

## MEDITATION FOR HEALTH AND HAPPINESS

If you don't meditate, you're missing out on a scientifically proven way to relieve stress, calm your mind, and to experience a general sense of peace and happiness. It's not only easy, but it doesn't cost anything to do. Plus, you can do it in the privacy of your own home.

### WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Simply put, meditation is sitting still and quieting your mind. It is the act of being totally present with "what is," without making mental commentary. When you meditate, you are in your most pristine, natural state of being. In other words, your mind is quiet and you are "just being."

Think of meditating as the freedom to "just be." There's no pressure. There are no deadlines. And while there are a lot of different styles of meditation, there's really no right or wrong way to do it. You are simply in a calming, peaceful "state of being." I believe that when you are in this quiet state of mind, you are a human being, instead of a human doing....

While you'll find that meditation is peaceful, it's not exactly peace of mind. However, meditation is freedom from the mind. By that, I mean that during meditation, your mind will be free from your egoic thoughts or mental commentaries. The egoic mind gets conditioned to build up a sort of wall around who you are. Meditation breaks down that wall, so that the mental commentary (mind chatter) isn't there. Meditation allows you to say, "Who am I if I am not these thoughts?" This is the most important question on the planet. And it's through meditation that you can ask that all-important question and to go into yourself for true self-discovery.

You see, when you are meditating, you are thought-free, and you lose the sense of fear and desire. If you're in a state of fearing something, then you are in a state of wanting something.

I won't go into too much detail about this topic, because I discuss it at length in my article, "Living a Peaceful Life." If you haven't already read

or listened to this Podcast, I recommend that you do so before continuing. That way you will more fully understand what I mean by terms like “fear and desire,” accepting “what is” and many other references I’m using here.

So, let’s assume you’ve already covered the basics and move on.

## PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

Let’s face it. We’re living in very stressful times. If stress is allowed to continue over an extended length of time, the result can be bad for both your mind and your body. Let me give you an analogy to demonstrate this point.

Hold out your arm straight at shoulder level. Keeping it in that position probably won’t bother you at first, but the longer hold it there, the more it will hurt. The pain will get worse and worse, until you can’t stand it any longer. Finally, there will be so much pain that you’ll have to drop your arm to your side. Stress is like that. In the beginning, it may not bother you much, but over an extended period of time, it will take a toll on your health, both physically and mentally.

Studies show that prolonged stress can weaken the immune system and lead to a plethora of health problems, like high blood pressure, one of the biggest killers on the planet. In fact, according to the website, [meditationtherapy.com](http://meditationtherapy.com), stress-related illnesses account for more than 60% of all doctor visits in this country.

Unfortunately, most people alleviate their stress with things like alcohol, chocolate, or prescription drugs. But simply numbing the pain by depending on one or more of these crutches isn’t the long-term answer. Instead, why not practice daily meditation? It has been scientifically documented that meditation lowers blood pressure by allowing you to completely relax your body and clear your mind. Meditation reportedly reduces stress-induced hormones in the blood, alleviating anxiety, anger and many types of illness.

That right. Meditation can help with illnesses. Scientific studies have shown that meditation not only helps with stress reduction, it can actually increase physical healing. It has been successfully used to help patients suffering with everything from cat allergies, to heart palpitations, to back pain.

How is this possible? Because being in a meditative state increases the amount of endorphins produced by the brain, and it’s these endorphins that can assist our bodies in the healing process. These same endorphins make us feel happy and give us a positive, uplifted sensation. I call it the “ultimate natural high!”

## MEDITATION AND THE MIND

Initially, when people begin to meditate, they might not feel much. If this happens to you after a few times of trying to meditate, don't get discouraged. Like everything else, meditation takes practice. And remember, practice makes perfect! Everybody who has meditated consistently for a while will tell you that meditation is very relaxing and peaceful. If you practice meditation long enough and regularly enough, that peacefulness will be carried with you throughout the day.

Not only will you feel more at peace with yourself and your life in general, you'll find that the people around you will begin to experience your peacefulness. Ask anyone who has meditated between three and five years, and they'll tell you that they are a much softer and gentler human being. This is something I've experienced in my own life. The proof is in the pudding. The effects of meditation are contagious!

On a deeper level, meditation instills a sense that all is well. Because of this, you learn to simply live life, instead of constantly trying to analyze life. It pulls on your "true self," (who you really are), instead of your "false self" (what you have achieved, your accomplishments, goals, and so forth). To figure out who you really are, ask yourself, who am I if I take all of these external things away? Try taking away all of your accomplishments and ask yourself, "Who am I?"

By mentally removing all of these external things that are around you, you can get to the real crux of the question of whom or what you really are. And you can do this by cleaning your mind through meditation. That's because meditation allows you to have a true awareness of "what is." From the day you were born until now, awareness is the only thing that has been consistently present in you. Everything else in your life has, and will continue to change over time, like the jobs you'll have and even many of your ideas.

When you learn to quiet your mind and to be with yourself in silence, you will understand what and who you are.

## THE SCIENTIFIC STUDIES

In the late 1960s, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School conducted scientific studies to test the health benefits of meditation. He determined that meditation could be used successfully in treating physiological problems, like high blood pressure, heart disease, migraine headaches, and auto-immune diseases, such as diabetes and arthritis. During their meditation, he found that his test subjects had slowed heartbeats and breathing; their blood lactate levels were

lowered; and their brains had increased in alpha activity, which is a definite sign of relaxation. Dr. Benson also found that meditation was helpful in stopping or slowing obsessive thinking, anxiety, depression, and hostility.

In the "Set Point Study," scientists found that each of us has a natural "set point" in our brains for both good and bad emotions. The study found that people who are used to being happy have more activity in the front portion of their frontal lobes. The right side is more active in people who worry or are anxious. Even when major events occur in a person's life, like winning the lottery, scientists have found that brain chemistry shifts back to its normal, or set point within about six months. One of the most dramatic examples of what can be called "resetting the set point" was a study done with people who had suffered paralysis from spinal cord injuries. Although they could no longer walk and often suffered from depression in the short run, within six months of the accident, these individuals had returned to their normal mental set points and their original state of happiness. In other words, no matter what happens in a person's life, the shift back to the set point inevitably takes place.

The good news is that you CAN change your set point through meditation. The study proved that after only eight weeks of meditating for approximately one hour each day, six days a week, these same people reported that they had become happier. Follow-up tests showed that their set points had been changed, so that their normal level of mental happiness had been raised. In addition, they had become better at picking up emotional cues from others, and they reported developing more empathy towards other people's emotions. On the physical level, these same researchers found that the meditators' immune system response had been enhanced.

In a very recent UCLA study, researchers used high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs) to scan the brains of a group of subjects who were long-time meditators. They found that these people's brains were larger than their non-meditating counterparts. Another study found that aging people who meditate regularly don't lose their gray matter as fast as non-meditators. Apparently, the meditators' brains have noticeably thicker tissue in the prefrontal cortex, which is the region of the brain responsible for attention and control. Imagine the implications of these discoveries! Not only can meditation prevent brain cells from dying, which typically happens as we age, it can boost a person's brain size in several crucial regions. And what does it all mean? Researchers have concluded that meditation can actually make a person more intelligent. It can also give people who meditate regularly the ability to focus deeply and deal well with stress better than non-meditators.

Let me share one of the most interesting studies I've ever run across with you. Researchers worked with a Tibetan Buddhist monk, who agreed to allow scientists

to monitor his blood pressure, muscle movements, heart rate and skin temperature while he practiced deep meditation. Then the scientists created a sudden, extremely loud sound similar to a firecracker going off. Remarkable as it seems, the monk not only appeared to remain calm, his body registered almost no signs of reacting to the startling sound.

If you think that the benefits of meditating are exclusively for adults, researchers studied the effects of meditation on a group of sixth graders from two schools in the Detroit area. After four months of meditating for ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the afternoon, the researchers found that these kids scored higher in self-esteem and emotional competence. And how did these children feel about meditating? Many actually believed that their studies were better.

The fight or flight study – When someone becomes overly stressed, epinephrine and norepinephrine hormones are released into his or her brain and bloodstream. This causes muscle tension, and raises the person's blood pressure and heart rate, resulting in potential medical problems and even violent behavior. Very few drugs can counteract this, but meditation has been shown to consistently ameliorate this reaction.

Countless studies of the human brain have shown that there are five brain wave frequencies produced. (1) Beta waves resonate at 14 to 30 cycles per second and are your normal active mind state. (2) Gamma or High-Beta is the highest, fastest frequency brain state that occurs during periods of high-level information processing and serious multi-tasking. Gamma is 28 to 40 + cycles per second and is just beginning to get research attention. (3) Alpha waves occur when our brains are heading into a dream-like state. Tests have shown that this is the state our minds are in when we're daydreaming or doing light meditation.

Alpha waves resonate at 8 to 13 cycles per second. (4) Theta waves resonate at a slow 4 to 7 cycles per second. The brain experiences theta waves during heightened states of creativity, deep meditation, and when we're in a dream state during sleep. Writers and artists often produce their finest work while their brains are in the theta wave state. And, finally, (5) the slowest level brain waves, Delta, resonates at an ultra-slow ½ to 3 cycles per second. There's no dreaming; just a deep sleep state. People in very deep meditation produce Delta waves, a very concrete way of measuring the level of mental and physical relaxation achieved during the deepest levels of meditation.

It can take a long time for new meditators to work their way through the BETA and ALPHA levels. But take heart, the longer you practice, the more quickly you will be able to guide your mind into producing slower brain wave frequencies. Eventually, you, too, will be able to experience the Delta level of meditation.

Experiments teaching inmates how to meditate have been conducted at numerous jails with great results. As many as 40% more of the meditating inmates don't return to prison, as compared to their non-meditating counterparts. This results in a safer society and reduced cost to society in not having to take care of returning inmates.

This is just a small sampling of the research that has been done about the physical and mental benefits of meditation. Because there is so much evidence that meditation is beneficial, and for virtually no reason that we shouldn't, even doctors practicing Western medicine are now recommending it to their patients with cancer, AIDS, infertility, Attention Deficient Disorder, and many other illnesses.

## THE HISTORY OF MEDITATION

Meditation is practiced in cultures all over the world. But when and where did it begin?

The first concrete evidence of the practice of meditation was discovered by archaeologists, who found wall art in the Indus Valley depicting people sitting in the traditional meditation pose. In other words, the figures sat on the ground with crossed legs, hands resting on their knees, and their eyes slightly narrowed, but not completely closed. These ancient paintings have been dated to sometime between 5,000 to 3,500 B.C. There are also descriptions of meditation techniques found in Indian scriptures dating back around 3,000 years.

As the centuries passed, the basic concepts of meditation were adopted by most of the world's great religions. Though the methods may vary from culture to culture, much of the world's population believes meditation is an essential cornerstone of spiritual development.

The fact is that various forms of meditation have been incorporated into all of the major religions in one form or another, particularly in the mystical part of their traditions. For example, in Judaism, there's Kabala, which is, in a nutshell, a meditative field of study. The use of meditation in modern Judaism, (hit-ba-dee-doot) "hitbodedut" is one of the best known meditative practices.

Islam has two forms of meditation: The more mainstream that is mentioned in the Qur'an (or Koran) is (taa-faak-kur) "Tafakkur", which is contemplative meditation and reflection upon the universe. The second, less accepted and more mystical form is Sufism.

There are numerous variations of the Buddhist tradition, including Zen, Tibetan, Theravada, and many more. Basically, however, most Buddhist traditions involve

finding the path to Enlightenment. Meditation is one of the most essential ways to do this.

But what about people who practice traditional Christianity? In his book, *The Relaxation Response*, Dr. Herbert Benson states, "The term meditation is difficult for some people to grasp because it may connote exotic Eastern cults or Christian monks who spend most of their waking hours in monastery cells contemplating God."

There are many Christian practices that are considered forms of meditation. Besides the various sects of Christian monks, other connections with the Eastern religions include counting rosary beads, and the Adoration, which focuses on the Eucharist in Catholicism. Biblical scholars point out references to meditation in the Bible, like the statement in the Old Testament that reads, "Be still and know that I am God." Is that a directive for people to quiet their minds through meditation? I believe that it is. In Joshua 1:8 of The Old Testament, there's a reference to meditating. In fact, the World Community for Christian Meditation was founded in 1991 to continue the work of the Benedictine monk, John Main, who introduced meditation in the form of repetitive prayer as part of his teachings of the Christian faith.

I could go on and on with examples, but the fact is that you don't have to practice any particular religious tradition to enjoy the benefits of meditation. The practice, by itself, can be an invaluable tool in healing and stress reduction, as we have already discussed. You can follow your own particular faith and still meditate. One doesn't conflict with the other. Millions of people all over the world believe that meditation is the way to clear your mind of extraneous thoughts so you can listen to God, while praying is considered talking to God.

Yoga and meditation were introduced to the United States early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Swami Vivekananda and popularized by Paramahansa Yogananda. In the 1960's there was an explosion of interest in meditation fueled by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi teaching Transcendental Meditation.

With the influx of Eastern philosophy into the United States and millions of Americans now taking Yoga and meditation classes, meditation has become more mainstream than ever. And with all of the research being done about the positive benefits of meditating, this trend is likely to continue.

## TYPES OF MEDITATION

Because meditation has been incorporated into so many cultures around the world, it's no wonder that there are so many ways to do it.

Here some examples:

1. Mantras - Use of a prayer, word or mantra to go with your breathing. For example, you can say, "I am peaceful." Divide these words into four parts. As you breathe in, say "I am." And as you breathe out, say "peace-ful." Of course, you're not speaking the words, but you are thinking them silently.

If you are a Christian, you can use the word, "Jesus." Breathing in, think "Je-sus. And again breathing out, think, "Je-sus." Another popular word to use is "maranatha," which means, "Come Lord" or "Christ Cometh." This mantra actually goes back to the early church.

In Hinduism, they often use Krishna as their word or phrase. Think "Krish-na," while breathing in, and "Krish-na" while breathing out. Again, it's done in unison with your breath.

2. Guided meditation - This is done by playing a CD with someone talking to you, as they guide you into a meditative state. Incidentally, I have created a Podcast that you can listen to with a guided meditation.

3. Background music - Some people prefer to use a CD with soft music while they're meditating. This can help them relax and get into meditation faster than having no background sounds at all. Numerous studies have been done with harp music, for instance, showing its calming influence on the brain. There are all sorts of CD's available that are especially good for meditation. Find one that works best for you.

4. Silent meditation – Personally, I prefer meditating in silence. Scientific studies show that people who meditate in silence achieve the deepest levels of meditation. See if it works for you.

5. Walking meditation - Let's say it's a beautiful Spring day and you feel like going outside. Why not do a "walking meditation?" It's easy and very pleasant. Walk slowly, taking a step with each breath. You can walk in a circle or a straight line. It's best to find a route where you don't have to think about what you're doing, like a track at the local high school. Follow a mantra or phrase with your steps. If you're walking in a crowd, you can walk a little faster, but try to have a rhythm. Keep your eyes on the ground, but not focused.

## WHERE TO MEDITATE

If possible, find a quiet room or a place outside where you won't be disturbed. If necessary, wear sound-blocking headphones to drown out the noise around you. Some people like to use soft music or guided meditation CD's, and this can help

eliminate noise that might otherwise distract you. Make sure that everyone knows not to disturb you. Unplug or turn off your phones. Wear comfortable clothes, or loosen belts, buttons, or anything else that might cause you discomfort. Find a comfortable, relaxing position. Eventually, make a special place in your home for meditation. You can have a candle, a statue of Buddha, a picture of Jesus, or whatever makes you feel at peace in this special place.

Not only do I have a special place to meditate in my home, but the fact is that I believe I've created a peaceful, meditative household. You can do it, too.

### MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

I started meditating when I was 19, after reading a book by Dr. Herbert Benson titled, *The Relaxation Response*. Among other things, Dr. Benson's book, discusses how to practice a basic form of meditation and the health benefits of doing it.

Through the years, I've studied hundreds of techniques. But I keep going back to the basic methods of doing it. I'll share this with you in a few minutes.

Before continuing, I would like to say that I can personally attest to the fact that meditation really works. I need less sleep than I used to – only three to six hours a night. I experience life as being very peaceful. It's much harder for me to get upset about things. I guess you could say that my fuse is longer. My family has seen a change in me. When something happens, like a reckless driver cutting me off on the freeway, it only takes a few breaths to calm myself and to return to a very relaxed state.

Another effect of meditating is that I've learned to love silence. My mind is much less judgmental, and I have fewer expectations. I now flow with life and love life more than ever. Needless to say, it's helped my overall health, both physical and mental.

During meditation, I have had incredible mystical experiences. I've been transported mentally to a place where I've felt as if I'm one with the universe. It's an ecstatic experience, like getting high without drugs and their terrible side effects. I suppose it's like the bliss that heroine addicts talk about. It's way beyond words. Of course, this takes time and practice to get to this deep state of meditation. Earnestness is the key. You must meditate on a pretty regular basis. This will bring the best results.

### LET'S MEDITATE

Many people would like to meditate, but don't know how to do it or where to begin. Others are afraid of making a mistake or that they might not do it properly. Here's the good news. It's very easy. While some meditation practitioners teach that you should sit in a certain pose, breathe in a regimented way, or do specified chant or mantra, after three decades of meditating almost daily, I believe that you don't need to follow any steadfast rules. You don't need special equipment or fancy gym clothes. All you need is a quiet place to sit and a little time.

So, let's begin with a very basic meditation to introduce you to the process. In my opinion, this is the most straightforward, least complicated way I've found to do it. First, sit in a comfortable position. You don't need to sit in the familiar "full lotus" posture, with your legs crossed like a pretzel. Sitting in a chair works well, too. But make sure that your legs are uncrossed, feet flat on the floor, and that your hands are resting comfortably on your lap.

The main thing is that you keep your back posture pretty straight. The reason for this is that many people become so relaxed during meditation, they fall asleep! That's less likely to happen if you're sitting, rather than lying down, and if you keep your back fairly erect.

Next, focus on your breath. Begin taking slow, deep breaths. Pay attention to each breath. Let the air flow in and out in a slow, steady rhythm. There's nothing mystical about this process. The reason that breathing is very important in meditation is that adding the extra oxygen to your body will help you relax.

Continue to focus on your breathing. Take long, slow breaths. Watch your breath coming in...and going out. Coming in...and going out. You'll notice that those tightened areas of your body will begin to loosen. Focus on your breath and continue your deep breathing.

This is where the mind can try to get in the way. You begin to think of what you need to do later, someone you forgot to call, an errand that needs to be run. Don't worry. It's very normal for thoughts to come up while you're meditating, especially when you're first learning how to do it.

It takes practice to let go of these random thoughts that dash around in your head, a process that is often called "monkey mind." When this happens, here's what I recommend. Don't try to suppress these thoughts. Instead, witness them. Then simply bring your mind back to your breathing. Do this each time a thought tries to distract you. Just acknowledge that you're having a thought and let it go. In time, you'll find that have fewer and fewer thoughts to distract you. But for now, don't worry about it. Simply acknowledge each thought...and then go back to your deep breathing.

Your goal in this very basic meditation is to sit comfortably, follow your breath, and work towards being in a thought-free state. Don't try to force things. You don't need to have any expectations. Just flow with your breath. It's easy.

After a few minutes of that gentle following of the breath, you'll find that your mind gets still. When you eventually hit that state, you'll find that it's very peaceful.

Try to meditate twice a day. I do it for about an hour in the morning, and an hour before I go to bed. You may want to start with a shorter time and build up to thirty minutes or more. Find what's comfortable for you, and do it consistently.

### OKAY, LET'S REVIEW

These are the key techniques of meditation:

1. First, get comfortable, either sitting on a chair or on a mat.
2. Begin by taking a slow, deep breath.
2. Then focus on your breathing; coming in and going out.
3. Don't suppress your thoughts or follow them. Instead, you witness them. You simply acknowledge that thought, and then you get back to your breath.

### SOURCES OF THE STUDIES

1. A team of Emory University (Georgia) researchers (which included Milos Cekic, Giuseppe Pagnoni and Ying Guo) conducted the **gray matter study**, regarding the effects of meditation on the aging brain. "Think on This: Meditation May Protect Your Brain," by Michael Haederle, Oct. 2008; ([www.miller-mccune.com/article/704](http://www.miller-mccune.com/article/704)) In addition, the study regarding the fact that **aging meditators had developed thicker tissue in portions of their brains** was done by Sara Lazar, a researcher at Harvard University.

2. The **Buddhist monk's startle study** was done by Paul Ekman, Ph.D, psychology professor at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine, and Robert Levenson, Ph.D, a psychology professor from the University of California, Berkeley. "Tibetan Buddhism and research psychology: a match made in Nirvana?" *Monitor on Psychology Magazine*, Dec. 2003.

3. "Ancient Art: The **origins of meditation** are lost in the mists of time," from the article "Health/Fitness." *O.C.Metro Magazine*, April 13, 2006.

4. Ronald L. Stram, M.D., who practices integrative medicine in New York, discussed his experience with meditation helping his patients suffering from a variety of physical ailments, from cat allergies to heart palpitations in the *O.C. Metro* article, April 13, 2006.
5. The study in which **school children in Detroit practiced meditation** was a University of Michigan pilot study. Rita Benn was the lead researcher and is the director of education at the Integrative Medicine Program at UM's Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research Center. "Well Being: Meditation Earns High Marks: Preteens who learn to quiet their minds enjoy greater self-esteem, a recent study has found." *Yoga Journal*, Jan/Feb 2004
6. Herbert Benson, associate professor at Harvard Medical School and president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute in Chestnut Hill, Mass., did the "**Fight or Flight**" study. Discussed in the article, "Learn to Meditate," *U. S. News & World Report*, Dec.2004/Jan. 2005 issue
7. The **set point study** was conducted by Richard Davidson, Ph.D., Director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., founder of the respected Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester. July/Aug. 2003 issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*.
8. The study of the **effect of meditation on prisoners** was done by psychologists at the Kings County North Rehabilitation Facility near Seattle, WA. "Just Say Om," *Time Magazine*, Aug. 4, 2003.
9. Dr. Herbert Benson, Harvard Medical School, conducted countless studies in his book, *The Relaxation Response*, Avon Books (1976), which are cited in this article.
10. The study on **how meditation makes people more intelligent by growing the brain** was done by Eileen Luders and her research team at UCLA using MRI scans and published in the journal *NeuroImage* 2009.