

Meditation

Meditation of one style or another can be found in most of the major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Generally, Eastern religions have tended to concentrate on meditation as a means of realising spiritual enlightenment. This has usually also included many health-promoting practices.

In the West, meditation has been embraced for both reasons, too, although many Westerners these days know it most as a self-help tool for promoting good health and managing stress.

Many forms of meditation result in clearing one's mind which promotes a sense of calm and heightened awareness. During meditation, the brain's activity alters significantly, as mapped by a device called an electroencephalograph (EEG) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

The most well known brain waves evident during many kinds of meditation are called alpha waves. These brain waves accompany relaxation of the entire nervous system. Gamma, delta and theta brain waves accompany other types of meditation and are associated with various altered states of consciousness.

Scientific studies show that the regular practice of meditation can be a powerful healing tool. In fact, there is now clear evidence from studies of long-term meditators that meditation produces profound changes in the brain, and that recovery from some physical and emotional illnesses is assisted by the practice of meditation.

Meditation and disorders

Regular meditation can be used to help treat a range of disorders, including:

- Anxiety
- Chronic pain
- Depression
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Migraines
- Stress
- Life-threatening physical illnesses
- Recovery from accident or illness
- A sense of rootlessness or purposelessness.

Benefits of meditation

The direct benefits of meditation can include:

- Improved physical, emotional and mental health
- Focused and clear thinking
- Enhancing a sense of self and personal presence
- Increased emotional balance
- Greater relaxation and ease
- More equanimity in the face of challenges
- Satisfaction in life
- An improved sense of spiritual fulfilment and awakening.

Soothing the nervous system

Resting the mind has a dramatic effect on brain activity. When the brain moves into an alpha wave state, many physiological changes occur, starting with the autonomic nervous system. One of the main roles of the autonomic nervous system is to regulate glands and organs without any effort from our conscious minds.

The autonomic nervous system is made up of two parts, called the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. These systems act in opposite yet complementary ways: the sympathetic nervous system 'revs up' the body, while the parasympathetic calms it down. Chronic stress or burnout can occur when the sympathetic nervous system dominates for too long.

During an alpha wave state, the parasympathetic half of the autonomic nervous system comes to the fore. This results in lowered blood pressure and heart rate, a reduction in stress hormones and slowed metabolism. If meditation is practised regularly, these beneficial changes become relatively permanent.

As mentioned already, research combining current technological innovations (magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI) and the talents of long-term meditators has revealed marked changes in both brain function and structure. Finding evidence of these types of changes adds Western scientific validation to many of the claims made by advanced meditators for centuries.

Types of meditation

Meditation has evolved out of many different approaches to life, religions and philosophies, which means there are many different techniques to choose from. Some examples include:

- **Concentrating on the breath** – consciously noticing the movement of air in and out of your nostrils, or counting the breath in various ways.
- **Mindfulness** – cultivating awareness of inner experiences (bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, memories...) and simply observing them.
- **Emptying the mind** – allowing the mind to clear and 'float', gently pushing aside any stray thoughts, or allowing thoughts to float in and out of awareness.
- **Looking at an object** – focusing your attention, but not necessarily your thoughts, on the shape, sound and texture of an object such as a tree, a candle flame, or spiritually significant painting or 'diagram'.
- **Movement** – using a physical technique like yoga, qi gong or tai chi to still the mind by coordinating the breath and the body with gentle movement.
- **Using a mantra** – repeating a word or phrase over and over, either aloud or silently, perhaps timed with the breath, to focus the attention and release different energies that benefit our bodies and minds.

Practising meditation

Whatever your preferred technique, it helps in the beginning to have a quiet place, a comfortable sitting position and around five minutes to half an hour without outside distractions. Set an alarm if you don't want to lose track of time.

Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to sit cross-legged on the floor in order to meditate. You can sit in a chair or sit up in bed. You might just fall asleep, however, if you try to meditate lying down which defeats the purpose of doing it.

Many people prefer to meditate while moving around. When meditating like this it is important to ensure that the physical activities are an expression of inner attentiveness, not a distraction from whatever we are experiencing. The activity is done slowly and attentively.

Examples include walking, swimming, and doing something repetitive that is not distracting (washing dishes, digging in the garden, sweeping...). The activity is not the purpose – it is a means of focussing and holding attention on inner processes.

Meditating every day at around the same time can help you develop a regular habit and make it easier and quicker to slip into deeply meditative states. You can master many meditation practices by yourself. However, some people prefer to attend classes and learn in a group from an experienced teacher, and there are certainly many benefits from doing this.

Trying too hard

Trying to meditate is a lot like trying to sleep – attempting to force it can often make it more difficult. Thinking of a meditation session as a chance to relax rather than as a discipline you have to master, can make a great difference.

If your attention wanders, practise acceptance and avoid getting annoyed with yourself. Simply direct your attention back to what you are doing and your experience of that moment.

Special considerations

In the instance of serious mental illness, meditation should be used under expert guidance, and if done alone extreme caution should be exercised.

When meditating without guidance, it is important to remember that meditation is part of living a balanced life – using it to withdraw from life or to avoid dealing with personal and practical issues is to be avoided.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Yoga, kum nye, qi gong and tai chi teachers
- Meditation teachers

Things to remember

- Meditation is the deliberate focusing of attention to bring about feelings of calm, and heightened energy and awareness.
- Regular meditation offers many health benefits, such as reduced stress, healthy blood pressure, and enhanced healing.
- There are many different ways to meditate, such as using a mantra, looking at an object, or focusing on the breath. It can also be done sitting still or moving around while cultivating self-aware attention.

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