

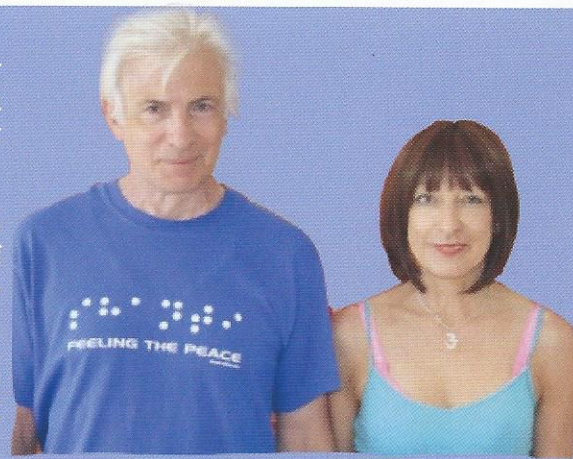
Open to Inner Peace

*By Heather George
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Together they run workshops and retreats. Go to www.omtropy.com or ring 01784 492500 for more details.



This is the first of a series of four articles that will explore meditation. To start, we will look at why people meditate, dismiss a few myths and seek to establish some principles that meditations follow. Subsequent articles will go into more detail about specific approaches to meditation. We will give practical examples that you can try yourself. Hopefully they will stimulate those new to meditation to experiment and for those more experienced, to deepen their practice. Meditation is a journey that can take many routes. It is sometimes beneficial to pop on another train to experience a different landscape.

Why do people meditate ?

- Desire for inner peace
- Search for truth and understanding
- Search for genuine happiness
- Reduce stress

Meditation is:

- Something you experience and not something you do
- A process not an achievement
- An inner journey not a destination
- Not to be rushed

Unpicking some Myths about Meditation

Myths

- It takes a lot of time and I'm too busy
- It is zoning out, day-dreaming, being spaced out or in a trance
- Practicing meditation could conflict with my religious beliefs
- It's only for New Age hippy tree-huggers or monks who sit on mountains

Facts

- Studies have shown that our minds wander for about 47% of the working day. Just 15 minutes a day of meditation can improve concentration
- Meditation develops our awareness and ability to focus our attention
- Although its origins were in some eastern religions it has also developed into a secular activity
- Meditation is practiced by people from all walks of life and is on the curriculum for main stream schools and colleges

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Key Differences between Meditation and Relaxation

Relaxation is important, indeed it is the usual precursor to meditation. However meditation goes further.

RELAXATION

- Requires no discipline
- No training required
- Mind can drift aimlessly
- The mind may spend time remembering the past, anticipating the future, analysing emotions etc
- Relaxation may engage the thought process
- The goal is to relax both body and mind as a short term release of stress
- Relaxation can lead to or invoke sleep

MEDITATION

- Disciplined
- Requires training
- Mind is focussed and alert
- The mind is in the present as a detached observer of thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. We are developing a profound state of awareness and inner peace
- Meditation transcends the thought process
- The goal is some form of mind training around concentration, mindfulness and/or contemplation
- In meditation we train ourselves not to fall asleep

Benefits of Meditation

Specific benefits include:

- Feel more relaxed
- Improved confidence and self-control
- More able to concentrate
- Ability to focus and work efficiently
- Ability to let go of negative emotions
- Better personal relationships
- Improved mental & physical health
- The physiological benefits have been demonstrated in scientific studies since the 1960s

Benefits of Meditation

Principles of Meditation

Meditations have a number of principles in common.

1. Try to meditate at the same time each day for at least 10 minutes, building up to much longer. Initially chose a quiet space, but you learn to deal with distractions.

2 Get comfortable in the position in which are going to meditate. Yoga practice is aimed at developing the strength and flexibility so that we can sit comfortably in Lotus position without pain. Unfortunately in the West we find this difficult to get into let alone maintain, as we are used to sitting on chairs. There are other positions: sitting back on your heels with a cushion between, cross legged on the floor with cushion/back support or in a straight backed chair. Sofas are not good as they tend to lead us to slouch with poor posture.

Our minds reflect the state of our muscles so if our muscles are tense because we cannot relax, our minds will be tense as well. Be wary of meditating lying down because it will be too easy just to drift off to sleep. Keep warm and relax your body. Stillness is the key.

3. Breathe deeply and steadily – the breath links the body and mind. Relax on the out breath because during exhalation the diaphragm relaxes, as do other major muscles.

4. Withdraw attention from your senses and still your mind. Become a passive observer of your thoughts, feelings and physical sensations with no attachment to them. To start with it may help to close your eyes for some meditations but generally, we meditate with eyes open.

5. Focus your attention. At the start of your practice it will be easier to focus on something tangible like the breath, rather than try to visualise something abstract. That ability will come with practice. Don't strain to focus but if your attention drifts, just gently bring it back and don't be worried.

6. You may lose all sense of time, space or even being in your body. When you come out of the meditation hours feel like minutes and minutes like seconds.

The goal of meditation in Yoga is to understand and identify with the true self and develop a connection with all things. Regular meditation practice on its own will lead to a sense of joy and inner peace. It is like climbing a mountain: there are many paths, some steep, some long but all with the same goals. We will explore some of these in subsequent articles.

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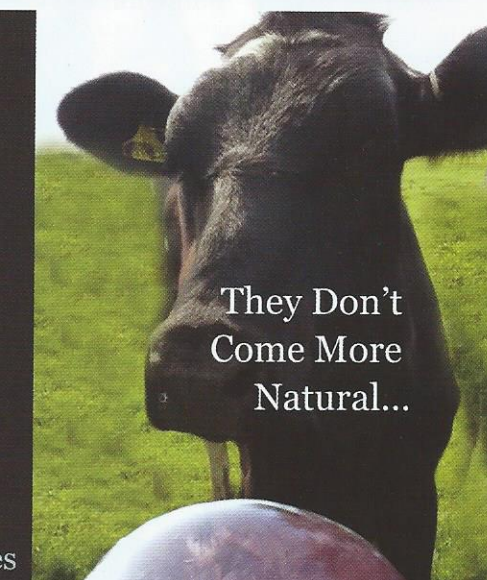
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