



## MEDITATE

The word *meditate* comes from the Sanskrit word *medha*, which means “locating your center, your inner wisdom.”

Meditation is now taught and endorsed by people ranging from gurus to physicians. Our contemporary ills—tension headaches, high blood pressure, insomnia, anxiety, irritability, lack of self-confidence, blocked creativity—have made the benefits of meditation more attractive than ever.

Meditation can provide a deeper form of relaxation than sleep. During meditation, pulse rate and oxygen consumption may drop as much as 20 percent. This form of focused awareness can restore energy and promote healing. Meditation also offers a way to promote inner peace, the value of which can be easily overlooked as we scramble toward other goals.

Meditation is a technique, not a doctrine. It need not conflict with your religious beliefs. In fact, meditating might enhance your current religious practices. You can also meditate in the midst of an active life. Meditation need not be a limiting or isolating activity.

### **Consider three aspects of meditation**

At the heart of meditation are three practices.

One is learning to focus attention. Human beings are famous for their ability to be in several places at once, at least in their minds. Meditators remind us that approaching life in such a mentally scattered fashion forces us to miss many moments of joy. Instead, we could view many activities as ends in themselves. Walking, working in a garden, talking to friends, eating delicious food, and even washing the dishes can become fulfilling activities in their own right. The key is to do them with focused awareness.

A second meditation practice helps us gain precise understanding about what goes on in our minds and bodies. Often we go through life with only a dim awareness of the nature of our thoughts and feelings. Through paying close attention we learn that feelings and thoughts are constantly changing, that we don't have to become attached to any individual pleasure or desperately try to avoid any discomfort. While paying close attention to constantly changing pleasure or pain, we can experience a sense of spaciousness and freedom. The highs are sweeter, the lows don't last as long.

Third, meditation involves an attitude of acceptance. While meditating, we don't have to censor any thought or resist any feeling. Events taking place in the mind and body simply float to our awareness. We can assist the process by refusing to judge them or repress them.

There are many different ways to meditate. Any of them can open the door to a wonderful new dimension in our lives. Following are a few guidelines.

## **Make a commitment**

Most of the benefits of meditation come from doing it *regularly*. The fragmented schedules and general hustle and bustle of life can make it difficult to do anything regularly.

Write your intention down. Be specific about when and where you will meditate. Practice for at least 20 minutes a day.

## **Pay attention to your breathing**

Sit in a comfortable position with your spine erect. Notice your breath as it flows gently in and out of your body. Imagine yourself breathing *in* calmness, relaxation, and well-being. Visualize yourself breathing *out* frustrations, tensions, and negative emotions.

## **Notice thoughts**

Thoughts will continue to pop into your head as you meditate. Notice them and let them go.

You also can concentrate on something to lessen distractions. Silently repeat a word or phrase that has special meaning for you. Stare at a candle flame or at a point on the wall or floor. Each time a thought enters, let it float away like a stray cloud in an endless sky.

## **Notice feelings**

Some people think that meditation is all about feeling good, getting blissfully spaced out, or dozing off. Actually, the essence of meditation is learning to become fully aware and to bring any feeling into sharp focus.

While you meditate, you might feel strong, negative emotions. Anger, sadness, anxiety, or fear may come to the surface. That's fine. The idea is to fully allow and experience any feeling, pleasant or unpleasant.

As we do this over time, compulsions and other negative emotions start to lose their grip on us. We discover that the very habit of repressing certain thoughts and feelings gives them a kind of power. We begin to free up a lot of energy when we change this habit.

## **Meditate at the same time and place**

When you're consistent about doing an activity in one location, at one time of day, your body and mind know what to expect. If you don't have a special place to meditate, then set up other signals: Wear a special shirt, light a candle, burn incense, or play certain music.

## **Consider taking a class**

Local spiritual organizations, meditation centers, YMCA's, and community education programs teach a variety of meditation styles, which can involve additional elements such as movement or prayer. Meditating with other people gives you a powerful incentive to learn and practice this valuable technique.



*Focus your awareness*

*To say that focusing awareness is simple does not mean that it's easy. You can verify this for yourself.*

*Tell yourself that for the next two minutes you will close your eyes and pay attention to nothing but the feeling of your clothing on your body. You won't think about sex, or about calling your cousin in Des Moines, or about all the things you need to get done today.*

*Go ahead. Do this right now.*

*Follow up by writing in the space below what you just learned about your ability to focus your attention.*

*I discovered that I ...*

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