

How to Meditate: A Primer for Beginners

JOEL M. EVANS

KEY CONCEPTS

- The main objective of the meditative experience is to shift the focus of the mind away from the frenzied thoughts of everyday living, such as worries about work, family, finances, or simply the “to-do list” of the day.
- Personal experience with meditation is required in order to accurately and sincerely communicate expected benefits to patients.
- Meditation involves trying to train your thoughts to stay in the present moment, because in the present moment there is true peace.
- Meditative experiences can be placed into three main categories: concentrative, expressive and movement.
- Examples of meditation include: painting or drawing, working in the garden, staring at the ocean, playing with your pet, journaling, teaching your child how to play a sport, dancing freely to your favorite music, etc.
- Other forms of meditation include tai chi and yoga, which incorporate breath work with choreographed movements. These ancient forms of meditation cleanse the mind of negative thoughts and, through proper breathing, put the mind in a relaxed and tranquil state in concert with body movements.
- Expressive meditation involves creating an outlet for your creative side, which neuroscientists believe lies in the right cerebral hemisphere.

Introduction

After reading and digesting the scholarly discussion on the myriad health benefits attributed to meditation, it is quite tempting for the busy physician to simply tell his patients that they “need to meditate.” However, when that recommendation—no matter how sincere, well-meaning or intellectually appropriate—is given by a physician that has not himself learned to meditate, the recommendation becomes hollow, compared to the same recommendation from a regular meditator.

Personal experience with meditation is required in order to accurately and sincerely communicate the benefits you expect an individual patient, with his or her unique needs, to experience, and it is impossible to present that information with clarity unless you “know” how the practice of meditation has effected your own life and health. Once you can speak using the authority of personal experience as part of the basis for your “meditation prescription,” as well as actually guide your patients as you provide specific instructions on how to meditate, it will be extremely hard for your patients not to pick up on the conviction behind your recommendations, making them far more likely to be implemented. After all, doesn’t every physician want his patients to follow his advice so they can achieve better health? Learning to meditate and starting a regular meditation practice are vitally important ways to improve the lives of patients and physicians alike.

The main objective of the meditative experience is to shift the focus of the mind away from the frenzied thoughts of everyday living, such as worries about work, family, finances or simply the “to-do list” of the day. There are countless ways, or techniques, to do this.

What is Meditation?

Meditation involves trying to train your thoughts to stay in the present moment, because in the present moment there is true peace. Thoughts of the future (what can/might/will happen, leading to fear or anxiety) or of the past (what did or might have happened, leading to sadness, depression, anger, or jealousy) prevent us from feeling the peace that is in the present moment. In other words, being totally focused in the present moment means that you do not think about the past or the future, and are freed (for as long as the meditation session lasts) from the negative emotions (stress) that accompany those thoughts.

EXAMPLES OF MEDITATION

- Can you think of an activity in which you totally lose track of time? When your attention is so focused that you say, “I don’t know where the time went?” Examples might be: painting or drawing, working in the garden, staring at the ocean, playing with your pet, journaling, teaching your child how to play a sport, dancing freely to your favorite music, etc. I found that when I was in the operating room performing surgery, I was so focused that my operations became true meditations.
- All of these situations are meditative experiences because there are no thoughts about the past or the future; the mind is thinking only of the present moment.
- So as you reflect on the experience(s) in your life where you lost track of time, you will realize that you also lost track of whatever was in your life that was causing you stress, whether it was a toxic relationship, a chronic illness, or the sadness that comes with grief or loss.

CATEGORIES OF MEDITATION

If you are lucky enough to have a hobby or some sort of activity in which you engage on a daily basis and that makes you lose track of time, consider yourself one of the lucky people who have a regular meditation practice without knowing it. However, the rest of us (the majority of people on the planet) need to create dedicated time in our schedule to engage in a formal activity to quiet the mind. As you can tell from the examples listed above, these experiences can be placed into three main categories:

- Concentrative
- Movement
- Expressive

These three forms of meditation have been used for centuries in different cultures and religious traditions. I will give examples of techniques for each category, and I suggest you experiment with them all so that you have enough experience to know what you like best (so it can become the start of your regular meditation practice), as well as to know how to best explain them to your patients.

How to Meditate

- First, scheduling time to meditate is of the utmost importance.
- We all lead busy lives and, despite the best of intentions, without a dedicated time for an activity, life often gets in the way and the activity never happens. (Think of the difficulty most people have finding the time to exercise unless they commit to a certain schedule.)
- Therefore, a meditation practice starts with finding the time on a daily basis. The good news here is that not a lot of time is required.

A beginner can start with just a few minutes a day, eventually getting to 20 to 30 minutes a day as the benefits to the meditator become so obvious that it becomes the most important part of his or her day.

CONCENTRATIVE TECHNIQUES



- I will discuss concentrative techniques first, because they are ones that are most often described, taught and practiced.
- They all involve active concentration, consciously focusing the mind on something specific. Examples of this type of meditation include staring at the dance of a candle flame, continuously repeating a word to yourself (such as *peace*, *love* or *God*) or simply following your breath. The goal is to concentrate and try to ignore the other thoughts that will unfortunately pop into your head.
- The secret is to allow those thoughts to come and to let them go by not allowing the mind to get caught up in them.

Tips for Applying the Concentrative Techniques



- Don't keep thinking of an unpleasant incident, start getting worked up, begin feeling angry or hurt all over again and begin to plan your revenge. That is *not* a meditative experience, but serves as an illustration of how a thought that arises, which is of a negative incident, is given additional power by thoughts of the emotions associated with it (how you feel) as well as the thoughts of how to achieve retribution.

- Instead of thinking that way, try your best to simply note that this is a thought that is occurring, and do your best to refocus your attention on the candle and not get stuck in the drama of the bad experience. This may be difficult to do at first, but with practice it certainly can be done, although rarely to total perfection, except by yogis or monks.
- If you need proof of the usefulness of these techniques, just ask an experienced meditator, who will likely be happy to share his or her success stories as well as the challenges that never fully go away.

Positioning



- Before starting, it is important to position yourself properly, which means that you should be sitting comfortably, not lying down.
- Sitting in a chair is fine; just keep your feet on the floor. Sitting on the floor works just as well, with or without a cushion, but try to keep your back as close to straight as you can without pain or a lot of effort.
- You should not be distracted by tight clothing and your shoes should be off.
- A quiet place is best for concentrative work, as is a comfortable temperature.
- Many regular meditators like to create a special place to meditate and feel they benefit from sitting in front of things that have special meaning, such as pictures of loved ones, sacred objects, or crystals (amethyst is reported to enhance meditation).
- While it is appropriate to try to achieve these “ideal” conditions, one of the wonders of meditation is that it can occur anywhere and everywhere, even in the harshest of conditions, and that even true beginners have had effective meditations sitting on the ground outdoors in the noisy chaos of a United Nations refugee camp.

Quieting the Mind



- The final step in preparing for a quiet, concentrative meditation is to perform a technique that will help quiet the mind.
- After getting comfortable (as described above), simply take your right hand and

hold the center of your palm approximately 3 to 4 inches away from the spot on your forehead that is above your nose at the level of and in the middle of your eyebrows.

- Close your eyes and rotate your hand so that the center of your palm makes the outline of a circle that is the size of a quarter. Move your hand toward your left, such that if an observer were facing you, your hand would be moving in a clockwise direction.
- If, as you move your hand, you gradually enlarge the size of the circle, that is not a problem. People may experience different sensations from this, such as a feeling of heat coming from their hand to their forehead, but almost everyone finds that it helps quiet the mind. When you feel your mind has quieted down a little, meaning you are not paying much attention to any thoughts that may be arising, it is time to start focusing on the object of your concentrative meditation (looking at a candle, repeating a prayer, word or phrase, or focusing on the breath).

FOCUS ON THE BREATH

- The most popular concentrative meditation is to focus on the breath.
- This is extremely versatile, since no supplies (like a candle) are needed, and it can be done wherever we are.
- The way this meditation is performed is to simply focus on your breath as it comes in and out of your body.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth (don't worry about doing this if your nose is stuffed), being aware of the air coming in and going out.
- By keeping your focus on the breath you prevent other thoughts from coming in. If they do, simply let them go as best you can, and return to concentrating on your breathing.
- Try to do this for a minute or two when you first start, and continue for longer when you feel you are able.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME



- There are many variations to this most basic script. It can be done in silence or with music that you find relaxing.
- If you find your focus drifting from your breath to the music, allow it to happen—it is just another form of meditation.

- You may feel you can control your mind better by adding the mental discipline of repeating in your mind a word or phrase in coordination with your breathing. An example would be the phrase “soft belly,” thinking of the word “soft” on the in breath and “belly” on the out breath.
- Another way to structure the meditative process is, after getting comfortable and performing the hand motions previously described, to *go through a prescribed pattern of thinking before starting the concentrative part of the meditation* (in this case, the focusing in the breath.
 - An example of this is the pattern of thought that I personally use every day, which I offer here for you to use as described, or to modify to your liking.
 - I share this with you not because I want you to think a certain way but because you might find it helpful.
 - This pattern of thinking helps me quiet my mind before starting my concentrative meditation by getting my negative thoughts out of the way so that they are less likely to intrude during my meditation time.

Expressing Gratitude

- Specifically, I begin each of my meditations by expressing gratitude for all that I have in my life, both the pleasant and the unpleasant.
- This forces me to try to find positives in the challenges I face, helping me to diminish, sometimes just ever so slightly, the drama with which the circumstances are associated.
- I then try to get to a place of surrender, where I work on making myself believe that I can’t consciously understand or control the events of my life. I have found that no longer lamenting “why me?” when life gets rough forces me to accept the situation at hand and frees up a lot of my mental energy, enabling me to focus forward on finding solutions.
- This ritual, which I perform every morning before starting the concentrative piece, clears my mind and prepares me for a more effective, deep and powerful meditation experience.

SETTLING INTO THE MEDITATIVE MOMENT



- If sitting and thinking seems quite difficult for you, then you might be best served by first trying a movement meditation, where there are no instructions other than to move! That’s correct: all you have to do is just move.

- That means you can shake your body wildly, or dance (modern or ballroom or tribal or ethnic) around the room to loud music that you really like. This is probably best done with no one else around (one might be self-conscious, as this could look quite silly to an observer). See how you feel after 5 minutes . . . if you want to continue, do so.
- Afterwards, try to keep still for a few minutes, paying attention to your breath. Don't be surprised if emotions come up while you are shaking or dancing. This is not an uncommon occurrence, especially if you have emotions just below the surface that have not yet been addressed.
- Becoming emotional during vigorous movement is a healthy way to move through and clear emotions. Of course, if this technique brings up powerful emotions that affect you throughout the day, working things through with a professional is far better than hoping that you can just shake the discomfort away.
- Finally, movement meditations are a wonderful choice for those who feel stuck, either emotionally or elsewhere in their lives.

Movement Meditation through Martial Arts

- A discussion of movement meditation would be incomplete without mentioning yoga, tai chi, qigong and other martial arts, which, in their pure form, are not only a meditation but also a way of life.
- All are ancient disciplines that blend controlling thought (primarily by focusing on breath) with movement (through postures or detailed choreographed routines) in order to achieve harmony between mind and body.
- I strongly encourage all practitioners to take an introductory class in a few of these techniques to decide if one feels right for you, and to help you explain them to your patients.

The editor regularly engages in tai chi, which incorporates breath work with choreographed movements (please see Chapter 22). My significant other is a yoga instructor. Her practice is to cleanse the mind of negative thoughts and through proper breathing, putting the mind in a relaxed and tranquil state in concert with body movements (see Chapter 35).

EXPRESSIVE MEDICATION: CREATING AN OUTLET FOR MEDITATING

- The last category of meditation, expressive meditation, involves creating an outlet for your creative side, which neuroscientists believe lies in the right cerebral hemisphere.
- Examples are journaling, drawing, or even working with sand, sticks and small stones, allowing your hands to create whatever they desire while you listen to relaxing music and fully concentrate on the task at hand.
- The way to journal is to find some private time to just write down truthfully and honestly how you think and feel about whatever topic comes up.
- Some structure this by writing about the important events of the day and their associated thoughts and feelings. Others write about a particular topic, such as writing daily about all the issues surrounding a chronic illness.
- Many people find that when they write exactly what they think or feel without letting their mind get in the way (by judging their grammar or deciding if a topic is off limits) they gain important insights into their situation, in addition to feeling less stressed and more relaxed.

Conclusions

An important final note is that this discussion, as stated in the title, was designed to deliver information on how to meditate at an introductory level. It was important to take information that was previously held secret and explained in complicated ways, and to package it to be readily understandable. I wanted to teach meditation in a way that could be embraced and understood by all, without the religious or cultural overtones that can serve as a block for some, or a source of deep meaning for others. While this approach has necessitated making arbitrary classifications and eliminating discussion of the spiritual aspects of a meditation practice, I know, through my own personal journey and professional experience, that practicing meditation in this religiously neutral, simple, and practical way has helped transform the lives of thousands of people. It is my firm belief that those that wish to learn and experience the esoteric and spiritual benefits of meditation will be led to, and will find, that which they sincerely seek.