

Fundamentals of Meditation



What is Meditation and What Does It Do for Us?

Meditation is both a state and a process.

The State

According to the Indian yogic system, we experience three 'normal' states of consciousness, waking, dream, and deep sleep. Deeper than these, yet threading through them is a fourth state, known as 'turiya' (lit., 'the fourth'). This is the state we access in deep meditation. Coexisting with all our other levels of experience, it is also the source of them, and it is filled with power, intuitive wisdom, and joy. It is also called the Heart, rigpa (expanded mind), pure consciousness, shunya (emptiness), super-consciousness, witness-consciousness, the highest reality, the inner Self (as opposed to the empirical, personal self associated with the body and personality), and the state of God-consciousness.

The Heart state has three main qualities:

It is always present, (though often hidden!). For this reason it is often described as 'pure being', or *sat* in Sanskrit. We do not have to attain it, because on the deepest level, we are it.

It is aware, conscious, awake. For this reason, it is sometimes described as the witness, or 'pure consciousness' (Sanskrit, '*cit.*')

It is innately joyful. For this reason, it is sometimes called 'pure love', or bliss (Sanskrit, *ananda*)

The Process

As a process, meditation is the act of sitting quietly with our spine erect, and focusing inward. Since there are different forms of meditative practice, the technique itself is less important than the act of inward attention. It is the inward attention itself that calls forth the meditation state.

Basic Types of Meditation Practice

Concentrative

In this, you focus your attention on an object – whether the breath, a part of your body (such as the heart center), a candle flame or picture, a mantra or word. When your attention wanders, you bring it back, disregarding whatever else comes into your awareness.

Concentration trains the mind to hold focus, and gradually calms the agitation that comes from repetitive thinking. In time, that focused concentration will bring about a state of peace and often bliss.

Integrative

Integrative meditation allows you to hold several aspects of your experience – such as emotions, thoughts, or bodily sensations – in your awareness, and to see them in a new way. This will ultimately allow you to approach those aspects of experience differently when you are out of meditation.

For example, labeling your thoughts by saying “Thinking” teaches you to step back and witness thoughts, without judging them. Eventually, you begin to realize that a part of you remains separate from thoughts, and this allows you to become independent of the content of your mind.

Being aware of the awareness that holds your experience shows you the presence of a ‘ground’ of experience that is beyond and yet contains the thoughts, feelings and perceptions that you are experiencing.

Being mindfully aware of the sensations in your body, and of the thoughts and emotions in your mind, allows you to become more present to your daily experience.

All of these processes enlarge and deepen your connection to the Heart, or original mind, and give you a greater capacity to tolerate and accept the pleasant or disturbing thoughts, feelings and sensations that you normally experience.

Contemplative

In contemplative practice, we cultivate inner states of spiritual feeling, like love, compassion, or peace, by focusing on that feeling itself, or on an image or idea that invokes the feeling. An example would be the Buddhist practice of loving kindness meditation, or the tantric practice of identifying yourself as a deity, or the practice of breathing in ‘Peace’ and breathing out “Peace,” or Patanjali’s practice of cultivating positive thoughts as an antidote to negative ones.

Health Benefits of Meditation

(Based on research from the US Government's Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM))

"Meditation is perhaps the most powerful tool for health."

Woodson Merrell, MD, Beth Israel Medical Center

Stress and the Brain

The health benefits of meditation have much to do with its capacity to dispel the effects of stress on the body, brain and immune system.

When we perceive danger – whether physical danger, or the subtler dangers of loss of security, love, or prestige – our *fight or flight* response is triggered.

The cortex sends signals to the limbic system, (sometimes called the emotional brain) triggering the hippocampus and amygdala. These then send messages to the endocrine system, which releases stress hormones, especially cortisol. As cortisol streaks through the body, our entire system goes on alert, and a circuit of stress-response is sent back to the brain. Besides being triggered by physical danger, the so-called 'stress response' is triggered by stressful emotions like worry, fear, grief, anger, even when these emotions are internally generated and unrelated to external circumstances. Imaginary scenarios and negative thoughts can also trigger stress responses, since the brain doesn't distinguish between *real* and *imaginary* threats. Chronic stress – measured by high levels of cortisol and other stress hormones – eventually wears out the endocrine system, which systematically weakens the immune system. High cortisol levels are known to be the major factor in brain aging, age-related memory loss, and Alzheimer's syndrome. An over-active immune system eventually debilitates the body, causing chronic fatigue, and loss of energy. This process of debilitation – generally called aging – begins in the *mid-twenties!*

Meditation and the Brain

Here's what happens in the brain and nervous system when we meditate:

The rational thought processes, located in the cortex, communicate with the emotional centers (the hippocampus and amygdala, in the limbic system). When these two centers *agree* to relax, they relay the message to the hypothalamus, which connects the brain to the endocrine system. This releases a flood of calming neurotransmitters and hormones, which soothe the entire body. The immune system then secretes its own molecules of information, some of which return to the brain, helping to complete this circuitry of healing. You shift into a relaxed alpha brain wave pattern, and your nervous system is dominated by the inhibitory parasympathetic branch of the nervous system. When the parasympathetic nervous system is favored, it sends nerve signals that stimulate your organs and glands of immunity, such as the thymus. As this occurs, you reach the ideal condition for healing and inspiration – the sacred space. In the state where self-criticism

and judgment about others is suspended, there is room for love, and you enter the zone in which miracles of psychological and even physical healing occur. (adapted from *Meditation as Medicine*, by Dharma Singh Khalsa)

In deeper states of meditation, that soft, non-judgmental state of sacred spaciousness extends, and begins to release and heal ancient stresses, and deep psychological imbalances.

Some Proven Medical Benefits of Meditation

- Meditation creates a unique hypo-metabolic state, in which the metabolism is in an even deeper state of rest than during sleep. Oxygen consumption drops by 10-20 percent, as opposed to 8 percent during sleep.
- Meditation is the only activity that reduces blood lactate, a marker of stress and anxiety.
- Meditation increases calming hormones melatonin and serotonin, and reduces cortisol.
- Meditation has a positive effect on three key signs of aging: hearing ability, blood pressure, and vision of close objects.
- Long term meditators experience 80 percent less heart disease and 50 percent less cancer than non-meditators.
- Meditators secrete more of the youth-related hormone DHEA as they age than non-meditators. Forty-five year old men who meditate have an average of 23% more DHEA than non-meditators; meditating females an average of 47% more. DHEA helps decrease stress. It heightens memory, sexual function, and the ability to control weight.
- 34-36 % of people with chronic pain were able to decrease medication when they meditated.

From research at Herbert Benson's Mind-Body Institute, Harvard Medical School:

Overall, meditators enjoy improved health in the following areas:

- PMS decreased by 57%
- Migraine headaches decreased notably.
- Anxiety and depression were reduced significantly.
- Fewer missed work days due to illness.
- Decreased symptoms of AIDS and cancer in patients with these diseases.
- 75% people with insomnia cured; 25% improved.
- Patients with high blood pressure recovered completely or improved.

Meditation has been shown to reduce the markers of aging. A group of older people introduced to the TM program showed lower rate of hospitalization for all diseases, with an 87% lower rate of hospitalization for cardio vascular disease, 55% less hospitalization for cancer, and 87% less hospitalization for nervous system diseases.

How Meditation Changes the Brain

- Increases the density of grey matter in the hippocampus and other areas associated with learning and memory
- Decreases grey matter density in the amygdala, the area associated with fear, anger and anxiety.
- May increase density in the areas associated with altruism

From a report in *Psychiatry Research: Neuro-Imaging*, January 2011

Sources:

Medical Meditation by Dharma Singh Khalsa, MD

The Relaxation Response by Herbert Benson, MD

Molecules of Emotion by Candace Pert, PhD.

Psychological Benefits of Regular Meditation

- Gives a capacity to withstand painful or negative emotions, and eventually dissolves them.
- Increases positive emotions like love, compassion, clarity, warmth, generosity.
- Gives focus and clarity to the mind.
- Increases our capacity to understand and connect with others.
- Creates lightness, humor, and balance.
- By showing us that our real being is an awareness that is not only within the body but contains it, meditation lets us deal with upset, grief, fear, and other difficult feelings without being swamped by them.

Spiritual Benefits of Meditation

- Meditation helps to free us from the fears, tendencies and limiting ideas that keep us from recognizing our kinship with others, with the earth, and with the divine.
- Meditation makes us aware of the love that is the real underlying force in this world.
- Meditation connects us with others, with the animal and vegetable kingdom, with the earth, and with the source of life itself.

- Meditation gives us access to peace, love and joy that is not affected by outer circumstances.
- Meditation accompanies us through all the ups and downs of life, and gives us a place to stand that is independent of whatever happens to us.
- Meditation shows us the vastness, power and love within ourselves and within all beings.
- Meditation allows us to love and respect all of life.

PRACTICES

Creating an Intention

Through intention, we give direction to our practice. It's a good idea to create an intention each time you sit for meditation. An intention might be:

"Today, I will sit for 20 minutes and keep myself lovingly focused in the energy of my heart center."

"I sit in meditation, resting inside my own awareness. When thoughts arise, I remember that I am their witness (or "I label them "Thinking") and return to my inner awareness."

"In meditation, I open my heart to grace."

Questions for Journaling

What practice did I work with?

What happened during meditation?

How did it feel?

How do I feel now?

Five Points of Posture

Take a position in which your back can be erect. If possible, sit cross-legged in the easy posture, or in half-lotus or supported virasana. If you sit on a chair, make sure your feet are firmly planted on the ground and your back is erect.

Leaning forward, pull up the skin on the buttocks, to free the sitting bones and preserve the natural curve of the back. Then return to your normal upright posture.

Placing one hand on either side of your right thigh, turn the skin in (towards the opposite leg). Repeat the process with your left thigh. Notice that this widens the base of your posture, giving you a stronger seat.

With one hand on each side of the rib cage, lift the ribcage up. Remove your hands and keep the lift in the rib-cage.

Let the shoulder blades release down the back.

Feel that the crown of your head lifts towards the ceiling, while the chin is slightly lowered.

Your hands may rest palms down on the thighs, thumb and forefinger touching, or you may rest your hands palms up in your lap, the back of the left hand resting in the right palm.

Points of Inner Posture

With your attention in your heart, ask yourself for permission to meditate. Ask for grace from the inner teacher.

Create an intention for your meditation, i.e., *"I will sit for 20 minutes and hold my focus on the breath"* or *"I will rest in the heart and let thoughts go."*

Let your awareness move through your body, from toe to head, becoming conscious of each part of the body. As you do, 'ask' that part of the body to relax.

Gently and without changing your breathing, focus your awareness on the breath.

Imagine a ladder from the nose to the heart center in the chest. With each breath 'walk' your awareness down one step, until you are focused in your heart.

Breathing in and out through your heart, imagine a flower opening and closing with each breath.

Rest in your heart.

Hamsa Breath-Mantra Practice

With your awareness in your heart, feel that with each inhalation you breathe in 'ham' and with each exhalation you breathe out 'sa.' From time to time, allow yourself to remember that your breath is saying, 'I am That' – I am pure consciousness, the pure Self of all.

Labeling Thoughts

As thoughts arise, label them '*Thinking*' and return to your practice.

If the mantra stops repeating itself and the mind becomes still, rest in the stillness.

Witness Practice

As thoughts arise and subside, a part of your mind is aware that you are thinking. When you '*catch*' yourself thinking, ask the question "*Who knows I'm thinking?*" Then pay attention to the state that arises in your mind in response to that question.

If an answer comes up in words – like "*Its me,*" or "*Its my mind,*" inquire – "*Who is that me?*" or "*Who knows that?*"

Let yourself become familiar with the knower of your thoughts. Let yourself rest in the knower.

Mountain Meditation

- Sit in a steady, comfortable posture, using the five points of posture.
- Imagine you are sitting in the presence of a mountain. It may be a mountain you have seen, or a mountain that simply appears in your imagination.
- Feel the strength, solidity, and rootedness of the mountain.
- Feel its vastness.
- Now, feel that you ARE the mountain. Within your own body, experience the stillness, the power, and the solidity of the mountain.
- Feel your own breath as the breath of the mountain.
- Your breath arises and subsides on its own, as though the mountain breathed.
- If thoughts arise, notice the thought, name it "*Thinking*" and return to the stillness.

Basic Principles

We meditate to get to know the inner presence/awareness/bliss that is our true Self. Another way of saying this, is that meditation is a relationship with yourself. In meditation you become intimate with yourself on every level – with your body, with your mind, emotions and feelings, with the different levels of your own energy, and with the inner presence/awareness/bliss that is the ground of your being. Like any intimate relationship, meditation works best when undertaken tenderly, and with love.

The secret of joyful meditation is to approach it playfully, as an experiment and exploration of your own being.

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