

How do I know which kind of meditation is best for me? ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Meditation is a way to get to know yourself.
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00:00:08 Now there's different kinds of meditation.
00:00:10 Somebody says, hi, I'm looking at a candle.
00:00:13 Somebody else is saying, what's the sound of one hand clapping or whatever.
00:00:17 What's the difference really in them and what distinguishes them or what's an advantage?
00:00:24 How do I know which one I want to do?
00:00:26 It's a matter of trial and error, I would say.
00:00:29 Read about the different traditions and you see which way of working appeals to you intellectually.
00:00:37 You also check out different teachers, see their teaching style, their personality, their emphasis.
00:00:45 They're all different.
00:00:47 Some are very heartfelt.
00:00:49 Some are very intellectually clear and precise.
00:00:54 Like you?
00:00:55 Yeah, I'm more the, as T.S. Eliot would have said, the sharp compassion of the healer's art.
00:01:06 Maybe a little bit less on the heartfelt side.
00:01:13 Everybody has their specialty.
00:01:15 So you check out the intellectual model.
00:01:18 You check out the personality of the teacher or teachers.
00:01:21 You can have more than one teacher.
00:01:24 Is that confusing to have more than one teacher?
00:01:26 It depends.
00:01:27 For some people that is confusing, but some people are naturally bi-spiritual or poly-spiritual.
00:01:35 You can be bi or poly.
00:01:40 For those people it's not confusing.
00:01:43 The main difference in the different meditation traditions is what do they have you focus on?
00:01:51 How do they have you build the concentration?
00:01:53 Typically, concentration power is built by giving somebody an object to focus on.
00:02:01 Then when their attention wanders, they bring it back.

00:02:04 Then it wanders again, and they bring it back over and over again.

00:02:08 I say typically because there are exceptions where you don't actually have an object that you focus on.

00:02:14 But that's pretty specialized.

00:02:17 Most forms of meditation will give you an object.

00:02:21 By an object, could you tell me what you mean?

00:02:24 A sensory experience of some sort.

00:02:27 I'll give you a range of possibilities.

00:02:31 Typical sensory experiences a person might focus on are the physical sensations of breathing,

00:02:38 which would be a body sensation that is specific and physical.

00:02:47 The physical sensation of breathing is one common object.

00:02:52 External sound is another common object.

00:02:55 You can do it with music, for example.

00:02:57 Some people do a music-based meditation.

00:03:00 You focus on music as a meditation.

00:03:03 Yes, on the sound of the music.

00:03:06 Another sensory experience could be, as you mentioned, something that's external sight, like a flower or a candle.

00:03:13 Your attention wanders, you bring it back.

00:03:16 The object could be an internal sound of a mantra,

00:03:21 which is any syllable, word, phrase, sentence that you repeat over and over again.

00:03:26 That could be an object.

00:03:28 It could be an internal image.

00:03:31 For example, some people like to visualize a sphere of light or something like that that they would look at,

00:03:40 or a blank extent of brightness or darkness.

00:03:44 That would be an image-type thing.

00:03:46 Does it matter which one of these you do?

00:03:48 Is there an advantage to looking at a sphere of light versus listening to music?

00:03:52 Let me list a few more, and then we'll talk about the relative advantages and disadvantages.

00:03:59 Let's see.

00:04:00 We could have touch.

00:04:02 We could have sight, sound.

00:04:05 We could have mental image.

00:04:07 We could have an internal talk,

00:04:09 but in the form of a syllable or word or sentence that is repeated over and over again,

00:04:14 which would tend to cool out talk space, your internal chattering.

00:04:20 That's called mantra in Sanskrit, but the Christians used it too.

00:04:24 Most of the traditions used it.

00:04:28 That's image talk.

00:04:30 You could even focus on an emotional sensation, like a pleasant emotional feeling in your body, like love or something like that.

00:04:38 Certain kinds of physical touches, sight, external sights, external sounds, mental images,

00:04:45 certain kinds of internal talk, certain kinds of emotional feel in the body,

00:04:49 would be typical objects that a person might take as a concentration.

00:04:55 Just like everything.

00:04:56 Potentially anything, because you're training a generic skill.

00:05:01 It does have to be based on sensory experience.

00:05:05 You pick a sensory experience, your attention will wander, it will be pulled elsewhere, you bring it back, you wander, bring it back.

00:05:11 Each time you bring it back, it's like lifting a weight, you're strengthening your muscles, you may get tired,

00:05:16 but in the end your muscles get strong if you do that consistently.

00:05:20 That's how most kinds of meditation work, not every kind.

00:05:25 There are some formless kinds, but most kinds of meditation will give you an object,

00:05:31 your attention wanders, you bring it back.

00:05:33 As to the advantages and disadvantages, I would say it very much depends on what appeals to you

00:05:39 and what works for you as a person.

00:05:42 So try out different things.

00:05:43 So would someone move from one to another, like say today I want to listen to music

00:05:49 and tune into that experience, and if my mind wanders I come back to the music,

00:05:54 and maybe tomorrow I want to watch this light in front of my eyes.

00:06:00 Or would someone pick one thing that they're doing and that's what you do every day to build this muscle of concentration?

00:06:07 That's an excellent question. It depends on the tradition you're working in.

00:06:11 Because meditations are organized into systems, and each system has an internal consistency that is designed for it.

00:06:26 So in some systems you'll be encouraged to, like, okay, it can be today this, tomorrow that,

00:06:33 based on some sort of algorithm.

00:06:36 In other systems it will be much more monolithic, no matter what, you always do this kind of thing.

00:06:42 Like the breath, I've heard a lot of people who do nothing but watch their breath.

00:06:46 Then the answer to the question, what should I focus on, is easy, it's always the same,

00:06:51 no matter what comes up, gently return to the breath sensation in your abdomen, nostril, wherever.

00:06:58 So it very much depends on the internal consistency of the meditation system that a person is practicing,

00:07:06 and the teacher or teachers will tell you how to make those decisions and why.

00:07:13 And every meditation teacher should be willing and able to explain to you why they ask you to do things in a certain way.