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by: Inner IDEA How To Meditate Effectively with Guided Meditation Tips for Beginners Meditation is an approach to training the mind, similar to the way that fitness is an approach to training the body. But many meditation techniques exist — so how do you learn how to meditate? “In Buddhist tradition, the word ‘meditation’ is equivalent to a word like ‘sports’ in the U.S. It’s a family of activities, not a single thing.” University of Wisconsin neuroscience lab director Richard J. Davidson, Ph.D., told The New York Times. And different meditation practices require different mental skills. It’s extremely difficult for a beginner to sit for hours and think of nothing or have an “empty mind.” We have some tools such as a beginner meditation DVD or a brain-sensing headband to help you through this process when you are just starting to learn how to best meditate. In general, the easiest way to begin meditating is by focusing on the breath. An example of one of the most common approaches to meditation is concentration. Concentration Meditation Concentration meditation involves focusing on a single point. This could entail following the breath, repeating a single word or mantra, staring at a candle flame, listening to a repetitive gong, or counting beads on a mala. Since focusing the mind is challenging, a beginner might meditate for only a few minutes and then work up to longer durations. In this form of meditation, you simply refocus your awareness on the chosen object of attention each time you notice your mind wandering. Rather than pursuing random thoughts, you simply let them go. Through this process, your ability to concentrate improves. Mindfulness Meditation Mindfulness meditation encourages the practitioner to observe wandering thoughts as they drift through the mind. The intention is not to get involved with the thoughts or to judge them, but simply to be aware of each mental note as it arises. When you meditate through mindfulness meditation, you can see how your thoughts and feelings tend to move in particular patterns. Over time, you can become more aware of the human tendency to quickly judge an experience as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. With practice, an inner balance develops. In some schools of meditation, students practice a combination of concentration and mindfulness. Many disciplines call for stillness — to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the teacher. Other Meditation Techniques There are various other meditation techniques. For example, a daily meditation practice among Buddhist monks focuses directly on the cultivation of compassion. This involves envisioning negative events and recasting them in a positive light by transforming them through compassion. There are also moving meditation techniques, such as tai chi, qigong, and walking meditation. Benefits of Meditation If relaxation is not the goal of meditation, it is often a result. In the 1970s, Herbert Benson, MD, a researcher at Harvard University Medical School, coined the term “relaxation response” after conducting research on people who practiced transcendental meditation. The relaxation response, in Benson’s words, is “an opposite, involuntary response that causes a reduction in the activity of the sympathetic nervous system.” Since then, studies on the relaxation response have documented the following short-term benefits to the nervous system: Lower blood pressure Improved blood circulation Lower heart rate Less perspiration Slower respiratory rate Less anxiety Lower blood cortisol levels More feelings of well-being Less stress Deeper relaxation Contemporary researchers are now exploring whether a consistent meditation practice yields long-term benefits, and noting positive effects on brain and immune function among meditators. Yet it’s worth repeating that the purpose of meditation is not to achieve benefits. To put it as an Eastern philosopher may say, the goal of meditation is no goal. It’s simply to be present. In Buddhist philosophy, the ultimate benefit of meditation is liberation of the mind from attachment to things it cannot control, such as external circumstances or strong internal emotions. The liberated or “enlightened” practitioner no longer needlessly follows desires or clings to experiences, but instead maintains a calm mind and sense of inner harmony. How to Meditate: Simple Meditation for Beginners This meditation exercise is an excellent introduction to meditation techniques. Sit or lie comfortably. You may even want to invest in a meditation chair or cushion. Close your eyes. We recommend using one of our Cooling Eye Masks or Restorative Eye Pillows if lying down. Make no effort to control the breath; simply breathe naturally. Focus your attention on the breath and on how the body moves with each inhalation and exhalation. Notice the movement of your body as you breathe. Observe your chest, shoulders, rib cage, and belly. Simply focus your attention on your breath without controlling its pace or intensity. If your mind wanders, return your focus back to your breath. Maintain this meditation practice for two to three minutes to start, and then try it for longer periods. After you have found an effective way to meditate, browse Gaiam’s Meditation Shop for all the necessary products to help perfect your meditation techniques. The most important habit I’ve formed in the last 10 years of forming habits is meditation. Hands down, bar none. Meditation has helped me to form all my other habits, it’s helped me to become more peaceful, more focused, less worried about discomfort, more appreciative and attentive to everything in my life. I’m far from perfect, but it has helped me come a long way. Probably most importantly, it has helped me understand my own mind. Before I started meditating, I never thought about what was going on inside my head — it would just happen, and I would follow its commands like an automaton. These days, all of that still happens, but more and more, I am aware of what’s going on. I can make a choice about whether to follow the commands. I understand myself better (not completely, but better), and that has given me increased flexibility and freedom. So ... I highly recommend this habit. And while I’m not saying it’s easy, you can start small and get better and better as you practice. Don’t expect to be good at first — that’s why it’s called “practice”! These tips aren’t aimed at helping you to become an expert ... they should help you get started and keep going. You don’t have to implement them all at once — try a few, come back to this article, try one or two more. Sit for just two minutes. This will seem ridiculously easy, to just meditate for two minutes. That’s perfect. Start with just two minutes a day for a week. If that goes well, increase by another two minutes and do that for a week. If all goes well, by increasing just a little at a time, you’ll be meditating for 10 minutes a day in the 2nd month, which is amazing! But start small first. Do it first thing each morning. It’s easy to say, “I’ll meditate every day,” but then forget to do it. Instead, set a reminder for every morning when you get up, and put a note that says “meditate” somewhere where you’ll see it. Don’t get caught up in the how — just do. Most people worry about where to sit, how to sit, what cushion to use ... this is all nice, but it’s not that important to get started. Start just by sitting on a chair, or on your couch. Or on your bed. If you’re comfortable on the ground, sit cross-legged. It’s just for two minutes at first anyway, so just sit. Later you can worry about optimizing it so you’ll be comfortable for longer, but in the beginning it doesn’t matter much, just sit somewhere quiet and comfortable. Check in with how you’re feeling. As you first settle into your meditation session, simply check to see how you’re feeling. How does your body feel? What is the quality of your mind? Busy? Tired? Anxious? See whatever you’re bringing to this meditation session as completely OK. Count your breaths. Now that you’re settled in, turn your attention to your breath. Just place the attention on your breath as it comes in, and follow it through your nose all the way down to your lungs. Try counting “one” as you take in the first breath, then “two” as you breathe out. Repeat this to the count of 10, then start again at one. Come back when you wander. Your mind will wander. This is an almost absolute certainty. There’s no problem with that. When you notice your mind wandering, smile, and simply gently return to your breath. Count “one” again, and start over. You might feel a little frustration, but it’s perfectly OK to not stay focused, we all do it. This is the practice, and you won’t be good at it for a little while. Develop a loving attitude. When you notice thoughts and feelings arising during meditation, as they will, look at them with a friendly attitude. See them as friends, not intruders or enemies. They are a part of you, though not all of you. Be friendly and not harsh. Don’t worry too much that you’re doing it wrong. You will worry you’re doing it wrong. That’s OK, we all do. You’re not doing it wrong. There’s no perfect way to do it, just be happy you’re doing it. Don’t worry about clearing the mind. Lots of people think meditation is about clearing your mind, or stopping all thoughts. It’s not. This can sometimes happen, but it’s not the “goal” of meditation. If you have thoughts, that’s normal. We all do. Our brains are thought factories, and we can’t just shut them down. Instead, just try to practice focusing your attention, and practice some more when your mind wanders. Stay with whatever arises. When thoughts or feelings arise, and they will, you might try staying with them awhile. Yes, I know I said to return to the breath, but after you practice that for a week, you might also try staying with a thought or feeling that arises. We tend to want to avoid feelings like frustration, anger, anxiety ... but an amazingly useful meditation practice is to stay with the feeling for awhile. Just stay, and be curious. Get to know yourself. This practice isn’t just about focusing your attention, it’s about learning how your mind works. What’s going on inside there? It’s murky, but by watching your mind wander, get frustrated, avoid difficult feelings ... you can start to understand yourself. Become friends with yourself. As you get to know yourself, do it with a friendly attitude instead of one of criticism. You’re getting to know a friend. Smile and give yourself love. Do a body scan. Another thing you can do, once you become a little better at following your breath, is focus your attention on one body part at a time. Start at the soles of your feet — how do those feel? Slowly move to your toes, the tops of your feet, your ankles, all the way to the top of your head. Notice the light, sounds, energy. Another place to put your attention, again, after you’ve practice with your breath for at least a week, is the light all around you. Just keep your eyes on one spot, and notice the light in the room you’re in. Another day, just focus on noticing sounds. Another day, try to notice the energy in the room all around you (including light and sounds). Really commit yourself. Don’t just say, “Sure, I’ll try this for a couple days.” Really commit yourself to this. In your mind, be locked in, for at least a month. You can do it anywhere. If you’re traveling or something comes up in the morning, you can do meditation in your office. In the park. During your commute. As you walk somewhere. Sitting meditation is the best place to start, but in truth, you’re practicing for this kind of mindfulness in your entire life. Follow guided meditation. If it helps, you can try following guided meditations to start with. My wife is using Tara Brach’s guided meditations, and she finds them very helpful. Check in with friends. While I like meditating alone, you can do it with your spouse or child or a friend. Or just make a commitment with a friend to check in every morning after meditation. It might help you stick with it for longer. Find a community. Even better, find a community of people who are meditating and join them. This might be a Zen or Tibetan community near you (for example), where you go and meditate with them. Or find an online group and check in with them and ask questions, get support, encourage others. My Sea Change Program has a community like that. Smile when you’re done. When you’re finished with your two minutes, smile. Be grateful that you had this time to yourself, that you stuck with your commitment, that you showed yourself that you’re trustworthy, where you took the time to get to know yourself and make friends with yourself. That’s an amazing two minutes of your life. Meditation isn’t always easy or even peaceful. But it has truly amazing benefits, and you can start today, and continue for the rest of your life. If you’d like help with mindfulness, check out my new Zen Habits Beginner’s Guide to Mindfulness short eBook.



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