

# Meditation For Everyone

A Practical Guide to the Power & Benefit of Meditation

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## **What's It All About?**

With a vast array of types and techniques, what is the common thread that makes meditation, meditation in all of them? Let's take a basic overview.

Most forms of meditation engage the focus and development of awareness. In a normal waking state we are predominantly identified with thoughts and feelings, and are constantly flitting from one to another. This identification we could say then is the opposite of awareness as we are using it here. In order to develop and engage with awareness, most meditation turns our attention away from the external, inwards.

A pre-requisite in meditative awareness is a deepening state of relaxation in the physical body. This deepening relaxation of the body facilitates a relaxing or slowing in the mind. I have heard many times from many people over the years the idea that meditation is stilling the mind, or stopping thought. Invariably this is followed by pronouncements of their failure to do this, and a subsequent abandonment of meditation. This is a basic and common misunderstanding of meditation. In the development of awareness, we step away from the identification with thought. The experience of stepping away occurs in the moment we become aware of a thought and recognize thought is happening. In this experience, we have the possibility of knowing directly that we are not our thoughts, for thought simply occurs. With this perspective then, thought is not a problem in meditation, and is held in awareness or focused to a particular end.

As the ability to rapidly and easily enter deeper states of relaxation and awareness develop, a meditator may observe a direct correlation between the presence of tension in the physical body and the process of thought. The more relaxed the body the less movement of thought. Meditation itself can be the process of developing the ability to consciously relax the body more and more deeply while remaining alert and aware.

Broadly speaking meditation can be seen as one of two types, Mindful and Dynamic. In mindful meditation we open our awareness to the continuous flow of sensations, feelings, emotion, images, even sounds and scents. The practice is to witness this continuous flow without engagement or identification. From this practice we develop what has been called the witness state. In the

development of our ability and experience in this type of meditation we can become more aware of subtler dimensions to our being. We also begin to see the fluid and dynamic relationship between body, emotion and mind. In mindful meditation our awareness is developed to contain everything occurring in our experience from moment to moment.

Dynamic meditation can take many highly varied forms. Common to them all is some degree of focus of awareness. The simplest form, and probably most commonly known, is the focus of attention on the breath. More complex and advanced forms of energy meditation, like those found in the Taoist tradition are also dynamic meditations. As are those falling under the umbrella of guided meditation. In dynamic meditation the concentration of focused attention can take the meditator into deeper states of consciousness. Other examples of dynamic meditation are the repetition of mantra or prayer, or the detailed and specific visualisations of the Tantric traditions.

Meditation is recognized as a component of almost all religions, and has been practiced for longer than recorded history. It is also practiced outside religious traditions. The word meditation originally comes from the Indo-European root med-, meaning "to measure." It entered English as meditation through the Latin 'meditatio', which originally indicated every type of physical or intellectual exercise, then later evolved into the more specific meaning "contemplation."

## **The Widening Acceptance of Meditation**

Meditation is becoming increasingly mainstream. A 2007 survey by the government found that about 1 out of 11 Americans, that's more than 20 million people, meditated in the past year. This widening acceptance of meditation is also reflected in a growing number of medical centers teaching meditation to patients for relief of pain and stress. More than 240 programs in clinics and hospitals teach mindfulness meditation.

This widening acceptance has much to do with the continuing research into the effects and benefits of meditation. The first scientific research on meditation began at Yale University in the 1930s. Research over the next 4 decades was sporadic and focused on experienced Yoga and Zen masters. In the 1970's researchers really began in earnest to look into the effects of meditation in quantifiable detail.

Numerous studies have shown evidence that practicing meditation can ease pain, improve concentration and immune function, lower blood pressure, curb anxiety and insomnia, and even help prevent depression. The latest research tools, such as brain imaging scans, show how meditation can have surprising effects.

In a brain-scan study of meditators who have practiced for a long-time was compared with a control group that never meditated. Brain scanning showed the meditators had increased thickness in areas of the brain associated with attention and with sensitivity to internal sensations of the body. A consequence of this is greater awareness of the body's responses to external stimuli. For example stressful conditions would be noticed as tension in the body and shortening of the breath.

Another UCLA study published in May found that, in comparison with a control group that didn't meditate, meditators' brains have larger volume in areas important for attention, focus and regulating emotion. They also have more gray matter, which could sharpen mental function, according to study leader and neuroscientist, Eileen Luders.

Scientists argue that nobody knows if these meditators' brains were already different. According to Richard Davidson, a pioneering meditation researcher and neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin, while studies have improved, most still need to be bigger and have good control groups.

His research shows that even novice meditators have greater activation in a part of the brain tied to well-being. The more activation, the greater their antibody response to a flu vaccine, which makes the vaccine more protective. By changing the brain, meditation could affect many biological processes, he says.

The proof is in the pudding, as they say, and today millions of people will testify to the value and benefit of meditation in their lives, scientist will continue to explore and understand why.

Another manifestation of this widening acceptance is in schools. In scattered locations across the USA, children are learning meditation at school to tangible benefit.

Steve Reidman, a fourth-grade teacher in North Hollywood, CA, reports that teaching meditation to children has helped curb fighting and also sharpening students focus. "You can just watch them breathe deeply and settle down rather than lashing out."

Another study showed that Los Angeles preschoolers ability to pay attention and focus improved after they were taught meditation.

As research expands, scientists expect to understand more of the benefits of meditation.

Meanwhile, for those who don't need scientific proof to know they benefit... assume the position!

## **7 Reasons to Learn Meditation**

If you are thinking about learning meditation, have done it and let it slide, here are 7 really significant reasons to learn to meditate.

### **1: Meditation Improves Physical Health**

The amount of supportive information for how meditation improves our physical health is vast. In the simplest and most basic terms I believe the benefits derive from one thing. When we meditate we consciously choose to relax the body while keeping the mind alert. This was termed the 'relaxation response' by Dr. Herbert Benson after his groundbreaking research into the physical effects of meditation. In essence all bodily functions improve towards optimum function in the absence of stress in the body.

The relaxation response of meditation allows the body to de-stress and allows the Autonomic Parasympathetic nervous system which governs all major bodily functions, immune, cardiovascular, digestive, reproductive etc, to move towards the optimal state of homeostasis - a stable constant condition.

### **2: Meditation Improves Mental Health**

That the body and mind are continually effecting each other is now pretty much undisputed. It follows then that as the body benefits from meditation so the does the mind. Clinical research has proven that meditation reduces anxiety and even depression. But more than this regular meditation practice has also been shown to significant improvements in self esteem, memory, concentration, and productivity. This goes so far as to indicate that meditators are likely to be just more positive and happier. Brain scans have shown that the 'happiness' or 'joy' centers of the brain are more developed and active in people who meditate regularly.

### **3: Meditation Increases Spiritual Health**

What exactly do I mean by spiritual health? Essentially I see this as our sense of connectedness. Initially and most importantly this is with ourselves. Living in identification with the chattering commentary of the mind is generally a pretty disconnected experience because the mind is largely

occupied with the past, interpreting and projecting from it. The regular practice of meditation brings us into a closer experience of what we are actually experiencing in the moment. From this we become more 'present' both to ourselves and the world. (see# 4 & 7)

As we deepen in our experience of meditation it is very possible to experience more of the mystery of reality beyond our physical sense perceptions. In or through meditation we can also experience the true nature, the ever present awareness, eternal, immutable.

#### 4: Meditation Improves Relationships

Meditation is a relationship with ourselves, a relationship that strengthens and deepens through acceptance and understanding. From greater acceptance, understanding and presence in and with ourselves we are able to be more present with others. We are also likely to be more empathetic, patient and understanding. Obviously this makes us a more pleasant person to be with. Additionally we are more likely to aware of our actual needs and limitations and as such less prone to the drama cycles of relationship. (see #7)

#### 5: Meditation Increases Intuition

Intuition it is an ever present dimension of our consciousness. Unfortunately most of the time we are so occupied and identified with the mental chatter that we do not perceive its subtle messages. Through the consistent practice of meditation we become more present to our direct experience and it can begin to attune to our intuition. We also come to recognize that we are not our thoughts and their capacity to rule us diminishes.

Meditation also opens us to greater awareness and sensitivity to our senses both physical and subtle. Our body is always in the present moment, so awareness of its experience through the senses reduces our mental activity. In this quieter mental space we become aware of intuition, our consciousness that is connected to higher consciousness. In higher consciousness we do not exist as this separate personality identity but have connection to the wholeness of Consciousness itself.

#### 6: Meditation Deepens Your Relationship with Life

Through a deeper relationship with ourselves. Through our increasing awareness of the falsehood of separation consciousness, and opening to the realization that we are in fact connected to, influencing and influenced by all that is, we cannot but deepen our relationship with life itself. We begin to understand each of our actions have consequences, and that we are responsible for the way that we experience life and the way that we live it.

And when we begin to understand not just intellectually but experientially that we are not separate, we cannot but help change the way we live, the way we see others, and our relationship with nature. We also become more caring and compassionate, understanding the precious divinity that is life is.

## 7: Meditation Increases Self-awareness

The message over the entrance to the Temple of Delphi was "know thyself". This same message is to be found in different forms in nearly all spiritual traditions. Self-awareness is a natural byproduct of meditation.

In meditation we choose to no longer distract and anesthetize ourselves from our experience of ourself. We choose to learn to just be with ourselves no matter what. In this choice we learn to accept ourselves exactly as we are. And in that choice insight arises as to why, and more importantly meditation can put us in the place where we can then let it all go and change.

From self awareness we become more authentic, we are less prone to pretend we are something that we are not and we can be more straight forward and clear in how we live, think and act.

## Common Objections To Meditation

### Isn't Meditation Religious?

The great thing about meditation is that our philosophical or religious beliefs are not important. Meditation is a process of immersion in consciousness itself, beyond the structures of mind. The beliefs of the mind become increasingly transparent and their power over us diminishes. We dive deep into the heart of ourselves to gain access to our spirit - our true nature. Therefore, mediation can (and is) practiced by people of different religions or those with no religion.

### But I don't have time To Meditate

Many people like the idea of meditation, but feel they don't have enough time. The truth is when you really want to do something you make time for it. Can you can get up earlier or watch 30 minutes less TV. Look at how you actually spend your time tomorrow and see where the time to meditate can be created. Meditation requires an investment of time, but clearing the mind makes the rest of the day more productive. Nothing is better than the feeling of inner peace and no relationship is more important than the one with yourself. Of course I do not mean this in a narcissistic way. Most of us are so busy running around chasing our lives and trying to keep up with our desires that our relationship with ourselves (and subsequently others) is superficial much of the time . What is the point in being tremendously busy but unable to enjoy it and if it doesn't make you happy? Meditation is not about retreating from the world; it is a journey of self-exploration and discovery. Whatever you do, if you have peace of mind, your work will be more enjoyable and productive.

### Meditation is boring!

Unfortunately, our mind is often addicted to complication and drama and it takes time to unlearn bad habits. Often the beginners experience of meditation is a confrontation with the inane chatter of their minds, and this is not comfortable. When we are busy with our lives the chatter of our 'monkey mind' is less obvious, largely because we habitually identify with it as 'who' we are. Confronting this 'who' we are when we sit for meditation can be an unpleasant shock.

Also the mind rebels, it enjoys its unbridled freedom to constantly jump from idea to idea, desire to desire, judgment to judgment. In the practice of meditation the free running mind is bridled and gradually trained. It is trained to focus, it becomes disciplined. Eventually it becomes the tool and not the master.

For centuries all human cultures have sought the spiritual benefits of meditation in one form or another. Through it many people have discovered its ability to momentarily separate us from our material needs and desires and put us in contact with the greater part of what we are. With time, practicing meditation will reveal as direct experience that we are not our thoughts, and open us to the 'mystery' beyond appearance and form.

We can use meditation to open up our minds to receive deeper wisdom, and insight into our own nature. This helps to guide us down the road of self-awareness as we evolve towards enlightenment.

Anyone can reap these spiritual benefits of meditation. The benefits include greater self-awareness and understanding, a deepening sense of being present in the here and now. From self-awareness develops self acceptance and in time compassion. A deeper relationship with yourself allows deeper relationships with others. Meditation can with time become your best friend.

## **Common misunderstandings About Meditation**

Misunderstanding #1 Meditation is stopping thinking and having a blank mind.

This is probably the number one misunderstanding about meditation - that meditation is to “stop thinking.” Certainly, a benefit of long term meditation is a reduction in the the amount of thinking that goes on, and that is great. The inane, repetitive and usually negative chatter of thoughts that jump one to another in their minds is one of the first things people new to meditation are confronted by.

But what would a blank mind mean? The confusion arises because we are most of the time identify with our mental thoughts (our inner monologue) and we believe it is reporting the truth of our experience. So a blank mind is assumed to be the absence of thought. But the vastness of mind encompasses so much more than thought.

In meditation we aim to develop mindfulness, that’s the experience of the full-ness of mind. When we’re mindful the mind is very much active and aware, just not consumed in thought. Rather, we are conscious of the physical sensations, movement of emotions and thoughts, and of how each of these things arises as part of our moment to moment experience. The mind becomes absorbed in the diverse richness of our experience, a richness that we are oblivious of when we spend our whole lives lost in identification with thinking.

Misunderstanding #2. Meditation is self indulgent escapism.

To some people who have no actual experience of practicing it, meditation looks like “escaping from reality”. We often hear the derogatory term “navel gazing,” suggesting meditation is pure self indulgence.

From a more conscious vantage, running around keeping busy and distracted so you never having time to be with yourself deeply is escapism. In meditation, we’re brought into direct contact with our own fears, delusions, pain, and selfishness. This is a big part of meditations purpose. When we can sit with and accept these unwelcome parts of ourselves we begin to disempower them. This simple act of allowing and accepting has deep significance in the process of healing and liberation.

Misunderstanding #3. You have to be super flexible & sit in full lotus.

Most of the meditation postures traditionally associated with meditation like full lotus, come from times and cultures that did not commonly use chairs. As a consequence, as it still is in many developing countries, people sat on the floor. As a result their pelvis was naturally conditioned to sitting in this way without discomfort.

For those of us then who have grown up sitting in chairs, as chair might be the more appropriate place to sit to meditate. There really is no required or necessary position to meditate in. The two primary things to consider the ability to relax deeply, stay alert, and keeping the spine straight. The mind already has plenty to obsess about without how you sit to meditate being one of them.

Misunderstanding #4. Meditation is just deep relaxation.

This misunderstanding about meditation is largely from it's increasing common prescription for stress management. While meditation is certainly greatly beneficial in managing stress and increasing health, to reduce it's function and purpose to this is way off the mark.

Deep relaxation is definitely an aspect of how to meditate, it is however one half of a fluid dance. The other half is alert attention. If that sounds less than simple to do, you are getting some idea of why meditation is a practice and isn't as simple as just sitting with your eyes closed.

Misunderstanding #5. The CD will do it all for you.

We have all seen the adverts for products that promise meditation as deep as a zen monk in a matter of minutes. Using the technologies of binaural beats for and other technologies to attune to slower brainwaves, is fine. It can and does have a beneficial effect, and it is not meditation and when using them you are not meditating.

To understand this lets look at the zen monk claim. Through many years of disciplined practice some meditators can attain a state of natural brain hemisphere synchronization, meaning neither left or right brain is dominant but they are working together. The issue is, that is not the purpose of

meditation and it disregards all else that meditation is and requires of the meditator.

Misunderstanding #6. Meditation is 'Eastern'.

It is easy to understand where this misunderstanding comes from. Meditation is though a universal spiritual practice in pretty much all human cultures and traditions. It may not be termed meditation in all cultures and traditions, but looking at the principles and intentions the names are not important. And let's face it the source of all three major world religions is 'Eastern'.

Misunderstanding #7. Meditation is Religious.

The great thing about meditation is that our philosophical or religious belief are not important. Meditation is process of immersion in consciousness itself, beyond the structures of mind. The beliefs of the mind become increasingly transparent and their power over us diminishes. We dive deep into the heart of ourselves to gain access to our spirit - our true nature. Therefore, mediation can (and is ) practiced by people of different religions or no religion.

Misunderstanding #8. In meditation you say "OM" a lot.

A silly and persistent stereotype.

## The Best Time To Meditate

The best time to meditate is usually said to be first thing in the morning. First thing in the morning being the hour before dawn. For those of us who don't live in a monastery it's a pretty big ask. For those of us who don't live in a monastery and have young children it's just not going to happen!

The reason that this hour is specified as the best time to meditate, is probably not applicable to most of us anyway. The reasoning is, because most people are soundly asleep at this time the psychic space of the collective consciousness is not busy with their thoughts and mental/emotional energies. At least in your immediate environment. But are any of us really so sensitive that we would really notice the difference? I think for most people, probably not.

We also have to remember that these directions on spiritual practice were written down a very long time ago. Before the advent of electricity most people's daily rhythms were much more attuned to nature. Meaning they tended to get up with the sun and go to bed not long after it went down.

Considering then these things, and the many diverse demands on our time, let's reconsider pre dawn as the best time to meditate.

Personally I don't think it really matters, but there are different factors to take into consideration.

For those who are new to meditation what is important is consistency. This means that the time of day you meditate should be a time in the day when you consistently can meditate. And then do, of course.

Those who practice yoga asana, an ideal time to meditate would be immediately after finishing your practice. There are those that believe that yoga asana practice is primarily a preparation and meditation. Whether this is true or not, it definitely is good preparation. For one thing yoga asana practice opens the body and allows a freer flow of prana or energy. It has subsequently softens and opens our consciousness. By this I mean that we become more present in awareness, and less caught up in the chatter of the mind. Yoga asana, when done correctly directs our awareness into

the body, into a more direct and kinaesthetic experience of ourselves. As such, yoga asana is in itself a form of meditation.

Another factor to consider in the best time of day to meditate, is the type of meditation to be practiced. If the practice involves a dynamic activation of your energy system it's really not a good idea to do it at night. This type of meditation would include things like, chakra meditations, and any form of meditation when you are bringing energy into your body, or circulating energy within your body. These type of meditation it is a definitely more appropriate to do in the morning.

In conclusion I feel the most important factor in deciding the best time of day to practice meditation, is when is the time it works best? If during your meditation practice you are not really yet awake enough, or conversely are already too tired, it's not the best time to be meditating. Equally if your time feels pressure and you are trying to squeeze meditation in, it's unlikely to be very satisfactory.

The most important thing about your meditation practice is that you enjoy doing it, even when it's challenging. So the best time to practice it is a factor in the equation creating consistency and ease, and limiting resistance, to sitting down and meditating.

From a completely different point of view, the best time to practice meditation is when you are upset. Once your practice is deep enough that you can be present with yourself when there is internal turmoil of one kind or another, you know that you are really making progress. There is tremendous benefit to be gained from being able to practice meditation at such times.

## **Meditation Posture**

When we think of someone meditating, we may call to mind an image of them cross-legged or even in full lotus position. If you have grown up accustomed to sitting in chairs the chances are, sitting in such a way is either not possible or quickly uncomfortable. As I said at the beginning, a fundamental of meditation is the ability to allow the body to deeply relax. Obviously if the position we are meditating in soon becomes uncomfortable or painful for the body, such relaxation will be harder to develop.

Most of the meditation postures traditionally associated with meditation come from times and cultures that did not widely use chairs, if at all. As a consequence, as it still is in many developing countries, people sat on the floor. As a result the pelvis is naturally conditioned to sitting in this way without discomfort. For those of us then who have grown up sitting in chairs, a chair might be the more appropriate place to sit to meditate.

The two primary things to consider are the ability to relax deeply, and keeping the spine straight. The reason there is near universal emphasis on keeping the spine straight is to facilitate the flow of subtle energies rising up the spine. This is a subject that requires more attention and we can give to it here, at this time. A good way to sit in a chair to meditate is to sit a little towards the front of the chair, with the legs parallel, and the soles of both feet on the ground. The hands can be placed wherever best allows the shoulders and upper chest to be fully relaxed and open, for example lightly placing them on the thighs. It is also possible to place a firm cushion to support the back of the pelvis and lower back, or even under the feet.

It is possible, and not uncommon, for an enthusiastic meditator to become obsessed with their posture while meditating. This is more likely in those adopting a more traditional meditation posture. For a beginner then, the posture for the meditation should be manageable and comfortable, offering the least distraction for the mind.

If you begin meditation seated in a chair, there are benefits to later adopting a more traditional posture, if health, age and everything else allow. Primarily it conditions the body to associate the

posture with meditation, which has the effect of making meditation easier. With time the appropriate muscles are strengthened, and the body opens to allow sitting this way without difficulty.

When choosing a cross-legged position the use of a cushion is highly advisable, if not essential in the beginning. This needs to be a cushion specifically for meditation, a type that is filled with buckwheat or pellets of some kind. This gives it a firmness to support, and allows it to mould to the body shape. The position of the cushion should slightly raise the back of the pelvis tilting the front slightly downwards. This helps the spine to stay straight and erect with the least muscular effort. The height of the cushion will depend on the degree of openness in the pelvis. The less open, the more high. Additional cushions can be used to give support under the knees or anywhere else necessary.

What to do with the hands? As I mentioned in meditating in the chair, the most important thing about the position of the hands, is that it allows the shoulders and upper chest to be fully relaxed and open. In sculptures of the buddha, and other sacred art we see all number of different 'mudras' formed by the hands. It is not necessary to do this, particularly as a beginner to meditation, you might be surprised how obsessed your mind can become with such details. On the other hand if something feels natural and easy, try it and see what you observe in doing it.

The head ideally should have the feeling of floating on top of the spine, and if that makes no sense to you at all, just let the position be natural, comfortable and balanced. Again work with the principle of relaxing and softening the body while maintaining length and erectness through the spine.

There are those that say that you should not move when meditating. Undoubtedly this develops necessary discipline and concentration. Personally I do not favour rigidity in such matters. It does not serve us to maintain a posture, for example, if our knees are hurting and there is the potential that we are damaging them. What is the point of ruining our meditation and our knees! On the other hand, if we fidget and move around with every distracting sensation, our meditation will never deepen. For those new to meditation, I feel the practice should be as easy and accessible as possible. Ideally meditation should be enjoyable, when it is perceived as hard work, uncomfortable, and difficult, many people do not keep it up long enough to experience its many benefits.

When you begin practicing meditation, you should expect to feel some discomfort during sitting - much as you would if you took up a new sport. You may even try standing behind your cushion for a while until you feel ready to sit again. It is important to accept your body as it is and to be gentle with yourself. Meditation is a life-long practice. In time your body will become comfortable with sitting whatever posture you choose, and you will look forward to 'assuming the position' .

Different poses and their Sanskrit names.

### Padmasana - Full Lotus Pose

The full lotus posture is sitting cross-legged with the feet resting sole upwards on the opposite thigh. Keep the body erect with both knees touching the floor. The hands can be placed either with hands or wrists resting on the knees, or the hands placed between the heels, the right hand resting in the left hand. This is an advanced posture, if you are uncertain about your ability to perform this posture that **do not** try it.

The full lotus posture, has a specific and practical function. When yogis, or other meditators practised, it could often be for very many hours, and outside in nature. In full lotus, the position of the legs creates a very stable base. In this position, even in very deep meditation with no conscious awareness of the body, the body will not fall over. This stable base allows the spine to remain straight and erect. In addition full lotus and other similar cross-legged positions facilitate openness in the base chakra, and some assistance with grounding.

### Half Lotus

In half lotus Only one foot is positioned on top of the opposite thigh. The other foot is positioned underneath the opposite thigh. If you use the full lotus, half lotus posture or any cross-legged posture, it is important that you alternate which leg is on top to maintain equal balance in the pelvis. You may find that you favour one leg on top indicating there is already more openness in one hip over the other

### Other variants of half lotus -

The foot on top can rest not on the thigh but on the calf or ankle.

Both feet and legs can be on the ground, with one placed next to the body, and the two heels close together. In Sanskrit this posture is called Swastikasana. The word 'Swastika' means prosperous in

Sanskrit, and is said to bring prosperity, success, and good health to the practitioner. It is done in the following manner: Stretch the legs in front of you. Bend the right leg at the knee, and place the right heel against the groin of the left thigh so that the sole will be lying in close contact with the thigh. Now bend the left leg and place it against the right groin. Insert the toes of the left foot between the right calf and thigh muscles. Now both feet can be seen to lie between the calves and thigh muscles.

Sukhasana - Easy Pose. This asana is achieved by simply crossing the legs and keeping the head and spine erect.

Vajrasana - Diamond or Thunderbolt Pose. This posture is commonly found in zen buddhism. Sit upon the heels with knees, ankles and big toes touching the ground. Keep the trunk, neck and head straight. Keep the knees together with the palms of the hands resting upon the knees, or with the right hand resting in the left hand upon the lap. This position can be challenging on the knees to do for very long. You can get special meditation stools for this posture.

Generally speaking lying down is not considered a good position to meditation. The reasoning here is that the strongest association and inprint in your nervous system and subconscious is lying down means sleep.

## 20 Practical Tips For Keeping It Up

Although a good number of people try meditation at some point in their lives, only a small percentage actually persist with it. This is unfortunate, as the benefits are enormous. One possible reason is that many beginners do not start with an appropriate mindset to make the practice sustainable.

The purpose of this article is to provide 20 practical recommendations to help beginners get past the initial hurdles and integrate meditation as an ongoing practice in their lives.

1: Make it a formal practice. Set aside a time in the day that is your meditation practice time.

2: Only meditate for as long as you are enjoying it. It is especially important in the beginning that meditation is not a chore.

3: Do yoga or stretch first. Firstly physical activity will draw your own awareness into the body and away from your mind. Also a practice like yoga loosens the muscles and tendons allowing you to sit more comfortably. Additionally, yoga opens the body not only at the physical level but also at subtle level, which facilitates movement of energy in the body.

4: Pick a specific location in your home to meditate. Ideally the place you choose will be somewhere that does not have much activity at other times. Two reasons for doing this are, the subconscious is conditioned by repetition, so by going to the same place at the same time each day to meditate, you will expect to meditate when you are there. The second reason is that when you meditate you begin to create a particular vibration in that spot. With time and meditation, the place will become increasingly attuned to this energy of meditation, again making it easier for you to meditate when you are there.

5: Make sure your meditation time is respected. If you live with others make sure that they understand that you are not to be disturbed while you are meditating. Equally for yourself make the same commitment, for example if your phone should ring, be aware of it and continue your meditation.

6: Create some representation of sacred space in your meditations spot. This should obviously be what is meaningful for you, maybe an actual altar with pictures and objects, or maybe just a special rug and your meditation cushion.

7: Use ritual if it helps you. This doesn't have to be elaborate it could be as simple as lighting a candle, or a lighting incense. The repetition of a ritual before you meditate, is again conditioning preparation for your body and mind.

8: Commit for the long haul. When you begin with the clear idea in your mind that the greatest benefits from meditation will accumulate with time, and see it as an ongoing process, you are less likely to give up in frustration.

9: Meditate with understanding. Get clear in your mind exactly what you think meditation is and what it will be like before you start. Invariably everybody does have ideas and expectations like this, it is very helpful to make them conscious before you start. So write them down and see exactly what they are.

10: Be clear of your motivation to begin meditation. When you understand your reasons and objectives in beginning meditation you are more likely to find a practice or technique that will work for you at that time.

11: Begin with a particular practice that you have actively chosen and commit to doing it for a given time period. Many beginners are constantly jumping from one type or technique of meditation to another. Your meditation practice is a relationship with yourself, it will not deepen if it consists of one night stands. This is not to say that the practice or technique you begin with is the one you stay with for the rest of your life, but a relationship is best left when you know exactly why it is that you are leaving, and not done simply on an impulse.

12: Educate yourself. Confusion and misunderstanding is the primarily caused by ignorance. Find a good teacher, or online community where you can get answers. Read some books on meditation and spiritual practice, and of course come back to [www.lifedivine.net](http://www.lifedivine.net) on a regular basis, or better yet sign up for our [rss feed](#).

13: Notice if frustration starts to creep into your practice. If you notice this happening take some time to explore what is going on for you, what expectation is not being fulfilled. Then examine the expectation itself, what is it based on.

14: Be honest with yourself. As I said meditation is a relationship with yourself, you are the most important person you need to be straightforward with, and meditation is a key place to practice this.

15: Be prepared for some discomfort. It is normal in the beginning to experience some physical discomfort when sitting to meditate. Most people are not accustomed to sitting still, other than maybe slouched on a couch. Your body needs time to develop strength and openness in the right places to allow you to sit comfortably and alert. Sooner or later discomfort will also be experienced at the emotional and mental levels. If you are not consciously prepared for this it is likely to deter you from continuing.

16: Until you are well versed in your meditation practice it can be very beneficial to use a recording to guide you. This will help your mind to let go of concern about what you are doing, and the recording can act as a guide until you no longer need it.

17: Start to look for moments of awareness during the day. Finding space to be consciously present during everyday activities is a wonderful way to evolve your meditation practice. Take advantage, of the time spent waiting in traffic, waiting in line, waiting for anything, to become present to yourself and what you are experiencing within yourself. Look for such opportunities in your day, however brief, simple as they are can radically change of experience of life.

18: Do it together. Meditating with a partner or group can have many wonderful benefits, and can improve your practice. When meditating with others many people say that it improves the quality of their meditation. However, it is necessary to make sure that you set agreed-upon ground rules before you begin.

19: Don't stress about it. This may be the most important tip for beginners, and the hardest to implement. Many people in beginning meditation become anxious about whether they are doing it right or not, or whether something they experience should be happening or not. 'Meditation is

practice', goes into more detail regarding this.

20: invest in a good, comfortable meditation cushion. If you need other things to allow your body to sit comfortably without strain, get them. If you set yourself up with the things that you need, you are removing a future potential pitfall to your practice.

Meditation is one of the greatest gifts that you can give yourself, like any lasting and meaningful relationship it takes energy and commitment, it takes understanding and tolerance. If you put these things in to your practice meditation will become your best friend, and powerful resource.

## **The Physical Health Benefits of Meditation**

Since the 1970s there has been a steady flow of research data on the effects and benefits of meditation. The results overwhelmingly show there are numerous benefits to meditation. In this article we are going to concentrate on the physiological and health benefits.

Nearly all forms of meditation have one thing in common, that is relaxing the body. When the body relaxes, the mind follows. Directly experiencing the inter-relationship of the body and mind, is then a significant benefit of meditation. This awareness is a doorway to increasing self awareness and self empowerment.

The relationship between body and mind is a parallel direction of scientific and medical study. That they do effect each other in positive and negative ways is now pretty much undisputed, and the complexity of ways and means continues to be revealed. With this understanding has emerged the significant role that stress plays in the development of illness and dis-ease.

Combine then the positive benefits of regular, conscious relaxation and the development of self awareness, including the presence and causes of stress, and you have a winning formulae. It is this later point which indicates that there is a whole dimension of greater benefit from meditation beyond simple relaxation practices.

Let us now look at the relaxation component, in order to understand it's health benefits. To do this justice we need to understand the autonomic nervous system, or 'ANS'. The 'ANS' governs and regulates involuntary functions of the body, which means all the wonderful things your body does on autopilot. We do not have to tell our bodies to breath, or our heart to beat, or have our food digested, our immune system to protect our biological environment, or our pupils to adjust as the light source changes. All of these things and more, are handled for our best interest and well being by the 'ANS'. The purpose of all these functions of the 'ANS' is to maintain homeostasis - a stable constant condition.

There are two aspects to the ANS, the Parasympathetic and the Sympathetic systems, which we can view as two different survival functions that have the opposite effect on the ANS. Most people will know the Sympathetic system as 'fight or flight' which occurs when there is the perception of immanent danger. When this response is activated, all available energy is readied to fight or flee for survival. In this state the function of the immune, digestive, and reproductive systems decreases or stops. At the same time adrenalin is pumped into the body, heart rate and breathing speedup and blood moves to the exterior of the body to power the muscles. In addition the higher functions of the mind give way to the powerful emotional impulses that drive survival. This is more or less what happens when we are 'stressed out'.

The Parasympathetic is then the opposite, it is the creation of homeostasis described earlier, in which each bodily system function to it's best current capacity.

It is easy to see then how the regular and accumulative experience of stress, depletes the bodies ability to maintain healthy function of it's systems. On the other hand we can also understand how conscious relaxation is a beneficial factor in maintaining health, both physically and mentally. But there is more....

Neuroscientists have found that meditators shift their brain activity to different areas of the cortex - brain waves in the stress-prone right frontal cortex move to the calmer left frontal cortex. This mental shift decreases the negative effects of stress, mild depression and anxiety. There is also less activity in the amygdala, where the brain processes fear. Several studies have demonstrated that subjects who meditated for a short time showed increased alpha waves (the relaxed brain waves) and decreased anxiety and depression.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, recorded the brain waves of stressed-out employees of a high-tech firm in Madison, Wisconsin. The subjects were split randomly into two groups, 25 people were asked to learn meditation over eight weeks, and the remaining 16 were left alone as a control group. All participants had their brain waves scanned three times during the study: at the beginning of the experiment, when meditation lessons were completed eight weeks later and four months after that. The researchers found that the meditators showed a pronounced shift in activity to the left frontal lobe, the brains happiness and joy center. Meditators then are rewiring their brain and nervous system to be more happy, more of the time.

Here then, as a list are the physiological and health benefits of meditating

- \* It stabilises the autonomous nervous system.
- \* It reduces the heart beat.
- \* It reduces the speed of breathing.
- \* Blood pressure drops.
- \* The Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) increases.
- \* EMG activity increases.
- \* Cardiovascular effectivity goes up.
- \* Breathing effectivity increases.
- \* The skin receives more blood.
- \* Stomach function and bowel function improve.
- \* The endocrine function is heightened.
- \* Muscle flexibility increases.
- \* The intake of oxygen gets stronger.
- \* Mobility and flexibility increase.
- \* The hand-eye co-ordination increases.
- \* Reaction-speed increases.
- \* Body posture is improved.
- \* Strength and resistance increase.
- \* Stamina increases.
- \* There is a heightened energy level and vitality.
- \* People's weight is stabilised at an ordinary level.
- \* The ability to sleep increases and the time people need to fall asleep decreases.
- \* Pain is weakened.
- \* Stability is improved.
- \* Depth perception increases.
- \* There is a heightened degree of relaxation.
- \* There is a lessened degree of muscle tension.
- \* The production of serotonin increases.
- \* Menstruation pains are softened.

\* Increases serotonin which influences moods and behaviour. Low levels of serotonin are associated with depression, headaches and insomnia.

\* Reduces anxiety attacks by lowering the levels of blood lactate.

\* Decreases muscle tension (any pain due to tension) and headaches.

\* Helps in post-operative healing.

- Enhances the immune system.

## **The Psychological Benefits of Meditation**

As we saw from the physiological and health benefits of meditation, a great deal of research has been done to study meditation in the last 50 years or more. This expansive body of research has also revealed numerous psychological benefits of meditation to which most committed meditators can testify. While it may be a new field of exploration for western science, the connections between the body and the mind are not new to the spiritual sciences. All the physiological benefits of meditation that we discussed quite naturally then have a corresponding benefit at the psychological level.

The reduction of stress at the physiological level that meditation brings, produces a reduction in the feelings of anxiety at the psychological level. A systematic review of 144 studies found that meditation was markedly more effective in reducing anxiety than other techniques (Journal of Clinical Psychology) Sometimes anxiety becomes paralyzing and overwhelming in the form of panic attacks. Panic attacks are often treated with drugs, but studies by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., associate professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester and director of the medical centers Stress Reduction Clinic, show that if people who are prone to panic attacks begin focused, meditative breathing the instant they feel the first signs of an episode, they are less likely to have a full-blown panic attack.

Meditation has also consistently been found to reduce depression, hostility, and emotional instability, indicating the growth of a more stable, balanced, and resilient personality. In another statistical review of 42 independent research results, meditation was found to be effective in increasing self-actualization-an overall measure of positive mental health and personal development. Further analysis revealed that the technique is exceptionally effective in developing

three independent components of this dimension: emotional maturity, a resilient sense of self, and a positive, integrated perspective on ourselves and the world (Journal of Social Behaviour and Personality)

Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and isolation are hallmarks of depression-the nation's most prevalent mental health problem. Meditation increases self-confidence and feelings of connection to others. Many studies have shown that depressed people feel much better after eliciting the relaxation response of meditation, and practicing meditation reduces their relapse rate by half. Brain scans show that meditation shifts activity in the prefrontal cortex (behind the forehead) from the right hemisphere to the left. People who have a negative disposition tend to be right-prefrontal oriented; left-prefrontals have more enthusiasms, more interests, relax more, and tend to be happier.

The research on meditation has shown significant improvements in mental health, memory, concentration, and productivity. Researchers tested novice meditators on a button-pressing task requiring speed and concentration. Performance was greater at 40 minutes of meditation than after a 40-minute nap. Meditators notice more, but react more calmly than non-meditators to emotionally arousing stimuli. Those with smoking, alcohol, and eating addictions who have been trained in meditation break their addictions with significantly lower relapse rates than those receiving standard therapies. Middle school children who practice meditation show improved work habits, attendance, and GPA (grade point average).

Brain scans of meditators show increased thickness in regions of the cortex associated with higher functions like memory and decision making. Meditation appears to slow aging. Those meditating five years or more were 12 years younger than their chronological age. Obviously this has both physical and mental benefits. Overall meditation can help most people feel less anxious and more in control. The awareness that meditation brings can also be a source of personal insight and self-understanding.

The research results will continue highlighting specific points of benefit from meditating, and this will only help to broaden the acceptance of meditation in the culture at large. This type of research can analyse in minute detail the subtle chemical changes in the brain and body that practising

meditation produces. It can also measure the psychological improvements, all of this data from reductionist science however, doesn't really help us to understand meditation.

The first thing that leads to these benefits is not the practice of meditation itself but the desire and commitment to do it. Wanting to meditate and being willing to do it indicates the desire for greater self-awareness and well-being. It is a willingness to take time to be with oneself, no matter what. This in itself is an enormous step for many people. Modern culture is completely oriented towards self distraction through an endless barrage of images and information. The focus is completely external and stimulates the perpetuation of desire.

Each of us regardless of a life circumstances carries within us pains and fears from the past. For the vast majority of us, for the vast majority of the time, these feelings, emotions, and their responding beliefs, influence us subconsciously. Meditation creates the opportunity for our attention to turn inwards and for these things to be made conscious. Without this conscious awareness of our inner fears, pains, and limiting beliefs, the habitual tendency is to project them outwards onto other people and the world at large. Through the practice of meditation, as these things reveal themselves within us, we can expand the depth of our self-awareness, self-responsibility, and develop an increasing empathy for others.

For those of you who like lists, the psychological benefits of meditation are &

- Increased brain wave coherence.
- Greater creativity.
- Decreased anxiety.
- Decreased depression
- Decreased irritability and moodiness
- Improved learning ability and memory.
- Increased self-actualization.
- Increased feelings of vitality and rejuvenation.
- Increased happiness.
- Increased emotional stability.
- Increased capacity to learn and better learning achievements
- Increased ability to solve problems

- Increase in productivity.
- Increased concentration.
- Stronger feelings of happiness and contentment
- Greater self-acceptance and empathy
- Increased self confidence
- Increased spontaneity.
- Increased emotional stability.
- Increased self-awareness
- Greater Equanimity

## **Meditation Is A Practice**

Meditation is a practice. I invite you not to say I meditate. instead say I practice meditation.

That word, practice is important. It removes whether we are doing it or not doing it, doing it right or wrong, we are simply practicing. It implies an acceptance that we are always learning and that we are always beginning.

We are practicing; how to live, how to be present, how to accept, to witness, how to open, how to be love, and there is the acceptance that we aren't, and will continue to forget how. So practicing is a commitment to ourselves, to our ongoing liberation, every time we sit (to practice) it is a new moment, and in it we begin again, always beginning in each new moment. In time our practice continues beyond the time of meditation and more and more becomes how we are and live.

Even in living, we are still practicing and will be until complete Liberation. Within the practice lies freedom, when we are able to stay present with ourselves more and more, and choose love.

## **Meditation Is The Way to Joy**

Meditation, like other form of 'trance' state, allows a bridging of the conscious and subconscious. It is of value then as a meditator to have some understanding of the subconscious mind and it's workings.

In the process of my last move, I came across two cassettes entitled "Your body is your sub-conscious mind, that I'd never made time to listen to." On the cassettes are a talk and an interview with Candace Pert, a neuroscientist and the author of 'Molecules of Emotion'. Pert spoke about research indicating that each cell of our body has intelligence. In technical terms it boils down to the presence of neuropeptides and their receptors, which I won't be explaining here! She also mentioned that such neuropeptides and receptors are found in the most basic single cell organisms, leading her to conclude that all living things have feelings!

Our feelings register our direct experience of each moment, and they do this whether we are paying attention to them or not. For most of us most of the time we are not. Our culture, education and habits are thought oriented and dominated by rationality. We are conditioned this way. Unfortunately most of the time this dominance of thought is at the expense of connection to our feelings.

In the Tri-One model of the mind I work with, the dominant rational part is our conscious mind and the feeling part the sub-conscious, our subconscious also remembers everything we felt - ever. Within the subconscious is the superconscious, the One, where nothing is, ever was or will be conditioned or separate.

Where we experience problems or conflict in ourselves, the conscious mind, the subconscious and the superconscious are out of alignment. We could say that where there is separation between what we think from what we feel, and from what we feel from what we are. We will experience that separation as problems and conflict in ourselves. When we are disconnected from what is felt within us, we project it outwards as how we experience what and who is around us on the outside.

If you've followed me this far you will see that this is a catch 22 situation. If we're not connected to our feelings and have problems, conflict or suffering, and are projecting that outwards and seeing it as the world we live in, where is the space to break the cycle to bring conscious awareness to what exists and drives us from within the subconscious? We need some means of stepping out of the cycle and turning inwards, often we need a guide in that.

Healing of our problems, conflicts and suffering is complete when the subconscious is made conscious and both come into alignment with our true nature, the superconscious. There is nothing conditioned in us that can't change and be healed.

Meditation can be practiced with this understanding. It can be a space in which we can be with ourselves in such a way to create a break in the feeling into projection cycle. With experience meditation becomes the ground on which we can meet our deepest fears and pains in the process of their release and healing.

To come back to Candace Pert and biology, when asked what in her view made us different in our feeling experience to other life forms she replied it is the development of the frontal cortex of our brain. Pert went on to explain that the frontal cortex allows us to recognise what is driving our behaviour (subconscious feeling) and to make a different choice if that behaviour creates problems, conflict or suffering. If or when that new choice brings our conscious, subconscious and superconscious into alignment we experience the other gift of our unique frontal cortex, joy of being.

There is a growing body of scientific data that shows correlation between the activity and vibrancy of the frontal cortex and meditation. So while meditation can open us to the unresolved and unhealed in us, it also gives the means to heal and resolve. Knowing this ability to be with whatever arises in us is powerful indeed.

## **A simple Meditation Practice**

Breathing meditation is one of the most basic forms of meditation. Deceptively simple, it will soon show you what a monkey mind we have. It is the foundation of many buddhist meditation practices such as vipassana and mindfulness meditation.

Some forms of vipassana place emphasis on observing the breath at the nose tip, while others at the navel. Here are the breathing meditation instructions of my own. My emphasis is attention on the body moving as it breathes. As I see it breath doesn't actually exist, it is just air that the body draws in and expels. So the place to pay attention is not the breath but the action that creates breath.

The second crucial part is letting go. We all carry so many tensions in the body, mostly from habit. Observing the body breathing will soon reveal tensions we never noticed before, and we can then choose to begin the process of letting them go and opening into greater freedom and expansiveness. The tensions probably took many years to accumulate and we must be patient in allowing their release.

Here then are my breathing meditation instructions

Sit comfortably with your spine erect and begin by becoming aware of your points of contact with the ground, and know that whatever form it takes in this moment that it is the earth. Notice if there is any resistance in your body to the contact with the ground any feeling anywhere of pulling up or away from the ground, and if there is, let it go and soften the body into simply, comfortably sitting on the earth.

Become aware of the breath entering the body. Have the feeling that the breath sinks into the body entering at the nose, feel the movements in the body as the breath enters and leaves. Pay attention to all the movements and sensations in the body as the breath enters and as it leaves.

Notice exactly where you first feel the inward movement, follow it's passage inward. Notice what in your body moves to bring the air in. Pay attention to the exact moment when the inhalation complete, and a notice if there is a moment of stillness at the fullness of the breath before exhalation begins.

Then notice exactly where you first feel the outward movement of the exhalation and follow it all the way out. Notice what in your body moves as the breath leaves. Then see if you notice a moment of stillness in the emptiness of the breath before the next inhalation begins.

Be conscious of witnessing these things as you witness them.

Begin now to pay attention to and enter the moment of completion of the inhalation, the moment of stillness in fullness before exhalation begins.

Also pay attention to, and enter the moment of completion of the exhalation, the moment of stillness in emptiness before the inhalation begins.

Continue to feel the movements of the body as it breathes with awareness of all four parts of a single breath. Inhalation, stillness in fullness, exhalation, and stillness in emptiness.

Be conscious of witnessing these things as you witness them.

Begin to notice any areas where you feel tightness, constriction or tension around the breath as it enters, and having noticed them choose to begin the process of letting go of the holding in those places, and allowing the body to soften and open.

Now begin the same process with the breath as it leaves the body, noticing anywhere in the body where there is contracting or tightening around the breath as it leaves. Be aware that they may be quite different places to the inhalation. Again having noticed them, choose to begin the process of letting go of the holding, and allowing the body to soften and open. Softening with each breath in each breath out.

Be conscious of witnessing these things as you witness them.

Also allow the face to soften, particularly the eyes and the area around and behind the eyes, allow the softening to spread across the cheeks to the jaw, the lips the tongue, everything releasing and softening. Gently place the tongue on the roof of the mouth just behind the teeth, and allow the tongue to soften.

Continue to meditate paying attention to each breath as it enters and each breath as it leaves, and soften the body around each breath, letting go, and letting go and letting go, deeper into this

present moment, deeper into yourself.

Breathing meditation is so simple and easy to remember how to do. It is a great one for those times, like being stuck in traffic or standing in a queue when you might otherwise feel you are wasting your time.

Practicing this or any other technique is to simply practice of the technique, in time you may well become good at it. The technique is not meditation. Meditation is beyond all technique and isn't something you can be good or not good at. Meditation is the doorway to the Mystery of life beyond the realm of the mind, only the Mystery itself can pull you through the door.

If this small book has inspired you and given you some insight into the innumerable benefits of meditation on your life, you might at this point be wondering what to do next. As a meditation teacher I want to help you. I began meditating in 1986 and studied a wide variety of techniques. After several years living in India and South East Asia I formulated my own practice based on all these years of experience and my years of experience doing spiritual healing work. This practice is called Living Liberation™ and what sets it apart from other practices is that it is firmly based on an understanding of life as a spiritual process. As such the meditation practice does not function as an addition to your life but as a way to live life to facilitate healing, integration and empowerment.

I began teaching Living Liberation™ in 1992. I have taught it in England, Australia, Japan, Singapore, Indonesia and the USA. Over time how I taught it evolved and improved becoming a 8 week course with self study material and exercises to help integrate the philosophical understanding and the meditation practice into everyday life. Living Liberation™ has changed people's lives and how they experience life. I still get emails from people who did Living Liberation with me years ago telling how their lives have been, and still are affected. This course is now available for home study, complete with audio recordings of each component of the meditation. If you are serious about your spiritual development and want a deeper, more authentic relationship with yourself, why not take a look? [Living Liberation - The 6 Principles of Conscious Healing & Awakening](#)