

# Mantra Practice vs. Mindfulness

Many people in the West get their first exposure to meditation through what is known as TM or Transcendental Meditation. TM is essentially the classic mantra practice of India presented in a contemporary format, easily accessible to Westerners. Mindfulness meditation is another practice which is growing in popularity in Europe and North America. It is also known as Insight Meditation or Vipassana. As a teacher of Vipassana meditation, I am frequently asked about the relationship between mantra practice and mindfulness.

On the surface they would seem to be very different, perhaps even antithetical. Typically in TM one leans back against a wall, withdraws from the phenomenal world and repeats a mantra to oneself for perhaps twenty minutes. It's relatively easy and usually brings immediate calming effects. In mindfulness practice one sits bolt upright with intense alertness, attending to the flow of ordinary experience. This usually means focusing on rather banal and sometimes uncomfortable phenomena such as itches, sounds, thought patterns, pains, etc. It would almost seem that the mantra practice "takes you out" while the mindfulness practice "brings you down." (However, beneath the surface differences, these two practices have a commonality that can easily go unrecognized.)

For one thing, both practices build calm and concentration, although in different ways. In mantra practice, one relaxes, withdraws and lets the rhythmic sounds of a mantra replace the chaotic sounds of one's internal conversations. This develops concentration, since internal talk is the major source of distraction in daily life. In mindfulness practice, each moment of ordinary experience is "penetrated" with awareness. The awareness literally soaks into the itches and sounds and thoughts like water into a sponge. This in effect represents a kind of silent merging or *samadhi* with each phenomenon as it arises in the six senses - hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, the feeling body and the thinking mind. Thus in mindfulness practice, though one's attention may shift rapidly through a sequence of diverse phenomena, one experiences *samadhi* with each in turn. The net effect is the same as having maintained *samadhi* on a single object (such as a mantra) for the same length of time. In Pali, the classical language of early Buddhism, this is technically referred to as *khanika samadhi* or "sequential momentary deep concentration."

Most people find this much harder to do than the simple mantra practice; so why bother? The answer to that question has many sides to it. I will only discuss one here. But before I can do that, we need to first clarify an even deeper way in which mantra and mindfulness are related. Because mantra is a repetitive rhythm, it sets up periodic waves or vibrations in one's consciousness. Let me try to explain this with a somewhat crude metaphor. You are probably familiar with hand-held electrical vibrators that are used for massage. Imagine the effect of holding such a vibrator in contact with the surface of a pool of water. It would impart very regular pleasing patterns of ripples throughout the water. Focusing on those patterns of ripples could easily take you into a state of relaxation. This is one facet of how mantra works. Its repetitive nature sets up rhythmic ripples throughout the meditator's whole consciousness. The meditator then focuses on the regularity of those ripples and rides them into deeper and deeper levels of relaxation, concentration and integration.

In mindfulness practice one focuses on a sequence of "material objects" but because of the penetrating way one focuses, those objects sometimes break up as soon as they arise. Break up into what? Pleasing ripples and vibrations! Buddhists call this *anicca* or "impermanence." The mindfulness meditator can then ride these ripples into deeper and deeper states of peace and fulfillment just as the mantra meditator does. In advanced stages

*mindfulness meditation in essence turns each ordinary experience into a mantra.* To extend the metaphor of the pool of water, in fully developed mindfulness practice, there is no mechanical vibrator imposing regularity. Rather, drops of rainwater (thoughts, feelings, sounds, etc.) incessantly impinge on the pool, but they immediately dissolve into pleasing, relaxing patterns of energy.

Should we then consider mindfulness to be a better form of meditation than mantra? Not at all! Such simple comparisons between meditation techniques are not appropriate. Each way of meditating has its own characteristic strong points and weak points. And each meditator has his or her needs and proclivities. The mindfulness practice can be difficult if not downright painful, especially at the beginning. By way of compensation it equips the meditator with a systematic procedure that will transform any ordinary experience of daily life into a profound contact with ones spiritual source. Mantra practice is easy to start with and has (at least theoretically) the potential to influence daily life.