

Meditation-Concept and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Recent researches indicate that meditation brings about dramatic effects in as little as a 10-minute session. Several studies have demonstrated that subjects who meditated for a short time showed increased alpha waves (the relaxed brain waves) and decreased anxiety and depression. To explore exactly what part of the brain meditation acts on, researchers at Harvard Medical School used MRI technology on participants to monitor brain activity while they meditated. They found that it activated the sections of the brain in charge of the autonomic nervous system, which governs the functions in our bodies that we cannot control, such as digestion and blood pressure. These are also the functions that are often compromised by stress. It makes sense, then, that modulating these functions would help to ward off stress-related conditions such as heart disease, digestive problems and infertility. Meditation: What is It?

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Meditation-Concept and Practice

Introduction: -

Meditation is a precise technique for resting the mind and attaining a state of consciousness that is totally different from the normal waking state. Meditation is not a part of any religion; it is a science, which follows a particular order, has definite principles, and produces results that can be verified. It is a practice of concentrating one's focus upon an object, sound, visualization, breath, or attention in order to reduce stress, relax body and the mind, increase awareness of the present moment and inculcate spiritual growth. Meditation helps body and mind go into a deep state of relaxation and tranquility.

Meditation has been practiced for a long time. It is commonly practiced for relaxation and stress reduction. It helps stressed persons restore their calm and inner peace. Anyone can practice meditation anywhere as it does not require any special equipment, nor is meditation limited to a space. One can practice meditation whether at home or at office, while waiting at a doctor's clinic or even while riding back home in a bus.

The term meditation is derived from the Latin meditation, from a verb *meditari*, meaning "to think, contemplate, devise, and ponder". The Tibetan word for meditation "Gom" means "to become familiar with" and has the strong implication of training mind to be familiar with states that are beneficial: concentration, compassion, correct understanding, patience, humility, perseverance, etc.

Apart from its historical usage, the term meditation was introduced as a translation for Eastern spiritual practices, referred to as *dhyāna* in Buddhism and in Hinduism, which comes from the Sanskrit root "dhyai", meaning to contemplate or meditate. The term 'meditation' in English also refers to practices from Sufism or other traditions such as

Jewish Kabbalah and Christian Hesychasm. An edited book on 'meditation' published in 2003, for example, included chapter contributions by authors describing Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Scholars have noted that the term 'meditation' as it has entered contemporary usage, is parallel to the term "contemplation" in Christianity, but in many cases, practices similar to modern forms of meditation were simply called 'prayer'. Christian, Judaic, and Islamic forms of meditation are typically devotional, scriptural or thematic, while Asian forms of meditation are often more purely technical.

In meditation, mind is clear, relaxed, and inwardly focused. When a person meditates, he is fully awake and alert, but his mind is not focused on the external world or on the events taking place around. Meditation requires an inner state that is still and one-pointed so that mind becomes silent. When mind is silent and no longer distracts the practitioner, meditation deepens. The goal of meditation is to go beyond mind and experience the inner and essential nature—which is described as peace, happiness and bliss. However as anyone who has undergone the process of meditation knows that mind itself is the biggest obstacle standing between the meditator and this awareness. Mind is by nature in disciplined and unruly, and it resists any attempts to discipline it or to guide it on a particular path. Mind has a mind of its own. That is why many people sit for meditation and experience only fantasies, daydreams, or hallucinations. They never attain the stillness that distinguishes the genuine experience of deep meditation. We are taught how to move and behave in the outer world, but we are never taught how to be still and examine what is within ourselves. When we learn to do this through meditation, we attain the highest of all

joys that can ever be experienced by a human being. All the other joys in the world are momentary, but the joy of meditation is immense and everlasting. This is not an exaggeration; but a truth supported by the long line of sages, both those who renounced the world and attained truth, and those who continued living in the world yet remained unaffected by it.

Types of Meditation:

Meditation is a generalized term for various ways to relax one's state of mind. There are various types of meditation all of which share a common goal of achieving inner peace.

Some of the popular types of Meditation techniques are mentioned below:

Guided meditation: This type of meditation is also called as guided imagery or guided visualization. In this form of meditation, a person focuses his attention to form mental images of some place/situation etc. that he associates with relaxation. A guide or a teacher usually leads the meditation session.

Mindfulness Meditation. In this type of meditation, a person does not concentrate on some single object, rather he remains aware of all thoughts, sounds, images or feelings that pass through the mind.

Mantra Meditation: In this type of meditation a person silently repeats/chants mantras (a mantra could be anything from a word, thought or a phrase repeated in a pattern) that help a person in relaxing.

Qi Gong (spelt as CHEE-gung): It is a traditional Chinese medicine where meditation is combined with relaxation, physical movements, breathing exercises etc. to restore good health.

Tai chi (spelt as TIE-CHEE): Is a Chinese martial arts practice where a person performs various body movements and postures in a sequential order while practicing deep breathing and meditation.

Yoga: Yoga includes a series of breathing exercises (pranayama) and body postures that

help in promoting flexibility in the body along with tranquil mind.

Preparation: -

Choose a peaceful environment. Meditation should be practiced somewhere in calm and peaceful place. This enables us to focus exclusively on the task at hand and avoid bombarding our mind with outside stimuli. We should try to find a place where free of any interruption or hindrance during the entire course of meditation - whether it lasts five minutes or half an hour. The space does not need to be very large - a walk-in closet or even our office can be used for meditation, as long as it's somewhere private.

Wear comfortable clothes. One of the major goals of meditation is to calm mind and block out external factors. This can be difficult if we feel physically uncomfortable due to tight or restrictive clothing. We should try to wear loose clothing during meditation practice and make sure to remove our shoes.

Decide the duration of meditate. Before we begin, we should decide how long we are going to meditate. While many seasoned mediators recommend twenty-minute sessions twice a day, beginners can start out doing as little as five minutes, once a day. We should also try to meditate at the same time each day.

4. Stretch out. Meditation involves sitting in one spot for a certain period of time, so it is important to minimize any tension or tightness before we begin. Doing light stretching for a couple of minutes can really help to loosen us up and prepare both our body and mind for meditation. It will also prevent us from focusing on any sore spots instead of relaxing our mind.

5. Sit in a comfortable position. As stated above, it is very important that we feel comfortable while meditating, which is why finding the best position for us is essential. Traditionally, meditation is practiced by sitting on a cushion on the ground, in a lotus, or half-lotus position. Unless our legs, hips and low back are very flexible, lotus postures tend to

bow our low back and prevent us from balancing our torso around our spine. We should choose a posture that allows us to be balanced tall and straight.

6. Close the eyes. Meditation can be performed with the eyes open or closed; however as a beginner it may be better to first try meditating with our eyes closed. This will block out any external visual stimulation and prevent us from becoming distracted as we focus on calming our mind.

Techniques of meditation:

Different types of meditation may require different techniques but there are a few common features across various types of meditation that include:

Focused Attention: Focused attention is a prerequisite for meditation as a person is required to channelize all his attention either to a specific object, image, sound, music, mantra or for that matter even his breath. Focused attention helps in keeping the mind free from any distractions and channelizing thoughts in one direction.

Deep and relaxed breathing: This technique involves deep and equal paced breathing through the nostrils. The objective is to take in as much oxygen into the lungs using the diaphragm muscles (a dome shaped muscle that separates the respiratory system from the abdomen) to expand and contract the lungs. Care should be taken that the shoulder neck and chest muscles remain constant.

Quiet Surroundings: A quiet surrounding may be required for beginners as any distraction or noise in and around may reduce the focus. As a person gets more and more skilled at meditation, surrounding may not make much of a difference

Comfortable position: Meditation may be practiced while sitting, lying down, standing or even while performing any activity but meditating in a comfortable position helps the practitioner to make the most out of it.

Steps for meditation:

1. Follow your breathing. The most basic and universal of all meditation techniques, breathing meditation is a great place to start our practice. We should pick a spot above our navel and focus on that spot with our mind. We should become aware of the rising and falling of our abdomen as we breathe in and out. We should not make a conscious effort to change our breathing patterns, rather just breathe normally.

2. Clear mind: To meditate, we must focus on one thing maximum if we are a beginner, it might help to focus on one thing, like a mantra or visual object. More advanced meditators may try to clear their minds completely.

3. Repeat a mantra: Mantra meditation is another common form of meditation, which involves repeating a mantra (a sound, word or phrase) over and over, until we silence the mind and enter a deep meditative state. The mantra can be anything we choose, as long as it is easy to remember.

4. Concentrate on a simple visual object. In a similar way to using a mantra, we can use a simple visual object to fill our mind and allow us to reach a level of deeper consciousness. This is a form of open-eye meditation, which many people find easier when they have something to focus their gaze on.

5. Practice visualization. Visualization is another popular meditation technique, which involves creating a peaceful place in our mind and exploring it, until we reach a state of complete calm. The place can be anywhere we like. However, it should not be entirely real, it should be unique and personalized for us.

6. Do a body scan. Doing a body scan involves focusing on each part of our individual body in turn and consciously relaxing it. It is a simple meditation technique which allows us to relax the mind as we relax body.

7. Try heart chakra meditation. The heart chakra (anahat) is one of the seven chakras, or energy centers, located within the body. The heart chakra is located in the center of the chest

and is associated with love, compassion, peace and acceptance. Heart chakra meditation involves getting in touch with these feelings and sending them out into the world.

We should feel our body from the inside. We can feel the energy field in our body, especially in our arms and legs. If we do not feel it, it is fine, but we should continue to think: How are we able to move different parts of the body? It's the energy field that flows in our body. Focusing our attention on that energy field will not only help us stay in the present but also will help us connect with our 'Being' and flow of life in us.

Advantages of Meditation:

The advantages of mindfulness meditation, increasingly popular in recent years, are supposed to be many: reduced stress and risk for various diseases, improved well-being, a rewired brain. But the experimental bases to support these claims have been few. Supporters of the practice have relied on very small samples of unrepresentative subjects, like isolated Buddhist monks who spend hours meditating every day, or on studies that generally were not randomized and did not include placebo control groups.

A study published in *Biological Psychiatry* brings scientific thoroughness to mindfulness meditation and for the first time shows that, unlike a placebo, it can change the brains of ordinary people and potentially improve their health.

To meditate mindfully demands "an open and receptive, non-judgmental awareness of your present-moment experience," says J. David Creswell, who led the study and is an Associate Professor of Psychology and the Director of the Health and Human Performance Laboratory at Carnegie Mellon University. One difficulty of investigating meditation has been the placebo problem. In rigorous studies, some participants receive treatment while others get a placebo: They believe that they are getting the same treatment when they are not. However

people can usually tell if they are meditating. Dr. Creswell, working with scientists from a number of other universities, managed to fake mindfulness.

First they recruited 35 unemployed men and women who were seeking work and experiencing considerable stress. Blood was drawn and brain scans were given. Half the subjects were then taught formal mindfulness meditation at a residential retreat center; the rest completed a kind of sham mindfulness meditation that was focused on relaxation and distracting oneself from worries and stress.

"We had everyone do stretching exercises, for instance," Dr. Creswell says. The mindfulness group paid close attention to bodily sensations, including unpleasant ones. The relaxation group was encouraged to chatter and ignore their bodies, while their leader cracked jokes.

At the end of three days, the participants all told the researchers that they felt refreshed and better able to withstand the stress of unemployment. Yet follow-up brain scans showed differences in only those who underwent mindfulness meditation. There was more activity, or communication, among the portions of their brains that process stress-related reactions and other areas related to focus and calm. Four months later, those who had practiced mindfulness showed much lower levels in their blood of a marker of unhealthy inflammation than the relaxation group, even though few were still meditating.

Mindfulness meditation affects the white matter as well as gray matter in the brain. Researcher observed that eight weeks of meditation can actually change the structure of the brain. To get the benefits, one just need to practice 10 to 40 minutes of mindfulness meditation a day at home or office. Mindfulness meditation is used for the treatment of the patients with depression, anxiety, stress or pain.

Neuroscientists have also found that mindfulness meditation reduces stress,

improves concentration, increases self-awareness, happiness, acceptance, slows aging and improves immunity and cardiovascular system. They found that mindfulness meditation increase the cortical thickness in the hippocampus area of the brain and reduces the size of amygdale. Different parts of these brain regions are influenced by different ways.

Meditation is a complex emotional and intentional regulatory training. Different meditation techniques require different cognitive processes and thus produce different effects on brain structure. But despite differences in meditation techniques and underlying cognitive processes meditation has significant influence on the anterior cingulated cortex (ACC) the insula, the amygdale, the thalamus and the hippocampus area of the brain

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Aside from determining its physiological effects and defining the actual act of meditation can be as elusive as imagining the sound of one hand clapping. In his book, "What is Meditation?" (Shambhala Publications, 1999), Rob Nairn talks about it as a state of "bare attention." He explains, "It is a highly

alert and skillful state of mind because it requires one to remain psychologically present and 'with' whatever happens in and around one without adding to or subtracting from it in any way."

The physical act of meditation generally consists of simply sitting quietly, focusing on one's breathe, a word or phrase. However, a meditator may also be walking or standing. It is not unusual, in fact, to see a meditating monk in the highlands walking a few steps and then lying prostrate over and over again until he reaches his destination many miles away.

There are many traditions and countless ways to practice meditation, and perhaps because of its polymorphous nature, new meditators wonder whether they are doing it correctly. According to Roger Thomson, a psychologist in private practice in Chicago and a Zen meditator, there is one way to know for sure: "If you're feeling better at the end, you are probably doing it right."

Thomson makes it sound easy, but many people cannot seem to get the hang of it, no matter how often they try. "It can be difficult," says Steven Hendlin, a clinical psychologist in Irvine, California. "It may be a struggle to overcome the internal chatter that we all experience."

Seeking methods for quieting that internal chatter and reducing stress are what initially attract many people to meditation. "It is a very effective stress-reducer, which is a way into the practice for many people," says Thomson, who sometimes refers clients to meditation. "If someone is struggling with feelings of anxiety, he or she may benefit from its calming aspects. And it is absolutely facilitative of mental health because it brings about a higher level of self-acceptance and insight about oneself."

However, greater awareness about oneself can be a double-edged sword. Mark Epstein, a New York City psychiatrist in private practice and a meditation practitioner, extends a

caution about one of the ironies of meditating. "It could actually raise your level of anxiety if there are certain feelings you do not own." In other words, there is nowhere to hide when you are practicing "bare attention." And this, for some people, is both good and bad news.

That is why some experts suggest marrying meditation to psycho-therapy. "Both allow the person to be present for the moment, open and not defensive," says Thomson, who explores the complementary nature of the two in a paper published in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*. "In both meditation and psychotherapy, we are trying not to get caught up in internal preoccupation, but to be intimately present with what is happening here and now."

To explain his thoughts on the connection, Thomson compares Zen to relational psychoanalytical theories. He writes "it encourages its practitioners to become aware of the fundamentally distorted aspects of an overly individualistic view of human experience. Recognizing that the true nature of all individuals is emphatically non-individual, neither lasting nor separate, is the wisdom of Zen."

Researchers like Herbert Benson, began amassing data; many studies have shown that indeed meditation has not only a mental but a profound physiological effect on the body. Studies have shown that, among other benefits, meditation can help reverse heart disease, the number-one killer in the U.S. It can reduce pain and enhance the body's immune system, enabling it to better fight disease.

More new research offers additional encouragement. In a study published last year in the journal *Stroke*, 60 Afro-Americans with atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries, practiced meditation for six to nine months. (Afro-Americans are twice as likely to die from cardiovascular disease as are whites.) The meditators showed a marked decrease in the thickness of their artery walls, while the non-

meditators actually showed an increase. The change for the meditation group could potentially bring about an 11 percent decrease in the risk of heart attack and an 8 percent to 15 percent decrease in the risk of stroke.

A second study, published last year (2016) in *Psychosomatic Medicine*, taught a randomized group of 90 cancer patients' mindful meditation. After seven weeks, those who had meditated reported that they were significantly less depressed, anxious, angry and confused than the control group, which had not practiced meditation. The meditators also had more energy and fewer heart and gastrointestinal problems than did the other group.

Other recent research has looked at precisely what happens during meditation that allows it to cause these positive physical changes. Researchers at the Maharishi School of Management in Fairfield, Iowa, found that meditation has a pervasive effect on stress. They looked at a group of people who had meditated for four months and found that they produced less of the stress hormone -cortisol. They were, therefore, better able to adapt to stress in their lives, no matter what their circumstances were.

Diana Adile Kirschner, a Philadelphia-area clinical psychologist, sometimes refers her clients to learn meditation and has seen firsthand how helpful it can be. "Not only is meditation an absolutely marvelous de-stressor, it helps people better relate to one another," she says. "I can tell when clients are following through with meditation. For instance, I had a couple who consistently bickered. After they started meditating, they came in less angry, more self-reflective and more loving."

So why are not more people taking up the practice? "Because it puts us in the middle of ourselves, which is not always where we want to be," suggests Thomson. "Often, we want to fix things rather than accept them the way they are. Many of us feel as though we

cannot afford the time and energy to meditate, when in fact we can't afford not to."

Epstein and several other experts feel that meditation's effectiveness has to do with putting aside attachment to one's ego. As he says, "When you look directly at a star at night, it is difficult to see. But when you look away slightly, it comes into focus. I find it to be the same way with the ego and meditating. When one zeroes in on a sense of self through a practice of meditation, the self-important ego paradoxically becomes elusive. You become more aware that you are interconnected with other beings, and you can better put your own worries into their proper perspective."

A group of elderly Chinese maintain their connection by meeting every daybreak in the village common in Monterey Park, California. They swoop their arms and stretch their torsos in graceful harmony, and then stand absolutely still, simply meditating. Only puffs of warm air flow from their nostrils. All of them look vibrant and relatively young, when in fact they are well into their years.

While western scientists are still exploring exactly how and why meditation works, we already know that it has both physiological and psychological benefits. And many therapists consider it a valid complement to more traditional therapies. So perhaps we should simply take Thomson's advice—and the Tibetans' lead—and do what makes we feel better in the end.

- Various studies have confirmed that meditation may help in reducing high blood pressure.
- Meditation is also useful in combating irritable bowel syndrome (an intestinal disorder that causes pain, gases, constipation or diarrhea).
- Studies also suggest that meditation helps in reducing ulcerative colitis (a chronic condition that causes ulcerations and inflammation in the digestive tract of a person).

- Meditation also helps in limiting depression and reduces anxiety.
- Meditation helps in reducing the craving for smoking as it reduces activity in the part of the brain responsible for craving.
- Meditation is found to be helpful in aiding in sleep in people suffering from insomnia.
- Breathing meditation techniques have been found to help in reducing asthmatic attacks in persons with Bronchial Asthma.
- Apart from the above, Meditation also helps in:
 - Increasing one's self-awareness
 - Aiding in stress management
 - Reducing various negative emotion
 - Being more focused and systematic
 - While meditation in general is highly beneficial to the body and the mind, however, it must not be substituted with any treatment etc. that have been prescribed by the healthcare provider.

Obstacles of Meditation: -

There are four obstacles to meditation. This is in relation to the obstacles once we sit for meditation rather than the obstacles in sitting to meditate.

1. Iccha

This means desire. It refers to the desire to do something and includes planning and intentions. When we are in the grip of iccha, it feels like there is a rock in our head. For most of us, this will be the primary disturbance in meditation. Wants (including hankering for enlightenment and deep meditations), work, family, or social commitments and the associated planning will tend to bombard the mind for many meditators.

2. Dwesha

This means aversion, hatred, or enmity. This also feels like we have a rock in the head and we are unable to meditate. We should accept people and situations as they are is so vital to meditators. If we sit with the intention of meditating when we are in the grip of

dvesha, and keep holding on to it, we will really appreciate the truth of the teaching, "it is we who suffer when we don't accept others".

3. Sukha

In this context, this means too much excitement. If we are feeling really happy and high, that feeling doesn't allow us to meditate.

4. Dukha

In both dukha and sukha, the feeling is like steam—boiling, unsettled. It's like we are in a pressure cooker and there's this huge pressure from the steam."

Overcoming obstacles in Meditation.

All four of these mental obstacles will definitely come up to most of us at different times in our meditations. Dispassion, or letting go and dropping them, is the key to deepening our meditations. But here is the rub – we often will not be able to let them go unless we really feel that they are not at all useful or interesting, or in other words, unless we have already developed some dispassion. Hence arises the need for knowledge. It is not the arising of desires and plans that is the problem—it is the mind holding on to them because it has a vested interest in them, and this stops the mind from settling. Having no vested interest in thoughts when meditating is dispassion. If we treat the invasion of thoughts like a big problem and raise a hue and cry about the need to get rid of them, then we will be in more trouble, as that will just add to our agitation.

So, the first thing to do is to be totally okay with whatever comes up in our mind – welcoming all mental activities as they are, without entertaining them or fighting with them. Noticing that we are fighting with them or entertaining them and being okay with that is also dispassion! We should not try to alter or correct anything that happens in meditation.

Then the second thing is letting go. Letting go is not something we do or 'work on' in meditation, because that would bring in effort. Letting go is not a skill that is acquired and practiced volitionally during meditation. It

is indeed a happening arising from understanding or from the sinking of the mind to more subtle levels through the mantra given in our Meditation Class.

What will be very helpful, and really the only thing we can take from this discussion and directly practice in our meditation, is to make a decision at the start of our meditation that we are not going to have anything to do with whatever arises in our mind. That is, we are not interested in thinking anything, working anything out, planning, or using any of our senses. In other words, we are renouncing the world for 20 minutes. Without that decision, mind is likely to reel in thought. With that decision, we are more likely to notice when we are getting caught up, and to effortlessly let go. Of course, sometimes we still get caught up, but that is fine. Whatever happens, this decision will certainly help.' Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has given us three little statements or Golden Keys. They are a beautiful and powerful way to bring dispassion into meditation. He recommends we entertain them before meditating and then drop them. Before sitting to meditate, say to yourself, "for the next 20 minutes, I want nothing; I do nothing; I am nothing. Entertaining the feelings that you want and do nothing at the start of meditation will set the stage for an effortless letting go of 'iccha'—desires, planning, and subsequent activities in the mind—as they arise.

Feeling that we are nothing gets to the core of dvesha, sukha, and dukha, which are also forms of feverishness that are ultimately based on a misperception of our identity. Sometimes, people find "I am nothing" to be a scary thought. However, you actually are 'no thing'. Any 'thing' that can be conceived of or perceived can't be you. You're the subject that is aware of these "things", which include all our self-concepts, identifications, and perceived limitations. Another way of looking at this is that meditation is the letting go of "I am something" and returning to the simplest form

of awareness— ‘I am’. When we are in the grip of enmity towards someone or you are overexcited or sad, the innocent recognition that behind that there is a little thought-based "me", will bring a joyous letting go.

The statements are just to be very gently brought to awareness at the start of meditation, and then they have served their purpose. Just like we wash off the detergent after it has removed the dirt from a garment. If we use the Golden Keys during your meditation to calm the mind, it would be introducing effort. Trying to cultivate dispassion during meditation so we can have deeper meditations would only show that dispassion hasn't yet dawned!

Swami Satyananda Saraswati - "When mind is silent and peaceful, it becomes very powerful. It can become a receptor of bliss and wisdom enabling life to become a spontaneous flow and expression of joy and harmony. However, this inner silence cannot arise while there is a continual stream of disturbing thoughts and emotions. All this inner noise of thoughts and emotions has to be removed before one can truly experience the soundless sound of inner silence."

The important thing is simply to meditate regularly. As Krishna says in the Gita “Even a little practice of this inward religion will free you from dire fears and colossal sufferings.”

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