

The Eastern View of Stress

Meditation is an eastern tool that offers western health practitioners a new way of looking at health. The role of stress in disease is well recognized by modern medical researchers but, despite the progress that has been made in this field, there remains some very fundamental yet unanswered questions. One of those questions is, "What exactly is stress?"

Few of us can easily come up with a good definition of "stress," yet while we do not know exactly what it is, we intuitively recognize that it is a factor that affects almost every aspect of our lives! The eastern explanation of "stress" is probably one of the most commonsense and practically useful ones. While you read this see if you can "look inside" and apply this perspective to yourself.

Stress, says the eastern perspective, is the by-product of thought. If we examine the nature of the thoughts that each of us experiences from the moment to moment we will find that they all relate to one of two broad categories: (1) **events that have occurred in the past** or (2) **events that we anticipate will occur in the future**. Whether the event was an argument with a friend yesterday (past), an unpaid bill (future), a deeply troubling childhood experience that has become part of our subconscious (past) or anxiety about the share market (future) we will find that all of these troubling thoughts, and the resulting stress that they cause us, to have arisen from only the past or future!

Take the exercise a little further. If the vast majority, if not all, our thoughts emanate from events in the past or future, is it possible to think about the absolute present moment? Most of us will admit that while we can think about events in the past (even a few moments ago), or events scheduled in the future (even milliseconds in the future), it is impossible to actually think about the present moment which we are continuously experiencing and is ever changing.

Now think about the stress that we all experience from time to time. Despite the huge variety of situations that "stress" us they all have one thing in common: ***we have to think about the events before they can reduce our sense of wellbeing.*** In other words thought itself is the final common pathway by which all events create stress within us! The past, comprised of events that have already occurred, no longer exists. Similarly the future, comprised of events that have yet to occur and are therefore undetermined, does not yet exist. However, paradoxically, we human beings exist only in the present.

The mind (and its thoughts), since it is comprised only of stuff from the past or future, is therefore not real and so the stress that it generates is also not real! If we are beings that exist in the present, and we realize that the stress and angst of life emanate from a mind which is the product of past/future, we

acknowledge also that the antidote for the mental illusions that cause stress is to reign in our attention and focus it on the present moment. While, for most of us, focusing on the absolute present moment is virtually impossible, it is this razor's edge of "thoughtless awareness" that the easterner seeks to cultivate and sustain in meditation. The vast inner silence of the thoughtless state leaves the mind uncluttered. By existing in that "space-between-the-thoughts" one is neither enslaved to one's past nor confined to a predetermined future. The inner silence of meditation thus creates a naturally stress-free inner environment.

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