



## How to start meditation practice

### Why meditate?

On one level, meditation is a tool. It can help combat stress, fosters physical health, helps with chronic pain, can make you sleep better, feel happier, be more peaceful, as well as be present. But on a deeper level, *meditation is a doorway into the unknown*. It can help us get a sense of the mystery of who we are.

When you start meditating, you will notice how unruly the mind is. Being aware of this it can be a quite 'shocking' experience that your mind is all over the place. Profound thoughts about you past or future maybe jostle with mundane thought clips about what groceries you needed to buy. Sometime afterwards you would come too and notice that you had spent 15 minutes running a painful memory over and over. It is like sitting in a crazy cinema!

So, if you're starting out with meditation, please don't beat yourself up about your wild mind. It is a natural condition. In time you will learn to work kindly with the barrage of thoughts and you will find some clarity and peacefulness.

Here are some simple tips on how to start meditating (partly from internet and partly out of my own experience).

### 1. Place

It's lovely to create a special place to sit (stand, walk or lay down). You can even make a shrine or an altar that you can face when you sit in meditation. You might like to place a candle on your altar and objects that have meaning to you. It's lovely to find objects for your altar as you walk. Maybe you find stones, or seashells, or flowers that speak to you. Think about what 'habitat' feels comfortable for you and try to bring some of this things (color, light, smell (maybe essence), etc.) in.

### 2. Silence

Silence is healing. So try to have as less disturbance around. Turn-off the radio, television, mobile devises. And when there disturbance will appear... just be Equanimeous (don't fight with yourself). Give some attention to this disturbance and with the breathing out try to let go. See it as an anchor to bring you back to silence. (Sounds come up out of silence, take on form, do manifest and fall down into silence. So you can see sounds as signs to silence).

There is a lot of 'meditation music' around. It can help you for instance to relax (Samatha) and/or to connect in breathing exercise. But nothing beats simple silence. Otherwise the music or sounds on the CD/tape just drown out the chatter in your mind. When we sit in silence we actually get to experience what our mind is doing. There is steadiness and calmness that comes from sitting in silence. In time outer and inner silence meet and you come to rest in the moment.

### 3. Length

Start with 10 minutes and only sit (walk or lay down) longer if you feel that that is too short. For standing meditation try to start only with 5 minutes. Don't force yourself to meditate longer if you are not ready to do that. In time you might like to extend your meditation to 25 – 30 minutes. That's a length that allows you to settle your mind without causing too much stress on your body. Most importantly, shrug off any 'shoulds'. Some people enjoy sitting for an hour at a time. Others find that they can't sit longer than 10 minutes. Listen to your inner voice. Do what feels right for you!

Try to see it as a way of Kaizen. The Japanese word "kaizen" simply means "good change", with no inherent meaning of either "continuous" or "philosophy" in Japanese dictionaries or in everyday use. The word refers to any improvement, one-time or continuous, large or small, in the same sense as the English word "improvement". While kaizen usually delivers small improvements, the culture of continual aligned small improvements and standardization yields large results in improvement.

### 4. Posture

Whether you sit on a chair or cross-legged on the floor, make sure that your spine is upright with head up. To straighten up, imagine there is a thin tread connected with the top of your head, pulling you up. Cut this tread and let gravity do its work. You also can imagine that your head is touching the sky (exercise with a cushion, walking on top of your head).

Try to keep your head in balance (no tension in the muscles of the neck and shoulders) and let your shoulders hang down. The upper arms close to the body.

If you are slumped your mind will drift. Mind and body are intertwined. If your body is well-balanced, your mind will also be in balance.



## 5. Eyes

Try and keep your eyes open when you use the 'window' of watching to help you to come in the present moment. Open eyes allow you to be more present. Just lower your eyes and let your gaze be soft. You can focus on something you feel attracted to (flame from a burning candle, crystal, picture, flower, something on the shrine / altar, etc.)

Then after a while you will feel it is more relaxing to close your eyes. Again, listen to your inner voice. Notice that if you close your eyes you will be more likely to drift away on thoughts and stories. However, it's important to do what is comfortable for you. Some people find closing their eyes much more effective. It's good to experiment and see what feels best for you.

## 6. Focus

In ordinary consciousness we are hardly ever present. For example, sometimes we drive the car on autopilot while being preoccupied with thoughts. Suddenly we arrive at our destination and don't remember anything about the drive!

So, meditation is a wonderful way of waking up to our life. Otherwise we miss most of our experiences because we are somewhere else in our mind!

Let's take a look at what focus is. In ordinary life, we tend to equate focus with concentration. That's like using the mind like a concentrated beam of light. But in meditation, that kind of mind isn't helpful. It's too sharp and edgy. To focus in meditation means to pay soft attention to whatever you place in the center of awareness. You can use the breath as a focus. It's like a natural door that connects 'inside' and 'outside'. Zen Master Toni Packer says: Attention comes from nowhere. It has no cause. It belongs to no one.

## 7. The breath

Paying attention to the breath is a great way to anchor yourself in the present moment.

Notice your breath streaming in and out. There's no need to regulate the breath – just let it be natural.

## 8. Counting you breath

If you are having difficulties settling, you can try counting the breath – which is an ancient meditation practice. On your out-breath, silently count "one", then "two", and up to "four". Then return to "one". Whenever you notice your thoughts have strayed far away or you find yourself counting "thirty-three", simply return to "one". In this way, "one" is like coming home to the present moment. It's good to return without a backward glance.

## 9. Thoughts

When you notice thoughts, gently let them go by returning your focus to the breath. Don't try and stop thoughts; this will just make you feel agitated. Imagine that they are unwelcome visitors at your door: acknowledge their presence and politely ask them to leave. Or see them as white clouds drifting away in a blue sky. Then shine the soft light of your attention on your breath. Just observe, do not judge, do not push away, do not attract.

## 10. Emotions

It's difficult to settle into meditation if you are struggling with strong emotions. This is because some emotions tend to breed stories in the mind. Especially anger, shame and fear create stories that repeat over and over in the mind. Anger and shame make us keep looking at past events of the past. Fear looks at the future with stories that start with, "What if..."

The way to deal with strong emotions in meditation is to focus on the body feelings that accompany the emotion. For example, this could be the tight band of fear around the chest or the hot roiling of anger in the belly. Let go of the stories and refocus on your body. In this way you are honoring your emotions but not becoming entangled in stories.

## 11. Enjoyment

Most of all it's important to enjoy meditation. You might like to try sitting with a hint of a smile. Be kind to yourself. Start sitting just a little each day. It's helpful to establish a daily habit.

## 12. Joining a group

Just to enjoy more but also as support (energy) and to share experiences it can be wonderful to join regular (for instance once a week) group meditation. Check about availability around the place you live and just be amazed about more people with same intentions and search for rest and in-sight (feeling).

### Remember:

Meditation doesn't require making big life changes.

Meditation doesn't require changing the way you eat. It doesn't require changing your religion. And it doesn't require ditching alcohol or becoming celibate.

All you need is a few minutes out of your day. Meditation can be the simplest of practices. Meditation generally focuses on releasing thoughts about the past and future and becoming grounded in the present moment.

