

CHAPTER VIII: CLAIM #2 – MEDITATION MIGHT REDUCE STRESS AND ENHANCE HEALTH

Historically this is the claim. Meditation might be part of the faith factor because meditation might reduce stress and through reducing stress might enhance health. Where does this claim come from? It comes from, initially, I'll bet some of you will guess this-- it comes from the '60s. It comes from the counter culture. It comes from this guy, the Maharishi Maresh of India who comes to the United States in the early 1960s and turns on a whole generation of disaffected youth to the magic and pizzazz and mystique of transcendental meditation. It didn't hurt that he found some celebrity followers like these guys and maybe even some of you have some personal or had some personal experience with this sort of cultural phenomenon. But, the point here to make about the phenomenon is that when the Beatles were meditating and all the sort of Beatles "wannabees" were meditating, they weren't meditating for their health. They were meditating because they were looking to expand their consciousness or they were looking for inner peace or they were looking to become more creative. That's what the Beatles hoped would happen. Or they were meditating because they had tried LSD and meditation was now the next thing. You think I'm joking. You should read what people were writing then.

Well, then--very simplifying the history here--a cardiologist named Herbert Benson who many of you here either know, or know of, because he's quite important to the history of alternative and complementary medicine, but who then was rather a conventional cardiologist interested in the relations between stress and heart disease. He became involved with the TM movement. He became involved with the TM movement when he agreed to investigate the possibility that practicing TM might be able to reduce your blood pressure and therefore might have implications for, you know, preventive kind of treatment for people at risk with heart disease. What he found, or what he thought he found, is that in fact TM could do this, that practicing TM was a way of lowering one's blood pressure. And this made--in fact, he said even more than this--practicing TM was opening a cascade of physiological changes in the body that together added up to what he

felt was a reversal of the stress response and therefore, potentially very good for your health since stress was now widely understood or increasingly widely understood to have nefarious health implications--too much stress, chronic stress. So, he settled this about TM and this made the TM people very happy, and it made the Maharishi very happy. They were no fools if they knew that having a Harvard medical doctor investigating them was important for their public image. But then Benson went on to say that actually there was nothing actually particularly stress-reducing about TM itself. All that TM did, he began to say, was to evoke a physiological response that could also be evoked by any number of other kinds of contemplative practices--a physiological response that he now named that he called "the relaxation response." This made the TM people and the Maharishi a lot less happy. But it changed the course of history here because Benson went on to outline his secular interpretation of TM in this book, *The Relaxation Response* in 1975 and had an enormous hit on his hands.

Most of you will probably remember that when David Eisenberg publishes in 1993 his survey of alternative medical practices in the general public, relaxation techniques top the list of those that patients admitted to practicing. And by this time--by the time the survey was being carried out it really no longer seemed that odd to think about meditation as a kind of medical intervention or stress reducer that might be--might have health implications. Other people had begun to take up the idea in a range of ways and run with it. This is Jon Kabat-Zinn who established a program in 1979 at Worcester Medical School in Massachusetts. This is his book about the ways in which the wisdom of your body, meditation helps you face stress, pain and illness. New research begins to be carried out that went beyond the original laboratory work of Benson that was concerned with trying to see maybe the health effects of meditation go beyond even reducing or turning off the stress response. Maybe meditation can affect other kinds of physiological systems with health implications like the immune system. And this is a study that got a fair bit of publicity several years ago that seemed to suggest that in fact that a group of people who meditated had a more robust immune response to a vaccine challenge--they were vaccinated for flu. They got a flu vaccine and they had a more robust response to

that vaccine than those who didn't meditate. Their immune system would seem to have been sort of pumped up by the meditation.

So how do all these developments speak to the larger question about a spirituality health link? Well, for a while it was actually unclear that these developments were going to speak to a question about a link between spirituality and health because for a while it looked as if we were dealing with a tool once called meditation, now renamed the relaxation response that had been thoroughly decontextualized, thoroughly dissociated from any kind of spiritual tradition, Asian or otherwise, and simply made into a thing, a tool, a technique, a kind of aspirin or something that you did on a prophylactic basis to help your health. And that was it. But the story didn't end up ending up there. Benson begins to get interested himself in the ways in which the relaxation response might in fact serve as a foundation or open the door to other kinds of more overtly spiritual practices and interested in how these might be health-enhancing. People like Richie Davidson who's the first author on this study, Jon Kabat-Zinn, increasingly begin to connect the research on meditation to a larger project in which they had gotten involved that it was concerned with developing a dialogue between the neurosciences, the mind sciences, and Buddhism--and particularly here, Tibetan Buddhism. And the fact that this connection begins to be made and that you see it developing across the 1990s and I will say that I had some connection myself with these developments and will be happy to talk more about my personal relationship to this during the discussion if people are interested. But the fact that meditation research, once so self-consciously secularized and dissociated from any particular Asian tradition, now is being framed within a context of conferences that feature the Dalai Lama of Tibet, tells you that we've landed now in some place new, back in the place where meditation is part of the larger conversation about the spirituality-health link. The Dalai Lama has become in the past several years a key reference point, a key cultural reference point for meditation research in our time. And actually, unpacking all the reasons why this is the case would be its own talk, but I do just want you to notice it. And notice also that the fact that he is now a central cultural reference point for meditation research in our time is producing its own shock waves, anxieties, and perturbations. Some of you might have followed the work, the article that

appeared in *The New York Times* just a week or two ago--“Scientists Bridle of Lecture Plan for the Dalai Lama.” The Dalai Lama has been invited to speak at the Society for Neuroscience in a couple of weeks. People are assuming--and I don’t know what exactly he’ll say--but people are assuming that he is going to talk about the meditation research and that he seems to be giving at least his imprimatur to or his blessing to it. And they aren’t quite sure what this means. It seems to put spirituality squarely back into the picture in a place that wasn’t necessarily looking for it and we’re seeing the shock waves now still reverberating and we’ll have to see how this history continues to play out.