

Bliss More

What's in it for me? Learn how to meditate without trying too hard.

If you're anything like the author, Light Watkins, you kinda hate meditating. Guided by a stack of spiritual books and a handful of well-meaning yoga teachers, Watkins set out on a meditation journey, looking for serenity and bliss. Instead, he found lower back pain, aching boredom, and the feeling that he was doing it wrong. In a way, he was. Although many meditation teachers say there's no wrong way to meditate, Watkins now realizes that he, like many people, was simply trying too hard. In these blinks, you'll learn the same simple strategies that Watkins has been passing on to his students for years. Whether you're just starting a meditation practice or are a frustrated expert, these strategies will help you turn meditation from a chore into a pleasure. Soon enough, you'll look forward to your meditations, excited for the opportunity to find a little more bliss. In these blinks, you'll learn

the secret to quieting your monkey mind; how to use a Settling Sound; and what the relaxation response really is.

Meditation should be easy.

Ever tried meditating? If so, you probably sat cross-legged on the ground, hands palms-up on your knees, with your back straight. After about five minutes, your back was probably killing you. So if it hurts so bad, why do we all keep sitting that way? Well, in the West, meditation is associated with Eastern monastic practice – the image is one of a serenely detached monk who seeks to be one with everything. That's where we get that pose from. However, in India, not every meditator is a monk seeking to renounce all his earthly possessions. Plenty of normal people with jobs, friendships, and even nicotine addictions practice daily meditation. In other words, acting like a monk won't make meditation any easier. The key message here is: Meditation should be easy. Let's say goodbye to that painful cross-legged position. To meditate right, you want to find a position that's effortlessly comfortable. For instance, try sitting the way you do when you binge-watch television. The whole point is to sit so naturally that you don't even think about it. Oh, and if you get an itch – scratch it! if you need to sneeze, then sneeze. Figuring out where to meditate should be just as effortless; no matter what you see on the internet, meditation doesn't require a mountaintop or a beach at sunrise. Life is busy, so meditate where you can – on your couch, in bed next to your partner, or on the subway heading to work. Ultimately it's not that quiet, zen-inducing spot that gives you the serenity – it's the meditation itself. Lastly, meditate for only ten to twenty minutes twice a day, once after waking up and again in the afternoon. While you sit, time yourself with a watch or a digital clock – something you can peek at to see how long you've been going. That's right! You can peek whenever you want. But don't use an alarm – that's too jarring. As with learning anything – whether it's swimming or playing the piano – meditation requires steady practice. And the best way to ensure that you practice is to make it as hassle-free as possible. As we'll see in the next blink, getting into a daily meditation practice is far easier when you learn to take it easy.

To quiet the mind, stop trying to quiet

the mind.

The Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky once mused that if you try not to think of a polar bear, you'll find yourself imagining one all the time. In the 1980s, Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner turned this musing into an experiment. Subjects were instructed to think about polar bears and then to not think about them. In both phases, they were asked to ring a bell whenever one came to mind. When they were supposed to avoid thinking about the bears, the bells really started going off. Clearly, Dostoevsky was right – try to banish a thought and that's all you'll think about. So what does that say about meditation teachers and their well-meaning instructions to let go of distractions and focus on something soothing? Unfortunately, any meditation that asks you to focus actually requires more work, making really letting go all but impossible. The key message here is: To quiet the mind, stop trying to quiet the mind. If you decided to take up running tomorrow, you probably wouldn't fault yourself if you failed to run a 5K right off the bat. And yet many beginners at meditation quickly give up in frustration because they think their minds are too busy. But you'd never say you can't start exercising because you're out of shape, so why give yourself grief for having a busy mind when you want to meditate? Your daily run isn't a race, and meditation isn't a competition either – it's just a workout that gets your mind into shape. So accept all your thoughts as part of your meditation experience. Since you no longer have to focus or let go of anything, and have nothing to be distracted by, you can stop worrying about random thoughts. Then, as you settle into meditation, you'll notice that your thoughts actually get more dreamy – that is, until you get to the settled mind, a state where you don't notice thinking at all. And as you experience various thoughts and sensations, apply the author's EASY technique. The acronym EASY stands for embrace, accept, surrender, and yield. Embrace means embracing every thought, and accepting that whatever happens – whether you get itchy or sleepy, happy or sad – it's neither good nor bad. Then surrender your expectations about how meditation is supposed to go and yield to how it actually is going. Over time, meditation will teach you how to glide through your thoughts just as a swimmer does through water, navigating your busy mind until you reach the blissful, settled state below.

To help quiet your mind, use a Settling Sound.

You might be worried that the settled mind is too far out of reach. But here's the good news: you've already experienced it. Ever take an afternoon nap? Or have that cozy feeling when you're reading before bed and your eyelids start to droop? That's the settled mind. To help you get there easily during your meditation, you'll need a mantra. There are many types of mantras – some sung, some whispered, and others chanted or simply just thought. They all have different effects, from aligning energy centers to increasing courage. Those used for meditation are what the author calls Settling Sounds. Over time, your Settling Sound will train your mind to quiet itself as it sinks down into that blissful settled state. The key message here is: To help quiet your mind, use a Settling Sound. Your Settling Sound is just as easy as everything else in this approach. It's written as "ah-hum," but the first part is pronounced "ahhhhh," as in "open wide," and the second is "hum," as in "hummingbird." Together, they sound like "ahhhhh hummm." Practice using your Settling Sound by saying it out loud. But don't chant and don't go too fast. Instead, whisper slowly, lengthening the syllables as much

as you can. Begin whispering more and more quietly, your lips moving but no sound coming out. Then, close your eyes and slowly still your lips, continuing to think the sound to yourself. If your Settling Sound is synced up with your breath then your cadence is spot on. The Settling Sound should be so soft that it's just on the edge of your perception. Although "ah-hum" means "I am" in Sanskrit, it doesn't have any literal meaning when it comes to your practice. What's important are its vibrational properties, which help your mind settle. As the "hummm" rings out in your mind, it should begin to feel like white noise that pulls your mind away from focused thinking and into a deeper, more restful state. If your Settling Sound fades away as you meditate, only to be replaced by random thoughts or sounds, that's normal. In fact, it's a sign that you're meditating correctly. You'll probably only be aware of your mantra in bursts, so just come back to it whenever you notice it's disappeared. Lastly, don't try to control your breathing. The whole "notice your breath" method actually takes too much focus and can prevent you from reaching the settled state. Remember, you're trying to do this the easy way.

To make meditation work for you, make a serious commitment.

When Light Watkins met his spiritual teacher, he was asked to donate a sum of money in exchange for the teaching that he was about to receive. The amount, he was told, should be equivalent to the value he placed on the teaching. Though Watkins had just \$900 in his bank account at the time, he gave \$400 to his teacher the next morning. Why? Well, there's a long tradition of exchanges like this in India, where gurus propose them as a test of their disciples' commitment. They do this because an exchange confirms your commitment, and that's what the quality of your meditation practice hinges upon. Real commitment leads to greater consistency and, in turn, a stronger technique. In other words, the more committed you are to your meditation, the more likely it is that it will change your life. The key message here is: To make meditation work for you, make a serious commitment. Light Watkins himself has found that students who've made the exchange tend to take his teaching more seriously, doing everything necessary to show up for themselves. That's because the exchange requires true integrity and willingness – the value of which will be passed onto you as you grow into your meditation practice. So what should you give? Ideally, something of benefit to others. The easiest thing is to give money to a worthy cause. If you can't afford that, consider donating your time – prepare food at a soup kitchen, tutor underprivileged children, or spend time with a lonely neighbor. The author's teenage nephew did his exchange by spending \$50 to make sandwiches and then gave them out to the people experiencing homelessness in his neighborhood. Once you've made the exchange, you're much better prepared to deal with the things that commonly make people stop doing things they know are good for them. When you're seriously committed, weak excuses like "life got hectic" won't work anymore – instead, you'll make sure you've got time set aside. And you'll need it! It takes about 90 days to get to the point where meditation is integrated into your life. That's because in the beginning, you're not just building the habit of meditating, you're also breaking the habit of not meditating. When the going gets tough, simply see that as a withdrawal symptom and then recommit to your practice.

Meditation leads to relaxation.

If you've read a magazine recently, you've probably seen some headlines about meditation. For instance, a couple of years ago, Psychology Today ran the headline "How Meditation Won the Super Bowl." Is it really what helped the Seahawks beat the Broncos? Probably not. Yet clickbait headlines constantly put forward specious claims about meditation's benefits - claims that, if you've tried meditation at all, definitely seem out of reach. So what does meditation actually do? Well, it doesn't fix codependent relationships, cure chain smokers, reform sugar addicts, or dispel anger issues. But it does lead to greater states of relaxation which, in turn, pay great dividends in terms of calmness. By sticking to your daily practice, you'll be able to keep your cool in a lot of stressful situations, from serious accidents to infuriating traffic jams. In social situations, you'll probably be more forgiving, empathetic, and insightful. And at night, you'll sleep easier and wake up happy to face the day. So the key message here is: Meditation leads to relaxation. Back in the 1960s, one type of meditation - Transcendental Meditation, or TM - was gaining fame as a great way to relax and counteract stress, but no one was willing to study it because Western medicine didn't consider meditation a legitimate technique. However, a Harvard Medical School researcher who was hoping to prove that the mind could influence the body, Dr. Herbert Benson, believed that TM's uniform teaching approach made it perfect for study. Using the Thorndike Laboratory - ironically, where the "fight-or-flight" stress response was first discovered - Benson measured TM practitioners for every biological metric possible: oxygen use, heart rate, eye movement, blood pressure, and more. The results were astounding. While meditating, his subjects entered into a physiological state that had never been documented. Leading to a range of results, from beneficial changes to notable drops across all biometrics, it was a state more tranquil than sleep, and the body's perfect answer to the stress response. He called it the relaxation response. In later studies, Dr. Benson learned that it wasn't just TM that led to this state; any meditation that uses a focus point, such as a Settling Sound, will do. And, as you've probably figured out by now, it's exactly this kind of approach that you've been learning. So whether you've been meditating daily for five years or just 90 days, compare yourself to who you were before you started meditating, and you're bound to see improvement across the mental and emotional spectrum.

Don't worry, you're just de-stressing.

During a meditation, one of Watkins's students, named Mona, began to smell cigarette smoke. She checked to see if it was coming in through the window, but no, it wasn't; it was coming in through her mind. After talking to Watkins, Mona remembered that for about six months when she was younger, she had been a smoker. Back then, she was living in New York, stressed out by the hectic environment and dealing with the insecurities of being twenty-one. All those stressful emotions were now coming out during her meditation as her body gradually de-stressed. De-stressing is an important part of meditation and at some point it'll happen to you. Essentially, it's a cleansing of the emotional trauma you've been carrying around all your life and the triggers associated with it. When it happens, your meditation might get a little uncomfortable. But don't worry! The key message here is: Don't worry, you're just de-stressing. Typical symptoms of meditation-induced stress release include noticing unusual sensations and sounds, a racing heart or weird fluctuations in body heat, and itchiness. Think of this as the mental grime washing off as your restful state cleanses both your body and your mind. But how does so much stress get accumulated in the first place? Since we're all descended from the prehistoric humans who were quickest at avoiding the jaws of saber-toothed tigers, we've all got the fight-or-flight response hardwired into us. The

problem is that our mind reads dangerous situations and stressful emotions as the same. And sometimes when we feel those stressful emotions, they act as stress triggers and our bodies re-experience some of that same trauma. We've all gone through this when hearing a song that reminds us of a painful breakup. During meditation, some of these painful emotions are liable to come to the surface. Whether the trauma is decades old or just stress related to an argument from the day before, your mind will probably be roaming all over the place. When this happens, stay passive, yield to the moment, and remember that you're just de-stressing. Even if you're sitting there with racing thoughts and gut-wrenching sensations, remember that meditation can sometimes be weird and yet still be working. So try to re-frame the experience as a sign of progress. Later on, when you have that important job interview or a longed-for date, you'll be able to walk in the door as the stress-free version of yourself.

True mindfulness is a product of meditation.

In 2004, a massive tsunami from the Indian Ocean killed over 150,000 people across twelve countries. Oddly, though, only a small number of animals were reported dead. Eyewitnesses recalled that before the tsunami, elephants were running to higher ground, flamingoes abandoned their nests, and dogs wouldn't go outside. Many believe that animals can sense danger a mile away. While humans sometimes have this kind of intuition, too, they often attribute it to some outside force, like serendipity or divine intervention. Practiced meditators, however, report having such intuitions more often. Why? Well, these aren't so much meditation-induced epiphanies as they are intuitive reactions. Yet they're a direct expression of a byproduct of meditation: true mindfulness - that is, being so in the moment that you don't even notice it. The key message here is: True mindfulness is a product of meditation. While the terms mindfulness and meditation tend to be used interchangeably, they aren't the same. Meditation is a practice that leads to mindfulness. And when you think of mindfulness as a technique, you end up focusing on being "mindful" instead of actually being present. Imagine if you tried to do that during a conversation. Sure, maybe you'd find deeper meaning in each word, but you'd also miss the gist of what was being said. That's because communication also includes tone and body language, nuance, and eye contact. True mindfulness is also multilayered. When you focus on one thing at a time, you miss the entirety of the experience. But when you engage in multilayered mindfulness, you're also in tune with the biological programming that helps you focus on what's most important, thereby picking up on the subtleties that help influence your intuition. Ultimately, true mindfulness is being so in the moment that you can sense what's around the bend, whether it's a risk or a reward. It subtly propels you in the right direction, toward the people and places you need in your life. We've all had those moments when we call a friend and they say, "I was just thinking of you." That's not coincidence, but intuition at work. True mindfulness comes about when you clear away your stress triggers, which keep you chained to old thought patterns. Without them, you become free to evolve and to act differently in situations that used to trigger you. You have less fear of the future and less regret about the past. And sometimes you even forget that you're present - a true sign of mindfulness.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Life can sometimes seem like a never-ending series of problems. But when you're in the groove, everything becomes effortless and your problems just seem like challenges that you'll easily rise to meet. So how do you get yourself there? By committing yourself to a meditation practice and giving yourself the opportunity to transform the drudgery of day-to-day existence into an unending series of precious moments, guided by intuition, enriched by a deep perception, and imbued with a bottomless bliss. And here's some more actionable advice: Save your intentions and affirmations for after the meditation. While setting intentions and doing affirmations are both powerful techniques, they still get in the way of doing nothing as you meditate. So wait until your timer is up, and use the two minutes of post-meditation time to do these things. They'll probably work better afterward anyway, because by then you'll have a clearer mind and a more rested body.