

Meditation: A Beginner's Guide



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POSTURE

Posture is an important component of meditation not in its own right, but as a way to help you claim your humanity and to help you make a conscious commitment to your meditation practice.

When you slouch or slump or fold yourself inward in a position of fear or collapse, it's hard to feel truly connected or plugged into the world. When you meditate, you want to do so consciously, intentionally, and on purpose. That's why it's important that you make a conscious effort to move out of any habitual patterns of collapse or defeat that you might have and decide to sit upright in a position that allows you to connect to your innate dignity and humanity.

I like to take a posture that makes me feel upright (open, available, even victorious as I commit to just sit here no matter what) and alive (vibrant, breathing, connected).

The typical meditation instructions are to sit with a tall spine and your chin slightly tucked (to bring length to the back of your neck), with the top of your ears right over your shoulders; this posture helps to open up your neck and throat. Sitting this way will also open up your chest so that you can have better access to your breath, the anchor of your meditation practice.

You can also imagine there's a golden string connecting the base of your tailbone to the top of your head. When all of your vertebrae are properly lined up, you will find yourself being held upright rather than holding yourself. This weightlessness doesn't usually come right away, but it can arrive over time.

When you sit down intentionally to meditate, taking this upright and alive posture helps signal to your body that this is meditation time--a time to move out of your habitual patterns and really tune into whatever is happening right now.

Some people sit on a chair or on a cushion on the floor. You can even meditate while taking the bus. If you're sitting in a chair you can decide if you want to use the back of the chair to help you be upright, or you can slide towards the front of the chair and feel your feet planted on the floor.

Your hands can come to rest on your lap or your knees. Your eyes can be open or closed. If they're open, let your gaze fall comfortably down in front of you by a few feet. There's nothing special to see right now, so your eyes can softly fall out of focus.

Eyes open or closed is fine. Different traditions have different perspective on this. If you find yourself falling asleep or getting lost in your internal dream world, you may want to open your eyes up for a bit. To paraphrase my teacher Barry Magid, you can't do it wrong.

BREATH

So, you're all setup to meditate. Now what?

The next step is to bring your attention to the breath. To the bodily sensation of the breath.

You can locate your breath in your lower belly, your ribs or your chest, or you can find it as a warm breeze above your upper lip as you exhale. Wherever you connect to your breath is fine.

We're not trying to fix or change anything about the breath. There can be a temptation to want to make the breath deeper or slower. Please resist this. We're cultivating an attitude of acceptance. However you're breathing is just fine.

If you're not sure where to start, you may want to begin by focusing on the breath in your lower abdomen area. Since most of us walk around lost in thought all day, it might be helpful to try locating your breath in your lower body, away from your busy brain.

So now you're sitting upright and bringing your attention to the breath. That's it! You're meditating! Nice work! Enjoy your breath.



Slide to the front of your seat to help you sit upright.



Use the back of the chair if you're needing more support.

PRACTICE

Sooner or later, something will come up to claim your attention. You might notice a thought, a bodily sensation, or something in your external environment. That's no problem. Allow your attention to shift and observe the thought, the bodily sensation, or something in your environment. Stay present for whatever you are noticing. Cultivate the role of the observer.

When you realize that you've been swept away and are lost in thought, sensation, or something in the environment (when you're no longer observing what's happening but are immersed in it completely, or if you get pulled into the past or the future), that's when you want to bring your attention back to the breath. The moment you realize that you're lost in thought, sensation, or an external sound or smell, you've already begun the practice of bringing yourself back.

As you continue sitting and meditating, continue observing what is happening for you. As things come up to claim your attention, simply label what you're noticing, then bring yourself back to the breath.

Thoughts: A thought might pop up to claim your attention. You might make a judgement of yourself or of this practice. "This is so boring and such a waste of time. There's no way I am doing this right." You would label this thought as "thinking" or "thinking this is a waste" then guide yourself back to the breath.

Sensations: You might notice tension in your body or temperature changes like feeling hot or sweaty. You would label these too. "Feeling sweaty," then gently guide yourself back. We're trying to cultivate the ability to stay put in uncomfortable situations. If your foot falls asleep or you need to move, go ahead and do so. Do it decisively though. Avoid the urge to wiggle or fidget. There's a difference between pain and discomfort. If you're really hurting, make a decision about what you need to do to relieve that sensation of pain and move once, swiftly and decisively, then settle back into your posture.

Environment: You might notice the sound of the air conditioner or the sensation of the cool air on your skin. Just notice that and label these too. "Noticing the air conditioner." You might be amazed by how many subtle experiences you've not noticed as part of your everyday life. If you find your attention drifting into thoughts associated with the external sensations you are noticing, gently bring yourself back to the breath.

As you sit and meditate, you will label your thoughts and bring yourself back to the breath over and over and over and over and over and over again. This is the practice of meditation. Allowing your mind to be flexible and open to whatever is coming up for you. Pay attention and notice when your attention was hijacked and you got lost. Then gently guide yourself back.

I like to think of the image of myself as an elderly lady with a walker who keeps turning off the path and stumbling into the grass. With the same gentleness and patience that you would use to

take hold of her elbow and steer her back, you can bring your attention back to the present over and over again.

LIFE

So what are we trying to do?

Meditation is surprisingly simple. It allows us to connect with the experience of *right now*.

And it's in the right now that the magic happens, because right now is all we really have.

Though many of us might feel stuck in our ways, held back by the accumulation of past experiences we've had and the ways we've typically reacted to them, meditation teaches us to be conscious, to be alert to our vulnerability, our talents, fears, and default reactions.

Meditation teaches us to not turn away when we find ourselves flinching or wanting to pull back. Meditation teaches us to be awake.

As we continue bringing ourselves back home to the breath, as it is in this very moment, we begin to cultivate an amazing capacity to stay present and to be completely available for whatever is happening right now.

This presence allows us to push a pause button on our tendency to "get ahead" of ourselves, to catastrophize or to react right away. By creating this capacity to slow down and to observe what's happening, we can begin to become more open and present. We can begin to respond with consciousness, tenderness, and care.

As we learn to open ourselves up to discomfort (which we may find in the speed and restlessness of our own minds, in a bodily sensation, or in the sensation of the sun on our skin), we learn how to stop turning away from our own suffering and the suffering of others.

We realize that we have choice in how we choose to respond to any given situation. We learn to become responsible for how we respond.

Meditation is called a practice because open awareness is something that we need to commit to, and to do over and over again so that a focused and receptive state of mind can begin to become something we turn towards. This, in turn, allows us to be upright and alive in the world.



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GETTING STARTED

So you have this guide and you're feeling (somewhat) ready to go. Now what?

There are several ways to get started (or to re-enliven) a meditation practice.

My best advice is for you to find a local teacher and group to meditate with. The benefit of having a teacher is that it gives you someone in real-time who can help to guide you as questions come up. A teacher will help you course-correct as you continue going deeper with your practice.

And having a group will help you stay on course! If you're meditating at home, it's easy to shorten your meditation time or even just stop meditating and declare whatever you have done as "enough" for one day. This isn't inherently wrong. A group just allows you to be held lovingly accountable.

Another way to get started is by using guided audio to help you remember to return to your breath. This will never replace a live teacher but it's a good way to get started at home. My website offers a number of free guided meditation audio tracks, and I also have more extensive paid starter packs as well. There's a link on the next page.

Regardless of if you go the teacher route or the audio route to get started, I can tell you that consistency trumps total length of time spent in meditation. Pick a habit you can commit to and keep returning to it regularly. This consistency will give you the foundation and support that you can't get by just binge-meditating then dropping off the wagon for weeks.

For example, try picking three regular times that you can meditate in a week then figure out how long each session will be. 5-10 minutes at a time is a fine way to start! Your schedule could be Mondays at noon, and Wednesdays and Saturdays at 7pm. The most important thing is that you pick a few regular times in a week and sit down and do it. If you miss a time, just start again.

Forming a new habit can be hard. Which is why I often recommend finding a group and sticking to their schedule. If that's not your style, become your own group. Commit to yourself. Or consider finding a buddy who you text at a regular arranged time and meditate with virtually. Whatever you decide, just sitting down and practicing is the most important piece.

I hope that this guide has been helpful in getting you started with your practice, or in helping you refresh your commitment to meditate.

I love feedback and would be happy to hear from you or to answer any questions that you have.

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