



sat chit healing

Introduction to Meditation and Breathing

The primary purpose of meditation is to become conscious of, and familiar with, our inner life.
Nisargadatta Maharaj

Meditation

Meditation is just the practice of focusing our attention on a specific object. The object can be a word, a sound, a candle flame, our breathing, parts of our body, our senses, our thoughts, the world around us. Actually we can meditate upon anything.

Many people believe that meditation is boring, difficult, ascetic, unproductive. On the contrary, meditation is natural, can be very interesting, powerful, and extremely productive.

Meditation is not

- Meditation is not a competitive activity, in the sense that we do not compete with someone else. Everyone is different, so each one of us have different tendencies towards meditation.
- Meditation is not a religion (however the prayer is a form of meditation). In meditation we are not looking for the divine, we are discovering our inner selves.

Why meditate?

Most of the times we do not admit, even to ourselves, that life does not always live up to our expectations, with result to be stressed and accumulate anxiety. Through meditation, we can learn to relate difficult and emotional situations with balance and compassion. Below, there are only some of the benefits of meditation.

- Makes us happier
- Makes us more empathetic
- Relaxes our body and mind
- Teaches us to live in the present
- Relieves pain
- Removes stress
- Boosts immune system
- Helps reverse heart disease

- Enhances our attention capacity
- Improves overall health

Nowadays, most of the benefits of meditation have been scientifically proven through medical experiments, but don't take mine or anyone else's word for its benefits; just try it out yourself and soon you will see the positive effects it has on you.

Build a habit

No matter how busy we are throughout the day, we all can find a few minutes to relax. Just sit somewhere comfortably and meditate daily, so that you build a habit. Start with only 5 minutes in the beginning and increase the duration of your meditation as you feel comfortable. Schedule your meditations on the same place and time each day. Soon, you will feel the draw to sit and meditate.

You can choose whichever technique you prefer. Experiment with various techniques in the beginning, however it is better to stick with one after a while, so you can explore deeper. There is no right or wrong way to meditate, just keep a passive attitude by allowing and not forcing. Forget about your expectations of the practice, and don't worry about the outcomes.

Sitting still

Even though we can meditate while walking, standing, lying down, in most of the following exercises we will meditate sitting down on the floor, or on a chair - just keep the spine straight.

While meditating, try to be still. Changing our posture make us lose focus, nevertheless small adjustments are okay. Before sitting still, various yoga stretches can help us maintain our posture longer by stretching our backs and legs. Try out for a few minutes the: "*Cat pose*", "*Cobra pose*", "*Pigeon pose*", "*Butterfly pose*".

Deal with pain

No matter how long and deep we stretch, pain (back and knee being the most common ones) will come to distract us soon. Instead of changing your sitting position, try to expand your awareness to include the pain or discomfort, while you continue to be aware of your meditation object.

You can also notice how your mind responds to the discomfort. Most of the times we create stories around our pain like "*I am not sitting correctly*", or "*I will ruin my knees*" - just see whether these thoughts intensify the discomfort. However, if you are in serious pain, maybe it is time to change the posture or to take a small break.

Pranayama (or Breathing)

Pranayama (“control of breath”, in Sanskrit) is a good starting point of meditation, as it has an interesting feature; it can be voluntarily and involuntarily. We can contract or relax our trunk muscles and breath on demand, but the moment we forget about it, breathing continues automatically. We cannot force ourselves to keep our inbreath indefinitely - either our body gives up and we exhale, or we pass out and the breathing continues on its own.

The same happens with our consciousness, we can be aware of any activity we do, like our walking, or eating. Again, soon enough we get distracted by a sound, a sensation, or a thought, but we are still able to continue walking or eating, without stumbling or choking. So, let’s start meditation by focusing on our breathing.

Breathing practice

We take on average 12-16 breaths per minute, however we almost never pay attention to this life force. Below, I present various meditation techniques which focus mostly to our breath.

Belly movement

The movement of our belly is an easy way to start meditation, as this movement while we breath is wide and we can feel it easily.

- Place your hands on your belly and/or chest.
- Breath and be aware of your body as it is expanding and contracting.
- Does the movement or breath feel tense? Uneven? Shallow?
- Simply observe the breath without any judgment.

Then try to make your breathing as relaxed as possible, and introduce a slight pause after each inhalation and each exhalation.

Breath counting

Counting the breath can be of tremendous help in the beginning.

- Count “one” when you inhale, and “two” when you exhale, and so on.
- Continue inhaling/exhaling while counting till you exhale on “ten”.
- Go back to “one” with inhalation, and continue.
- You can subvocalize the numbers, if you find it helpful.
- You can extend the duration of each number to fit each inhalation or exhalation (eg “ooooonne”, “twoooo”, “threeee” etc).

Breath counting variation

The following technique tends to increase the duration of your exhalation, which relaxes the nervous system, helps with insomnia and anxiety.

- Inhale while you count to 4.
- Before you exhale, count to 4.
- Exhale slowly while you count to 8.

- Repeat.

If your breathing is faster, you can inhale while you count to 2, and exhale while you count to 4. Find your own pace based on the 1:1:2 ratio (inhale:pause:exhale).

Anapana

Anapana is being aware of the breathing, without putting any effort to change it, and It is said that this is the technique that Buddha himself taught to his disciples. To practice it sit down comfortably, at a place that you will not be distracted, and focus on any sensation you may feel around your nose while you inhale and exhale; that could be cool air travelling inside your nostrils, tinglings, vibrations, etc. Initially be aware of your whole nose but as you progress with this exercise, try to stay focused on a smaller part of you nose, like the tip of your nose, your upper lip, the entrance of your nostrils - just experiment.

- Inhale and, be aware of your focus point (nose, nostrils, upper lip).
- Exhale and, just be aware of your focus point.
- Just feel any sensations that arise (cool air, tinglings,vibrations, etc).

Breath of Fire

Breath of Fire is a great way to give you energy and vitality. Best to practice it when you wake up in the morning; it can be better than coffee! Breath of Fire is used a lot in Kundalini Yoga, where you rise your energy from your Root Chakra to your Crown Chakra. In the beginning, practice it for 1 minute and increase the time as you feel appropriate. In the case you feel dizzy don't panic, just stop and take a few deep slow breaths.

To practice it sit on the floor, take a few deep breaths to relax your abdomen and then pull your navel inwards. This muscle contraction around your belly forces you to exhale, as the volume of your lungs decreases. Then relax your abdominal muscles so that the air moves into your lungs freely. Then pull your navel inwards again (exhale), relax your belly (inhale) and repeat. At the end, relax and stay aware of your breathing, let it go in and out without forcing it.

Alternate Nostrils Breathing

This technique is great for relaxation and, it is said that balances your right and left brain hemispheres.

- Place your index and middle fingers of your right hand on your Third Eye (or you can bend them to touch your palm).
- Your ring and little fingers should be extended on the left side of your nose (touching each other).
- Your thumb should also be extended to on the right side of your nose.
- Close your right nostril with your thumb.

- Exhale
- Inhale
- Close your left nostril with your ring finger (your pinky touches your ring finger), while you open your right nostril with your thumb. When your left nostril is closed:
 - Exhale
 - Inhale
- Repeat by closing your right nostril with your thumb and opening your left nostril. You can continue as long as you feel like, but 5 minutes is a good starting point.

Other tips and techniques

Meditation Diary

Maybe you would like to keep a meditation diary, where you write down your experiences and track your progress - very useful for your future reference. You will be amazed about your progress when you go back and read it :)

Get focused with deep breathing

A quick way to relax and get focused on our next activity is just to take a few deep breaths. Before your next presentation, exam, or serious decision, just try the following.

- Fill your lungs with a deep inhalation.
- Then, let your breath flow out on its own, as the gravity pulls down your chest.
- Feel how your mind empties as the air flows out.
- Repeat 3 times, and go on with your activity.

Lying in your bed

This is excellent to try out when you go to sleep in the night - it will calm your monkey-mind down and you will fall asleep easily. The next morning, try to remember in which stage you slept.

- Lie comfortably on your bed - preferably on your back, in Savasana.
- Feel the sensations of the bedsheets touching your skin.
- Feel how the gravity pulls downwards every cell of your body.
- Feel how the mattress holds your body against gravity.

Mantra

Choose a word and repeat it subvocally over and over for as long as you feel comfortable - you can start with 5 minutes per day. You can do it while you walk too! It is better to choose a meaningless word that you cannot relate to. If you choose the word "tree" for example, you may start creating pictures in your mind and get distracted.

Here are some mantra suggestions:

Lam / Vam / Ram / Yam / Ham / Om; just choose one of these words and repeat it now consciously.

Laughter Yoga

Laughter is a quick way to relax and a natural healing medicine, as it has been proven very beneficial to various medical conditions as anxiety, depression, stress. We all had times that we were feeling down, and after a good joke or watching a funny video, we got lost in our laughter and we forgot about our issues, even for a while.

Begin with a voluntary laugh (fake one in the beginning), and soon your brain will shift to a mode that laughter just happens. Remember to keep an open and non judgemental mind for this exercise. There is not always a reason to laugh, but this should not restrict us from doing so. Try it out for 1-2 minutes and then maybe ask yourself where was the “*You*” when you were laughing.

*Namaste
Spiros*