Introduction-

Have any of you ever watched Doctor Strange? It’s this story about a doctor who goes on an epic journey to a small, unknown monastery in India in order to get the surgical power of his hands back. He begins to meditate, goes into a mind-bending journey where he breaks through this world’s dimensions and finds himself with a heroic purpose to use supernatural abilities to save the world.

Well… I’m sorry to break this to you, but real meditation is not like this. You can discover much about yourself and the world around you, but it can be difficult, and, much like performing a speech, requires lots of practice.

Estlabishing credibility-

I’ve been meditating since I discovered Buddhism at the age of 11. There are many different schools of Buddhism, but all of them use meditation as a form of practice. Currently, I attend a Zen center in Cambridge where the great majority of my time is spent meditating with a group of practitioners.

Overview-

In this demonstration, I will tell you little about the background of meditation and then we will practice the core steps. I will ask you all to join me in a short meditation, and I will finish by telling you about the benefits of this practice. Hopefully, you will learn something new and perhaps come to appreciate the impact meditation can have on our daily lives.

Background-

The earliest known records describing meditation are 3 and a half thousand years old, but origin of this practice is unknown. Cambridge Dictionary defines meditation as “the act of giving your attention to only one thing, either as a religious activity or as a way of becoming calm and relaxed”. It originated in… Meditation has many forms you may not know about. It is practiced widely all over the world throughout yoga, religion, spiritual practices, martial arts. Prayer is meditation, and so is Tai Chi, a Chinese martial art. Currently, our society is undergoing a mindfulness movement that is demystifying meditation and is increasing opportunities for the average person to learn how to practice it. Many meditation apps have become mainstream- such as Headspace, etc, etc. I personally use an app called Insight Timer. People will often meditate on a pillow and cushion called a zafu and zabuton, but you can meditate in literally any position, and any circumstance. Traditional forms of meditation include meditating while sitting, lying down, walking, and even eating, but you can informally meditate just about anywhere- there’s not much of a difference. Sitting in the car, lying in bed, walking down your neighborhood street, eating delicious wings or tofu, and yes, sitting in a classroom whose university evidently didn’t want to pay for separate desks.

Describing Demonstrating process-

Now I’ll guide you through the steps of meditating, and then we’ll all try it for a couple of minutes.

First, you’ll want to find a comfortable position, as if you’re sitting on a couch at home.

You can keep your eyes half-closed, looking downwards 3 to 6 feet in front of you, or you can close them altogether. Whichever you prefer.

Take a few deep breaths before settling into a natural rhythm… (pause)…

Bring awareness to your breath. Where do you feel it the most? Coming in and out of your nose?... In the rise and fall of your belly or chest?... At the back of your throat as the air rushes past into your lungs?...

Focus on an area where you feel your breath most strongly.

What is it like? Is your breath quick and shallow? Slow and deep? Somewhere in between? All of these are perfectly alright.

Many people believe that meditation is about getting rid of thoughts, but that is a common misconception. Thoughts are natural to have. They will come and go as they please, on their own.

Don’t beat yourself up if you’re having a lot of thoughts. The point of meditation is to bring attention to your thoughts when they come, take note of them, and then let them pass as you return your attention to your breath. They are like clouds in a bright blue sky. They will come, and they will go, but the sky is always there.

A strategy that many Zen students use is to count their breaths silently, up to 10, and then start over at 1. Whenever you notice you have gotten lost in thought and have lost your place in counting- perhaps you don’t remember the last number, or you’ve started counting beyond 10- begin again at 1.

Remember, try your best to be non-judgmental when you notice thoughts, and gently return your attention to your breath, counting steadily.

Let’s try doing this for one minute. I will ring this gong to signal the start, and will ring it again to signal the end.

So, as a quick summary- take a comfortable position. Lower your gaze or close your eyes. Turn your attention toward your breath. When I play this gong, begin counting your breaths. When you lose your spot, turn your attention gently back to your breathing, and begin again at 1. \*play gong\*

(wait 1 minute)

(play gong again)

Now slowly open your eyes if they are closed, and bring your attention back to this classroom.

I’m sure many of you had some very different experiences. What sorts of thoughts did you notice? What did you feel? Sometimes when I’m meditating, all I can think about is “When will it be over?”. Other times, I feel calm and centered.

Conclusion

Benefits of meditating- value of being in the present/developing a capacity to stay with the present, all the benefits research has shown (better quality sleep, etc). Meditation isn’t some fancy thing only heroes and monks do. Many people do it, too, and now you can as well.