

Understanding the mind with meditation

Having a regular meditation practice is by far my single most important habit. Interestingly, this practice has helped me form other habits; I'm now a lot more peaceful, more focused, not as worried about discomfort, and more attentive to and appreciative of everything in life. And, as it happens, far more productive.

Most importantly, meditation, journaling each session, and then reflecting on my journal once a month, helps me understand the mind better. Before I was meditating, I rarely gave thought to what was going on inside my head; looking back, it feels like I'd been sleepwalking my way through life.

From time to time, course, I'd catch myself, but being more aware of what's going on means I now *pause*, and choose whether or not to go with the flow. Understanding myself better means I have greater flexibility in what I do, and I tend to respond with care for all beings, with compassion. And a wonderfully unexpected result – worrying has just dropped away.

But developing a *regular* meditation practice is hard. We find this out pretty quickly. Be patient, and don't expect to be good at it for a while. This is why it's called practice. Start with few expectations, and as time goes on your meditations will become more and more rewarding.

Here are a few suggestions to help you get started and, importantly, keep going. This is *not* a programme. You may find it useful to re-read this once a month, perhaps when you go through your meditation journal.

► **Sit for just three minutes**

Meditating for three minutes seems ridiculously easy. If you find you can do it, add a further three minutes. Increasing just a little at a time, before you know it, you'll be meditating for 12 minutes a day and that's fantastic.



▶ **Do it first thing each morning**

It's all too easy to promise yourself you're going to meditate every day, and then forget about it, or find reasons not to do it. Include the practice in your daily schedule, doing it every morning soon after you get up. Put a sticky note on the bathroom mirror that reads MEDITATE.

▶ **Don't get caught up in 'how' ... just do it**

Some people stress about where to sit, how to sit, whether to sit on a cushion, a stool, a chair, and worry that if they sit in the lotus position they'll get stuck. *Fuggedaboudit!* Sit on a comfy chair somewhere quiet, settle down, and close your eyes. It'll only take a few minutes.

▶ **Notice how you're feeling**

As you begin to settle into a meditation session, notice how you're feeling. Are you tired? Anxious? Busy? How does the body feel? Whatever you bring to this meditation session is completely okay; it's what's happening to you on that particular morning.

▶ **Take just one mindful breath**

Or perhaps two or three deep mindful breaths to settle yourself down, placing your attention on your breath as it comes in and following it in through your nose, all the way into your lungs, then ...

▶ **The mind will wander**

This will happen every time you sit, and is totally, completely and utterly normal. When you notice the mind wandering, smile. You may feel frustrated having a mind that wanders, but it really is perfectly okay not to stay focused. At the end of that meditation, reflecting on what went on the mind is key to developing a worthwhile practice. Journal what went on; it takes a while to make this a habit, too.

▶ **Develop an attitude of kindness**

When you notice thoughts and feelings arising, observe them with kindness. See these thoughts as friends. They're part of you, though not all of you of course. Be gentle with yourself.



- ▶ **Don't worry about doing it wrong**
You simply cannot do it wrong. There's no one right way to do it, so be happy you're making the time to do it.
- ▶ **You cannot empty the mind**
A common misperception about meditation is that you're going to stop all thought and clear the mind. Wrong! This *may* happen from time to time, but it's not the goal. The brain is a thought factory, and we can't shut it down. When the mind wanders, the mind wanders. Full stop.
- ▶ **Stay with whatever arises**
When thoughts and feelings arise, stay with them. It's normal to want to avoid difficult feelings such as frustration, anger and anxiety, but amazingly useful to stay with these feelings for a while. Be curious.
- ▶ **Getting to know yourself**
Meditation practice helps us learn how the mind works. What *is* actually going on in there? By watching the mind wander, getting frustrated, seeing ourselves trying to avoid awkward feelings, we start to understand ourselves a lot better. One tiny bit at a time.
- ▶ **Become friends with yourself**
As you get to know yourself, cultivate a friendly attitude toward yourself – and toward others. Watch those critical thoughts; you're getting to know a friend. Smile, and give yourself a little love.
- ▶ **Notice sounds, smells and the sensation of sitting**
When you're used to sitting quietly, notice what you hear with eyes closed. Become aware of sound, but don't judge a sound as 'good' or as 'annoying'. It's just a sound. You may notice smells, and sensations in the body from sitting. If you need to move, do so slowly and focus on the the body as you move.
- ▶ **Commit**
To get real benefit from the practice, commit to meditating daily for a fixed period. Start with a month.



▶ **Do it anywhere**

You can also practice meditation at work, on the bus, even as you're walking somewhere. Sitting meditation is a good place to start, and to reflect on practising this style of mindfulness for the rest of your life.

▶ **Find other people to meditate with**

Most of us find that sitting with others as we meditate encourages us to do it at home. Ask questions. Get support. Encourage others. Invite some friends over to meditate in your living room, perhaps.

▶ **Practicing with friends**

You may prefer to meditate alone, you can do it with your partner or child, or with a friend. If your buddy is doing it somewhere else, making a commitment to check in after meditation every day could help you keep doing it.

▶ **When you've finished, smile**

When you've finished a session, however it went, smile. Be grateful that you given time to yourself, that you stuck with it, that you showed yourself how trustworthy you are, that you took a little time to get to know yourself, to make friends with yourself. This is a great use of the precious minutes of your life.

Meditation isn't always easy, or peaceful, but it in the long term it really does result in amazing benefits – for ourselves as a person, as active, engaged members of our communities, and for this rapidly overheating planet.

But don't believe a word of this – see for yourself. Start today and you may well find yourself doing it for the rest of your life. And wherever you are on this planet, when you want to talk about your practice, get in touch.

For the scientifically inclined, if you set yourself the task of doing 12 minutes of meditation each day, over a year this adds up to 4,380 minutes, which in days comes to ... goodness.

