

# Making the Most of Meditation

One of the first things I do each morning is meditate. For 15 minutes (or more, if I can), I'll just sit and focus my attention on my breathing and body sensations. This peaceful ritual helps me start the day with a clear mind and a relaxed body. I've been practicing meditation for 30 years now, and feel that meditation allows me to lead the active life that I do yet remain centered. Over time, meditation has evened my moods, improved my concentration and focus, and benefited my work.

When I first started practicing meditation, it was often viewed as a countercultural curiosity. Today, meditation is an accepted mind-body therapy at hundreds of clinics and hospitals, thanks to mounting evidence showing that it can benefit health concerns ranging from stress and anxiety to atherosclerosis and chronic pain. In previous issues, I've frequently recommended meditation as a relaxation method. In this article, you'll learn more about what meditation is (and isn't), how it can help you, and how to get started.

## Quieting the Mind

Meditation is simply directed concentration. Meditators learn to focus their awareness and direct it onto an object: the breath, a repeated word or phrase (known as a mantra), or a mental image. What makes meditation so calming and relaxing? By keeping your attention in one place, you're also removing your attention from anxious thoughts and the mental chatter that can often fill your head. Meditation quiets the mind and can offer a sense of balance and centeredness when you're feeling stressed, whether it's from juggling a busy schedule or coping with a chronic illness.

If you're unfamiliar with meditation, I'd like to dispel some common misconceptions. First of all, you don't have to give up—or take on—any religious beliefs in order to meditate. While many forms of meditation come from religious traditions (both Eastern and Western), you can apply the

basic principles and techniques regardless of your belief system. Second, you don't have to sit cross-legged on the floor in order to meditate. It's fine to sit in a chair or even lie down if you can stay awake. You can even do moving meditation—for instance, by walking slowly and mindfully.

Finally, meditation isn't just an exercise in self-absorption. By helping you to focus your attention, meditation may allow you to function more effectively as you go about your day. Indeed, the real goal of meditation practice is to extend this mindful, attentive attitude into other aspects of your life. What's more, taking time each day to do something that's just for you, for your own peace of mind, is important self-care.

## A Range of Benefits

Numerous studies have demonstrated the health benefits of meditation. Thirty years ago, Harvard professor Herbert Benson, MD, documented immediate benefits in terms of lowered blood pressure, decreased heart and respiratory rates, increased blood flow, and other measurable signs

---

## Two Basic Forms of Meditation

### Observing the Breath

Sit in a comfortable position with your back straight and your eyes lightly closed, having loosened any tight clothing. Focus your attention on your breath without trying to influence it in any way. Follow the contours of the breathing cycle through inhalation and exhalation, noting the points at which one phase changes into the other. Do this for at least a few minutes.

Your goal is simply to keep your attention on the breath cycle and observe it. No matter how the breath changes, just continue to follow it. I like to do this exercise soon after I wake up in the morning or while I'm falling asleep at night.

### Using a Mantra

A mantra is a meaningful word or phrase that you repeat during meditation, either silently or out loud. You can choose a holy name or brief prayer from your religious tradition, or you can choose a neutral word or phrase such as "One," "Peace," or "Let go." As with the breathing exercise, assume a comfortable position and gently close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. Then let your breath come naturally and begin to repeat your mantra at whatever rhythm feels comfortable to you. If your mind begins to wander, gently bring it back to your mantra. Try this simple meditation for at least a few minutes.

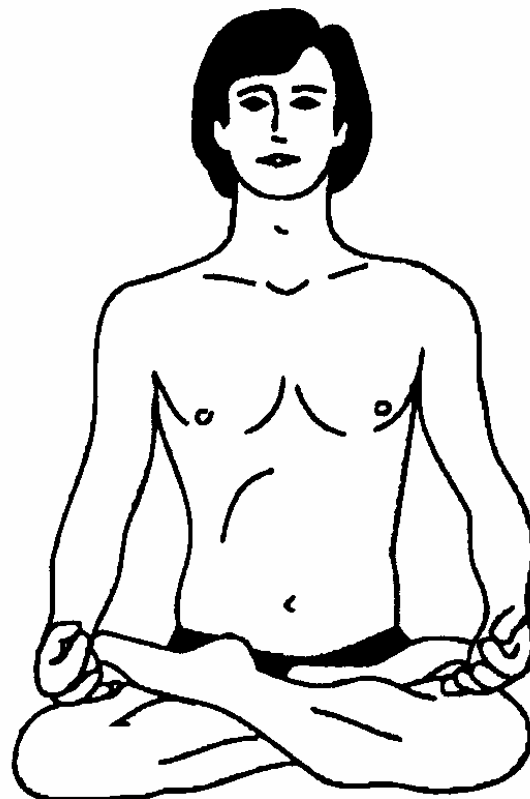
*If you wish to meditate, keep the company of those who meditate and meditation will happen spontaneously.*

— Swami Muktananda

of the relaxation response. Meditation is an important component of Dr. Dean Ornish's lifestyle program that's been proven to reverse coronary heart disease. Studies by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, and others at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center have found that mindfulness meditation (which involves remaining aware of bodily sensations and thoughts, without passing judgment on them) can benefit people with chronic pain and anxiety disorders. In addition, research shows that regular meditation practice can help fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, and PMS.

At our Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona, the Fellows learn to meditate, and we recommend meditation to a variety of patients at our clinic. One of our senior Fellows, Bob Lutz, MD, recalls a patient with ulcerative colitis whose practice of mindfulness meditation (in conjunction with other lifestyle measures) has dramatically lessened his symptoms. Another senior Fellow, Victoria Maizes, MD, is launching a study at Tucson elementary schools to see if third graders who learn meditation and other mind-body methods have fewer stress-related symptoms and better academic performance.

Although meditation is clearly helpful, we don't recommend it to all patients looking for a way to relax. Some people need relaxation techniques that give faster results, such as the Relaxing Breath exercise (see "The Art of Breathing," May 1998). Others have trouble sitting still, so we might suggest mindful forms of activity, such as yoga or tai chi. Also, it may not be a good idea for people who are mentally ill to meditate without supervision.



## Getting Started

If you want to give meditation a try, there are many varieties to choose from. Besides mindfulness meditation (also known as *vipassana* or insight meditation), other popular forms include Transcendental Meditation and zazen (sitting meditation in Zen practice). Shop around for an approach that seems comfortable to you. Perhaps the simplest form of meditation is to observe your breath (see box on page 2). You can learn to meditate from self-help books, instructional audiotapes, meditation classes, retreats, or stress-reduction programs. Once you learn an approach, you then have to practice it over time to reap the most benefits.

Here are some general tips for practicing meditation: Choose a quiet place—inside or outside—where you won't be interrupted. Find a comfortable position, preferably sitting with your spine straight. While meditating, if your mind begins to wander, gently bring it back to your breath or your chosen object of meditation. The tricky part of meditation is this constant running after your attention and bringing it back. But be patient: Your mind may wander repeatedly, or you may feel restless or bored. As your meditation practice deepens, your concentration will become more focused.

Try to meditate every day, beginning with five minutes a day and slowly working up to 15 or 20 minutes once or twice a day. If you can't do a full session, try to fit in a few minutes at some point during your day. I find that if I don't meditate in the morning, before I get caught up in the day's activities, I tend not to do it at all; by bedtime I'm often too tired. Also, don't meditate after a big meal, which can make you drowsy.

How do you know if your meditation is "paying off"? Don't expect unusual states of consciousness. Instead, you may gradually notice subtler changes in your daily life. John Tarrant, a California-based Zen teacher and psychotherapist who offers meditation training to our Fellows, says you might find you're more patient with others. Alan Clements, a Vancouver-based meditation teacher who has also worked with our Fellows, suggests that you may feel "less reactive, more open, more aware, more in control of your life."

In today's increasingly faster world, it's no wonder an ancient practice that quiets the mind, stills the body, and offers greater insight is catching on. Done regularly, meditation can help buffer you from stress and naturally induces tranquility. It's made a real difference in my life. Why not see what meditation can do for you? ☺