

Starting a Meditation Practice? Tips and Myths

Being still and silent really helps

- Choose a location and time of day when you can be in a quiet setting and not interrupted.
- To sit still for 15 min, you must be structurally comfortable. Use proper posture.
 - Sit so you are completely vertical and balanced in the torso and hips. You can imagine there is a string pulling your spine up through the top of your head up into the ceiling.
 - If you are sitting on a chair or couch, you might need to put a folded blanket on the back of it since many are tilted ~10 degrees backward. Put both feet on the floor about hip distance apart.
 - If you sit on the floor, having some height (like a thick pillow or folded blanket) under your hips is helpful. You can kneel or sit cross-legged. If cross-legged, make sure your knees are on the floor or supported by pillows so you can relax your hip flexor muscles.
 - Relax the shoulders open and back, pull the shoulder blades down toward the ground gently. Hands are in your lap or on a pillow on your lap.
- Remain still, resist the impulse to shift positions or scratch, etc. If/When that impulse comes up, look right at and say “thank you, not now, we are being still now”. And breathe in to it. (I know that sounds silly for some of the readers, but really, that works.) As you re-educate your body to rest in a structurally supported position, the mind will slow down and rest... frequently anyway. (Sometimes the thinking won't slow down if you are avoiding / need to look at some aspect; the mind will take the quiet time to show you, so look for patterns and listen to the quiet subtle voices and emotions as well as the loud ones).

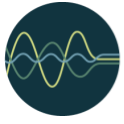
Start with following your breathing

Whether you are on your own or with a group class, start by feeling the breath come through your nose, throat, and into the lungs. Your whole rib cage – front, back, sides - will move. Feel the air flowing inside you. Relax your belly and let the diaphragm contract and release so the belly moves a lot. You can count how long your inhale is (1,2,3,4,5) and your exhale (1,2,3,4,5) and then make that period longer and fuller (1,2,3,4,5,6,7). Then begin your meditation practice (there are hundreds of techniques).

If this is too annoying, try the 5-senses meditation instead. There is a video on my website (Free Resources).

My mind won't shut up

Exactly. Just like you cannot force your eyes to not see, or your ears to not hear, you cannot force your mind to stop thinking. With meditation, we are seeing into and re-training how our minds work and handle situations. In most meditations, we practice concentrating on one object – the breath, an image, a question, etc. The mind will get distracted and think about something else. When it does, just return to the selected focus and concentrate again (e.g. breath, image,



question, etc). If it feels like work and it is frustrating, good. That gives you the insight that your mind has been trained to be scattered and that's certainly one thing that causes you stress. Situations are a lot easier to figure out and resolve if you are in them, here and now and focused, rather than distracted in a personal fantasy based on memory or projection or a text. The guidance of 'clear your mind' is frequently misinterpreted to mean all thinking and observation stops. Thinking might stop for a few seconds, but the mind is not controllable. A better translation is: "Observe all the details and become clear about what is going on with your mind, your body, and all around you". Meditation helps enable this focus.

Should I have my eyes open or closed?

Either is OK for short meditation periods. I find that closing my eyes is helpful when I am concentrating on 'inside the body' (e.g. breathing or imagery) meditations. For meditating longer periods, all senses meditations, and inquiry practices, having the eyes open works much better. This way you are less likely to get distracted into a daydream or fall asleep, and more likely to apply the technique during other parts of the day when your eyes are normally open. Just look at the floor, about 3 feet (1 m) in front of you. Don't look around – just look at that spot. If you wear glasses, take them off and look at the blurry view.

What can I practice?

Having a trained instructor and committed people doing it with you makes it easier. Look for a meditation (only) class in your area, such as at a local Zen center or yoga studio. You can also try an app: *Calm*, *Headspace*, and *Insight Timer* are popular. I recommend starting with nature sounds, or a very basic guided meditation for breathing or a body scan. Sometimes the guided meditation are well informed, sometimes they are not. Observe your reaction and turn off the app if it sounds or feels 'wrong'. Then explore that intuition or defense mechanism.

Why am I doing this?

I encourage everyone to have a daily meditation practice (20 - 60 min). Developing awareness of your thinking and emotions, controlling impulses, accepting your intuition are as important as training your physical body and requires practice. Thousands of scientific studies have shown there are many benefits of regular meditation, such as:

- Develops concentration and cognitive performance
- Relieves and prevents anxiety, anger, depression
- Relieves and prevents effects of trauma, substance abuse, ADHD...
- Promotes relaxation, sense of peace / balance
- Meditates stress
- Enhances intuition and kindness