells of the human body. The \$150 dollar yoga pants do not cause the anterior cingulate cortex of the human brain to oscillate. The classes and paid instruction may help, the yoga class might help, and the yoga pants might be comfortable to meditate in, but those things are not necessary in order to practice meditation. If anything, people should at least sit down once or twice a day and breathe. They should reflect on their day and focus on things they are grateful and appreciative of. Even a tiny amount of mediation will result in increased positivity and reduced stress that could benefit them throughout their day. Relationships with friends, family, and coworkers could be strengthened, and a person is likely to be happier when they take time to focus on the positive aspects of life. After discussing all these benefits, twenty minutes of mindfulness meditation a day does not seem like an inconvenience.

If more evidence of the benefits of meditation is needed, multiple millionaire celebrities have found success whilst using meditation. Take Bill Ford, for example. As the executive chairman of Ford Motor Company, Ford cites loving-kindness meditation as one of the keys to his success, especially when the company is going through hard times. Leading with compassion has led Ford and his company to great and continued success (Gregoire). Oprah Winfrey also takes advantage of the perks of meditation. Oprah sits in stillness for twenty minutes at least twice a day, and has even brought people in to teach the employees at Harpo Productions Inc. how to utilize meditation. Oprah cites transcendental meditation as one of the reasons she

is hopeful and feels full of deep joy (Gregoire). Thus, mediation is key to a happy, healthy, and more successful life and should be used daily.

Do not let the industry make you feel like you can't take advantage of these benefits just because you cannot afford the ritzy accessories. Try to breath instead, and see if you notice a difference.

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### Self-Reflection

1. I think that choosing this topic worked well for me because there is an abundance of information about meditation. Finding the sources was probably the easiest part, while actually organizing all the information I had and writing the essay was the hardest part. I overall liked the writing process, and I think it went smoother because I did not procrastinate. I actually tried to follow my timeline and get my essay done so that when finals week came around, I was not super stressed out. That went well for me. I was, of course, still stressed out, but it was not as bad as it could have been.
2. With more time, I would elaborate much more on the science of meditation. It is hard to take the scientific articles that I read and explain them shortly in the essay, especially without plagiarizing. I would love to find more articles on this and be able to go deeper into the biological component, but to explain all of it I would have to write like 30 more pages.
3. I feel that I have at least earned a low A on this paper. I have worked hard to organize the information in a meaningful way and to address my opposition in a way that highlights something that I am very passionate about. I am passionate about not buying into the materialistic side of life and actually focusing on the meaningful aspects of life. I think that I logically explained how meditation is biological and how yoga pants and the industry are not needed to appreciate life and meditate.