

Meditation and Health

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Outline

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The aims of this article are:

1. To develop a deeper understanding of the practice of meditation according to the Bahá'í Writings
2. To explore the effects of meditation on health.

Meditation has been practiced in diverse forms throughout the world for thousands of years. In an attempt to understand meditation, scientists have studied it in highly controlled settings. According to Professor Deane Shapiro, such controlled scientific experiments often remove meditation from its spiritual and religious contexts [1]. These studies can address certain aspects of meditation such as stress reduction and relaxation but are ill-equipped to deal with broader elements.

Shapiro asserts that most published studies of meditation have examined Eastern forms meditation from Vedic or Buddhist traditions; few studies have examined meditation from Africa, North or South America [1].

There are many forms of meditation such as:

1. Contemplation
2. Concentration without contemplation (e.g. focus on breathing or watching a flame)
3. Mindfulness
4. Zen meditation pondering words or phrases, often paradoxical (e.g. if the Buddha stands in the way of your enlightenment kill him)
5. Visualizing or imagining certain states such as love
6. Transcendental Meditation, in which sounds without meaning are repeated to attain a state of restful alertness where the mind is silent (the effect of the sounds is linked to their resonance frequencies)
7. Meditation designed for people living a monastic life

Activities not typically considered meditation, such as immersion in natural beauty in mountains, or waterfalls may foster episodes of meditation. Many people use music to relax and in some cases meditate; the Bahá'í writings have called music a ladder for your souls to ascend to the world of spirit [Bahá'u'lláh. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 38]. Likewise, certain activities such as fishing may lead to periods of contemplation and reflection.

Before considering the relationship between meditation and health it is important to define health. The word *health* comes from the term *wholeness*. The World Health Organization has defined health as the optimal state of physical and mental well-being rather than the absence of disease. According to this rigorous definition, few people are truly healthy. In this age of medical syndromes, the rarest of all syndromes has been described by a New Zealand comedian, Gary McCormack, as TNP: totally normal person!

Palliative care of people in their last months of life offers rather different definitions of health as a state of peace and acceptance of death in which symptoms such as pain and shortness of breath are controlled. In this model a person about to die can be seen as whole whereas a person with no measurable disease can be quite unhealthy and wishing she or he was dead.

I have organised this article into ten topics. For each topic I will examine pertinent references from the Bahá'í Writings and from books and articles about specific forms of meditation. I have employed Mars for Windows, a computer database of the Bahá'í Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, to sample the relative frequencies and associations of terms such as meditation, contemplate, reflect and ponder. Because Mars for Windows lists certain quotations twice when they appear in different books, the absolute number of citations for a given word is not a perfect measure of the frequency of that term. The table below shows that the most frequently cited term is *reflect* followed by *ponder* and *meditation*. The least frequently cited term is *commune*. None of these key words were linked within 10 words to *health* or *healing* suggesting that the Bahá'í writings either do not or rarely connect meditative practices to health or healing.

<u>Word</u>	<u>Citations</u>	<u>Health / Healing</u>
Reflect	253	0
Ponder	199	0
Meditation	100	0
Meditate	95	0
Contemplate	53	0
Transcend	24	0
Commune	32	0

1. Prayer and Meditation: Synergistic Forces of Spiritual Transformation

The Bahá'í Writings often associate the words *prayer* and *meditation* in the same sentence. The words *meditate* or *meditation* appear in 100 citations from Mars for Windows. In fifty one percent of these citations, the words *meditate (tion)* and *prayer* appeared within 10 words of one another; in 47% these terms were within three words of one another. Bahá'í book titles linking meditation and prayer include *Prayers and Meditations* and *The Importance of Prayer, Meditation and the Devotional Attitude: A Compilation*. The Bahá'í month of fasting is also a month of meditation [*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Notes, pp. 176-177].

Here are several examples of exhortations to pray and meditate:

The first thing to do is to acquire a thirst for Spirituality, then Live the Life! Live the Life! Live the Life! The way to acquire this thirst is to meditate upon the future life. Study the Holy Words, read your Bible, read the Holy Books, especially study the Holy Utterances of Bahá'u'lláh; Prayer and Meditation, take much time for these two. Then will you know this Great Thirst, and then only can you begin to Live the Life!

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Importance of Deepening*, p. 204]

For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites Man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer.

[Shoghi Effendi. *Directives of the Guardian*, p. 86]

The Guardian has thus linked prayer and meditation with communion with God. In summary, meditation is depicted as a necessary companion to prayer in the journey of spiritual transformation. The Bahá'í Teachings also link study with prayer and meditation: 'These gifts of the spirit are received through prayer, meditation, study of the Holy Utterances and service to the Cause of God...'

[Shoghi Effendi. *The Importance of Deepening*, p. 232]

Bahá'u'lláh has emphasized the link between worship and bliss: 'Who-soever experienceth the holy ecstasy of worship will refuse to barter such an act or any praise of God for all that existeth in the world'

[*The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting*, p. 5].

Dr Hossain Danesh, a Bahá'í psychiatrist and academic, has explained that:

While meditation is directly connected with our capacity to know, prayer is indispensable to our capacity to love. Through prayer we commune with the ultimate object of our love. Prayer is love talk. The lover earnestly supplicates the Beloved, humbly entreating the loved one to shower her or him with loving bounties. In the context of spiritual transformation, the loved one is God - the source of all truth, love, and assistance. Therefore when we pray we enkindle our soul, open our heart and mind, attract the hearts of other people, and help to create a reciprocal relationship of love, truth and service.

[Danesh. *The Psychology of Spirituality. From Divided Self to Integrated Self* p. 230]

2. What is Meditation According to the Bahá'í Writings?

Perhaps the best explanation of meditation within the Bahá'í Writings is in a passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá that appears in *Paris Talks*. Because the meaning of this passage is so concentrated, I will analyse it sentence by sentence. To begin, 'Abdu'l-Bahá cites Bahá'u'lláh stating that contemplation is essential for understanding and that this process requires the meditator to remain silent: 'Bahá'u'lláh says there is a sign (from God) in every phenomenon: the sign of the intellect is contemplation and the sign of contemplation is silence, because it is impossible for a man to do two things at one time - he cannot both speak and meditate' ['Abdu'l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 174].

The word *contemplate* was cited 53 times in *Mars for Windows* but never in association with meditate or meditation.

Next, 'Abdu'l-Bahá depicts meditation as speaking with your own spirit - asking questions and receiving answers:

'It is an axiomatic fact that while you meditate you are speaking with your own spirit. In that state of mind you put certain questions to your spirit and the spirit answers: the light breaks forth and the reality is revealed'

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 174].

‘Abdu’l-Bahá labels meditation as an essential feature distinguishing humans from animals:

'You cannot apply the name 'man' to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal, lower than the beasts'

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 175].

‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us that God bestows the breath of the Holy Spirit during meditation:

'Through the faculty of meditation man attains to eternal life; through it he receives the breath of the Holy Spirit - the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation'

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 175].

He further asserts that we are inspired, strengthened and informed of new wisdom during meditation, receiving spiritual nutrition:

'The spirit of man is itself informed and strengthened during meditation; through it affairs of which man knew nothing are unfolded before his view. Through it he receives Divine inspiration, through it he receives heavenly food'

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 175].

‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us that we can unlock the doors of mysteries during meditation:

Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves. To illustrate this, think of man as endowed with two kinds of sight; when the power of insight is being used the outward power of vision does not see.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 175]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes the importance of meditation to advancing science, art and civilization:

This faculty of meditation frees man from the animal nature, discerns the reality of things, puts man in touch with God. This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts. Through the meditative faculty inventions are made possible, colossal undertakings are carried out; through it governments can run smoothly. Through this faculty man enters into the very Kingdom of God.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 175]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá enjoins us to direct the mirror of meditation towards spiritual matters and issues that benefit humanity:

Nevertheless some thoughts are useless to man; they are like waves moving in the sea without result. But if the faculty of meditation is bathed in the inner light and characterized with divine attributes, the results will be confirmed. The meditative faculty is akin to the mirror; if you put it before earthly objects it will reflect them. Therefore if the spirit of man is contemplating earthly subjects he will be informed of these. But if you turn the mirror of your spirits heavenwards, the heavenly constellations and the rays of the Sun of Reality will be reflected in your hearts, and the virtues of the Kingdom will be obtained. Therefore let us keep this faculty rightly directed - turning it to the heavenly Sun and not to earthly objects - so that we may discover the secrets of the Kingdom, and comprehend the allegories of the Bible and the mysteries of the spirit.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, pp. 175-176]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred to prayers that ‘transcend the murmur of syllables and sounds ...’ [*Bahá’í Prayers* (US edition), pp. 70-71]:

Adorn our bodies with the robe of Thy bounty, and remove from our eyes the veil of sinfulness, and give us the chalice of Thy grace; that the essence of all beings may sing Thy praise before the vision of Thy grandeur. Reveal then Thyself, O Lord, by Thy merciful utterance and the mystery of Thy divine being, that the holy ecstasy of prayer may fill our souls - a prayer that shall rise above words and letters and transcend the murmur of syllables and sounds - that all things may be merged into nothingness before the revelation of Thy splendor.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Bahá’í Prayers* (US edition), pp. 70-71]

Might such prayers not represent a meditation that leaves the plane of thinking and travels towards the absolute Being?

I propose that Bahá’í meditation comprises three or more distinct processes:

1. Contemplation or thinking in a conscious state.
In this paper I will use the term *contemplation* to refer to this process. An example is reading the Writings and pondering the meaning using logic or intuition.
 2. Silent wordless reflection, seeking Divine wisdom
In this paper I will use the term *wordless reflection* to denote this process.
 3. Reflection on repeated words or phrases
An example is repeating the Greatest Name [Allah-u-Abhá] ninety-five times.
- In this article I will use the term *reflection on words* to refer to this process.

3. Meditation as Pondering, Reflecting and Thinking Deeply

There are a number of passages in the Bahá'í Writings which depict meditation as pondering, reflecting and thinking deeply as opposed to a process which goes beyond or transcends formal thinking. Bahá'u'lláh enjoined meditation for a thousand years:

'It is necessary for them to meditate, to meditate for a thousand thousand years, that haply they may attain unto a sprinkling from the ocean of knowledge, and discover the things whereof they are oblivious in this day.'

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp. 126-127]

He particularly emphasized pondering the Divine verses:

Do thou meditate on that which We have revealed unto thee, that thou mayest discover the purpose of God, thy Lord, and the Lord of all worlds.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings*, p. 153]

Meditate profoundly, that the secret of things unseen may be revealed unto you, that you may inhale the sweetness of a spiritual and imperishable fragrance, and that you may acknowledge the truth that from time immemorial even unto eternity the Almighty hath tried, and will continue to try, His servants, so that light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood, right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 8]

Meditate on the world and the state of its people.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 56]

Bahá'u'lláh has assured us that meditation, like reflection, is a highly condensed form of worship:

'...the meditation referred to in the words "One hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship" must needs be observed...'

[Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Iqan*, p. 238].

Shoghi Effendi has assured us that meditation would confer Divine inspiration; I cannot determine whether the Guardian was referring to contemplation or another type of meditation in this passage.

The inspiration received through meditation is of a nature that one cannot measure or determine. God can inspire into our minds things that we had no previous knowledge of, if He desires to do so. We cannot clearly distinguish between personal desire and guidance, but if the way opens, when we have sought guidance, then we may presume God is helping us.

[Shoghi Effendi. *Directives of the Guardian*, pp. 77-78]

Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have linked the words *meditate* and *ponder* in a number of passages: Referring to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh enjoined his followers to peruse, meditate and ponder the Most Holy Book: *'Blessed those who peruse it! Blessed those who apprehend it! Blessed those who meditate upon it! Blessed those who ponder its meaning!'* [Bahá'u'lláh. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Other Sections, p. 16]. The separate instructions suggest a hierarchy from peruse (survey in superficial study) to apprehend (logical study) and meditate (seeking Divine inspiration).

In other passages, ponder and meditate have been linked:

The sanctified souls should ponder and meditate in their hearts regarding the methods of teaching.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 200]

It is incumbent upon you to ponder in your hearts and meditate upon His words, and humbly to call upon Him, and to put away self in His heavenly Cause.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 241)

The words ponder and reflect are often linked in the Bahá'í Writings:

Ponder and reflect how mighty and potent hath the Cause of God become!

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Selections* p. 99]

O SON OF MAN! Ponder and reflect. Is it thy wish to die upon thy bed, or to shed thy life-blood on the dust, a martyr in My path, and so

become the manifestation of My command and the revealer of My light in the highest paradise? Judge thou aright, O servant!

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Arabic Hidden Words*, p. 46]

Pondering can release extraordinary power. In the Fire Tablet, the Blessed Beauty advised us: *'Should all the servants read and ponder this, there shall be kindled in their veins a fire that shall set aflame the worlds'* [Bahá'u'lláh. *Bahá'í Prayers* (US), p. 221]. Thus, reading the Fire Tablet is only one step in the process of enkindlement - pondering is also necessary. Elsewhere Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Do thou ponder on the penetrative influence of the Word of God'

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp. 75-76]

"Blessed the man", He, moreover, has stated, "who will read it, [the Kitáb-i-Aqdas] and ponder the verses sent down in it by God, the Lord of Power, the Almighty.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Other Sections, p. 16]

In more than one passage Bahá'u'lláh asks his followers to ponder with their hearts:

Ponder this in thine heart, that the truth may be revealed unto thee, and be thou steadfast in His path.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings*, p. 76].

Ponder this in your hearts, O people of Bahá, and render thanks unto your Lord, the Expounder, the Most Manifest.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings*, p. 117]

Ponder this in your hearts, O people, and be not of those who have turned a deaf ear to the admonitions of Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Praised.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 13]

We are also enjoined to ponder with our inner and outer eyes. Outer vision is essential for most of our daily activities. How much more important is inner vision to our spiritual development:

Ponder a while thereon, that with both your inner and outer eye, ye may perceive the subtleties of Divine wisdom and discover the gems of heavenly knowledge...

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings*, p. 144]

O My Brother! Until thou enter the Egypt of love, thou shalt never come to the Joseph of the Beauty of the Friend; and until, like Jacob, thou forsake thine outward eyes, thou shalt never open the eye of thine inward being; and until thou burn with the fire of love, thou shalt never commune with the Lover of Longing.

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, p. 9]

What is our inner and outer eye? Could the inner eye refer to a state of detachment with our minds focused on or opened towards God in wordless reflection? Bahá'u'lláh writes, '*O MAN OF TWO VISIONS! Close one eye and open the other. Close one to the world and all that is therein, and open the other to the hallowed beauty of the Beloved*' [Bahá'u'lláh. *Persian Hidden Words*, p. 12].

Thus, meditation may be compared to opening our spiritual eye to become more conscious of the perfection of God and less aware of the imperfections of the world.

Bahá'u'lláh has enjoined His followers to reflect on the Teachings:

Reflect: Who in this world is able to manifest such transcendent power, such pervading influence?

[Bahá'u'lláh. *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 235]

This subject needs deep thought. Then the cause of these changes will be evident and apparent. Blessed are those who reflect!

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 96)

Study groups in the Ruhi institute collectively reflect on the teachings:

The posture of learning avoids searching for formulas that are to be followed strictly. Decisions are carried out, after consultation, with the understanding that the developments which follow will be observed and reflected upon. This community reflection is done in light of the wisdom enshrined in the Writings.

[Institute Training Programs, June 1995]

In the Ridván 157 Message of April 2000 the Universal House of Justice enjoined the Bahá'ís to meditate on the sacred word. This passage is most likely referring to conscious contemplation of the Writings: '*...members of our worldwide community also gave more attention to drawing on the power of prayer; to meditating on the sacred Word, and to deriving the spiritual benefits of participation in devotional gatherings*' [Ridván 157 Message, p. 3].

Bahá'u'lláh enjoined His followers to '*...Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning...*' (Bahá'u'lláh. *Arabic Hidden Words*, p. 31). Contemplation and reflection is a suitable process of reviewing each day and correcting our behaviour.

4. Meditation as Silent Wordless Reflection, Seeking Divine Wisdom

In the *Book of the River*, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that experience and observation is necessary to understanding - logic is not sufficient:

...human reason is not a sufficient standard. When viewed with the eye of insight, no phenomenon on earth could be comprehended by any human, whether high or low, without prior observation and experience. Observe the sun in the heavens... Certainly, human reason would not be inclined to accept the possibility of the existence of such a thing by means of any rational definition or description without actual observation and experience.

[*Sahifiy-i-Shattiyyih (Book of the River) Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. A Provisional Translation. By Nader Saiedi. Journal of Bahá'í Studies 1999; 9:3, p. 57]*

Nader Saiedi concludes that: '*After actual observation and experience, reason takes for granted all the wonders of natural phenomena and reduces them to necessary rational truths capable of deduction through rational analysis*' [Concealment and Revelation in Bahá'u'lláh's *Book of the River. Journal of Bahá'í Studies 1999; 9:3, p. 301*].

These passages from the *Book of the River* have particular relevance to the Bahá'í approach to meditation. If meditation is a direct communication channel with God, then it can provide the experience of knowing God, which is far more important than knowing about God. This experience of knowing God is not and cannot be put into words.

Reflection without words may follow periods of prayer, communion with God or study of the Writings. Just as prayer can be viewed as speaking to God, reflection without words may represent listening to God or communing without the constraints of language.

Various passages in the Writings refer to entering the Divine Presence and being immersed in the love and bounties of God: '*...the people of Bahá have entered the blissful abode of the Divine Presence, and quaffed the wine of reunion, from the chalice of the beauty of their Lord, the All-Possessing, the Most High*' (Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings*, p. 32).

5. Meditation Using Repetition of Words or Phrases

As mentioned above, Bahá'ís repeat the Greatest Name, [Allah-u-Abhá], ninety-five times per day. When believers repeat the Greatest Name they are using a phrase with meaning as opposed to a mantra, which is a sound without meaning. The mantra in Transcendental Meditation is used to settle the mind in a deep state of restful alertness, at which time the meditator passively lets go of the mantra. If one persists repeating the sound after one starts to transcend, then the mind is drawn back to the intellectual level and out of transcendence. The repetition of the Greatest Name is different from repeating a mantra until a state of transcendence is reached. However, Jan Dietrick has suggested that *'the Greatest Name is so transcendental in its meaning that it can support the mind to transcend its meaning'* [personal communication]. She recommends that during repetition of the Greatest Name one should *'slow down and turn inward to the Self between words'* [personal communication].

There are a number of Bahá'í prayers which use repetition in a manner that fosters meditation. One of the prayers for the Fast re-affirms our spiritual lifeline fourteen times, reminding us that we are: *'...clinging to the hem of the cord to which has clung all in this world and in the world to come'* [Bahá'u'lláh. *Bahá'í Prayers* US Edition pp. 238-245]. Each verse of the Tablet of the Holy Mariner except for the last three ends with the phrase *'Glorified be my Lord, the All-Glorious!'* [Bahá'u'lláh. *Bahá'í Prayers* US Edition pp. 220-229]. The long prayer for the departed includes nineteen repetitions of six separate phrases, emphasizing each as a separate meditation on the greatness of God.

6. Forms of Bahá'í Meditation

The Guardian stated that there is no set form of Bahá'í meditation - believers may choose whichever forms suit them: *'As to meditation: This also is a field in which the individual is free. There are no set forms of meditation prescribed in the teachings, no plan as such, for inner development. The friends are urged - nay enjoined - to pray, and they also should meditate, but the manner of doing the latter is left entirely to the individual'* [Shoghi Effendi. *Directives of the Guardian*, p. 35].

Bahá'ís are not to teach specific methods of meditation at Bahá'í summer school because this could be divisive and the Faith does not endorse one method over another method:

There are, of course, other things that one can do to increase one's spirituality. For example, Bahá'u'lláh has specified no procedures to be followed in meditation, and individual believers are free to do as they wish in this area, provided that they remain in harmony with the teachings,

but such activities are purely personal and should under no circumstances be confused with those actions which Bahá'u'lláh Himself considered to be of fundamental importance for our spiritual growth. Some believers may find that it is beneficial to them to follow a particular method of meditation, and they may certainly do so, but such methods should not be taught at Bahá'í Summer Schools or be carried out during a session of the School because, while they may appeal to some people, they may repel others. They have nothing to do with the Faith and should be kept quite separate so that enquirers will not be confused.

[Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, September 1, 1983) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 542]

The Guardian affirmed that meditation connects us with God: *'Through meditation doors of deeper knowledge and inspiration may be opened. Naturally, if one meditates as a Bahá'í he is connected with the Source... Meditation is very important, and the Guardian sees no reason why the friends should not be taught to meditate, but they should guard against superstitions or foolish ideas creeping into it'* [Shoghi Effendi. *Directives of the Guardian*, p. 47].

Meditation, like prayer, should be linked with action and bear fruit: *'Prayer and meditation are very important factors in deepening the spiritual life of the individual, but with them must go also action and example, as these are the tangible results of the former. Both are essential'* [Shoghi Effendi. *Lights of Guidance*, p. 457]. Prayer and meditation are the prelude for action, particularly service. Shoghi Effendi has indicated that we act in cycles, with periods of reflection and meditation followed by periods of action and service, precluding a monastic existence:

Dear friends, this is the day of faithfulness; this is the day of unity; this is the day of service. Let us not wait, nor ponder, but, detached from the world and its concerns, clad in the armour of faith, filled with the divine spirit of love, and quickened by His life-giving exhortations, let us arise in utmost love and harmony, hasten to the field of service, and subdue the domain of hearts with the arms of the love of God and the sword of peace and brotherhood.

[Shoghi Effendi. *Bahiyiyih Khanum*, p. 164]

7. Forms of Meditation With Proven Health Effects

Bahá'í Writings either do not or rarely directly link meditation with health or healing. As mentioned previously, the Mars for Windows database contains no sentences in which the words *meditate*, *meditation*, *ponder*, *reflect*, or *contemplate* includes the words *health* or *healing*. The absence of such links, however, do not prove that the Bahá'í Teachings do not connect the

two subjects. In fact, the Writings advise us to study health and treatment of disease.

Let them also study whatever will nurture the health of the body and its physical soundness, and how to guard their children from disease.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Selections*, p. 124]

Thou shouldst endeavour to study the science of medicine.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Health and Healing*, p. 461]

Individual Bahá’ís are encouraged to compare the Writings to scientific knowledge. Thus the admonitions to refrain from smoking and drinking alcohol would be reinforced by scientific studies demonstrating the harmful health effects of smoking and alcohol abuse.

Although health is not the primary purpose of Bahá’í meditation, meditation could have as a secondary purpose the goal of health improvement. For example, although we regard the ‘*procreation of children as the sacred and primary purpose of marriage*’ [Shoghi Effendi. *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 188] there are many other important purposes of marriage. In the Tablet to a Physician, Bahá’u’lláh warns that ‘*anger burneth the liver.*’ If anger is harmful to health, then it follows that measures that prevent or control anger can protect against the damage from anger. Meditation and other forms of relaxation can dissipate anger and may indirectly improve health conditions influenced by anger. Furthermore, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us that communion with God attracts a power to understand the secrets of the universe, which presumably include secrets about our health and well-being:

...if thy mind become empty and pure from every mention and thought and thy heart attracted wholly to the Kingdom of God, forget all else besides God and come in communion with the Spirit of God, then the Holy Spirit will assist thee with a power which will enable thee to penetrate all things, and a Dazzling Spark which enlightens all sides, a Brilliant Flame in the zenith of the heavens, will teach thee that which thou dost not know of the facts of the universe...

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Bahá’í World Faith*, p. 369]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá enjoins us to focus our attention or ponder the Divine teachings: ‘*Now, if thou wishest to know the true remedy which will heal man from all sickness and will give him the health of the divine kingdom, know that it is the precepts and teachings of God. Focus thine attention upon them*’ [‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 152].

Evaluation of the health effects of the meditation of Bahá’ís would be extraordinarily difficult given that the practice is completely individualized

and unique for each person. It may however be possible to examine the health effects of elements of Bahá'í prayer or meditation such as recitation of the Greatest Name ninety-five times.

The form of meditation that has been most widely studied with respect to health and healing is Transcendental Meditation.

8. Transcendental Meditation and the Bahá'í Teachings

Transcendental Meditation, often labelled TM, is the most widely researched form of meditation. TM claims to create a state of restful alertness different to that of waking, dreaming or sleeping without dreaming. TM involves repetition of a sound without meaning for twenty minutes twice daily, in the morning and late afternoon or early evening. This sound is used to quieten the mind; once in a state of quietness the meditator does not consciously repeat the sound.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a physicist by training, developed TM after studying Vedic scriptures under a spiritual master. Although Maharishi did not originate TM, he made it accessible for Westerners and helped to establish its scientific basis. He remains the central figure in TM.

About one-third of TM research has studied an advanced technique known as the TM-Sidhi program. Outcomes of conventional TM must be analysed separately from the outcomes of the TM-Sidhi program in the same way that an exercise group doing a 15 minute light warmup four times per week would be analysed separately from another group running 10 km four times per week after a 15 minute light warmup.

The basis of TM shares much in common with the Bahá'í teachings. In the following list, numbers in square brackets refer to the page number from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *The Science of Being and the Art of Living. Transcendental Meditation*:

1. One almighty God
2. All religions come from the same Absolute Being
3. Meditation is essential
4. Live a life of service to others
5. Individuals responsible for their own spiritual progress
6. World government to bring world peace
7. Spiritual basis for solving economic problems
8. Obey the government and abide by law of the land [166]
9. Moderation in all things [170, 225]
10. Alcohol is harmful and should be avoided [117, 162, 291]
11. Follow the scriptures of your own Faith [132]
12. Unity in diversity. [351]
13. A set of natural laws underpin the universe [323]

Some teachings of Maharishi contradict those of the Bahá'í Writings, such as:

1. Follow Your Own Religion - do not look to other Faiths [131-132]
2. Reincarnation [110]
3. Behave naturally, do not plan or ponder how to behave [112]
4. The 'Bhagavad-Gita is the highest divine wisdom ever revealed to man...' [321]
5. Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation Movement, continuing in the world, will create an ideal civilization. [author not stated p. 333]
6. No reference to the Bahá'í Faith in TM literature

These teachings, however, do not relate to the practice of TM. Hence the practice of TM does not conflict with Bahá'í principles.

TM proponents are permitted to earn money through the teaching and application of TM in publishing, health spas and other areas whereas Bahá'ís do not as a general rule earn money from teaching or applying the Bahá'í teachings.

The Bahá'í Writings praise the word *transcendental*: '*No one except Thyself can unravel the secret of Thy nature, and naught else but Thy transcendental Essence can grasp the reality of Thy unsearchable being*' [Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings*, p. 64]. Shoghi Effendi has labelled Bahá'u'lláh as transcendental: '*Dominating the entire range of this fascinating spectacle towers the incomparable figure of Bahá'u'lláh, transcendental in His majesty, serene, awe-inspiring, unapproachably glorious*' [*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 97]

The Bahá'í Writings further depict a set of universal laws similar to Natural Law in TM:

This Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design, from which it will never depart - to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization and are under one law from which they will never depart.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3]

It is said that Nature in its own essence is in the grasp of the power of God, Who is the Eternal Almighty One: He holds Nature within accurate regulations and laws, and rules over it.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 4]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred to natural law in at least three passages:

The world of creation is bound by natural law, finite and mortal.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*, p. 57]

The phenomenal world is entirely subject to the rule and control of natural law.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 17]

Man is not the captive of nature, for although according to natural law he is a being of the earth, yet he guides ships over the ocean, flies through the air in airplanes, descends in submarines; therefore, he has overcome natural law and made it subservient to his wishes.

[‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 17]

Maharishi describes natural law somewhat differently than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. According to Maharishi, natural law cannot be overcome or made subservient.

I will now compare features of meditation mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings to the practice of Transcendental Meditation:

1. Contemplate in silence (do not speak while meditating)
2. Speak with your own spirit
3. Ask questions of the spirit and receive answers
4. Meditation unlocks the doors of mysteries
5. Meditation informs and strengthens the spirit
6. Meditation is like a mirror which should be turned towards spiritual, scientific and artistic themes that benefit humanity
7. Meditation as prayer that transcends the murmur of syllables and sounds
8. Meditation should generate action
9. Prayerful meditation on the Bahá'í Teachings, particularly meditations written by Bahá'u'lláh

Starting with the first feature, Transcendental Meditation is practiced in silence:

...sanctuaries of silence be constructed in the midst of noisy market-places of big cities, before going to their businesses, and after completing their businesses of the day, may enter into silent meditation rooms, dive deep within themselves, and be profited by undisturbed, regular, and deep meditations... it seems necessary that such silent meditation centers also be constructed in the holiday resorts where people go on weekends to stay for one or two days.

[Maharishi p. 300]

Maharishi regards contemplation as an intellectual path towards God consciousness, different from TM:

... the intellectual path of God realization through contemplation is not a path for practical men...No man remaining active in the world...can possibly succeed in infusing the divine nature into his mind through this method of contemplation. The intellectual path of divine revelation suits those who have nothing to do with practical life... The silence which a recluse enjoys is such that it keeps him away from work. He is in silence most of the time...

[Maharishi p. 282]

Although TM is not portrayed as contemplation, Maharishi does not oppose contemplation as an adjunct to meditation. TM is a specific form of meditation whereas the Bahá'í Writings define meditation more broadly.

The second feature of Bahá'í meditation, speaking with your own spirit, is not a phrase used by Maharishi, who depicts TM as communication with the Absolute. TM refers to this process as returning to the Absolute Self.

The third feature of Bahá'í meditation, asking questions of the spirit and receiving answers, is likewise not a phrase used by Maharishi. He refers to this phenomenon as *creative intelligence*, in which the meditator receives inspiration from the Absolute to gain unlimited imagination, energy and joy:

Because absolute Being is the source of all thought and of all creation, when the conscious mind comes to that level, it comes in contact with the unlimited creative intelligence of absolute Being. Great creative intelligence enters into the nature of the mind; constructive imagination, the power of creative thinking, increases along with joyfulness and contentment. The mind coming in tune with the field of Being gains the source of unlimited energy. Such a powerful, energetic mind naturally has very powerful thoughts.

[Maharishi, p. 116]

The fourth feature of Bahá'í meditation, unlocking the doors of mysteries, is related to the creative intelligence released by TM as previously described.

The fifth feature of Bahá'í meditation, that meditation informs and strengthens the spirit, is consistent with the writings of Maharishi on TM and creative intelligence. The elimination of stress in the mind and body while practicing TM strengthens the mind and body as well as spirit and can empower an easier pursuit of a devotional life.

The sixth feature of Bahá'í meditation is that meditation is like a mirror which should be turned towards spiritual, scientific and artistic themes that

benefit humanity. Maharishi's writings support this view of using meditation; after meditation the mind is more open to right thought which will in turn create right action.

The seventh feature of Bahá'í meditation, in which meditation is viewed as prayer that transcends the murmur of syllables and sounds, is consistent with TM, which does not employ words with meaning to achieve a state of higher consciousness.

The eighth feature of Bahá'í meditation, that meditation should generate action, is consistent with TM. Maharishi has explained the unique role of meditation in creating right action:

A right thought will be that which will produce a good, harmonious, useful and life-supporting influence for the doer and for the entire universe in the present and for all times... It does not seem possible to entertain thoughts which are always right by trying to think rightly. Any conscientious attempt on the part of the mind to entertain only right thoughts will only mean straining the mind on a plane over which there can be no control. In order that the mind succeed in entertaining only right thoughts, it should be cultured so that by nature it picks up only a right thought.

[Maharishi p. 140]

The ninth feature of Bahá'í meditation, prayerful meditation on the Bahá'í Teachings, particularly meditations written by Bahá'u'lláh, would be regarded by TM as contemplation rather than meditation.

9. Transcendental Meditation and Health

TM is associated with health promotion, disease prevention and improved health status. A large number of scientific studies have been published in refereed medical and scientific journals to support the role of TM and the TM-Sidhi in prevention and treatment of disease and risk factors for disease. Less than one-quarter of the studies randomized subjects to either TM or a control method, in part because it is difficult to gain adherence to a life-style change not selected by the participants. By comparison, it is very easy to randomise subjects to take a tablet once daily that might contain an active treatment or a placebo.

Review of these studies [3-29 below] indicates that:

1. TM reduces risk factors for vascular disease and dementia such as blood pressure, serum cholesterol, smoking and anxiety [7, 8, 21, 24, 25, 28]
2. TM practice may virtually eradicate essential hypertension, the most common form of high blood pressure [10, 13, 21, 22]
3. TM prevents all forms of stroke based on its effects on blood pressure,

- smoking and prevention of heart disease [7]
4. TM reduces symptoms of many conditions such as angina [5], headache, pain [25] and asthma [29]
 5. TM reduces the rate of hospital admission by 50% in North America [9] We cannot extrapolate this finding to Australia or New Zealand
 6. TM reduces hospital admissions in all categories except childbirth [9]
 7. TM improves cognitive performance [18, 23]
 8. TM reduces biological aging as measured by DHEA-S levels, systolic blood pressure, visual and auditory thresholds and intellectual performance [3, 4, 15, 27]
 9. TM improves psychological health and stress hardiness [6, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20]

These studies suggest that the benefits of TM are cumulative: groups practicing for five years have greater benefit than novices while those practicing for ten years have greater benefit than those practicing for five years.

10. Conclusions

According to the Bahá'í Writings, meditation is essential for our spiritual growth. The regular practice of meditation is exalted to the level of prayer and fasting. The Bahá'í Writings also encourage natural preventative practices to maintain health and thereby serve mankind. Bahá'ís are required to seek competent physicians when they are ill and follow the physician's instructions. A growing number of health practitioners are recommending TM for preventative and curative health benefits. Bahá'ís consider learning TM as part of their health.

'Abdu'l-Bahá asserted that the meditator must observe silence. Meditation should generate action such as service. There is no set form of Bahá'í meditation. Therefore individuals are free to choose processes that enhance their spiritual development. There are at least three processes involved in meditation: 1) contemplation or thinking in a conscious state, as exemplified by reflecting on the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh or calling ourselves to account each day; 2) wordless reflection in an altered state of consciousness, as suggested by prayer that 'transcends the murmur of syllables and sounds.' TM qualifies as one such meditative practice; 3) repetition of words and phrases such as the Greatest Name. These words and phrases may be separated by periods of contemplation or wordless reflection.

Scientific evidence on the health benefits of Transcendental Meditation is quite strong. Further research is needed to identify health benefits from other forms of meditation and to assess the effects of different forms of meditation on the well-being and health of Bahá'ís.

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