

An Introduction to Meditation

Meditation used to be an esoteric practice for spiritual growth, but in recent years it has entered the mainstream and has become diluted, distorted and sometimes overcomplicated. It is now commonly used for stress relief and relaxation and is being promoted as a way to bypass life's difficulties. It is being used to relieve the symptoms of an ego-driven life, but it was originally intended to be a way of dis-identifying with the ego-self and developing a deeper connection with our true-Self. Meditation is not supposed to give us a break from our troubles; it is supposed to help us connect with the root causes of our troubles, whilst simultaneously dis-identifying from the belief that we are our troubles (e.g. I am angry, anxious or depressed). Basically, meditation helps us to experience the infinite nature of Self and the ephemeral nature of ego.

So what exactly is meditation? Meditation is practising presence; it is practicing present-moment awareness; it is experiencing what is arising without any judgement or agenda. It is as simple as that. Hundreds of books have been written on how to meditate but they are largely unnecessary, because meditation is not something that we “do” – meditation is pure “being”. All it requires of us is to stop doing everything and just notice what is occurring, within us and/or without. It is that simple, but it is not that easy.

Undoing decades of conditioning is not easy. Stopping the mind from analysing and judging is not easy. Stopping the emotions from reacting to our thoughts is not easy. Stopping the body from becoming restless or uncomfortable is not easy. The good news is that we don't have to do any of that – we can just let it all be.

Perhaps the biggest misunderstanding about meditation is that we have to be mentally, emotionally and physically calm. This is not true, and trying to achieve it is incredibly difficult and can result in a lot of unnecessary frustration and suffering. Striving to achieve inner peace by attempting to control the mind, heart and body can actually take us further away from our goal. Meditation is all about letting things be. If we stop resisting the mind, heart and body they will quiet down naturally – not through our efforts, but through our non-effort. Meditation is not about being calm or blissed out; it is about being present and aware. Calmness and bliss are not the goal, but they are often pleasant by-products.

It is the nature of the mind to think thoughts, form associations and make judgements – they are its purpose for being. Yet some people on the spiritual path try to quiet the mind, repress the mind, or stop the mind in the hope that it will allow them to become more spiritual. Actually, the problem does not lie with the mind at all (which is just doing what it is supposed to do); the “problem” is with our awareness. We do not need to train our minds to become quieter; we need to train our awareness to be less affected by and less identified with the contents of mind. The same applies to our emotions and desires. The mind must be allowed to think, the heart must be allowed to emote and the body must be allowed to act. Trying to repress them is almost impossible, but noticing them with conscious awareness and feeling them with conscious presence stops them from getting out of control. The spiritual path is not really about our physical, emotional and mental bodies; it is primarily about developing and refining our soul body (or causal body).

Meditation is about observing, feeling and welcoming whatever arises, even if what arises is resistance, boredom, restlessness, mind-chatter, critical thoughts or all of the above. If these things come up we simply notice them and feel them without any agenda (to stop them) or judgement (about them or about ourselves). Distracting thoughts and emotions are not enemies that must be vanquished; they are teachers that we can learn from. Everything that arises is an experience through which our consciousness can grow and evolve; even if, on the face of it, it seems unpleasant. That is just the ego's subjective view – the Self is completely objective so it doesn't judge these things as good or bad. The Self isn't interested in controlling or changing things. The Self just wants to experience all that life has to offer, “good” and “bad”, and experience it fully. Meditation is practicing being our Self.

Meditation involves observing with an open mind and feeling with an open heart; without thinking, analysing, judging or trying to change anything. Meditation is noticing “what is” and surrendering to “what

is". Surrendering does not mean a passive detached "whatever" attitude. It means active and engaged presence. It means being with it fully.

Meditation is focused presence; not mindless absence. It is not about being in a spaced out trance; it is about being present (here and now), more than we are normally. Presence is our natural state of being, but we have forgotten this because we are too busy thinking, reacting and doing – we have forgotten how to just be. Meditation helps us to return to our natural state; it trains us to simply be.

Just stop for a few moments and simply be. In this still quiet space, our false sense of self falls away and all our troubles fall away. There is no suffering – there is only "what is". Meditation involves practicing this state of being so that it becomes second nature; so that it becomes our default state of being. Meditation is practicing "being" – anything more complicated than that is not meditation.

Many so-called meditations give the meditator (the ego-self) a task to do, such as counting the breath or repeating a mantra. These practices aren't actually meditation; they are a type of mindfulness. Meditation is about "being", not "doing". It is about identifying with the true-Self, not the ego-self. Meditation is the practice of consciously "being", so it doesn't require any "doing". These other practices are fine, there is nothing wrong with them, but they will not help us to discover our true-Self.

Meditation isn't a means of achieving anything; it is merely a way of realising presence and pure awareness. Meditation involves noticing that pure awareness is present, feeling that presence, and being that presence. With meditation there is no goal, so there is no expectation. If you expect to become enlightened by meditating an hour a day for 20 years, you will almost certainly be disappointed. This is because you are fixated on an ego goal which is never going to lead you to your true-Self.

Meditation is not about trying to achieve pure awareness, nor is it about practicing pure awareness (although it does involve this). Meditation, in its purest sense, is simply being pure awareness. It is about experientially knowing that we are pure awareness. It is about "being" who we are as much as possible and "doing" as little as possible. So please don't try to manipulate your experience in any way – just be with "what is".

I am going to build on the glass half full analogy to describe what makes an effective meditation: A glass (our awareness) that is half full of water (mind, emotions and body) is also half full of air (soul). The contents of the glass remain the same whether the water is still or unsettled, so meditating to still the psyche (mind, emotions and body) is of little benefit. The real benefit of meditation comes from raising our awareness from the everyday level of the psyche to the higher/subtler level of the soul (i.e. aligning with Self). Admittedly this is easier when the psyche is still, but it is by no means essential. It doesn't really matter if our mind, emotions and body are all restless. If we sit in pure awareness and simply notice the turmoil within us, without trying to change it, we will benefit from the meditation. All meditation is beneficial and effective, whether it feels like it or not. If we meditate without any agenda, expectation or judgement, we will reap the benefits whether we know it or not.

The Difference Between Meditation and Mindfulness

Mindfulness and meditation are highly beneficial practices: mindfulness for personal development and meditation for spiritual / transpersonal development. The main difference between these two practices is where our attention is focused:

- **Meditation:** During meditation our attention is primarily on the pure background awareness of our soul (the cinema screen).
- **Mindfulness:** During mindfulness our attention is primarily on the content of our mind (the moving pictures on the screen).

One of the goals of mindfulness is to clear and calm the mind. This is not a goal of meditation because meditation has no goals. However, by not focusing on the content of our minds we are no longer encouraging the mind to keep bringing us more content – so meditation does indirectly result in a clearer and calmer mind.

The Benefits of Meditation

Meditation has been the central practice in almost every spiritual and religious tradition for thousands of years, and will quite rightly continue to be so for millennia to come. Regular meditation will enrich your life, develop your consciousness and cultivate abilities that will benefit you now and in the future. Some of the direct and indirect benefits of meditation are listed in Figure 20:

Direct Benefits (spiritual development)	Indirect Benefits (personal development)
Facilitates spiritual/transpersonal development.	Facilitates psychological healing and reintegration.
Develops “mind” qualities such as creativity, intuition and wisdom.	Calms the body and mind, and improves the clarity of thought.
Develops “heart” qualities such as compassion, courage, peace and joy.	Increases feelings of peace, happiness and contentment.
Develops “body” qualities such as will, resilience and presence.	Reduces stress, anxiety, depression and anger.
Systematically activates higher levels of consciousness.	Increases efficiency and productivity in our daily lives.
Increases presence and purifies awareness.	Subdues automatic ego reactions and conditioned behaviours.
Develops a deeper understanding of Self and the true nature of reality.	Can reduce our biological age by 5 to 10 years (i.e. health benefits).

Figure 20: The Benefits of Meditation

The presence, pure awareness and essential qualities that we cultivate in our meditation practice gradually percolate through into our daily lives. Being present and surrendering to “what is” is a lifelong practice – both in meditation and in life.

Posture & Timing

Meditation is a spiritual practice, so physical posture is of secondary importance. The only things that really matter about meditation posture are comfort, stability and not falling asleep. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Seated:** Sit on a straight-backed chair, with your hips slightly higher than your knees (so as not to strain your back), and your back not leaning against the chair back (to stop you from getting sleepy).
- **Cross-legged or kneeling:** on a zafu, cushion or folded blanket on the floor.
- **Standing:** with feet shoulder-width apart and knees very slightly bent (but not locked).
- **Lying:** on a rug or yoga mat on the floor (not a bed or sofa because you will get sleepy). Small cushions can be used under your head and/or knees if that is more comfortable.

Relax any areas of tension, tightness or clenching in your body. A quick scan of your body from top to bottom can help you to identify areas of tension. Tension is common in the brow, jaw, tongue, shoulders and buttocks. Keeping your chin tucked in slightly helps to ensure the spine remains erect, which reduces back strain. Your eyes can be kept closed, half-closed or open, depending on your preference and the type of meditation.

Whatever posture you choose to adopt, if you encounter any physical pain, please change your position. You don't want to hurt yourself or be distracted from your practice. Some mild discomfort or numbness may be experienced. If it is not too distracting it can be used as the object of the meditation, i.e. move your awareness into the area of discomfort and feel it as fully as you can. Don't just notice it from your head

(that will make it feel worse); actually move your presence and awareness into the area so that you become one with it.

Meditate for an allotted time period, and ensure that you will not be disturbed for that time period. Start with 10 minutes and increase it by 5 minutes a month until you reach 30 or 60 minutes. Don't use an ordinary alarm clock or a kitchen timer because they are too harsh to end the meditation. Suggested options include:

- Buy a dedicated meditation timer or interval timer.
- Set a vibrating timer on your smartphone.
- Download a meditation timer app onto your smartphone.
- Place a clock in front of you. Use your judgement to estimate how much time you have been meditating. Gently open your eyes and check the clock when you think the time is up. If not, close your eyes and continue meditating.

When the time is up, ease yourself out of the meditation by expanding your awareness out into the room before gently opening your eyes. Take in the room with all your senses while still maintaining your body awareness. Carry this living presence into the rest of your day.

Difficulties & Distractions

Don't get frustrated by distractions, because the attention you give them will actually reinforce them and make them more difficult to overcome – just let them “be” and they will eventually fade away. Don't beat yourself up for getting distracted because that will take you back to your ego (or super-ego) and away from your soul. The following pointers will help your meditations to flow more smoothly; with fewer difficulties and distractions:

- **Before You Begin:** Ask if there are any parts (e.g. exiles or ego structures) that want to be seen or heard before you begin. If so, invite them to share their concerns. Listen to them compassionately and reassure them as best you can. Tell them that you are only going to meditate – you are not trying to stir anything up – you just want to meditate to develop your consciousness. Ask them to give you some space so that you can sit quietly and just “be”. Let them know that they are welcome to keep an eye on things, but you would appreciate it if they did not interfere or try to distract you.
- **During The Meditation:** If a distraction arises during a meditation and you get a sense that it is being caused by a part (e.g. exile or ego structure), ask it to share its concerns with you. Listen to it, reassure it and ask it to give you some space while you finish your meditation. You can also ask it if it would like to talk to you again after the meditation (or at a convenient time) so that you can get to know it better and welcome it back into your life. If you make an agreement like this, please stick to it because developing trust is an essential element of the healing and reintegration process.
- **Persistent Thoughts & Emotions:** If you notice a persistent thought, emotion or body sensation, stay with it, experience it as fully as you can and see if it has anything to show you. This could be a perfect opportunity for doing a self-inquiry (see Section 1 of Chapter 4).
- **Distracting Thoughts:** Meditation involves noticing “what is” without resisting it, so don't try to stop your thoughts (it won't work anyway). If your thoughts are active, that is perfectly fine – just notice them. The very act of noticing them may quiet them down, but it may not. It doesn't matter either way; so drop the belief that you need a quiet mind and accept “what is”. The next point may also help with this.
- **Mind Chatter:** Imagine that your field of awareness is the size of a football stadium. Mind chatter is the equivalent of a small radio playing in a far corner of the stadium. It seems loud and distracting when you focus your awareness directly on the radio, but if you de-focus your awareness and spread it out to fill the entire stadium you will barely notice it. So spread your awareness throughout your body (and beyond) to reduce the significance of mind chatter.

- **Can't Concentrate:** Drop the belief that meditation requires a focussed, still and quiet mind. This is a judgement and a false belief; both of which come from the ego. Meditation is about transcending the ego and connecting with your soul's presence and pure awareness. Just say the word "presence" when you notice that you've lost concentration. Then expand your awareness to feel your entire body (with presence) and continue the meditation.
- **Boredom:** If you meditate dutifully and mechanically you are bound to get bored because you are in the wrong state of mind. Meditation should be done with a sense of aliveness and innocence because you are connecting with something truly authentic and wondrous. Boredom is a consequence of the ego's expectations – if you don't have any expectations or agenda you have no idea what will happen next. You will be completely open to anything, and that is what meditation is all about. It is about moving from the closed, predictable, rigidity of the ego to the openness, aliveness and wonderment of the soul.
- **Sleepiness:** If you feel tired or sleepy before meditating, don't meditate – wait until you are more alert. If you become sleepy during a meditation, the usual advice is to stand up and continue meditating and/or keep your eyes half open. But you can actually use the sleepy symptoms (heavy eyes, detached consciousness, etc.) as the focus of your meditation. If you stay with these sensations and feel them fully, your meditation may become more focused and you may become more alert.
- **Restlessness:** A restless mind and/or body doesn't have to affect your meditation. You can just "be", no matter what is going on, internally or externally. The purpose of meditation is to dissociate from the content of your awareness and associate with "being" that awareness. However, it can help to do 5-10 minutes of moderate exercise about 30 minutes before your meditation to burn off any excess energy.
- **Itches:** If you become aware of an itch, just noticing it in your mind will probably drive you crazy. The itch will intensify and before long you will just have to scratch it. But if you move your awareness into the area of the itch and feel it fully, you will probably find that you are better able to tolerate it. By fully feeling the itch you will not be mentally judging it as a source of irritation – you will just be noticing a body sensation without any resistance, which makes it easier to tolerate. Your soul's presence may soothe the itch and allow it to fade away. But if it doesn't, just give it a good scratch, because itches fall into the category of "change what you cannot accept" not "accept what you cannot change".
- **Pain & Discomfort:** The above principles also apply to physical pain and discomfort. The pain might simply be telling you to change your body position to a more comfortable one. If this is the case, listen to it and do something about it. But if the discomfort is tolerable, feel into it as fully as possible – move your awareness to the location of the pain, merge with it and engage with it. It is just a part of you that wants some attention. If it doesn't calm down, inquire into the pain to find out what it is trying to tell you. Mild discomforts can often be eased by spreading your awareness throughout your entire body, which will take your focus off the discomfort.
- **Energy Blockages:** You may become aware of some subtle sensations (e.g. dense, cold, uneasy, irritated, sticky, clogged, tight or heavy) in certain areas your body. These blockages are the energetic components of ego structures, exiles and holes. If you notice such a blockage, move your awareness into it, feel it fully and express loving acceptance. Try to get a sense of what it is about, but do not resist it, try to change it or want it gone. Alternatively, if you don't want to turn your meditation into a healing session or a self-inquiry, you can simply notice the blockage and continue with your meditation.
- **Blissful States:** Not all distractions are unpleasant. If you experience a blissful state or a spiritual phenomenon whilst meditating, enjoy it by all means, but don't cling to it. Simply notice it, feel it and allow it to be, then allow it pass.
- **After the Meditation:** If the meditation didn't go as well as you would have liked, don't be too hard on yourself – that will just take you further away from where you want to be. Drop the false beliefs that meditation must be peaceful and that you must do it perfectly. Drop all your agendas (inner peace,

healing, psychic powers, enlightenment, etc.) and just allow yourself to “be”. There is no right or wrong; there is only “what is”.

- **No Improvement:** If your meditations aren’t “improving”, even after several weeks, don’t worry – they are still having a beneficial effect. Just accept that this is the way things are for now and know that things will “improve” in good time. Sometimes you just need to demonstrate your determination and resolve to stick at it. The path of awakening is not easy, and these early challenges separate the wheat from the chaff. Your Self will not allow you to enter the path unless you are truly prepared to follow through.
- **The Best Advice:** The next time you sit down to meditate, don’t try to be calm and still; simply ask yourself “Is stillness here now?” Then allow yourself to feel the answer – don’t go looking for it with the mind – feel it in your body. You will probably discover that the inherent stillness of your soul will reveal itself naturally. You can do the same for peace, happiness, fulfilment, etc. You don’t need to go looking for these things because they are already present – you are them. Tuning into your body disengages the meditator (the ego-self) and allows you to feel the presence of these qualities within you.

Some steadfast meditators may not agree with my suggestions about allowing a meditation to become a self-inquiry or a healing session. But if the opportunity is there to discover more of ourselves, or heal and reintegrate a part of our consciousness, we should probably not ignore it. Life provides us with all the opportunities we need to develop our consciousness, and all the clues to discover what is holding us back, but it is up to us to decide whether we want to take those opportunities or not.

Two Types of Meditation

There are two main types of meditation:

- **Form or Object Meditation:** It involves concentrating on an “object”, e.g. the breath, the body, an essential quality, a candle flame, a mandala (image) or a chant. This type of meditation trains the mind. It requires the mind to concentrate on one thing to the exclusion of everything else. Concentrating on the object of our meditation means there is little room in the mind for anything else. Strictly speaking, form meditation is not true meditation because it focusses on the content, not the underlying awareness – so in that respect it is more like mindfulness.
- **Formless or Objectless Meditation:** With no “object” to focus on, our attention shifts to the underlying pure awareness that is our soul. Not “doing” but simply “being” enables us to experience our true-nature. We may experience a refreshingly cool and clear sense of spaciousness, or a warm and loving sense of unity, or perhaps a deep sense of peace and well-being. In this highly receptive state of pure awareness we may also receive insight, intuition or inspiration. Formless meditation is true meditation.

It is useful to include both types of meditation in our daily practice. In fact, form meditation is the ideal practice to lead us into formless meditation. The following meditation incorporates both types – form and formless:

Basic Meditation

1. Get comfortable, close your eyes (or half close them) and centre yourself.
2. Take three slow deep breaths to release any stress and muscle tension. Fill your lungs completely by pushing your belly and chest out, then gently exhale.
3. Expand your awareness to encompass your entire body. Notice any tension, tightness or clenching and relax as much as you can.
4. With your awareness still in your body, turn your attention to your breath. Feel the rise and fall of your ribcage. Feel the coolness of the air flowing into your nostrils and the warmth of the air flowing out. (FORM)
5. If your mind is restless or if you want to develop your concentration, try counting your breath for a few minutes. Silently count (inhale-exhale) 1, (inhale-exhale) 2, (inhale-exhale) 3, (inhale-exhale) 4, (inhale-exhale) 5, (inhale-exhale) 6, (inhale-exhale) 7, (inhale-exhale) 8, (inhale-exhale) 9, (inhale-exhale) 10. Then return to 1 and repeat for as many cycles as you wish. If you lose concentration or get distracted just return to the practice and start counting from 1 again. (FORM)
6. Return your attention to simply watching the breath for a few minutes (i.e. stop counting). Allow your breathing to occur naturally, without trying to control it or change it. Notice if it feels steady or uneven – it doesn't matter either way, it just helps to keep you focussed and present. (FORM)
7. Release your focus from the breath and check that you are still aware of your entire body. If not, expand your awareness to encompass your entire body. Feel the palpable presence of your soul in your body. (FORM to FORMLESS)
8. Expand your field of awareness slightly beyond your body (into your aura). The body is no longer the object of your awareness; you are simply "being". Stay with this for as long as you like. (FORMLESS)
9. Optional – At this point you can incorporate additional elements into your meditation, for example:
 - a. Meditate on an essential quality to help embody it.
 - b. Contemplate a question or concept to develop insight.
 - c. Scan your body for energetic blockages and feel into them with presence.
 - d. Inquire into a psychological issue.
 - e. Contemplate the true nature of Self.
10. When you are finished, slowly open your eyes and incorporate the room/environment into your field of awareness. Give yourself time to adjust from a purely internal focus to an integrated internal and external focus.