

MEDITATION (USING A MANTRA)

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Introduction

Meditation has been practiced for over 3000 years for the purpose of training and calming the mind. It originated as a practice within Hinduism and Buddhism. Eastern philosophy has taught that the origin of human suffering is in our automatic, conditioned thoughts, and that nothing in life is inherently bad. Rather, we think about it or react to it as such. According to this philosophy, through the practice of meditation, it is possible to learn to “step back” and simply witness your automatic thoughts and reactive patterns without judging them (or the experiences that “caused” them) as either positive or negative. Regular meditation practice, then, can help us avoid being caught up by our automatic (often negative) thought patterns and eventually become freer of them.

To achieve this freedom from our automatic thought patterns, one must expand one’s awareness, which is defined as a pure, unconditioned state of consciousness that can be experienced deep within oneself. Our automatic thought patterns and the emotional reactions we have learned over our lifetimes tend to “cloud” our ability to achieve this state of conscious awareness. However, when we become very still and quiet, when we become willing to just be, and when we observe our inner experience in the present moment without judgment and without striving to do anything, our awareness can re-emerge. Once you achieve this unconditioned state of awareness, you are likely to feel a deep sense of peace.

What will this technique do for you?

With practice, meditation has several benefits. Meditation is a way for us to expand our awareness, and with practice, it can help us achieve a sense of peace and tranquility.

Some of the physiological (bodily) effects of meditation include:

- **Decreased heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen consumption**
- **Decreased concentration of lactic acid in the blood, which is associated with the reduction of anxiety.**

Other long-range benefits of meditation include:

- **Sharpened alertness**
- **Increased energy level and productivity**
- **Decreased self-criticism**
- **Increased objectivity, which means increasing your capacity to view situations non-judgmentally**
- **Increased awareness of and access to one's emotions**
- **Heightened self-esteem and sense of identity**

Types of Meditation

There are two types of meditation: concentrative and non-concentrative. The concentrative approach emphasizes concentrating your attention on a particular object during the meditation. For example, you may be asked to focus on your breathing or on a particular word.

The non-concentrative approach to meditation does not narrow attention to a particular object and instead, focuses attention on the total content of the experience. This involves witnessing whatever thoughts, feelings, desires, or physical sensations that arise in your experience, without resisting or judging them in a way.

Learning to Meditate

Learning to meditate involves learning 4 components of meditation.

- 1) The first component of meditation is having the right attitude or mindset. This involves:
 - a. Seeing and accepting things as they actually are in the present moment.
 - b. Reducing (or eliminating) assumptions and judgments about what you experience.
 - c. Not striving to achieve something while meditating, rather focusing on just being.
 - d. Patience - allowing things to unfold in their own natural time.
 - e. Letting go of any attachments to thoughts or feelings that come up for you in the moment.

- 2) The first component of meditation is having the right technique, which involves:
 - a. Finding a quiet environment where you can limit distractions.
 - b. Reducing muscle tension by engaging in abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or some yoga exercises before proceeding with meditation.
 - c. Sitting properly using either Eastern Style or Western Style.
 - i. Eastern Style is when you sit with your legs crossed on the floor, with a cushion or pillow supporting your buttocks, while resting your hands on your thighs. In this position, you lean slightly forward so that some of your weight is supported by your thighs and buttocks.
 - ii. Western Style involves sitting in a comfortable, straight-backed chair, with your legs uncrossed and both feet on the floor, hands resting on your thighs. In either position, you will want to keep your back and neck straight without straining to do so.
 - d. For beginners: set aside 10 minutes for the exercise.
 - e. With ongoing practice (for those with moderate to advanced experience): set aside 20-30 minutes.
 - f. Making it a regular (daily) practice.
 - g. Not meditating on a full stomach.
 - h. (For Concentrative Meditation) Selecting something to focus your attention on. This may be your breathing cycle or some sort of mantra.

3) The third component (for concentrative meditation) involves developing the concentration for the exercise. There are 2 ways to develop concentration in meditation: using a mantra or counting breaths.

a. Using a mantra involves:

i. Selecting a word or a short phrase to focus on such as “let go,” “at peace,” or “relax.”

ii. Silently repeat this word or phrase, ideally on each exhalation.

iii. If any thoughts, reactions, or distractions come to mind, just let them pass over you and gently bring your attention back to the word or phrase that you have chosen. Don’t judge yourself if your mind wanders and you get caught up in your thoughts. Simply bring your attention back to the mantra.

b. It is important to concentrate on your mantra during meditation, but do not try to force or strain yourself to do so.

c. During meditation, it is generally recommended that you have your eyes closed in order to reduce your distractibility, but this is up to you and your comfort level.

4) Finally, learning to meditate involves cultivating mindfulness. This simply involves paying attention to whatever comes up in the present moment or to your experience. It is witnessing your immediate experience just as it is, without judgment and without trying to change, react to, or interfere with it.

The Exercise

Before you begin, decide how you would like to sit (Eastern Style – on the floor cross-legged – or Western Style – in a chair).

Now, choose a word, phrase, or syllable that you like, perhaps one that has special meaning for you. Some examples include: “relax,” “let go,” and “peace.” This word, phrase, or syllable (e.g., “Ohm”) will be one that you repeat to yourself as you exhale during the meditation exercise.

It is important during the meditation exercise to keep in mind the basic attitudes of meditation: Seeing things as they actually are in the present moment; acceptance; non-striving; patience, non-judgment, and letting go.

Sit comfortably in the position you have chosen. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable, establish a posture that is upright without feeling uncomfortable, and begin to centre yourself.

Now, notice the level of tension you are feeling in your body. Simply notice how you are feeling without judging or attempting to alter it in any way. **Place one hand on your abdomen right beneath your rib cage and the other hand on your chest.** Notice which hand moves as you breathe. Is it the one on your chest or the one on your abdomen? Ideally, the hand on your abdomen will move, as this indicates that you are engaging your diaphragm and breathing more deeply (NOTE: your hand on your chest might also move, which is fine).

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the “bottom” of your lungs. **Now exhale** fully through your nose or mouth, and while you exhale, allow your whole body to just let go.

Inhale slowly and deeply again (1, 2, 3, 4); exhale (1, 2, 3, 4); Inhale (1, 2, 3, 4) and exhale (1, 2, 3, 4); Inhale (1, 2, 3, 4), exhale (1, 2, 3, 4); Inhale (1, 2, 3, 4) and then exhale (1, 2, 3, 4).

Now place your hands in a comfortable position. Continue to breathe slowly and evenly deep into your lungs so that your belly but not your chest moves with each breath. As you continue to breathe deeply, begin to silently repeat your mantra every time you exhale. If your mind strays, notice the thoughts, and then bring your attention back to your mantra and breathing. If you notice any sensations in your body, make note of the feeling, let the thought go, then return to the repetition of your own special word/phrase/syllable each time you exhale. Continue to breathe deeply and rhythmically, repeating your mantra on each exhalation until you hear my voice again.

(Practice for 10 minutes; try to practice longer with successive sessions until you are able to meditate for 30 minutes)