

Meditation workshop

Overview

The benefits of meditation are increasingly being recognized as an aid to physical and spiritual well-being.

It is one of the eight limbs of Yoga:

- Yama – code of conduct, self-restraint
- Niyama – spiritual observances, commitments to practice, such as study and devotion
- Āsana – integration of mind and body through physical activity
- Pranayama – regulation of breath leading to integration of mind and body
- Pratyahara – abstraction of the senses, withdrawal of the senses of perception from their objects
- Dharana – concentration, one-pointedness of mind
- Dhyana – meditation (quiet activity that leads to samadhi)
- Samādhi – the quiet state of blissful awareness, superconscious state.

Meditation is our personal journey to understand and explore the mysteries of our minds, discern the purpose of life, search for truth and ultimately achieve inner peace. Initially it is important to learn to build awareness and observe our thoughts rather than trying to stop the mind. We should work towards controlling our thinking and quality of our thoughts for a more positive outcome. In time and with practice we can slow our thoughts down and enter an inner space within our consciousness devoid of thought and become "silent".

There are many methods of meditation, some use objects to aid concentration such as candles, others use sounds for instance the chanting of mantras or sounding gongs and some may just concentrate on the breath. These may require us to be seated, lying down or walking.

The first step in learning to meditate is to relax both the body and the mind and to free ourselves of distractions.

The workshop outlines the benefits of meditation and then provides an introduction to some of the different forms of meditation providing an opportunity to experience them. This includes deep relaxation methods to help concentrate and focus the mind. Different meditation techniques include: mindfulness, breath control, concentration on an object, chanting of mantras, guided visualisation through the chakras (covered in a separate workshop) and meditation for loving kindness. The aim is to calm and focus the mind.

The purpose of the workshop is to allow participants to feel the power of meditation and learn techniques that they can then practice at home.

Benefits of Meditation

The benefits of meditation are many, and can bring about feelings of confidence and self control, increased concentration, better relationships and reduced stress levels to name just a few.

Once you have found your own inner stillness, through regular meditation, you will be able to access it again and again and with ever greater ease. This brings with it many far-reaching and profound benefits. You will start to notice some changes within yourself fairly quickly; others

will take more time. If you are so inclined, it is worth keeping a diary, so that, after some experience of meditating you can look back on how you have changed.

Discovering your own inner stillness will have a ripple effect on the rest of your life, bringing surprise benefits as well as some that are more predictable, such as better health and a longer attention span.

Regular practitioners say they develop a feeling of greater emotional equilibrium. In psychoanalytic terms, they involve their egos less in everyday situations. According to Buddhists, one of the results of meditation should be a feeling of compassion – much easier when your ego is dissolved. Self control, in turn, increases self confidence and a person's sense of certainty. Simply put, this means meditation could make you 'nicer' to your fellow beings.

Meditation does not mean 'zoning out'. In fact, regular practice will make your mind much sharper and quicker. The ability to concentrate is hugely enhanced, so that tasks take less time and feel easier to accomplish. When you decide to do something, you will be able to just do it, instead of wasting time agonizing about it.

Specific Benefits of Meditation

- Confidence and self control
- Improved concentration
- Inner certainty
- Ability to focus and work efficiently
- Ability to let go of negative emotions such as anger and paranoia
- Improved posture
- Greater enjoyment of the physical
- Better personal relationships
- Improved health

On a purely physiological level, meditation has been subject to many scientific studies since the 1960s. These have shown that among its benefits are lower blood pressure, alleviation of some pain, increased levels of the sleep hormone melatonin and lower stress levels.

Some doctors have prescribed meditation for insomniacs, chronic pain sufferers and heart patients, with good results.

However, studies have shown that some people suffering from severe depression may become worse after practicing meditation over a **sustained** period. If you are concerned about such rare negative side effects you should consult with a medical professional, but otherwise, the benefits of meditation can apply to anyone willing to devote some time to regular meditative sessions.

Types of Meditation

There are so many different types of meditation. How many? Who knows, but enough so that you can find the one that's right for you. To get started, we briefly experienced five types of meditation.

1. An **empty mind meditation**. Meditating can create a kind of "awareness without object," an emptying of all thoughts from your mind. The techniques for doing this involve sitting still, often in a "full lotus" or cross-legged position, and letting the mind go silent on its own. It can be difficult, particularly since any effort seems to just cause more business in the mind.

2. **Breath watching.** Meditating can be as simple as paying attention to your breath for a few minutes. Relax in whatever position works best for you (sitting or lying down), close your eyes and start to pay attention to your breathing. Breathing through your nose gets your diaphragm involved and gets oxygen all the way to the bottom of your lungs. As your mind wanders, just re-focus your attention on the air going in and out of your nose. Just do this for several minutes, or longer as you get used to it.
3. **Mindfulness meditation.** A practice Buddhists call vipassana or introspective alertness, mindfulness is the art of becoming deeply aware of what is here right now. You focus on what's happening in and around you at this very moment, and become aware of all the thoughts and feelings that are taking your energy from moment to moment. You can start by watching your breath, and then move your attention to the thoughts going through your mind, the feelings in your body, and even the sounds and sights around you. The key is to watch without judging or analyzing.
4. **Meditation on an object.** Object meditation can be conducted in any comfortable position you see fit, which will most likely be seated on cushion or a chair, facing your object, with your weight spread evenly. Examples of objects used for mediation are candles, yantras (symbols used to balance the mind or focus it on spiritual concepts), fire or water. They need to be placed at a comfortable distance from you and in a position where a steady eye level can be maintained, softly focus on your object, making sure to clear your mind by breathing evenly and feeling your breath rise and fall.

Simply observe the object and let the object help you to forget your worries. See the object in all its separate details, and then see it as one whole object. Feel your self linking to the object, as the rest of the world falls away. With your breathing continuing at an even pace simply continue to focus upon the object as your perception of it changes. If you lose your focus upon the object merely relax a little and let your focus come around again.

5. **Meditation on loving-kindness.** In his wonderful book “Why Kindness is good for you” (published by Hay House), Dr David Hamilton provides an introduction to Loving Kindness Meditation and quotes scientific studies that have demonstrated its benefits in terms of promoting positive emotions and even in some cases pain relief. First get into a comfortable sitting or lying position focusing on your breathing and bringing your attention to our heart. In your mind say “May I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering.” Then think of loved ones and send the same message out to them in turn “May you be well, may you be happy, may you be free from suffering.” You could then move on to other friends, work colleagues people you don’t know and even include people you don’t particularly like. Spread the circle as wide as you want. Say the words out loud if you want. Regular practice brings the benefits, certainly in part, as it stimulates the production of Oxytocin. Read David’s book for details.
6. **Simple mantra (transcendental) meditation.** Many people find it easier to keep their mind from wandering if they concentrate on something specific. A mantra can help. This is a word or phrase you repeat as you sit in meditation. In some traditions it is chosen for you by an experienced master. If you are working on this alone, you can use any word or phrase that works for you, and can choose to either repeat it aloud or in your head as you meditate. Mantras work on three levels. Firstly it gives you something to focus on. Then there is the meaning behind the mantra. Finally there are the sounds of the syllables that make up the mantra which have an effect in themselves. The simplest example is “Aum”. This is said to be the primordial sound that was present at the creation of the universe and the original sound that contains all other sounds, all words, all languages and all mantras.

“A” is pronounced by simply opening the mouth and making a sound. That sound is produced in the throat where the tongue is rooted. So audible sound begins with “A”. Then as the sound comes forward between the tongue and the palate up to the lips “U” or “OO” is produced. Closing the lips produces the “M”. So A - U - M includes the entire process of sound. Further, when chanting Aum you can feel the vibration of the sound starting in your diaphragm and working its way up your chest cavity to your throat and finally in your head. It is traditional to chant a mantra 108 times which is why there are 108 beads on a Mala. There are said to be 72,000 nadis (energy channels) in the body but 108 main ones. So the chanting is aimed at clearing these channels to get the body in balance. The number 108 also has many other significances as a quick search on the Internet will reveal.

7. **Walking meditations.** Here our focus is on the process of walking and developing an awareness of the involvement of our whole physical and mental body in it. This awareness will be at four levels called “the four foundations of mindfulness”. We use these to anchor our minds and prevent distraction:
 - a. Our physical sensations;
 - b. Our feelings;
 - c. Our mental and emotional states, and
 - d. Objects of consciousness.

There is a sort of logical sequence through these levels, but as we progress, we work with all four together. We include a walking meditation on our retreats and there is an introduction on our website: <http://www.omtropy.com/images/Guide to Walking Meditation.pdf>.

Each type of meditation has its own advantages and effects. For this reason, you may find that at different times and for different purposes you want to use several different types of meditation.