

ERIK MARCUS'



Meditation
in Moments

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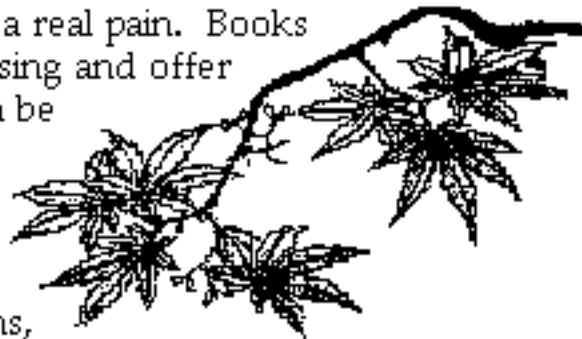
About This Stack

Learning to meditate can be a real pain. Books on meditation often seem confusing and offer conflicting advice. Teachers can be hard to find, and frequently request “donations” that seem more in line with what your local loan-shark charges.

Despite all these complications, meditation can provide some of the most pleasant and profound experiences achievable in a lifetime. Best of all, the fundamentals take just a little while to learn.

If you are curious about what meditation involves, or have wanted a source that teaches the basics of meditation without a lot of nonsense, then you’ve come to the right stack.

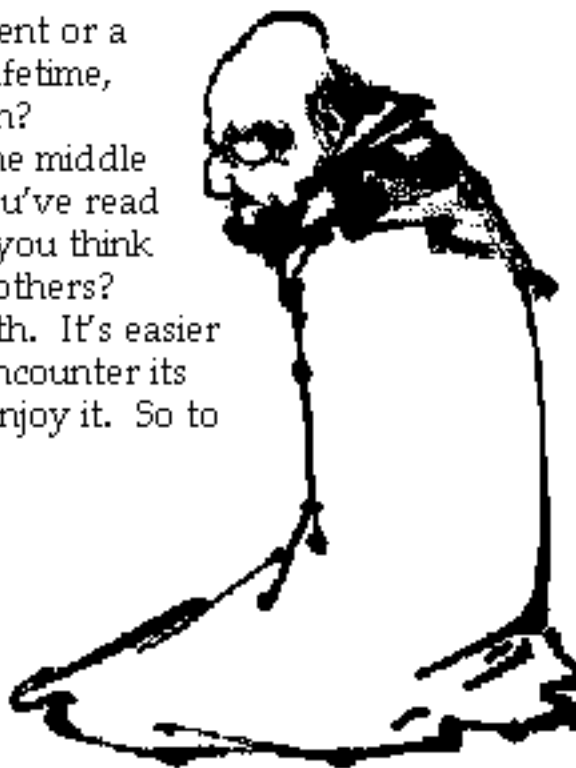
To Scott, Melissa & Kristen



What is Meditation?

If you'll experience contentment or a sense of enlightenment in your lifetime, when do you expect it to happen? Spontaneously? On the job in the middle of some task? One day after you've read your thousandth book? Or do you think this an experience reserved for others?

Meditation might be your path. It's easier than you think. You'll quickly encounter its benefits. You'll probably even enjoy it. So to begin, just keep reading...



One Culture's Definition

A dictionary's definition of meditation usually goes something like "to reflect on; contemplate," or "a devotional exercise of or leading to contemplation."* These definitions, drawn from a highly regarded American dictionary, capture not meditation, but rather the typical Western view of meditation.

Ironically, the Western preoccupation with reflecting on or contemplating things (work, financial matters, relationships, you name it) brings about precisely the unpleasant mental conditions that meditation can help to untangle.

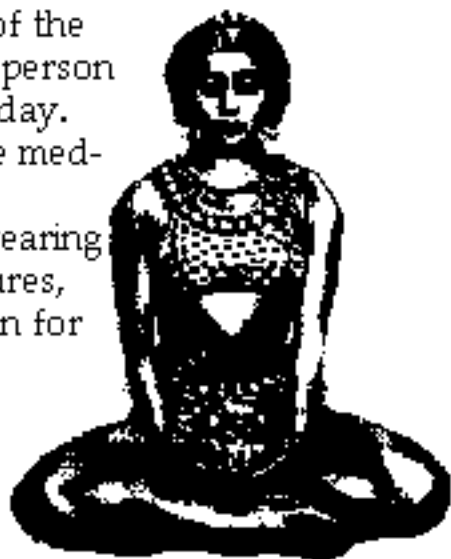
* The American Heritage Dictionary, 1992

So, What Really is Meditation?

People describe meditation in lots of different ways. For our purposes, let's define meditation as, "the techniques used to clear the mind of extraneous thoughts."

There are literally hundreds of different meditation techniques. This stack covers a few of the most basic, and teaches everything a person needs to know to start meditating today. Many surprisingly easy and accessible meditation techniques exist.

If you think meditation is about wearing a saffron robe, sitting in painful postures, and chanting strange words, you're in for a surprise.



Why Meditate?

Meditation offers plenty of benefits. Here are some:

- **Relaxation** - Probably nothing serves as a better source of relaxation than meditation.
- **Stress Reduction** - Meditation offers an ancient and ideal tool towards countering the stress of the modern world -- job worries, financial matters, personal problems, etc.
- **Pleasure** - While meditation may at first feel unpleasant for beginners, it quickly becomes something to look forward to.
- **Euphoria** - During meditation, your perception of reality may bend in interesting ways. You remain in total control, and no expensive or illegal chemicals are involved.
- **Behavior Improvements** - Many meditators notice undesirable character traits diminishing over time through meditation.
- **Spiritual Progress** - Meditating provides a direct connection to the universe and a method for detaching oneself from the

What Will Meditation Do?

The human mind, at least all those conditioned by Western culture, spends almost every moment thinking, reasoning, scheming, fearing, and generally whirring away like a machine with no "off" switch.

Yet, amazingly, all this activity and energy leads to virtually nothing beneficial. 99% of our thoughts are forgotten almost as soon as they are thought -- pushed out by the barrage of new thoughts crowding into the mind.

Oddly enough, many people pass through life without ever noticing how the mind never stops moving. Want to see for yourself how the mind constantly buzzes? Try Exercise One on the next screen.



Exercise One:

Do You Really Control Your Own Mind?

Sit in a chair in a quiet place. Get comfortable. Now spend two minutes in silence. Try to keep all thoughts from entering your mind. Above all, don't get mad at yourself when you flunk this test. Probably no new meditator can still his or her mind for more than a few seconds, let alone a full two minutes.

Naturally, you can't expect to hallucinate wildly, chat with God, or find true inner peace just by completing the first exercise (although you might find some of these things through later, more involved meditations.) But this exercise should give at least a taste of what's to come.

Exercise Two: A First Meditation

- Sit Comfortably.
- Close your eyes.
- Take four slow breaths. Pay attention only to the feel of the air as it passes in and out of your nostrils. Don't let any thoughts creep into your mind -- this, the essence of meditation, is harder than it sounds. Even for just four breaths.

After your four breaths:

- If you had a bunch of words or thoughts flow through your mind, don't get discouraged. One of the main goals of mediation lies in confronting your mind's out-of-control nature. Try another four-breath session after while. Eventually, this exercise won't feel that difficult, and you'll start to notice that you feel sharper and more aware after even a simple four-breath "vacation."
- Congratulations: you've stopped reading about meditation and actually completed your first short session!

How to Mediate

Learning when to meditate is the first part of learning how to meditate.

Most teachers advise two main daily half-hour sessions: once after waking up, and then a second in the evening. Some people like meditating right before sleep, while others have too much trouble fighting fatigue and therefore meditate earlier in the evening.

In practice, however, half hour sessions seem way too long to many beginners. There's no point in trying to meditate if you're only frustrating yourself. When I first started, keeping my concentration for any length of time felt like a painful chore, and I ended my main sessions after five minutes or less. As my concentration improved and my meditations deepened, it became easy (and enjoyable!) to remain focused for sessions lasting a half hour or more.

Choosing a Place

Before you start meditating, you need to pick out a good place that you can regularly use for your sittings.

Most teachers advise selecting a special, quiet area in your home as the place to practice meditation. The spot you choose should offer silence, comfort, and an absence of distraction. In your meditation place, you'll need a pillow and either a carpeted floor or a bed. A small but pleasant amount of light seems ideal: too much light can produce distraction, while too much dark can lead to fatigue.

Many meditators supplement their daily sessions with short meditations done in less than ideal places -- the bus, the office, or wherever they may find some idle time.

Sitting Posture

Beginners frequently confuse meditation with hatha-yoga, a practice which involves contorting the body into a variety of simple or intricate positions conducive to meditation. Fortunately, in order to meditate, you need not assume a posture more complicated than a comfortable sitting position.

Most people meditate sitting down. When you meditate in your customary place (on the floor or on a bed), cross your legs comfortably (Indian-style), and put a pillow under your butt. Sit upright and gently interlock your fingers or put your hands in whatever position feels comfortable.

Keep your posture as good as possible without letting yourself get overly conscious about it.



Meditating

OK, this is the stuff you've been waiting for: in your sitting posture, breath normally through your nose and concentrate on each breath.

I can sense your disbelief: "Concentrate on each breath?!? That's all meditation is??? Where's the chanting? Where are the special rituals? You want me to sit comfortably and just pay attention to my breath -- you must be joking!"

I can only respond by telling you to try it for a while -- it's much harder than it sounds. Your concentration will wander in and out, as your brain "spins out" onto strangely stupid avenues of thought in a desperate effort to avoid having to relax. Then, when you least expect it -- and maybe not after you've tried it a few dozen times -- your brain will give up and settle into...magic.

Just breath normally, focusing as completely as possible on the feeling of the air as it passes in and out of your nose.

Counting Breaths

The whole basis of meditation lies in concentrating on something simple and repetitive. This focus gradually loosens our hold on everyday problems and worries.

Many teachers advise counting breaths as a kind of “training wheels.” Starting by counting “One” on your first breath and then counting up one with each successive breath. After the count reaches four or five, restart your count to “One” on the following breath.

Counting breaths provides a nice tool to beginning meditators in that it helps to preserve focus on the breath, and it provides an instant warning when you've lost concentration: if you lose count, you've obviously stopped paying attention to the breath, and it's time to bring your attention back to your breathing.

Breathing Without Counting

Personally, I stopped counting my breaths within a couple of weeks after I began meditating. I liked how counting helped to train my mind. But as I got more advanced, thinking a word (number) with every breath seemed to block deeper levels of meditation.

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When not counting breaths, try your entire attention to **one** of following two things:

- The feel of the air as it passes in and out of your nostrils
- The rise and fall of your chest with each breath

Knowing When to End a Session

After a while, you'll probably make your main sessions about a half hour in length. Some wonderful teachers recommend setting a desired time for each session, and rigidly adhering to this goal.

Alternately, you can choose to meditate as long as its enjoyable and productive. Sometimes you'll need to stop when an anxiety wave hits that's simply too powerful to concentrate through. Over a period of weeks, beginners frequently notice their sessions naturally and comfortably growing in length.

Near the end of a session, a moment comes when you'll want to stop. Lie down, open your eyes, and take several gentle breaths to ease the transition back into the world.

Short Sessions

While half hour sessions around the start and end of each day help to keep your mind clear and your meditation progress on-track, don't forget about the value of brief sessions during the day lasting only a few seconds or minutes.

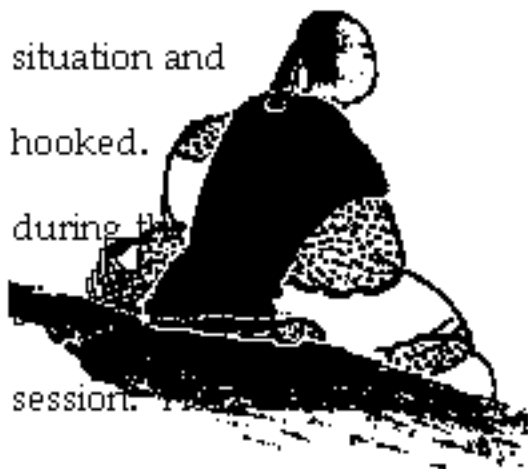
At those times -- on the bus, waiting for an appointment, before a meal, etc. -- when you have a few minutes to kill, try meditating for just a short time. Or just try a short session during or after a stressful

situation and

hooked.

during the

session.



you'll probably find yourself

A few short sessions
daytime will keep you in
your longer night-time

A Closer Look at the Mind

It seems that once you start meditating, your mind instinctively wants to wander. You concentrate earnestly on a breath, a second breath, and then halfway through your third you realize that your thoughts concern flamingoes in Florida.

So what do you do then? Well, most importantly, avoid getting angry with yourself. Don't think something like, "You idiot! Concentrate!" The mind naturally wants to wander, especially in the beginning. You've already done something right in recognizing your attention has slipped back to everyday thoughts, so now just relax and return focus to the breathing.

Again and again, you'll find your brain trying to run away with new thoughts. So again and again, just gently bring your focus back to your breath.

To put your wandering mind into everyday perspective, try Exercise Three on the next screen.

Exercise Three:

Does Your Mind Ever Get a Chance to Rest?

When you first start meditating, you'll likely be overwhelmed with how your mind protests your every attempt to relax as though it were an unbroken colt.

You may think that this unpleasant stuff happens only when you sit down to meditate, and that at almost all other times your mind is comparatively calm. The truth is that the untrained mind almost never gets a chance to relax, and in fact is accustomed to whirring away at all moments.

Next time you're walking down the street, pause and notice the thoughts involuntarily crowding your mind. Consider those thoughts and judge their importance. We probably spend 99% of our mental energies involuntarily spinning out thoughts that are forgotten as soon as they are conceived.

A Look at Thoughts

By now, you're probably wondering about all those thoughts that race through the mind. Where do these thoughts come from, and what methods exist to slow or control them?

Future meditations will probably bring a great deal of insight concerning the nature of these thoughts. You'll start to realize that, just as the heart beats every second or so whether you want it to or not, the brain thinks up new thoughts almost as rapidly and involuntarily.

So if your brain naturally floods itself with thoughts, you don't have much choice about their creation. What, then, can you do to keep from living a life immersed in a flood of passing, trivial thoughts?

Since the valve that allows thoughts to flood the mind can't be easily closed except by drugs, death, or the most advanced levels of meditation, it's important to know how to deal with the thoughts that inevitably come.

Handling Uninvited Thoughts

While you don't have a choice about what thoughts your brain produces, you do have a big choice in how you react to your thoughts, and your reaction can go along way toward calming the mind. Let's take an example: you're meditating and you suddenly become aware that you're thinking about a day off:

Option One: You follow the thought into its complex web: "Wow, tomorrow's Saturday. I've got to see Sally in the morning. It's been three weeks since I've seen her. I wonder how her new job's going. I should see if she and Jack want to try going to the flea market next week. No, maybe I should give her a little space until she's settled in her job..." and so on, as diving into each new thought produces a new one.

Option Two: You let the thought that tomorrow's Saturday pass, returning your attention to your breathing. A new thought soon replaces it. You let that thought pass too, and so on.

The Wave

One of the big reasons people meditate is to release the mind from all the nagging anxieties of “sane” life on earth.

Well, guess what? Those anxieties resent letting go of their hold on you. And from time to time, when you meditate, you'll likely become overwhelmed with a barrage of negative feelings. When you suddenly feel anxious, hyperactive, depressed, and unable to meditate, you'll know you're in the midst of a wave.

Simply relax and try to keep focused on your breathing. Some waves get so strong that you'll have to stop your meditation.

Realize, however, that the wave really signals an opportunity. The wave represents your anxiety's one last huge effort to break down your concentration. While a wave may last several seconds, maintaining calm focus for its duration often results in a profoundly deeper meditative state as soon as the wave passes: it's as though the wave retreats and leaves a reward washed up on the shore.

An Antidote for Dualism

Meditation can greatly help to cut through the “Yes - No” duality that tends to preoccupy our thought and substitute for feelings and true experience. Notice how, for most of us, perception seems inseparable with judgment. Upon encountering something, we immediately label it good or bad, pretty or ugly, hot or cold, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. The experience never just *is*. Soon, the true nature of our encounter gets replaced with a jumble of dualistic words -- and it's these words that evoke our feelings.



Meditation helps to suspend this labeling process. True non-judgmental experience replaces words and the lifetime of conditioned reactions and emotions these words bring forth.

A Light Switch or an Ocean?

Ironically, while meditation helps to break apart our tendencies to judge and label, one trap that new meditators frequently fall into involves judging the quality of their meditations, as though the sitting either ends **successfully** or **unsuccessfully**.

This judging might make sense if the mind were like a light switch; that is when you sat down to meditate the mind is “On” and during the meditation it shuts “Off.”

But like most things, the mind remains too complex for dualistic labels. It's more like the mind is an ocean. When you sit down to meditate, the waves might break violently, and when you finish the waters might seem somewhat still and calm.

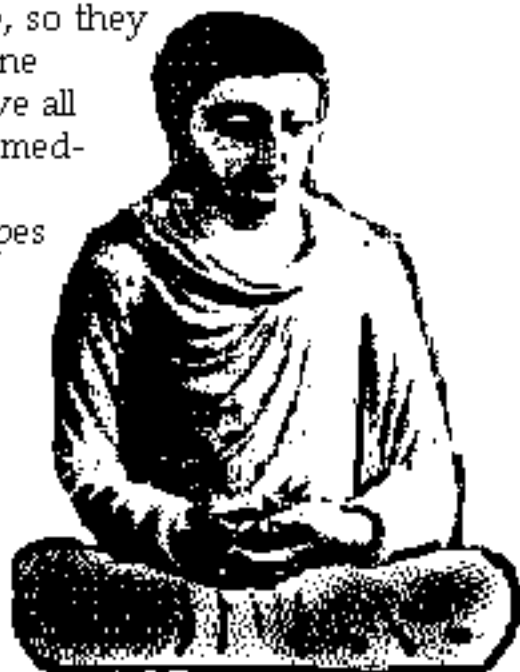
While an exceptionally practiced meditator might be able to still their mind like a pond on a humid, windless night, reaching this state is rare at first. Rather, your goal in meditating should involve quieting your mind as much as possible, and being content with what you achieve.

Other Types of Meditation

This stack mainly focuses on breath meditations, which are perhaps the most commonly practiced form of meditation. Breath meditations are unobtrusive, so they can be done in public without anyone catching on. Plus, you'll always have all the equipment you need, since this meditation requires only a set of lungs.

There are many, many other types of meditations. Since all meditation demands is a rhythmic source for concentration, you can come up with some great meditations on your own.

The next screen mentions a few common types of meditation, which you can try incorporating into your practice.



Three New Meditations to Try

Walking

Next time your walking somewhere, concentrate each time you put your foot down.

Chanting

Sit in the same posture you use for a breath meditation. Chant a sound, word, or phrase that's significant to you, concentrating on each repetition as you would on a breath during a breathing meditation.

Crickets

If you live in a place where you can hear crickets outside, go out one night and meditate to the rhythms of their chirping.

What I Get from Meditation

When I get deep into a sitting, my feelings translate only awkwardly into words, but here's a stab at it.

I feel my awareness in the husk of a body that's being held on a planet that's in turn held by the sun. There's 400 billion other suns in the Milky Way galaxy, and there's 100 billion other galaxies in the universe. Generously put, my body and its mortality in time constitute barely a vanishing speck.

Yet I have awareness and calm, and a consciousness that transcends time and space. I realize that the things we get caught up in are mainly a bunch of distractions: money, SAT scores, your job, what college you've gone to, what kind of car you drive.

For some reason, we put our energies into the details of our personal lives rather than in experiencing life. When I meditate, my little world and its thousand selfish desires drop away. And despite a strong sense of mortality and scale, I feel an eternal connection to love and awareness.

Going Further: A Look Ahead

Meditation seems one of those things that people tend to read about more than they actually do. Without sounding too much like a crusty old man, let me emphasize that the only way to achieve the benefits of meditation is by regularly sitting down to sessions.

Reading comes far easier than doing. And lots of new meditators make the mistake of rushing out and buying a bunch of books, reading them carefully, and then never getting around to regularly meditating. Your time, especially in the beginning, is much better spent meditating than reading about how to meditate.

This stack will give you all the tools you need to grow in your meditations for many months. The next screen recommends several excellent books that you may wish to pick up after a few weeks of regular sittings.

Selected Readings

Books about Meditation:

Ram Dass, *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook*

David Harp, *The Three Minute Meditator*

Stephen Levine, *A Gradual Awakening*

Books Indirectly Dealing with Meditation:

The Bhagavad Gita

Wavy Gravy, *Something Good for a Change*

Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Poo*

P.D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way*

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Meditation in Moments

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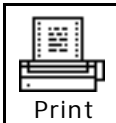
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