

How to Meditate.

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John Shackleton



What exactly is MEDITATION?

The dictionary definition of meditation is *Meditation: The act or process of spending time in quiet thought.* I don't think though that this actually helps us to work out how to meditate!

It is also said that meditation requires **not thinking**. To me, meditation is not about having a quiet thought, nor is it about stopping the thinking process. It's more about becoming **aware of** or **observing thoughts**. For most of us in the beginning it feels difficult, or even impossible, to **not think** but when you use the concept of **thought awareness**, the practice of meditation becomes easier and simpler.

My own discovery.

My background is in sports psychology and, in all my years of studying how the human mind works, I've never discovered anything as important as meditation. Meditation has become the most powerful technique I've ever used to help with my own, or other peoples, thinking. Every other psychological practice I've studied, used and taught becomes insignificant compared to the benefits I've derived by learning to meditate.

Early on, when trying to mediate, I found my mind

was racing so much that it felt almost impossible to slow it down. However, with practice, I found it easier and easier. In the early days I would sometimes notice a feeling of peace and relaxation immediately after meditating and, the more I was able to practice, the more I found this sensation deepening.

I quickly discovered that it wasn't necessary to sit crossed legged in a circle with 20 leotard clad women all chanting omm!!! I realised you could meditate anywhere, at any time, in any situation, on your own or with others and the more you did it the more benefits you gained. I found the real secret to progressing with meditation (as with almost any new skill) is to get into a regular habit, doing it as often as possible at the same time, every day.

After only a couple of meditation sessions I felt as though I was *more in control of my stress levels*. After a couple of weeks I realised that the *dark thoughts* that would occasionally come into my head, weren't occurring as frequently as before and, after a couple of months, I was usually able to accept or ignore them completely.

But on top of that I also found the following:

- An increase in my general level of happiness

- A frequent and lasting feeling of peace and tranquility
- Less dark moods
- Less dominant negative feelings and anxiety
- More joy and a feeling of wellbeing
- Less of a need to 'win at all costs'
- A lowering of my need to control everything and everyone around me
- Acceptance of 'non perfect' results, or, as I saw them, 'failures'.

There are many wonderful benefits that meditation provides that almost everyone would want. There have been hundreds of medical studies published on the physical and mental benefits of meditation and when you look at the list below I expect you'll find you'd like to receive most, if not all, of them. You can read published scientific and medical studies, which show that meditation:

- Improves attention levels, mental focus and memory
- Improves relaxation & sleep

- Increases blood flow & slows the heart rate
- Helps reverse heart disease
- Increases energy levels
- Reduces stress levels
- Enhances the immune system
- Helps in overcoming alcohol & drug addiction
- Aids in pain management
- Reduces feelings of depression, anxiety etc.
- Aids creativity
- Improves decision making
- Provides sense of calm, peace and tolerance
- Increases happiness

In fact it would seem that the only thing meditation doesn't do is make the tea!

So exactly how do we do it?

Let's start by dispelling a few myths:

- You don't have to sit crossed legged on the floor
- You don't have to do yoga first
- You don't have to say or chant anything
- You don't have to dress a certain way or be in a special place or do it at particular time.
- You don't have to be in a group of like minded people
- You don't have to 'believe' certain things or adhere to certain practices

It doesn't have to be a religious experience.

Meditation is a simple, secular and scientifically validated exercise for your brain.

It's usually best to sit upright with a straight back rather than lying down, as this will help you to stay awake. Falling asleep may be relaxing but it won't give you the same rewards as being fully present and alert during a meditation session. Your eyes

may be open or closed, but most people find it easier, in the beginning, to maintain their focus if they close their eyes.

Get comfortable and relaxed and make sure you are in a place where you won't be disturbed or interrupted. If I'm using my smart phone as a timing device for my meditation then I make sure it's on airplane mode so that I don't receive calls, texts, emails, notifications etc.

Most forms of meditation start with something to **anchor** yourself to, something to focus on, and something to stop you from being distracted. One of the easiest things to focus on is **your breath** because it's always there and it happens by itself. It's worth considering that since you started reading this you've probably not thought about your breath. In fact you probably seldom think about it at all! You don't consciously breathe, it just seems to happen. It's been said many times that we don't breathe, the breath breathes us.

When we use the breath as an anchor we don't need to alter anything, we just become **aware** of our breathing and **observe** it as it happens, simply focusing all our attention on the inhale and then the exhale.

Having said that it can help to **start** by taking a

couple of exaggerated breaths to become more relaxed. Begin with a deep inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds), hold your breath (2 seconds), and then a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds). When you're doing this it's useful to focus on **relaxing the body as you exhale** and try to feel as though each exhale causes you to sink deeper into your chair.

After a few exaggerated breaths, just begin to **observe** each breath without trying to adjust or control it. It may help to focus on the rise and fall of your chest or notice the sensation of the air passing through your nostrils.

As you do this, you'll find that your mind wanders, distracted by interruptions, thoughts, emotions or body sensations. That's OK. Just notice that this is happening and gently bring your attention back to the breath. The whole point of meditation is actually to just notice when you've started **thinking** and gently come back to **observing**. Every time you bring yourself back, it's like a bicep curl for the brain. The more of these curls you do, the stronger your brain gets.

So, in essence, the more mistakes you make (the more times your mind wanders), the better, because it means that you're doing more

repetitions of the exercise. Simply put, mediation is a series of 'mistakes'. You focus on your breathing and then when your mind wanders you gently bring it back to the breath. As long as you follow this practice you can't really get it wrong!

My suggestion would be to try this for 3 or 4 minutes and notice what happens. Notice how often your mind wanders and gets into it's thinking mode. Notice how easy it is to just drop the thoughts and go back to the breathing. Don't get frustrated because you can't seem to stop your mind wandering. Remember the more 'mistakes' you make the better.

Once you feel comfortable with doing 3 or 4 minutes then ramp things up a little and try 10 to 15 minutes. It doesn't really matter how long you meditate for, the most important thing is to develop a **regular** practice. Meditation isn't something that works if you do it once - it isn't a switch. Just like going to the gym to get fit, you have to do it everyday. Many people find that meditating at the same time of day, in the same place helps them to create this new habit. However, as we said earlier, you can meditate anywhere at any time. Why not give it a try on the train or at your desk or even sitting on a bench after you've eaten your lunch?

Every meditation session is different. Sometimes it

takes a long time to slow the mind down and sometimes it happens immediately. Sometimes the session will end and you'll experience a peaceful feeling inside, sometimes you'll feel very alert or notice that you've become acutely aware of everything around you.

There's very little skill development involved in meditation as the ability to be mindful and to meditate is already within you. It's really more about getting better at the process through repetition than anything else. In fact most meditation instructors will talk to you about your *meditation **practice*** no matter how long you've been involved. It's not about increasing your ability *not to think* because for most of us, that would be impossible.

Simply put, success with meditation comes from getting good at **noticing** that you have drifted away from your anchor and are dwelling on a thought. If we choose that mindset then we won't be upset when our thoughts distract us. Thoughts will come into our mind whether we like it or not, there's not much you can do about that. When we experience a thought, we have drifted away from the present and into either the future or the past. **Thoughts are not the enemy**, they are just a signpost, telling us that we need to bring ourselves back to our anchor

and back to the present moment. The more often we do that, the more we are able to disassociate from our mind whenever we want to and the stronger we get.

Some forms of meditation teach you to focus on a **mantra** or phrase. You can say the words out loud or inside your head and they are often words or sounds that have no meaning to ensure you don't start thinking about the meaning of what you're repeating. Other forms of meditation choose the **body** as an anchor, often referred to as a body scan. This can take the form of a guided meditation session asking you to focus on the feelings in various parts of the body and many people find this process very relaxing. Guided sessions are certainly a great way for some beginners to start meditating.

An adaptation of the body scan meditation is the technique of focusing on the **inner body** or the energy field that can be felt inside the body. To try this method, start by focusing on any feeling you can detect in your hands or feet. At first maybe all you can feel is a tiny buzzing sensation or perhaps a feeling of heaviness. If you focus on this for several moments you'll probably find that the sensation increases and you can then start to feel it in other parts of the body too. For some people

this can be a really profound area to concentrate on but for others it may sound like complete mumbo jumbo!

There are several forms of meditation centred round controlled **body movements** including practices like Yoga, Tai Chi or Qi Gong which can be helpful for some people. You can also do **walking** meditation in which you focus on the sensation you feel when each foot touches the floor.

Summary

1. Find somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed.
2. Sit upright with your back straight and your eyes closed.
3. Take a few deep breaths to relax your body and then settle into your normal breathing.
4. Observe, feel or become aware of the flow of your breath.
5. When you notice that you've got lost in a thought, gently bring your mind back to the breath.

Resources

There are several smart phone apps which will give you guided meditations to follow. Most of the apps have some free guided sessions and then you can purchase further ones if needed. My favourite apps include:

PRESS PAUSE - created by my friend Suzanne Masefield

CALM - Which includes guided sessions and an unguided session with timer, that you can set to tell you when you've finished.

There are numerous books and/or CD programmes that offer some guided meditation sessions and I suggest trying as many as you can, to find the programme that suits you best. I personally find it difficult to read too much about these ideas and I prefer to buy audio books and listen to them while I'm driving. My favourite books include:

THE POWER OF NOW and **A NEW EARTH** by Eckhart Tolle. - These books have a strong spiritual (not religious) leaning.

MINDFULNESS by Mark Williams and Danny Penman - Very factual, scientific and pragmatic with an excellent 8 week follow up programme. Comes with a CD which includes many guided

meditations.

THE HAPPINESS TRAP by Dr Russ Harris - This book is less about meditation and more about developing better thought processes.

A final word.

Whichever method suits you best you need to understand that repetition is the key to all of this. You cannot get fit by going the gym once, and in the same way you won't get much value from meditation unless you form a regular practice and make a commitment to stay with it. In my early days I thought of meditation as a *cure* for my own and other people's problems. Unfortunately that approach means that you won't be committed to a regular practice, you'll just meditate until you've fixed your problem.

I now understand that meditation isn't a cure for anything - for most of us it's a completely new way of living our life and needs constant attention even if it's only ten minutes out of your day.

My gran used to say that *an apple a day keep the doctor away* and in that vein I suggest that:

10 minutes of meditation a day keeps the stress away!

John Shackleton

For more information call 09 294 8570 or go to
www.johnshack.com