

MEDITATION BASICS

An introduction to the practice of meditation by Stephanie Noble

Why Meditate?

As with any new regimen, at first it may be challenging to make time for meditation. To help motivate you, here are a few of the most obvious benefits of that can come from regular meditation:

- 1) Relaxation, release from everyday tensions, a little time out from frantic activity to settle down and get centered.
- 2) Regeneration and healing, mentally, emotionally and physically.
- 3) Clarity and compassion.
- 4) Self-exploration, insight and discovery; potential for personal growth and transformation
- 5) Accessing an inner wellspring of wisdom; feeling that connection, that sense of acceptance and belonging.
- 6) Bringing the meditative awareness and attention into daily life, enriching every moment with boundless appreciation and joy.
- 7) Transformation of relationships when operating from a sense of connection. (Your family and friends will appreciate your meditating, so don't think it is selfish to take this time for yourself!)
- 8) Potentially global transformation and world peace as more people operate from that sense of connection and find peaceful resolution to conflicts.

These benefits are listed only to get you to practice meditation. Once you are meditating, forget them. Don't let them become goals to attain. That would only cause a sense of expectation, comparison, impatience, and be disruptive rather than helpful.

FORMS OF MEDITATION

There are many methods of meditation including repetition of a mantra, visualization, visual concentration and various movement meditation practices. The form I do and that I will be sharing instruction on is awareness or insight meditation. This is simply following the breath, being fully aware of what is in the present moment, including any arising thoughts, emotions, sensations and sounds.

WHY WE THINK MEDITATING IS DIFFICULT

Conditioning

Since meditation is not yet a part of our daily life, we easily forget to do it. Just like exercise or any other habit we try to fit in to our lives, it takes an initial effort to get us hooked. Once we feel the positive effects of regular meditation, it is much easier to remember to do it.

Expectation

We often have an exalted idea of what meditation is and believe that it is an experience beyond our mere mortal capacity to achieve. So we discourage ourselves from trying. If we do try it and our own experience doesn't meet our expectations of cosmic euphoria, we give up. There is a mystique around meditation with a resulting elitism that we can ill afford at a time the very earth is crying out for us to take a few moments to quiet down, listen in and feel connected.

Judgment

While we all have thoughts during meditation, the harsh critical thoughts we may have when first beginning to practice meditation, the ones that belittle us for being foolish to sit quietly, can derail the meditation if we let them. But if we continue despite these voices, they will eventually soften and dissipate.

Striving

Spiritual ambition may motivate us to practice meditation but it doesn't allow us to relax into the very experience it struggles to create. Instead it creates judgment and comparison. It sees what it believes to be enlightenment on the horizon. But horizons never come any closer, so the striver is caught in an eternal living for the future. If we can just allow for this experience right now in all its richness and complexity, even if at first glance it seems dull as dishwater. If we just pay closer attention we might see that even dishwater has some pretty fascinating rainbow bubbles.

PREPARATIONS FOR MEDITATION

Ultimately, perhaps, no special preparations will be required. A practiced meditator can meditate any time, any place, under any conditions.

But for most of us, developing the practice of meditating requires some degree of ritualized preparation. Just as we have some before-bedtime habits that cue the body-mind that it is time to sleep, so we prepare ourselves for meditation.

Environment

For meditating at home, it's nice to have a specific chair or floor space for a cushion that reminds us to practice. It's helpful, especially at first, to be able to shut the door and request that others not disturb you for this period. Turning off cell phones and other potential disruptions will aid in create a quiet time and place for practice. It doesn't matter if there is noise outside our immediate area. The 'perfect' setting isn't necessary and the desire for one only gives us an excuse not to get started.

Body Preparations

Meditating on a full stomach is not recommended, so preferably meditate before a meal or at some neutral time of day or night.

Stretching before meditation is always a good idea to help release knots and tension. If you do yoga or other forms of movement, consider meditating directly afterwards.

Sometimes if you are feeling tense, taking a few deep breaths helps release inner tensions. Allow this to be a real cleansing breath, and with each exhalation, feel yourself relaxing deeper and deeper. Unless you are doing a particular breath work meditation

that calls for continued purposeful breathing, return to normal breathing after these few relaxing cleansing breaths.

Posture

The longer we sit, the more important it is that our position be sustainable. To this end make sure that if you are sitting in a chair you are not reclining on cushions but are sitting upright, preferably on the forward part of the chair with your feet squarely planted on the ground.

It is important for the back that the buttocks be positioned at least slightly higher than the knees, whether you are in a chair or on the floor. In a chair you might want to add a cushion under your buttocks. If sitting on the floor in a cross-legged position, if your knees are up in the air, you need more cushions under your buttocks. If the knees are still in the air, you might want to put cushions under them to support them. OR you might prefer to sit in a kneeling posture with the buttocks on a cushion of a height that feels comfortable for your body, or you can use a low meditation bench to support you.

Sense in to your body and adjust until you feel solid and stable in your position, relying as much as possible on the skeleton to support you, so that the muscles may remain relaxed.

How Long Should You Meditate?

If you are new to meditation and trying it on your own, I suggest you start with five minutes. Set a timer and see how it goes. That's not much of a commitment, but it's enough to get a sense of the experience. Then build up to twenty, thirty or forty minutes over a period of time.

The Meditation

We begin by closing our eyes (you can leave them open with a downward gaze) and setting our intention to be present with our experience, and to be compassionate with ourselves when we get lost in thought. That's the basic instruction. It's really simply sitting and being aware that you are sitting, continually bringing the wandering mind back to the present experience.

Remember that there is no wrong experience of meditation. You might experience frustration. You might experience boredom. You might notice expectations not being met. You might notice yourself afraid you are not doing it right. You might notice yourself judging your experience. You might notice comparing this experience to another you've had or to something someone else said they had. This is all fine. Just stay with it and keep noticing. It's not the experience itself but the development of our ability to stay present with it that is important. And like any activity, it takes practice, developing new 'muscles' we haven't really used before. Be as kind as you can be to yourself.

Inevitable thoughts, sensations and feelings come up during meditation. Your goal is not to get rid of them, but to be fully aware of them and to notice them passing through without getting attached to them. One technique that helps many people to release the attachment is called 'noting'.

When you become aware of a thought, you say (silently) "thought". When an emotion rises up in you, you simply name it "feeling". And when you hear a sound outside or have an itch, simply say "sensation". It sounds way too simple to work, but it really does quiet them down. Try it!

When you find yourself tempted to pursue a thread of feeling, just note it. (If you like you can remind yourself to look into it later. Right after meditation you are in a very receptive state to get answers to questions like, "What was that feeling about?" It may be a rich vein for self-exploration. By promising yourself to explore it after meditation, you satisfy that feeling's need to be acknowledged without getting yourself off track.)

If it is helpful to you, think of your mind as a little puppy, rambunctious, lovable and all over the place, bouncing from one thought or sensation to another, chasing down butterflies of feeling or our own tails of thoughts, lost in the experience. By thinking of the mind this way, we can be more loving and forgiving of its natural wanderings. We don't scold a puppy for being a puppy, but if we want to train it we do encourage it gently but firmly. And that's what we do with our mind. Imagine your puppy-mind on a leash. When you find yourself lost in thought gently pull your puppy mind back from where it wandered. Eventually you will become aware of your wandering puppy-mind much sooner, and the leash will be shorter. And maybe sometimes the puppy will calmly walk beside you...but don't count on it!

If you find you fall asleep during meditation, try doing it at a different time of day. If that doesn't help, do a standing meditation or meditate with your eyes open. It is simply the body mind being unclear what is expected, and eventually you should be able to stay awake during meditation.

After Meditation

To get the most value out of the meditation, allow time for a slow easy transition back into daily life. Don't schedule any appointments or obligations immediately following meditation. Instead, allow time to walk, make notes in a journal, or do household chores, preparation and eating a meal or personal hygiene in a mindful way. Rushing after meditation wastes the calm centeredness you have to which you have become attuned. See if you can sustain whatever awareness, openness and appreciation you have attained through your practice. Ultimately the gift of regular meditation practice is the spaciousness it brings into our lives. It is a gift that benefits all beings, not just ourselves.

Most people find it helpful to attend a weekly class to learn to meditate. Look into ones in your area. If you live in the San Francisco Bay Area, consider attending classes at [Spirit Rock Meditation Center](#). And of course, feel free to [contact me](#) about classes I offer.