In recent years, there has been resurgence of psychological interest in the study of positive psychology. A number of positive psychology interventions have successfully helped people to learn skills for improving mood and building personal resources (e.g., psychological resilience and social support). Positive psychology and meditation both support the benefits of developing a new habit of living with a positive attitude. The experience of meditation can take us beyond the usual mental pressure and emotional agitation to a calm, centered place. The Art of Meditation course introduces a graceful and effortless meditation technique and effortless transcendence. Meditation techniques have been developed to take advantage of latent capacities of consciousness in the contexts of different systems of religion, philosophy, mysticism, psychology, and medicine. For many Westerners and Easterners alike, the prospect of stress reduction — broadly conceived — is the main allure of meditation. From a subjective standpoint, being “stressed out” often involves unhappiness enough to motivate seeking relief. But there are other powerful reasons to look for an antidote to stress. From a modern medical standpoint, stress has been shown to suppress the body’s immune system, making it more susceptible to sickness and disease — and slower at recovering from them. Stress reducing meditation techniques often reduces risk for such afflictions and can often play an important role in alleviating them. This paper tries to highlight the importance of meditation and the significance of positive psychology for overcoming stress in day to day life.
period of mutual ignorance in which each tradition remained blissfully or willfully ignorant of the other. Ignorance bred misunderstanding. The second stage was one of paradigm clash. Practitioners of each discipline tended to dismiss or pathologize the other. They used the distorting lens of their own unquestioned cultural and paradigmatic assumption – a process sociologists call inhalation. For example, many meditation teachers dismissed Western psychology and psychotherapy as superficial. They claimed that psychology overlooked the deeper level and potentials of mind. Likewise some mental health practitioner initially pathologized meditation, as well as disciplines such as yoga and shamanism. For example, the classic text *The History of Psychiatry* pointed to “the obvious similarities between schizophrenic regressions and the practice of Yoga and Zen” (Alexander & Salesnick, 1966).

However, with greater knowledge has come greater open-mindedness and mutual exploration. Yoga has emerged as one of the world’s most widely practiced, enduring and researched psychological discipline (Deurr, 2004). The result is the third and currently dominant stage of growing relationship and assimilative integration. Nevertheless, much misunderstanding remains. Contemplatives often still view Western psychology and psychotherapy as limited adjuncts to meditation practice. Psychologists usually regard meditation as just another therapeutic technique to be applied and investigated in conventional ways. Unfortunately research findings on yoga have been interpreted almost exclusively within Western psychological perspectives. This has been widely described as a necessary “decontextualization”. In anthropological terms, this is the trap of adopting a purely etic (outsider) perspective rather than both etic and emic (insider) perspectives.

**Varieties of Meditation**

There are many definitions of meditation nevertheless common themes are apparent. Western definitions emphasize that meditation is a self-regulation strategy with a particular focus on training attention. The meditative traditions contend that there are multiple meditations and the main goals is mental development. Patangali’s *yoga sutra* emphasizes the control of mind and desires (*chitta* and *vritties* or *vasanas*). Similar emphases are noticed such as *bhavana* (mental cultivation) in Buddhism and *lien-hsin* (refining the mind) in Taoism. The goal is to cultivate beneficial mental capacities such as calm and concentration and positive emotion such as love and joy. The other goals is to reduce negative emotions such as fear and anger (Goleman, 1988). By integrating these common thames, Walsh and Shapiro (2006) offer a definition: The term *meditation refers to a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration.*

This definition differentiates meditation from a variety of other therapeutic and self-regulation strategies such as self-hypnosis, visualization, and psychotherapies. In general, these do not focus primarily on training attention and awareness. Rather, they aim primarily at changing mental contents (objects of attention and awareness) such as thoughts, images, and emotions. Likewise, the definition distinguishes related practice such as yoga, Tai Chi, Chi gong. These practices include additional elements such as controlled breathing and body posture (yoga), a body movement and supposed energy manipulation (Tai Chi and Chi gong).
Despite having common features, meditation practices come in many varieties. Walsh and Shapiro (1966) observe the following varieties:

1. **The type of attention**: Concentration meditations aim for continuous focus primarily on one object, such as the breath or an inner sound. Awareness or open meditations aim for fluid attention to multiple or successively chosen objects.

2. **The relationship to cognitive process**: Some practices simply observe cognitions such as thoughts or images whereas others deliberately modify them.

3. **The goal**: Some practices aim to foster general mental development and well-being, whereas others focus primarily on developing specific mental qualities, such as concentration, love, or wisdom.

Although meditation is most often associated with India, it is actually a worldwide practice grounded in every major religion and in most cultures. Examples include Taoist and Hindu yogas, Jewish Hassidic and Kabalistic *dillug* and *tzeruf*, Islamic Sufism’s *Zikr*, Confucian quiet-sitting, Christian contemplations, and Buddhist meditation (Goleman, 1988).

By far the most researched practices are mindfulness, Transcendal Meditation (TM), and Yoga. Mindfulness is an open focus or awareness practice usually identified with Buddhist mindfulness or *vipassana* (clear seeing) insight meditation. TM is a mantra (inner sound) practice that researchers sometimes describe as concentrative, but in advanced stages awareness becomes increasingly panoramic.

**Working Principles**

Research has so far focused on the first-order question: Does meditation work? Such research obviously is linked to the second-order question: How does meditation work? Three kinds of explanation have been offered: metaphoric, mechanistic, and process.

Traditional contemplative explanations are usually metaphoric. Classic metaphors include *purifying* the mind of toxic elements, *freeing* it of illusions and conditioning, *awakening* it from its usual trance, and *healing* pathology. Others include *calming* disturbances, *rebalancing* mental elements, *unfolding* innate-potentials, and *uncovering true identity*.

Mechanistic explanations are more common among contemporary researchers. Here, it is implied that the mind and/or brain are a machine. Suggested psychological mechanisms include relaxation, exposure, desensitization, dehypnosis, deautomatization, catharsis, and counterconditioning. Other include cognitive mechanisms such as insight, self-monitoring, self-control, self-acceptance, and self-understanding. Suggested physiological mechanisms include reduced arousal, modified autonomic nervous system activity, stress immunization, and hemispheric synchronization and laterality shifts.

While mechanistic explanations explain phenomena in terms of lower levels of a system, processes can refer to any level and are therefore less susceptible to inappropriate reductionism. One important process that may be central to meditation is refining awareness, a process that may incorporate and facilitate several of the mechanisms and metaphors already indicated. Refinement of awareness may also be a necessary precondition for a further important meditative process: *disidentification*. Disidentification is the process by which awareness (mindfulness) precisely observes, and therefore
creases to identify with mental content such as thoughts, feelings, and images. It reflects a state of psychological freedom that occurs when attention remains quiet and limber, without attachment to any particular point of view. Meditators report that if they are clearly aware of a thought, then they do not identify with it, recognize it as merely a thought, and are unaffected by it.

Meditation disciplines claim to carry these metacognitive processes of heightened awareness and disidentification. Dramatic heightening and continuity of awareness are said to allow meditators to recognize and disidentify, not just from a problematic subset of thoughts, emotions, or images, but from all of them. The result is said to be the ability to observe all experiences with imperturbable calm and equanimity, in a state of mind variously described as “transcendental consciousness” TM, “mind-body drop” (mind-body disidentification-Zen), xujing) (calm stillness-Taoism), “divine apatheia (Christian contemplation), or equanimous” witnessing” (Yoga).

Perhaps the most encompassing explanation of meditation’s effects may be a classic higher order process. It catalyzes certain developmental process by restarting and/or accelerating them. These ideas are consistent with both research findings of increased scores on developmental scales in meditators and with classic texts that map out meditative progress in explicitly developmental terms. Classic examples include the Sufi stages of selfhood and nafs (drives), Taoism’s “five periods” of increasing calm, yogic levels of samadhi (concentration), Jewish stage) of asient “Buddhist “stages of insight”, and Zen’s “Ten ox Herding Pictures” (Goleman, 1985). Meditation can profoundly accelerate the unfolding of a given line of development, but it does not significantly alter the sequence nor the form of the basic stages in that developmental line (Wilber, 200).

**Meditation and Health**

Several hundred studies conducted over four decades have identified a wide array of meditation-responsive variables that range across psychological, physiological, and chemical parameters in both clinical and nonclinical populations.

Research suggests that meditation can ameliorate a variety of psychological and psychosomatic disorders, especially those in which stress plays a causal or complicating role. For example, cardiovascular disorders responsive to TM include hypertension and hypercholesterolemia. Other medical conditions responsive to meditation include asthma and stuttering, as well as hormonal disorders such as type 2 diabetes, primary dysmenorrhea, and premenstrual syndrome (now called premenstrual dysphoric disorder). Meditation has also proved effective in enhancing immune functions in cancer patients, reducing symptoms of distress in fibromyalgia and cancer patients, and decreasing pain in multiple chronic pain syndromes. Meditation may also enhance treatments for psoriasis, prostate cancer, and atherosclerosis.

Psychotherapeutic effects have been documented. Several clinical populations appear to benefit, the most studied have been those with stress disorders. For example, mindfulness meditation appears to ameliorate insomnia, eating, anxiety, panic, and phobic disorders. Likewise TM is reported to alleviate anxiety, aggression, and recidivism in prisoners and to reduce both legal and illegal drugs. However, TM subjects are required to cease drug use for several days before training, so they may be a particularly responsive population. Stress-related benefits are consistent with classic claims that a central effect of meditation is “calming the mind and the elimination of anxiety”. A similar claim is popularized in the West that meditation is a “relaxation response” (Benson, 1984).
Beyond the Stress-related Benefits

Few researchers have examined meditation’s original purpose as a self actualizing strategy to enhance qualities such as wisdom and compassion. However, some pioneering studies provide a valuable foundation. It is also important to recognize the growth of a new subspecialty positive psychology. It has drawn our attention to the significance of the study of human character and strengths in psychology.

Positive Psychology

Western psychology has tended to focus almost exclusively on pathology. In over a hundred years of our Western psychological tradition, our greatest thinkers and researchers have focused on understanding hysteria, obsessions, psychoses, compulsions, depression, anxiety, impulsive anger, personality disorders, and the like. On the other hand, very little scientific research or theoretical thought has gone into understanding positive emotions or the psychology of human strengths and well-being. Dr. Martin Seligman, a former president of the American Psychological Association, has written about our neglect of positive psychology, reflecting that “the exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living.”

Building strengths and positive qualities in life is the main goal of positive psychology (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). It is to build systematically build the human competencies. We come across people who have much strength: optimism, hope, honesty, work ethic, faith, courage, and future-mindedness. These are the people who change their own personal and social lives in important ways. They contribute to the growth and development of society in a constructive manner. The study of positive psychology is geared to understand the various human strengths and contribute to the prevention of various problems. Exploring the human strengths and virtues is its central concerns.

For long “pathology”, “deficiency”, and “disease” have been major concerns of those who deal with health-related issues. The idea of positive mode of life, people who are fulfilled and communities which are thriving were neglected. The recent interest in positive psychology is more in the direction of understanding the strengths and positive qualities among individuals and communities. It goes beyond the traditional concern for psychological disorder and treating the mentally ill. It is also about important aspects of human life like work, love, growth and play.

The strengths are the areas in which we can excel and achieve. Also, there are certain virtues that every one of us must have. Positive emotions like joy, love and interest are usually considered as markers of optimal well-being. In addition, we most have an antidote for the adverse effects of negative emotions. Optimism, hope, self-efficacy, and compassion are significant in this context.

In sum, the role of meditation in the context of positive well-being needs legitimate research attention.

Positive Well-Being

Mindfulness appears to enhance perception as measured by perceptual sensitivity processing speed, empathy and synesthesia. Several kinds of meditation may improve concentration, reaction time, motor skill and field independence. Likewise, it is claimed that cognitive performance is
enhanced as measured by learning ability, short and long-term memory recall, academic performance on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, and some measures of creativity.

Personality variables are also modified. Not surprisingly several kinds of meditation appear to reduce trait-anxiety. A study of the Big Five personality factors found that conscientiousness was unchanged, but the other four factor—extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and especially emotional stability—all increased.

Because meditation is self-regulation strategy, it is not surprising that practitioners report feelings of improved self-control and self-esteem. (Anderson, 2000). Since meditators report higher empathy ratings, it is not surprising that measures of interpersonal functioning and marital satisfaction also increase. Finally several studies using TM have suggested that meditation may foster maturation, moral and cognitive development, self-actualization, coping skills and defenses.

Enhancement of the Mind

How do people lastingly change their lives for the better? Research shows that many people are willing and able to learn methods for self-generating positive emotions, including skills such as loving-kindness meditation (Fredrickson et al., 2008), savoring and gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), cognitive reframing (Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), acts of kindness towards others (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2005, 2007), and active-constructive responding to others’ good fortune (Seligman et al., 2005).

Freud (1935/1962) shocked the Western world with the claim that “man is not even in his own house, his own mind”. However, meditators have made similar claims for millennia. They have suggested that the untrained mind is so unruly that “the wind is no wilder” (Prabhadanond & Isherwood, 1972) and that this lack of control underlies considerable psychological suffering and pathology. In a provocative statement, Maslow (1968) states that “what we call normal’ in psychology is really a psychopathology of the average, so un dramatic and so widely spread that we don’t even notice it ordinarily”. The meditation traditions claim to be able to heal much of this normal dysfunction. In fact, the most radical of meditation’s implications concern psychological potential and what Maslow (1971) famously called “the farther reaches of human nature”. Meditative disciplines claim to be able to enhance multiple psychological capacities. A representative sample of these research domains may be presented in the following section.

Compassion. Among positive emotions, compassion has been particularly neglected in our Western tradition of psychology. Freud once advised psychoanalysts to “model themselves during the psychoanalytic treatment on the surgeon, who puts aside all his feelings, even his human sympathy.” Heinz Kohut, who is very well-known for his work on the psychological importance of empathy, warns psychologists that empathy (which he defines as a tool for understanding the contents of other people’s minds) should not be confused with “such fuzzily related meanings as kindness, compassion, and sympathy.”

Attention. A century ago, William James (1910/1950) wrote that ability to control attention “is the very root of judgment, character and will” and that to “improve this faculty would be the education par excellence”. Yet he lamented that “it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical
directions for bringing it about”. His despairing conclusion that “attention cannot be continuously sustained”, was a conclusion that Western psychology adopted.

Meditative disciplines agree completely that (without training) attention cannot be sustained. We all suffer from some degree of attentional deficit disorder. However, meditative disciplines claim that attention can be trained to the point of unbroken continuity over hours. Examples are found in Christian contemplatio, yogic samadhi, and TM’s “cosmic consciousness”. In Tibetan Buddhism’s “calm abiding”, your mind remains placed on its object effortlessly, for as long as you wish”. (the Dalai Lama, 2000). Both psychometric and sensory-evoked potential studies offer initial support of enhanced concentration, although there has been little research on advanced practitioners.

**Sense withdrawal.** When highly developed concentration is directed internally on the mind itself, the result can be what yoga calls an “inward-facing consciousness”. Here attention is so focused that awareness of somatic sensory stimuli is dramatically reduced or even entirely eliminated, as in Buddhist “absorption”, Jewish self-isolation, Sufic contemplation, and yogic pratyahara (sense withdrawal). Freed from external distractions, introspection and cognitive control are enhanced. EEG studies of sensory–stimulus–induced alpha blocking are supportive to this conclusion.

**Thought and Cognition.** For centuries, meditative traditions have concurred thought control. Examples include the Jewish practice of “elevating strange thoughts”, the intellectual analysis of jnana yoga, or the Buddhist repetition of thoughts of love or compassion to cultivate corresponding emotions.

Cognitive therapy recognizes the importance of “thought stopping”. However meditative traditions suggest the possibility of learning to slow, and even to stop, the usually incessant flow of subliminal thoughts for prolonged period, not by suppression but by deep calm. This is said to permit easier recognition and substitution of thoughts and to facilitate disidentification from them and their self-hypnotic power. The depths of a lake are only revealed when surface waters are stilled. Initial laboratory support comes from TM practitioners who display distinctive autonomic and EEG correlates during reported episodes of thought stilling.

**Lucidity.** It has been claimed that clear awareness can eventually be maintained through dreams (lucid dreaming) and even nondream sleep (nondream lucidity), possibilities discounted by Western psychologists until recently. Sufism’s greatest philosopher, Ibn Arabi, lauded lucid dreaming as “providing greatest benefits.” Continuous 24-hour-a-day “ever present wakefulness” is described in yoga as Turiya (the fourth) a fourth state of consciousness beyond the usual three of waking, dreaming and nondream sleep (Feuerstein, 1996). Unbroken lucidity throughout sleep is recognized in yoga and Christian contemplation. It is a goal of Tibetan dream yoga. In TM, it marks the maturation of sporadic “transcendal consciousness” to unbroken “cosmic consciousness”. In Western terms, this is the transition of a peak to plateau experience any from an altered state to altered trait. Confirmatory studies of TM practitioners have yielded sleep EEG profiles consistent with alert awareness throughout sleep. For Freud, dreams were a royal road to the unconscious. For meditative practitioners, lucid dream and nondream sleep are a royal road to consciousness, allowing meditation and maturation to continue throughout the night.
Emotional Intelligence. Meditative traditions aim for a twofold process of emotional balancing. Like Western therapies, they aim to reduce destructive emotions. Going beyond most Western therapies, they also aim to cultivate positive affects such as joy, love and compassion, even to the point where they become nonexclusive and unconditional. Examples include the all-encompassing love of Buddhist metta, yogic bhakti, and Christian contemplative agape, as well as the Confucian jen. For Taoist, a goal is emotions but no ensnarement. For Dalai Lama “the true mark of a meditator is that he has disciplined has mind by freeing it from negative emotions” (Goleman, 2003). An implication is that the long-term meditation can raise the happiness set point which psychologists usually assume to be tightly generically constrained.

There is initial experimental support for such shifts. Meditators show reduced anxiety, hostility, and depression, together with enhanced subjective well-being. In addition, advanced meditators display unique degrees of lateralization of prefrontal cortical activity, which may be a neural indicator of positive affect, and a unique high gamma EEG profile while cultivating compassion.

Equanimity. Emotional transformation is facilitated by equanimity—the ability to experience provocative stimuli nondefensively and with minimal psychological disturbance. Equanimity is opposite of reactivity and emotional lability. It is highly valued across meditative traditions, and is said to be “the characteristic temperament of the sages (Aurobindo, 1922). It is, for example, a basis of the Sufi’s “contented self”, yogic samatva (evenness), Buddhist upekkha (equanimity), the Christian contemplative’s “divine apatheia”, and Taoism’s “principle of the equality of things”. Equanimity overlaps but goes beyond Western concept of “affect tolerance” and “emotional resilience” to include not only tolerance but even serenity in the face of provocative stimuli.

Motivation. Motivators aim for several distinct but related motivational shifts. These include a reduction of the mirror-image compulsions of addiction and aversion and a redirection of dominant motives similar to movement up Maslow’s (1971) hierarchy of needs. Western psychologists have now moved beyond the one-dominant philosophical stance of psychological egoism to acknowledge altruism as a significant human motive, but they lament their lack of effective tools to cultivate it. By contrast, meditative traditions contain such practices.

Moral maturity. Few questions in psychology are of greater social and global significance than how to foster moral maturity, but unfortunately psychological interventions usually produce only modest gains. Meditation is said to enhance ethical motivation and behaviour via several mechanisms. These include sensitizing awareness to the costs of unethical acts, reducing problematic motives and emotions (such as greed and anger), strengthening morality supporting emotions (such as love and compassion), and cultivating altruism. Reports of TM practitioners indicate increased scores on moral development. Such measures are correlated with duration of practice and with EEG measures.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the capacities described, advanced meditators have also demonstrated a number of unique capacities. These include voluntary control of the autonomic nervous system. Roschach testing has revealed a unique integrative cognitive capacity and a dramatic reduction-possibly even an eradication-of drive conflicts. Unique perceptual capacities include control of binocular rivalry and motion-induced blindness and the development of synesthesia, which was formerly thought to be
Meditation and Positive Psychology: Beyond the Stress-Reduction Paradigm

a rare, uncultivable capacity (Walsh, 2005). In addition, some advanced practitioners exhibited cortical thickness and detected fleeting microexpressions of emotion more-effectively than any other group. Likewise, some studies involving advanced Tibetan Buddhist practitioners found two further capacities. The first was almost complete inhibition of the startle response. The second was an ability to respond with subjective compassion together with objective relaxation while observing a video of severely burned patients that ordinarily elicit intense disgust. Paul Ekman, who conducted the studies of microexpressions, startle response, and video observation, stated that these were “Findings that in 35 years of research I’d never seen before” (Goleman, 2003, pig).

Thus, meditative disciplines demonstrate enhancement of multiple psychological capacities, some even beyond levels currently recognized by psychology. However, psychologists now recognize post conventional stages on multiple developmental lines, such as post formal operational cognition, Kohlberg’s “postconventional morality”, Fowler’s “universalizing faith”, “Maslow” “Metamotives”, and Loevinger’s “integrated ego”. Meditative disciplines seem to facilitate maturation to these kind of stages and beyond. Empirical and experimental studies offer supportive evidence. Thus, it appears inappropriate to limit meditative paradigm to stress-reduction parameters. Rather a much broader framework to understand, explore, heal and enhance human mind seems to be in order.

REFERENCES
http://www.buddhanet.net/compassion.htm assessed on 10.7.11