

## Meditation and Inner Balance

The Latin root of the word meditation is similar to the root for "medical" or "medicate." This suggests attending to or paying attention to something. The simple, yet profound practice of meditation allows us to experience inner contentment and balance, bringing relief from the stress of daily life.

So, how do you meditate? I personally, cannot just close my eyes and instantly clear my mind. How do you think of absolutely nothing? How do you stop the many restless thoughts and tension in your body? So, instead of just trying to clear your mind and focus on nothing, give yourself something to focus on. For example, focus on the breath or say a mantra to keep your mind simple and calm. Finding inner peace helps to make you feel less scatter brained.

Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Sit on the floor or in a chair. Imagine you're sitting with your back against a wall, keeping the natural curvature of your spine. Imagine a string gently lifting your spine from the tailbone to the top of the neck. Close your eyes, but don't squint them. Let your eyebrows slide wide toward your ears. Smooth out your forehead. Relax your upper lip and jaw. Imagine comfortable sandbags gently pressing your shoulders down. Take your time and enjoy the process of letting go of tension physically in your body. Meditation is the art and science of letting go, beginning with the body and then progresses to our thoughts. Maybe saying and repeating a mantra out loud or mentally inside will help your quiet your focus too. A mantra is a word used to distract the mind from restless thoughts, such as "Ohm."

Once your body is relaxed, bring your awareness to your breath. Observe your breath, without trying to control it. At first your breath may be irregular, but gradually it will become smooth and even. Imagine your breath is not just going in and out of your lungs. But, your breath is entering every single cell of the body, dilating and expanding each cell. Imagine each cell in your body is like a sponge, soaking up the oxygen you breath in, and gently squeezing out the stress and toxins as you exhale. Then, imagine your whole body is like a giant sponge, filling up with clean and healthy air as you inhale. Then, getting rid of anything you don't need as you exhale.

Next, feel your breath entering in and filling up spaces in your body. Feel your breath entering your lungs, chest, stomach, between each of your vertebrae in your spine, between each of your back ribs, underneath your shoulder blades, into the back of your neck, and in every single joint in your body (shoulders, elbows, wrists, knuckles, hips, knees, and ankles). As you inhale, widen your eyebrows and smooth your forehead. As you exhale, drop your shoulders and relax your jaw.

Allow yourself to experience your breathing in an open and accepting way. Inhale through your nose a full deep breath, and exhale out through your nose or mouth. Inhaling through your nose encourages deeper fuller breaths. This is because your nostrils are a narrower passageway, taking longer for you to inhale. Open yourself so fully that eventually there is no distinction between you and the breathing.

While meditating, many thoughts may enter your mind such as, "Am I doing this right? How long will this take? I need to add something to my shopping list. I wonder what's on tv tonight?" Instead of reacting to your thoughts, and listening to your restless mind, simply bring your mind back to the focus on your breath. It's not the thoughts that disturb you, but your reaction to them. The focus on your breath becomes so important, that the restless thoughts get pushed out of your mind. There is no more room for these various thoughts, because your breath consumes you, calming your entire mind and body.

Through practicing meditation, you learn to react to daily life experiences in the same way you learn to react to distracting or negative thoughts. For example, if someone says something negative to you, you become angry or depressed. If you lose something, you become emotionally upset. Your mood depends on what happens to you, and as a result, your life may sometimes feel like a roller coaster ride. You react before you have fully experienced what you are reacting to. You immediately interpret what you see or hear by your expectations, fears, and resistances, limiting yourself to one or two conditioned responses. This is very straining physically and emotionally.

Your meditation practice has reminded you to calm your mind and body to react in a healthier way. You learn to acknowledge your feelings and say to

yourself, "I feel threatened." or "This worries me." Take a deep breath and relax your muscles. Then, you can select the one healthy response that would be most helpful in your particular situation. So, meditation not only produces inner balance, it also helps you balance your thoughts with your unproductive reflexes and habits.

When we learn to be calm and examine what is within ourselves through meditation, we attain the inner contentment and overall balance. Meditation is a simple way to remind us to be not so hard on ourselves and others. It is a way of training your mind so that you are not easily distracted and caught up in its endless spiral. Have patience with your meditation practice. Remember, it's a practice, so each time you meditate you learn a little more each time. You are learning to not judge yourself and others. You are learning to love yourself a little more each day.