

How to Meditate

Part 1: What is Meditation?

Meditation is the hot new buzzword in the United States. Everyone seems to have heard about it in one context or another. It is oftentimes associated with Yoga, Buddhist monks, the Far East, and long-haired Gurus. For the most part, meditation is viewed positively and, based on the fact that you've landed on this article, it is being researched frequently. In fact, the term "meditation" is searched more than 450,000 each month, according to Google.

But, what is this phenomenon called meditation? Dictionary.com offers a few helpful definitions: continued or extended thought; reflection; contemplation. And, devout religious contemplation or spiritual introspection. Wikipedia offers a more lengthy explanation, but generally defines meditation as ... a practice in which an individual trains the mind or induces a mode of consciousness, either to realize some benefit or as an end in itself.

Sometimes it is easiest to understand what meditation is not.

Meditation is not a religion. While meditation has been associated with Eastern Religion, it's origin dates back more than 5,000 years to the time of the Buddha, or Enlightened One. Buddhism, however, is not a religion. A religion generally has a combination of a set of beliefs, a supreme being or beings, and devotion to the being or beings. Meditation has none of these qualities. There is nothing to believe, there is no deity, and there is no practice of devotion, though one may wish to be devoted to practicing meditation.

On an aside, some Christians may feel that because meditation has its roots in Eastern Religion that it is at least non-Christian and at worst anti-Christian. In fact, "meditate" and "meditation" is used in the Bible about 20 times. And, it is referring to contemplation. Later in this article I will discuss Centering Prayer, also known as Contemplative Prayer, which is a form of Christian Meditation created by Father Thomas Merton.

Meditation is not a singular, specific practice. It is much like the word "Sport", which takes the form of football, basketball, soccer, tennis, golf, and so on. Meditation can similarly take various forms in that it can be practiced in a variety of ways and with various methods. None of these are necessarily the "right" method, just "a" method. When you first begin a practice of meditation, you may try various methods until you find one that appeals to you. But, all meditation practice can be beneficial.

The only time I, as the author of this article, would say that a meditation practice is not beneficial is when it is harmful or dictated to you in a manner that is designed to commit

you to the leader of that particular practice. What I mean by this is that you should be wary of the meditation "master" who says you will only achieve "enlightenment" if you follow that master's exact prescription for practice. This is baloney and this person is only taking advantage of your vulnerability as a student so that you "must" commit to his or her form of meditation. By some definitions, this is considered a cult. But, this is only my opinion on the matter.

Finally, let me dissolve another common myth about meditation. Meditation is not about stopping the mind from thinking. The purpose of the mind is to think and the only point at which it stops thinking is when we pass away. We do not want to stop our mind from thinking anymore than we want to stop our heart from beating. So, what are we trying to accomplish if not to stop thinking? The goal of meditation is to practice flowing with the thoughts of the mind while not responding, reacting, or thinking about the thoughts. This will not happen in your first meditation session and, hence, the reason it is referred to "meditation practice". Like learning a musical instrument, we have to play over and over again to learn how to play the music.

Regardless of how meditation is or is not defined, and regardless of the method of practice, the benefits of meditation seem to be universal. Meditation helps to reduce stress, improve health (reducing stress improves health), and over all has a positive effect on one's well being.

Meditation should be enjoyable, relaxing, comforting, and leave you with a sense of wholeness. After each session you should feel good, though you may experience some physical discomfort at first and from time to time. Essentially, you should look forward to your meditation practice each day. If not, you are being too rigid, your expectation is too high, or the method you are using does not match your personal needs. But, you should keep practicing.

Part 2: Why Meditate?

Meditation has many benefits for mind, body and spirit. While much of the evidence is anecdotal, more and more scientific and medical research is proving that meditation does good things for us individually and as a society.

As I stated in part one on How to Meditate, meditation helps to reduce stress, improve health (reducing stress improves health), and over all has a positive effect on one's well being. People who regularly meditate report a greater sense of calmness in their everyday lives. They are less reactive to daily stresses and tend to feel less overwhelmed when problems arise. You can read more about these effects of meditation in this article on the Mayo Clinic Website. ([clickable link](#))

While meditation does not have its origin in stress reduction, relaxation, or any medical field, it is becoming a popular technique for promoting a healthy lifestyle in many hospital and clinic settings. At Sage Meditation we have helped chaplains at several

prisons, therapists at alcohol and other drug addiction treatment centers, and researchers at the University of Wisconsin studying the use of meditation in smoking cessation programs to acquire meditation cushions for their clients. The results of this research are encouraging, though regular meditation practice is essential.

But, meditation was first used as part of spiritual practice among monks. Calming the mind, it is believed, allows us to hear God, the Universe, or our Inner Being. However we label this experience, meditation takes us to a state of consciousness that allows us to experience something "different" from our day-to-day thoughts.

Some may describe this in charismatic or mystical ways:

- Bliss
- Levitating
- Out of body experience
- Euphoria
- Expansion of the mind beyond the physical realm

These are just descriptions of what people sense when they reach a deeper level of meditation. Not everyone has these sensations, though everyone benefits from regular meditation. If you are practicing meditation, you must remember that it is beneficial in subtle ways even if you don't think it's "working". Just keep practicing and, one day, you will realize that changes have occurred.

My final thoughts on why we should meditate come from an article on The Chopra Centered Lifestyle website. This article presents a rather exhaustive list of the benefits of meditation including:

- Healing Benefits - lowered blood pressure and cholesterol
- Reduced Stress and Burnout
- Enhanced Concentration and Memory
- More Harmonious and Loving Relationships
- Improved Creativity and Problem-Solving
- Decreased Depression, Anxiety, and Insomnia

I strongly feel that the benefits of a regular meditation practice could serve to change the world. And, for this reason, I believe everyone should meditate. Meditation takes more effort than popping a pill, but its effects are longer lasting and meditation will not simply mask over the problems in our lives. I believe it is a real solution to world problems.

Part 3: Basic Meditation Technique

Meditation is a personal experience. It should be relaxing, stress reducing, and above all, it should be enjoyable. In part one of this blog series, I discuss what meditation is

and what it is not. In part two of this blog series, I discuss the benefits of meditation and why we should all be meditating.

In this third part of my blog series on How to Meditate, I want to give you some basic techniques. These will be generic - not specific to any particular meditation practice or "religion". I put this word in quotes and remind you that meditation is not a religion even though it may be associated with words like Buddhism or Hinduism, which are oftentimes considered religions.

Let me begin by stating the obvious. Meditation is a quiet practice. You must necessarily practice meditation in a quiet place without distractions. By distractions I don't mean traffic noise, an occasional siren, people talking while passing by, or for people in prison the constant noise of fellow inmates. What I mean by distractions are the stereo, TV, phone calls, roommates, family, and house guests. Essentially, anything that potentially wants to interact specifically with you. Whether it be a time or a place, as much as possible, you need to remove yourself from the places and objects that will call to you during your meditation practice. In some cases you may want to use a white noise generator, a room fan, or a CD of some steady sound such as gentle rain to block out distracting noise. Otherwise, turn it all off.

Now that you've eliminated possible distractions, you need to get physically comfortable. Meditation posture is very important. You may be sitting for only a few minutes at first but, over time, you will want to extend your meditation sessions to 20 minutes, a half hour, or longer. Not only do you need to be comfortable, you also need to be in a posture that will not aggravate the body. But, you also need to sit in a meditation position that will help you maintain some alertness. You are not taking a nap, so sitting in an active posture will keep you awake.

Some meditation cushions may be helpful, but you can sit in a chair or use some blankets and pillows to get started with meditation. I suggest that you practice meditation for a while to learn more about your body before investing in expensive cushions and props. In most cases, you will find that sitting in a cross-legged posture is the best posture for meditation. It is easeful and yet active. Simply ensure that the knees are level with or somewhat lower than the hips. This puts the spinal column into an alignment that will support the upper body.

On a side note, you may want some sort of timer so that you will commit to a specific length of time for meditation. Don't use your cell phone as you will most assuredly get a call or text during meditation. And, a kitchen timer will likely rip you out of your meditation, which can not be good. We offer an affordable kitchen-like timer with a vibration mode, which is more gentle.

Once you have gotten into a comfortable posture, it is time to relax and meditate. The best way to relax quickly is to take some deep breaths. Just breathe normally, but breathe in deeply and release the breath normally. Be sure to relax your belly and let

the breath go into the abdomen. We're not showing off at the beach, so there's no need to hold your stomach in. You might breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth or through one or the other exclusively. Do this at least 3 or 4 times or until you start to feel more relaxed. If there is any place in your body that feels tension, imagine yourself breathing deeply into that spot - stretching and releasing. If the spot is particularly nagging you, you may need to reposition your body slightly. Or, you may need to project some loving thoughts into the spot to let it know that you care about the discomfort.

Deep breathing should help you become relaxed, but try also to become aware of any places where your muscles are active. This most often occurs in the shoulders. If you feel tight in the shoulders, raise them up to your ears with the in breath and let them gently come down with the out breath. Do that for a few repetitions until the shoulders relax.

Once you feel more relaxed, gently close your eyes. This will help to block out visual distractions, though some meditation techniques suggest staring at a candle flame or a specific point or even a black dot on a piece of paper on the wall across from you. These are all fine as long as your eyes are not wandering about the room. The sight of a book, a clock, a pile of laundry, and any number of things can trigger excessive thinking about something other than your meditation session.

By now you can begin to breathe normally without any effort. But, to maintain some focus on your meditation and away from distracting thoughts, you can gently begin to count the breath. You should do so in a manner that doesn't change the way you breathe, however. In other words, don't go "huff one", "huff two", "huff three" and so on. Let your breathing be natural and count the breaths as though you were observing them from the outside. You can count to five and then start over. You can count an entire breath, or count the in and the out breath separately, in which case you might want to choose an even number to count to. Again, the counting of the breaths is to simply stay focused and not go off on a complex thought process about the day's activities.

At the end of the meditation session, be gentle with yourself. You've accomplished a great task and you should reward yourself by being loving with your body and your state of mind. If you've used a timer that has signaled the end of the session, slowly reach out and silence it without opening your eyes if you can. Take several deep relaxing breaths and gently open your eyes. When you are ready to get up, be gentle. If you are on the floor, lean forward to stretch. Carefully stretch out your legs. Support yourself as you get up.

Your very first meditation session may not go so well. You may not have been able to relax at all. Your eyes may have fluttered as if they were resisting you when you tried to close them. Your mind probably wandered and you forgot to keep counting the breaths. Your legs may have gone numb and your back may have started to ache. This

is perfectly normal and you may continue to experience some or all of these issues for quite a few more meditation sessions.

But, I encourage you to continue. The benefits of meditation are not quickly seen. And, they may not come easily. However, you will be surprised at how different you feel after just one week of daily meditation practice - even if the sessions are only 5 minutes long. Do try to work on making them a little longer each day. Most people meditate for a maximum of 20 minutes, once or twice a day.

Final Part: Advanced Meditation Technique

In this final part on How to Meditate, I will dig a little deeper into more advanced meditation technique. After reading the third part of this series you will have learned to use the breath to relax and some simple counting to maintain focus during meditation. The mind wanders easily and never stops thinking about things. You will quickly find yourself thinking about the day's events or "to do" list. Use the breath or the count to gently remind yourself that you are meditating and draw yourself back into your meditation.

There are many things you can do to prepare for meditation and they all relate to calming the mind and settling down. In part three I talk about ensuring that all the possible distractions are literally turned off. Morning meditation is great because you wake up without a day's worth of thoughts to get after you and you have not yet turned on all your technology - TV, cell phone, radio, and what have you.

If your meditation time is in the evening, you will want to turn off the technology at least an hour before you meditate. Make sure anyone for whose needs you are responsible has been taken care of and knows you need your quiet space.

One advanced technique may be something you do before you even sit down for your meditation practice. This may include some yoga or a practice of chanting. Yes, actually singing. Singing is a great way to focus the mind since it involves concentration on the rhythm, melody, and words of the music. In the Hindu tradition, this is known as Kirtan and generally involves the repetition of a simple phrase such as *Om Namah Shivaya*. This is known as a Mantra and it means "I bow to Shiva" where Shiva is the first God of the Hindu faith. It is not meant as Idol worship, but as reverence to God.

If you are of the Christian faith, you can find similar types of music such as your favorite Hymn. And, you don't have to sing it on key, with all the right words, or perfectly at all. It is simply engaging in a practice that will set the stage for your meditation. I've found a version of the Our Father set to a simple melody through the Lutheran Church that I like to sing a few times and then hum as I slowly go into meditation.

Once you begin meditation, you can use a Mantra or other short phrase as a point of focus in the meditation. Again, in the Hindu tradition, repetition of the Mantra *Om*

Namah Shivaya can be used. Similarly, in Centering Prayer, a Christian meditation practice, you can use a short phrase that is meaningful to you such as *God is Good* or *Amazing Grace*. The phrase should be short enough to fit into a normal, relaxed breath.

This is a particularly powerful technique since our minds love words and using words as a focus can be very effective at maintaining focus. To make it a meaningful meditation, however, you have to eventually stop speaking the words, whispering the words, and eventually thinking the words. Remember that this level of focus is designed to calm the mind in its sea of thoughts.

The next thing that can happen during meditation is the tendency to get sleepy or to just fall asleep. One technique to help with this condition is to be sure that you are sitting comfortably, but also actively. That is, sitting in an upright and mostly unsupported posture so that falling asleep would likely cause you to tip over. Generally, as soon as you feel yourself tipping, you will regain consciousness and remind yourself that you are meditating. But, don't be disappointed with yourself if you actually fall asleep. It happens and, with practice, you will discover techniques to help you keep alert enough to maintain your meditation.

After you complete your meditation session, you may want to do some stretching or yoga to re-energize yourself. Whatever you do at the end of your session, you must be gentle with yourself and allow your awareness to slowly come back to the real world. Smile, feel happy, and feel content that you have completed the meditation and always be positive about the experience even if it wasn't your very best meditation session.

Above all, be patient. I've been practicing meditation for 20 years as of the writing of this article and there are days I have great meditations out of several days of mediocre and sometimes seemingly useless meditations. In some sense this is like your stock portfolio - someday you make big gains and other days you have some loss, but in the long run you make steady gains. This is a learning process. Learning techniques that work for you and postures that help you feel comfortable are all part of the process. Make it a lifetime process.

I hope this short article on How to Meditate has been helpful to you. I would encourage you to explore meditation through books, groups, and CDs. But, always be mindful of the instructor that is too rigid and trying to severely control your meditation process. However the pace goes for you, it is exactly right.

About the Author

My name is Jay Suthers and I am the founder and owner of Sage Meditation. In the mid-1990's I was introduced to the practice of meditation through Siddha Yoga, which is a Hindu tradition. After about 10 years of practice with this tradition, I returned to my Christian roots seeking to maintain a regular practice of meditation within my Christian faith. By grace I discovered the practice of Centering Prayer also known as

Contemplative Prayer, which has the same foundation of meditation brought to the U.S. from the East with the principles of Christian faith.

Sage Meditation is primarily a retail business offering products for meditation, yoga, and Thai Shiatsu Massage. However, my meditation practice and experience compelled me to start this business. For that reason I am also greatly interested in sharing my experience and in helping others to learn the practice of meditation. Since starting Sage Meditation in the Fall of 2002 I have spoken with countless people about the challenges they face with starting and continuing a meditation practice. The results of those discussions have contributed greatly to this paper. For that, I am grateful to everyone whose path, however briefly, has merged with mine.

I cannot overemphasize that meditation is a journey. I hope that this paper is just part of your life-long path in life. Every experience in life is worth having and I encourage all my readers to keep up with their meditation practice - especially when it seems mostly fruitless. You are always making progress, even in those times. If you feel you are at an impasse, look for more information and have discussions with others who are meditating. Your life can only be better for having pursued it.