

Meditation Basics

Meditation means different things to different people. The most important factor in most meditation is a focus set exclusively on one thing. This can be on a phrase, a feeling, an area of the body, breath, pulse, a memory, an object, a deity, a prayer; really anything. The most important thing to know is that meditation does not need to be strict. Though certain specific types of meditation may be, the best way to approach it is in a way which works for you. Do not feel as though you have to stick to a specific perspective on it if you don't think it works well for you.

People who meditate may do so with a range of different aims in mind. A common purpose for meditating is to attain an enduring mental calm and relaxation following the period of time spent meditating. Along with this mental calm, many people report having much more clarity of thought afterward, and may be able to make decisions more rationally or with more confidence. Mental health professionals are beginning to prescribe meditation as a way of combating a range of mental disorders, as well as physiological ones, and data is becoming more and more supportive of its efficacy for both of these purposes. Beyond self-improvement, meditation can also be used for things like focus, in the sense of focus for perhaps studying for a test, as well as the kind of focus one might prefer to have while praying or performing religious and spiritual activities.

Meditation is also an extremely powerful tool for altered states, and with practice, can be used as a means of reaching any altered state of consciousness that is desired. Trance states, most importantly, are made more possible through the use of meditation; a trance state occurs each night just after one goes unconscious and into sleep, and this is because we are lying down and have trained ourselves to enable this loss of consciousness. However, with an upright posture and a clear, observing mind, loss of consciousness is less likely. From the trance state, any other type of conscious experience is possible: lucid dreaming, out-of-body experience (astral projection), remote viewing, states of “pure awareness” or “ego death,” deep sleep awareness, and various others.

Common Meditation:

Preparation:

It is best to be in a quiet environment for meditation, away from the sounds of talking and other things (remember to silence your phone) that are likely to distract you while you are meditating. However, if this is not possible it is not uncommon to listen to instrumental music or, preferably, ambient sounds. <http://naturesoundsfor.me> is an extremely useful website for this, and gives you a lot of control over the type of sounds, even allowing for multiple sounds at once and at varying levels. Other types of music – especially vocal music – are not used as often due to the involuntary emotional responses they tend to cause, as well as the unconscious processing of language which takes place. As helpful as listening to even ambient types of sounds can be in loud or distracting environments, it is best not to become too reliant on them, as this may cause the relaxed meditative state to become too strongly associated with the stimulus of sound, making it more difficult to clear the mind while not under its influence.

Apart from sound, it is good to wear loose clothing so as not to restrict blood flow or require one to adjust too frequently while trying to relax. It is also best not to eat a large meal immediately before meditating, as much of your blood flow will then be diverted to aid in

digestion, reducing your level or clarity of consciousness.

Posture:

Don't worry about having an overly strict posture; you're not going to be able to relax if you're contorted into a position that you aren't comfortable with. If you're interested in sitting in a full lotus position, that's entirely fine, but meditation can be just as effective from any other posture as long as a **straight spine** is maintained.

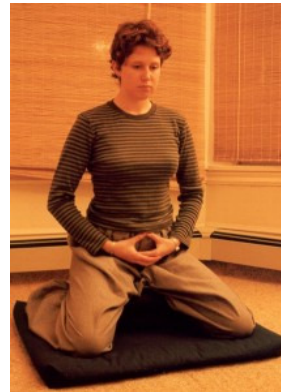
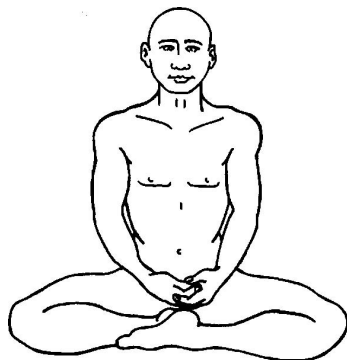
Full Lotus



Half Lotus



Burmese



(Above, right) Meditation pillows are extremely useful because they help one to maintain a straight spine, while also allowing for variation in posture. A meditation pillow can be used in combination with any of these postures, and will often make it more comfortable to sit for longer periods of time.



(Left) Meditation from a chair is just as useful as any of the other common postures, and has no drawbacks. A straight-backed chair with no arms is ideal. Those who use a chair often put something like a pillow or folded blanket under their feet for added comfort to aid in physical relaxation. The aim here is the same: a straight spine.

Though it may feel uncomfortable at first, a straight spine is necessary for proper relaxation of both the body and the mind. Discomfort will result if it is not maintained from the start. The preliminary discomfort of maintaining a straight spine subsides after a short amount of time as you allow your muscles and vertebrae to fully relax and settle into this posture.

Laying down is also a valid meditation position, however it is very likely that you will fall asleep once your physical body is fully relaxed, so it may be best to avoid this position unless you are doing other practices such as working specifically on remaining conscious *despite* this complication.

Hand/finger positions – also called “mudras” – may be added depending on the specific practices being performed and their religious and ideological origin, but are not vital to most meditation.

Eyes can be open or closed. It is somewhat more common for them to be closed, and may be more comfortable and lend itself better to full concentration.

Breath:

It is very important to breathe correctly when working on meditation or altered states. The kind of breath required is a **diaphragmatic** breath. This means breathing with the lower part of your lungs first by expanding your diaphragm. Often when you aren't thinking about how you're breathing, only the upper part of your lungs is used; your chest rises, your abdomen remains still. With a diaphragmatic breath (also used by vocal and wind instrument musicians), the first and most noticeable part of the body that expands is the abdomen. This is considered a deeper breath, and allows a much higher level of energy by increasing blood flow, as well as concentration. The shallower the breath, the less useful it is and the more difficult it may be to reach a deeply relaxed state.

All breathing while meditating is generally done through the nose, with the mouth entirely closed. To avoid having to repeatedly swallow saliva while meditating, it is common to place the tongue against the roof of the mouth.

Focus:

This is the most important part of meditation, and certainly the one with the most variation. Most typically, the primary goal is to stop inner dialog – your voice inside your head that narrates to you. You want to facilitate a relaxed, clear mind which *observes* or *notices* thoughts that arise, rather than *developing* on them. Each time a thought or image comes to your mind, simply notice it and allow it to fade away. Do not get discouraged when these thoughts arise, as this is completely normal and happens with even very experienced meditators. The MOST IMPORTANT thing in meditation is to remain patient; all it takes is practice. Start in small increments – even just 2-5 minutes at a time – and work up to 10, and then 15, and then 20, 30, and so on depending on what you're interested in. The most effective way of training yourself to meditate effectively is to do it often; the amount of time spent meditating is less important than the *frequency* and the *quality* of practice. Don't give up too soon! Everyone can do this, all it takes is a bit of practice – and even if you don't reach as clear a mind as you might like during your practice, its effects on your mental state can still be very significant. Each time you drift into thought, just bring it back to focused and clear, and continue. It is a lesson in self-acceptance in that aspect, so just go for it and with practice you'll

get it.

A common way of reducing and ultimately halting inner dialog is to focus on the space in *between* thoughts. There is always at least a moment, no matter how short, just after one thought ends and just before another begins; this is where you want your awareness to reside. If you can perfect this practice, thoughts will dissipate and eventually you will be completely clear of inner dialog.

Another way – probably the most common of all – is to focus on your breath. You don't want to focus too hard on it to the point where it's distracting you from relaxing, but simply notice your breath and keep your attention lightly attached to the leading edge of your breath as it goes in and out. You can even imagine the breath as a color (green, white, really any color), entering through your nose and going straight down to your lower torso – the root chakra. Then on the out breath, imagine it going back up the same way and expelling it through the nose. A common thing to imagine for the out breath is black smoke, often in combination with the intention of expelling negative energy. All of this color business is just a way of thinking about the breath more deeply if that interests you, but the main purpose of focusing on the breath in meditation is usually simply as a mechanism for preventing thinking and distraction.

If certain thoughts continue to arise (especially ones about obligations relating to school, work, relationships, etc.), it can help tremendously to stop and write them down. Physically writing them down – as opposed to typing them in a computer or phone – is extremely useful as a means of getting these thoughts out so that you don't have to worry about them anymore because you know they will be there when you're finished meditating, and you can devote all of your attention to the task at hand.

Mantras are also a well-known device used in an effort to better focus the mind. A mantra is a word or phrase which you focus on to the exclusion of all else. You repeat this either in your mind or aloud, and don't allow your mind to wander to anything else. Some mantras are also used for their particularly strong vibrational effects, felt within the body during their verbalization.

A few common mantras: (*Vibrational qualities, given slow, exaggerated pronunciation)

- *Om – pronounced AUM; 3 syllables

- *Ong

- *Sat Nam

Clear mind (in breath), don't know (out breath)

What is the sound of one hand clapping? – this is a mantra which doubles as what is called a koan, used primarily in Zen meditation. These are questions with no discernible answers, used to quiet the mind

“The Lord is My Shepherd” prayer

- *Ong Namō, Guru Dev Namō – used in kundalini yoga and meditation; literally translates to “I bow before my highest consciousness,” talking about the “higher self” (“I bow to my higher self”)

When one has developed a sense of how meditation works and how best to suit it to their own needs, it becomes extremely easy to combine it with other activities such as energy work, some of the various altered states mentioned earlier, healing, simple relaxation, and many other purposes. This is very valuable to keep in mind: do not feel stuck to a rigid structure; feel free to mold your meditation practice to your own interests and needs, and that is how you will get the most out of it.