

Meditation



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Meditation

Throughout recorded history and in every part of the world, meditation has been practiced by individuals seeking to calm and discipline the mind and perhaps find answers to some of life's deepest mysteries. They have been brave enough to ask questions such as: "What am I ?" and "What is reality?"

While physicists explore the vastness of the cosmos and delve into the smallest components of matter, to the point where matter dissolves into mere vibrations on the surface of something deeper; while psychologists study the workings of the human brain and the mental phenomena that we notice as thoughts, opinions, beliefs and personalities on the surface of our conscious awareness, the source of which lies beyond the scope of both psychology and physics; only those who meditate seek to experience directly the "something deeper" underlying the universe and ourselves.

"Our essential nature is usually overshadowed by
the activity of the mind...

When the mind has settled, we are established in
our essential nature which is unbounded
consciousness."

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

Meditation is often over-mystified and can appear difficult and inaccessible, when in fact it is a simple process and can be practiced by more or less anyone.



What is Meditation?

Meditation is the process of bringing the mind to a state in which it rests quietly, thoughts settle and dissolve away and there is simply a sense of being fully present in the moment: alert, awake and yet deeply at peace.

"My teaching is simple: sit and be."

Buddha Maitreya, Purelands, North Clifton, UK

This is a simple concept. The only reason it can be tricky to do in practice is that the thinking mind usually puts up a fight.

If you have ever sat down and tried not to think about anything for a few minutes, you may be aware that bringing the mind to stillness is not necessarily as easy as it sounds. You may well have discovered just how much stuff goes on in our heads most of the time.

The thinking mind has a vested interest in keeping itself busy. For one thing, it believes itself to be your identity. It assumes that all the ideas and opinions you have collected over the years are what make you *you*, and it assumes that if it stops thinking these thoughts, it will somehow cease to exist. It also prides itself on being rational and analytical, so it will try to puzzle out, describe and explain what you are doing, and it thrives on telling stories; stories about the past such as: "This has never worked for me before so why should it now?" and stories about the future, like: "If I don't get this right, I'll never become enlightened, and what if..?"

The thinking mind, even when it's not totally incapacitated by emotional interference, thrives on these dramas. Shutting it up and finding a bit of peace can be a bit daunting. If you just try to force the mind to be still, you may eventually get to the point where you think: "Aha! This is it! I'm not thinking about anything now!" But then you realise that you are just thinking about not thinking!

Using the rational mind to try to prevent itself from doing what it does best is a bit like trying to take hold of your own feet and lift yourself off the floor. A better strategy is to trick the mind into being still by keeping it occupied with something simple and then, when all its attention is focussed on that, you can quietly let it go and simply be present in the moment without the mental noise and activity that usually clutter up the space of your inner being.



What Meditation is not

Meditation is not the same as mental blankness of the sort you might experience when you are very tired and can't be bothered with thinking and perhaps start drifting off to sleep. In contrast, when you are meditating, there are no thoughts, yet you are wide awake, fully alert and present in the moment.

Meditation is not guided imagery, visualisation or contemplation of a particular subject.

That is not to say that these are not, in themselves, useful pastimes.

Guided imagery is used with great success in many types of therapy, for example to overcome phobias and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. It involves using the power of your own imagination to rest deeply in a place of your own choice such as a beautiful beach, a garden or a forest glade while the voice of a therapist assists you to put past difficulties behind you, reminds you of your own unique talents, strengths and capabilities and then allows you to rehearse various possible situations you may encounter in the future so that you are prepared and confident and ready to achieve your full potential.

Visualisation of a calm, beautiful place, even without the help of a therapist, can be very restful, and visualisation of the future we choose to create is one of the most powerful things we can do to transform our lives for the better. Every beautiful thing that has been created by mankind began as an idea or concept visualised in someone's mind.



In *contemplation*, we may allow the mind to explore a particular subject or challenge and then let it go while we rest or get on with something else, and often some kind of insight or solution will then arise quite naturally from a deeper part of the mind, as inspiration or intuition.

Although very useful, however, none of these mental activities are meditation, since the brain is still active rather than resting in stillness and peace. Perhaps more importantly, believing ourselves to be "meditating" on a problem when we are actually ruminating and worrying about it can lead to disturbed sleep patterns and depression; therefore it is important to be very clear about what meditation is, why we are doing it, and how to do it safely.

Why Meditate?

Meditation can take quite a bit of patience and practice, so why would anyone want to do it?

There may, in fact, be many different reasons, the most obvious being the calming effect of meditation on the mind. If you are over-stressed, over-anxious, angry, upset or otherwise wound-up or overwhelmed, meditation can be like a lifeline. A few minutes of meditation can help you to let go of whatever is bothering you and find some rest from troubled thoughts and unwelcome emotions, thereby enhancing your quality of life and increasing your capacity to deal with day to day challenges. For this reason alone, it could be worth taking a bit of time to master this skill.

There are other benefits, however, including a restorative effect similar to that of deep sleep and a kind of mental re-charging of the batteries, allowing you to feel refreshed and more able to cope.

"When, through the practice of yoga, the mind ceases its restless movements and becomes still, one realizes the Self. It satisfies one entirely. Then one knows that infinite happiness which can be realized by the purified heart but is beyond the grasp of the senses."

The Bhagavad Gita

In meditation, though the eyes may be closed and the detail irrelevant, the attention is wide open. We are very alert and the mind is fully present in the moment.



This is the opposite of a trance state, the definition of which is a state of locked attention, in which we are focussed on one thing and shutting out all the rest.

With practice, wherever you are, you can mentally step back, rest in the stillness underlying everything and open the awareness outwards. The practical advantages of this are significant.

For example, martial artists practice meditation. They know that by mentally stepping back, you may become less likely to be so absorbed in looking at your watch when a stranger asks you the time that you miss the accomplice with the knife behind you. Takuan Soho, in "The Unfettered Mind", refers to this as the difference between ice and water. For a swordsman, focussing exclusively on the opponent's blade is his downfall, while keeping the attention fluid allows him to be aware of the full situation and respond appropriately. Similarly, in a fight, if you develop tunnel vision on the fist in front of you, you may be oblivious to the presence of the chap with the broken bottle behind you.

In everyday life, the habit of stepping back, calming down and taking a wider viewpoint helps you to think more clearly, avoid excessive emotional arousal and develop a greater ability to see other people's points of view.

"A person who does not meditate cannot have wisdom. He may be able to concentrate, but not for any length of time. His power of concentration remains weak and cannot be maintained."

Rabbi Nachman

For those of us who have an interest in some of the deepest mysteries of life, and are brave enough to ask questions that others may dismiss as unanswerable (such as "What am I?"), meditation can provide a means of exploration and, potentially, this can lead to discoveries which make sense to us on many levels and give meaning and purpose to our lives.

For now we will focus on the practicalities of meditation as a technique or tool to help us on our journey.

How Meditation Works

Effective meditation techniques tend to have one thing in common: they give the mind one particular thing to do, thereby interrupting the usual stream of thoughts and peripheral mental clutter. When we become very skilled at doing this and the mind is focussed, disciplined and calm, we can then let go of the vehicle that brought us here and just rest deeply in the moment, experiencing the silence, stillness, peace and bliss, which is all that remains when there is no mental or emotional activity to disturb it.

"The more you talk and think about it, the further astray you wander from the truth. Stop talking and thinking, and there is nothing you will not be able to know."

Zen Master

Popular Meditation Techniques

Meditation using a Mantra

A mantra is any word or phrase which you can use as a tool to bring the mind to stillness. Some people use a traditional mantra; a word or phrase with some significance for them, or a word they like the sound of such as "peace" or "love", or a statement such as "I am". The mantra may be chanted aloud or whispered or internalised so that the mind simply plays it over and over again and you just listen, with the attention lightly focussed on that sound. If any thoughts arise, you can just allow them to dissolve away and gently bring the attention back to the sound of the mantra. This, in itself, is very calming and cuts out any thought of past or future, allowing the mind to have a rest. When the mind has settled sufficiently and the attention rests purely on the mantra, you can simply let it go and rest deeply in the silence and stillness.

Tratak Meditation

In a similar manner, Tratak meditation allows you to focus the attention on an object, often something bright, such as a candle flame. You simply rest the gaze on a point just to the side of the flame for a period of time and then close the eyes and continue to observe the afterglow on the retina. When that disappears, there is just stillness.

Meditation on Silence

A very simple, yet powerful technique is to listen. Not attaching to any particular sound, allow all the sounds to come and go, noticing how they arise out of silence and fall back into silence, and just rest the attention on that silence. If you are not keen on the concept of silence, just be aware the profound quietness underlying everything, which you can notice when you don't bother to think about anything at all.



"In this quietness falls down the burden of all your sorrows."

The Bhagavad Gita

Some might say that there is no such thing as silence. Even in the quietest place, you might still hear your breathing or your heartbeat. Silence then is something that is experienced in the mind and that, in itself, is very interesting. In the same way, we can believe our bodies to be still while the waves within each atom of it zip around at close to light speed and the planet spins you around at nineteen miles a second as it hurtles around the sun, whizzes round the galaxy and participates in the universal expansion at a speed we can barely imagine. Stillness is also an experience of mind.

Listening is like an anchor in a storm and can be used very effectively in stressful situations. Stress is normally dependent on thoughts about the past or the future. Being present in the moment cuts out worries about what might be or regrets about what might have been. Opening up the hearing brings us fully into the here and now. From this calmer perspective, we can then engage effectively with what lies before us rather than being manipulated by others or allowing our actions to be subject to the whims and tantrums of the emotional brain.

Meditation on Breathing

From Yoga to Zen, there are a variety of meditational disciplines which involve paying attention to the breathing. Some involve breathing in particular ways, such as the Buddhist "abdominal breathing", or the "reverse breathing" of Taoist meditation and Tai Chi. Other methods involve observing the natural breathing without interference or perhaps counting the breaths with each exhalation. Some methods involve being aware of the air entering and leaving the body, others may involve noticing a particular point of the breathing cycle, such as the point at which inhalation becomes exhalation or vice versa.

Whether you wish to sit cross legged on a cushion and practice Zazen, or whether you simply count ten breaths before entering an important meeting, exam or interview, this is a very calming activity and is accessible to everyone.

Tai Chi (Meditation on Movement and Stillness)

Learning a Tai Chi sequence requires complete, undivided attention to what you are doing. There is so much going on in terms of posture, breathing, footwork, waist control, dantien control, silk-reeling etc, etc, that it is unlikely that your mind will be on what jobs you need to do later that day or what your boss said to you yesterday. It brings you fully into the present so that you can leave your concerns at the door and just get on with it. This in itself is relaxing and quite liberating. Before you start the form, and when the movements stop, you rest in the silence and stillness, Wu Chi, and when you get to the point where, like riding a bike, or driving a car, you no longer have to think about the movements any more, your mind can just rest in the stillness while you are moving. This is excellent training for daily life, where you can conduct your affairs more objectively by stepping back, taking a wider viewpoint and remaining inwardly calm, even in challenging situations.

Mindfulness

How much of our lives do we miss? Have you ever been lost in thought on public transport and missed your stop? Have you ever looked at your children and wondered at how quickly they grew up and how much of that process you didn't notice at the time?

We can go through much of our lives in various trance states, focussed on internal cinema footage about the past or the future while the present simply passes us by.

If you look back at your most treasured memories, they will probably have an immediacy and colour about them; a result of having been fully present in that moment. In contrast, you may not

remember the stuff that was going on in your head when you went sailing down the motorway on autopilot and came off at the wrong junction.

Mindfulness is simply being fully present with whatever is in front of you in that moment. There can be a timelessness about it and the world may seem richer and more alive.

Try sitting for a few minutes in a garden or a park, just resting in the beauty of your surroundings, experiencing it fully with all your senses. You don't need to label any experience or sense-impression. You don't need to selectively overlook the litter basket and focus preferentially on the flowers. Just be there with it all and let it be.

It's the same with your thoughts and moods; you can just be present in the moment and notice any thoughts and feelings without judgement or any attempt to fix them, understand them or do anything in particular about them; you can simply accept them as interesting yet temporary experiences and gently let them go, just as clouds arise and dissolve back into a perfect sky.

It's a bit like watching television; one programme ends, another arises. It's all very interesting yet we know that none of these images or stories have any effect on the screen they dance upon, and we are aware that we are watching TV, which means that we always have the choice to either continue to watch and be entertained or to flick to a different channel, or to turn it off and stare at the blank screen for a while and just enjoy the peace.



"When water is still it is like a mirror...
and if water thus derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind?
The mind of the sage, being in repose, becomes the mirror of the universe."

Chuang Tzu

When we judge our thoughts and feelings, comparing any disturbing ones with previous similar experiences and imagined scenarios of what might be to come, we start to fret about what it all might mean and how to fix ourselves. We get bogged down in all this rumination, amplify our unhelpful feelings and build ourselves an unnecessary mountain of misery that we believe we have to "cope with" and "sort out" and blame ourselves for - a brilliant recipe for digging ourselves into a depression or stewing ourselves in stress.

When we are mindful, we can see that all this stuff is just part of the passing show, no more real than the memory of yesterday's breakfast. Then we can stand back, switch off the channel and choose to either have a nice rest or put our attention on something more helpful to our well-being.

Some Practical Advice

With so many methods to choose from, the important thing is to choose something that works for you. Like any type of exercise, physical or mental, if it is enjoyable or appealing to you in some way, you are more likely to stick with it for a while and begin to notice its benefits.

One important point is not to expect too much. If you are looking for glorious visions, choirs of angels, flashing lights, psychic powers or heavenly trumpet choruses when you reach "enlightenment", you run the risk of either being very disappointed and frustrated in your efforts or, worse still, having your imagination provide these desired experiences just to keep you happy. There is a famous Zen story about a young monk who bursts into his master's room to announce that he has just seen a brilliant vision of a golden buddha. The master doesn't even look up as he tells the student: "Don't worry. If you keep practicing, it will go away."



How often to meditate

Too much meditation can be counter-productive. Instead of enabling us simply to be present in the observing self and engage effectively with reality, excessive meditation practice can make us feel detached, cut off and "out of it", like a ghost walking through the world and not caring much about what's out there, which is a pretty horrible feeling. Or we can be so wrapped up with, some might say addicted to, our "blissing out" that we may come across as a bit wierd and empty-headed to people around us. Neither of these states is desirable and they can even become pathological. It is important to strike the right balance.

In my personal opinion, when you are first learning to meditate, in the early days when the mind is putting up a fair bit of resistance, you might gradually build up from five minutes a day to twenty minutes a day at the most, bearing in mind that this is a kind of training for the mind in much the same way that you can train the body in the gym. You gradually become able to concentrate for

longer periods without the mind wandering, and eventually reach the point where you can easily bring the mind to rest within seconds without necessarily employing any of the techniques listed above. At this stage, even a couple of minutes of this kind of rest can be as beneficial as a twenty minute period spent repeatedly bringing the mind back from wandering thoughts.

Just as a well trained, fit body needs less effort to maintain it that it did when it weighed twenty stones and got out of breath walking up the stairs, a well trained mind does not need prolonged periods of meditation.

Occasional calm moments, particularly just before a challenging situation such as a job interview, exam, public performance or important meeting, can be sufficient to restore equilibrium and allow proper access to the rational, thinking mind. And when oneness has been experienced and understood at a profound level, our world-view shifts so that all our actions arise from this and we feel grounded and steady, whether or not we are meditating.

Where and when to meditate

Obviously, this will depend on where you are and what is going on in your life. For a busy, working mum, it may well be that the only quiet time and place available is sitting on the stairs after everyone is asleep, or five minutes in the toilet during the lunch break! For those with a less frantic lifestyle, it may be that you have a particular room or corner in which you can relax and enjoy some quiet time without interruptions. (We don't want to give the mind any excuses for getting sidetracked by interesting diversions). You might prepare the space carefully with a particular mat or chair or cushion. Some people like certain objects around them, others like it to be open, uncluttered and "Zen". In some ways, other than to generate a peaceful feeling prior to meditation, the surroundings are not that important, particularly if you are doing an eyes-closed meditation in which all thought of your surroundings disappears.



The position you choose is whatever position you feel the most comfortable in, though laying down is not ideal as it encourages you to fall asleep, which is great if you are in bed and that is your intention, but sleep is not the objective of meditation. Sitting on a straight backed chair at a height which allows your feet to touch the floor is ideal, as is sitting on the floor, cross legged or with your legs out in a V shape.

The idea is to be stable (so you don't fall over) and upright, with your head in line with your back. Some people think that this is so that the energy in your body can flow freely through your chakra centres, from the base to the crown. However, whether or not that is true, it can also help you to avoid getting a bad back from spending twenty minutes in an awkward position.

If you do become uncomfortable, change your position. If you develop an itch, feel free to scratch it. Cough or sneeze if the need arises. There are no extra bonus points for enduring discomfort stoically. The idea is to be so comfortable that you can forget the body for a while and focus on the mind.

As to the timing, some people prefer sunrise or sunset, or a particular time each day, but it really doesn't matter that much. Whenever you have time (and remember to do it) is fine. We don't need to overly mystify or ritualise this process, which can again be counter-productive and lead to negative feelings if we feel we missed a session, didn't clean up first or "lacked the discipline to make ourselves do it". Approaching meditation as a chore or ordeal is not recommended; neither is turning it into an addiction so that we need our daily fix of peace in order to function properly. A more helpful attitude is one of curiosity and interest, like an explorer on a great journey. This is, after all, a process of discovery.

Of course, if you are doing Tai Chi, you will need sufficient space. If you are practicing mindfulness, you may choose a natural setting such as a garden or hilltop or the bank of a stream, or be mindful of the process of eating, or of washing crockery, or of ironing a shirt. Then again, choosing only attractive places and avoiding others is not entirely helpful. Mindfulness of a dirty rag in the gutter is an equally valid experience on the path to enlightenment.



Mindfulness of the breathing can be useful in the moments before an important job interview or exam. If you're scared, that's OK - so are most people in such situations - just watch the breathing, let your heart rate settle, let your rational brain come back on line and then go in and do what needs to be done and give it your full attention. It's amazing how much you know and what you are capable of when your mind is calm and clear and present in this moment.

In the end, you will be able to meditate anywhere, in different ways, as appropriate to the circumstances. In the heart of a city, amid the crowds and the traffic, you can step back into an internal stillness as you walk along, quietly observing everything without getting too caught up in it or becoming embroiled in internal mental conversations with yourself.

"The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen while several people are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great a tranquillity as if I were on my knees at the blessed sacrament."

Brother Lawrence

A good time to meditate is when you have been driving and you pull up on your drive, or in a car park, and turn off the engine. You can take a few moments to enjoy the sudden peace instead of rushing out of the car and back into the rat race. You can even decide to arrive five minutes earlier at your destination to allow time for this. Just that few minutes can be enjoyable in itself and also allow you to be fully present and calm when you do get out of the car and go about your business. People may even notice and comment on how "together" you are and how happy you look. They may even find that being in your company allows a little of that peace and happiness to "rub off" on them and you can enjoy spreading a little sunshine wherever you go.

The View from the Centre

Being a ray of sunshine to light up others' lives is more than just a charming metaphor. It can serve as a model to help us to understand the world and our place within it, giving meaning and purpose to our lives. It can also enable us to understand what wise men and women all over the world and throughout the ages have been telling us, in every way they could: "We are all one."

In this model, each person is like a ray of the same sun, always looking outwards, seeing only its neighbouring rays, which appear to be separate from itself.

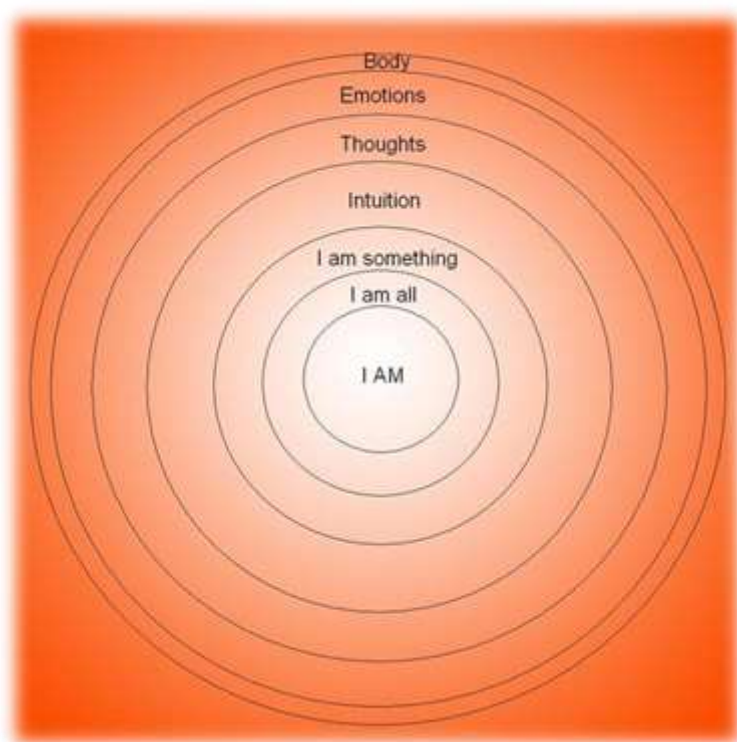
Each person imagines himself or herself to be a separate body, confined by skin and containing a specific set of feelings, memories, thoughts, opinions and beliefs which they cherish as their own identity and will go to almost any lengths to protect. From this limited viewpoint, other people are seen as separate from, and different to, ourselves and this is the cause of most of the suffering in this world.

This individual, separate self, or ego, may even imagine that it's true inner self is a frightened child who needs to be nurtured and supported by others. Nothing could be further from the truth!

"You realize that, all along, there was something tremendous within you, and you did not know it."

Paramahansa Yogananda

Were we to look back once in a while, we would be stunned by our own magnificence. We would see that all the rays arise continually from the same source and that no thing and no one is separate from that source, nor has it ever been separate, nor will it ever be separate. There is only the One. Individuals may overlook it, avoid looking at it, refuse to believe it - just as a wave may choose not to believe in the ocean upon the surface of which it forms and subsides - but believing it is there is not required, the ocean continues to wave, whatever the wave thinks it is, and the rays may argue among themselves if that is their choice; meanwhile the sun simply continues to shine.



The word "sin" is an archery term which means "missing the mark". Look at the target above. In the outer circles, the passionate rays (the little ego-selves), under the illusion that they are separate and different from their neighbours, are the source of all "sin". At the centre of the "target" there is only the "I AM" - the Self of all. The process of re-discovering the centre is at-one-ment; re-membering.

We can continue to view the world from the edge, or we can choose to step back and view the world from the centre; the "I Am". This freedom to switch our perspective from the individual to the universal at will is what is known as "enlightenment".

"All religions, all this singing, one song.
The differences are just illusion and vanity.
The sun's light looks a little different on this wall than it does on that wall,
and a lot different on this other one,
but it's still one Light."

Rumi

Meditation is the means by which the outer layers of mind are tamed and settled so that we can remember what we are and simply be it. Once we know this, from our own direct experience, we are forever free to step back to the centre at any time and, as we go about our lives in this world at the leading edge of the sunlight, our interactions with our fellow rays are based only on love.

"The ten thousand things and I are one.
We are already one –
What else is there to say?"

Chuang Tzu

There is a word which means:

"The Self in me is that same Self in you; we are One."

That word is:

Namaste



Most of the material in this guide was first published on www.yiheyuan.co.uk in 2009 and some appeared before that in handouts issued to students in my classes.

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More information about meditation, enlightenment and related subjects can be found on our websites:

www.taichileeds.com

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