

Meditation, Enlightenment, and Human Thriving

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Historically, those who follow the spiritual path are a small percentage of the population. While many are inspired by great teachers, few attempt to follow in their footsteps.

For thousands of years, those committed to the spiritual path went to special places such as hermitages, wilderness retreats, monasteries, and convents. They exiled themselves from ordinary society in order to pursue nonordinary states of consciousness, or “enlightenment,” as neuroscientist Andrew Newberg (Newberg & Waldman, 2017) and others call it.

These seekers couldn’t achieve extraordinary states amid the stress and demands of society, so they left it and entered sacred space. The rest of society stayed in ordinary consciousness, driven by the desires and needs of survival.

What percentage of the population chose to withdraw from ordinary life and pursue enlightenment?

No census of enlightenment seekers is possible, but one proxy is the number entering religious seclusion. In the early 1300s, England had a monastic population of about 22,000, with another 10,000 in other religious occupations (Mortimer, 2009). That was a total of 1% of the population. Estimates are similar for other medieval European countries (Brucker, 1998). Those who actually reached enlightenment, however, were just a fraction of these aspirants.

In Tibet, traditionally one of the most religious countries, surveys from the past 500 years estimate that around 12% of the population has been monastic. But today in Thailand, a more typical Buddhist country, monks and nuns comprise only 1% of the population (Goldstein, 2010).

History’s best estimates thus tell us that the spiritual path has been walked by about 1%.

What is the comparable number in Western societies today? And in the world as a whole?

One answer comes from a large-scale survey undertaken by the US National Center for Health Statistics (Clarke, Barnes, Black, Stussman, & Nahin, 2018). It found that the number of people

practicing meditation tripled between 2012 and 2017, going from 4% to 14% of the population. That’s a huge increase in a very short period. Not only adults, but also children are increasingly practicing. Among 4- to 17-year-olds, the percentage rose from less than 1% to over 5%. Similar numbers are reported in Europe (European Values Study, 2017).

Part of the increase is explained by meditators no longer believing they have to seclude themselves to find enlightenment. Meditation and mindfulness are now common in the home, the classroom, the gym, and the workplace. Medtronic founder Earl Bakken set up a meditation room at the company headquarters in 1974. Goldman Sachs offers its employees meditation classes.

Celebrities and influencers are meditating. US Congressman Tim Ryan from Ohio, elected in 2002 when he was just 29 years old, formed the “Quiet Time Caucus” to practice meditation in the US Capitol. Basketball player LeBron James has been a regular meditator for years, famously meditating during a time-out in the 2012 NBA playoffs.

After his team, the Seattle Seahawks, won the 2014 Super Bowl, coach Pete Carroll told reporters that he’d hired psychologists to teach meditation to his athletes and get them in the zone.

Pop singer Katy Perry told a reporter, “I start the day with Transcendental Meditation. It puts me in the best mood” (Transcendental Meditation, 2017). In the 1960s, the Beatles studied meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Paul McCartney said, “In moments of madness, meditation has helped me find moments of serenity” (Transcendental Meditation, 2014). Among the many other celebrity meditators are Clint Eastwood, Hugh Jackman, and Madonna.

In Chapter 2 of my book *Mind to Matter*, I review the extraordinary phenomenon called “emotional contagion.” Emotions spread through communities just like the flu (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Chapman & Sisodia, 2015). A single happy person makes the people around them happier by 34%. Those affected in turn make others

happier—by 15%. The ripple keeps spreading, with the next layer happier by 6% (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

Do negative people spread contagion, too? Yes, but Negative Nancy has less clout than Positive Pete. Having an unhappy connection increases your chances of unhappiness by 7%, as opposed to 9% for happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

In-person contact isn't required for emotional contagion. We are being affected by our virtual environments, too. In a notorious experiment, researchers used an automated system to tweak the emotional content in the timelines of Facebook users (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). They were able to induce emotional contagion. When the experimenters manipulated timelines to emphasize positive emotions, users passed along these emotions in their posts and likes. When timelines were skewed toward negative emotions, user posts became darker. Within just seven days, emotional contagion had spread to 689,003 users—no physical or verbal contact required.

The 14% of the US population who are meditating and the large numbers doing so worldwide are likely to be producing positive emotional contagion in many more. It's an additional possible reason why the number of meditators is exploding.

Emotional contagion is just one explanation for the growth of meditation. Another is field effects. Everything begins as energy and then works its way into matter. Though energy fields are invisible, they shape matter. Albert Einstein said, "The field is the sole governing agency of the particle."

Many studies show that human beings are influenced by the energy fields of others. In a series of 148 one-minute trials involving 25 people, trained volunteers going into heart coherence were able to induce coherence in test subjects at a distance (HeartMath Institute, n.d.). They didn't have to touch their targets to produce the effect. Their energy fields were sufficient.

When you are in a heart coherent state, your heart radiates a coherent electromagnetic signal into the environment around you. This field is detectable by a magnetometer several meters away. When other people enter that coherent energy field, their heart coherence increases, too, producing a group field effect.

Through field effects, emotional contagion, social influence, resonance, and the simple human desire to feel good, meditation is spreading. Large

and growing numbers of people worldwide are seeking enlightenment. This is accelerating the already strong positive trends toward human thriving outlined in books like Steven Pinker's monumental work *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Pinker, 2019).

As a species, we are moving far beyond the survival mentality that the majority of people have been stuck in for most of history. We're leaving behind the standards of behavior that defined "normal" up until the last century. Rather than withdrawing from society to seek enlightenment, we're bringing our quest for enlightenment into our everyday lives.

This isn't simply helping us feel better as individuals. It is contributing to a huge leap forward in social evolution. Just as the Renaissance of the 1300s changed art, law, education, politics, religion, agriculture, science, and every other facet of human existence, the explosion of meditation is likely to accelerate human and planetary thriving.

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