

## **How and Why to Meditate**

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Try this. Close your eyes and try to quiet your mind. Do that now, for just a moment. Then return to the page.

Did you notice that quieting your mind was no easy task? Usually, when I try this, I become anxious and agitated. That happens because, without the practice of disidentifying ourselves from thought, we believe that we are our mind, so it has ultimate sway over our attention. If you find yourself saying, “I don’t think I’m my mind,” guess who said that? Right, your mind!

Now try this. Close your eyes once again, and place all of your attention not on your thoughts but on the sensations you feel in your body. Perhaps you can rest your attention on the temperature of your hands or on the weight of your legs or on the tension in your face. Be careful not to observe emotions, but rather sensations.

If you notice that you’re feeling sad, for example, go deeper into the inquiry, and study what sadness feels like. Pay no attention to what thoughts are associated with the sadness or to the undesirability of the emotion. Just observe where sadness resides in your body. What, in fact, is sadness? Is it tightness in your face? Heaviness in your throat? Fluttering in your belly? Whatever it is, let it be. It’s entirely OK. Study it as you imagine a scientist would study it. Try to dissect it with your consciousness. Notice how long it lasts and how it dissipates, how it goes away, with no mental effort on your part.

Notice how all sensations in or on your body have this same quality. They arise, remain for a time, and then cease. Be kind to yourself. Whatever you feel is OK. In fact, think of the sensations as fuel for your consciousness. What Ram Dass calls “grist for the mill.” There is no prerequisite to enlightenment. It can’t happen in the future. It can only happen now. As Ram Dass says, “Be here now.”

Twelve steps for a simple meditation practice:

- Sit comfortably in an upright position with your back straight, arms comfortably in your lap.
- Keep your eyes and your mouth closed.
- Take three “cleansing breaths,” forgetting your cares.
- Commit to using this time for self-inquiry, not thought.
- Focus on your breath as it enters and leaves your nostrils.
- Don’t try to change anything you notice. Accept it as it is.
- Give yourself a brief reminder to maintain perfect awareness and perfect equanimity or acceptance throughout this process.
- Begin to become aware of the sensations over your body. Move your attention up and down your body, uncritically noticing whatever feelings arise.

- If you become bored, distracted, frustrated, or overwhelmed, realize that these, too, are just sensations. Observe them as you do all other sensations or thoughts.
- Practice for at least twenty minutes. Do as much as an hour at a time. It's best to practice both in the morning and in the evening.
- Use this same practice any time something upsetting or stressful occurs during your day.
- Bring your attention, as quickly as possible, into your body and away from your thoughts.
- Remind yourself that you are not your thoughts; you are not your mind.

Because of the habit of your mind to take over, you'll believe you have to think about this. You don't. According to the Third Zen Patriarch,

“Stop talking and thinking, and there's nothing you can't know.”

I've often found it helpful, when my mind picks up a train of thought that it doesn't want to let go, to remind myself of Barry Weiss' words. “Your mind will constantly try to fool you into believing that whatever you're thinking about right now is vitally important.” Don't let it fool you!

The practice of observing your sensations will lead you towards liberation. You should commit yourself to at least twenty minutes per day, simply observing your sensation, noticing when your mind tries to take over the show and draw you into a thought loop. Whenever that happens, simply smile at the current habit pattern of your mind and return your attention to your sensation. Notice how it flows and changes. Watch how what started as what some might call bad feelings will often melt into good ones. Begin to recognize how feelings you used to suppress or indulge become like clouds moving across the sky. They come, and they go.

As you practice the art of simple observation, what the Buddha called vipassana meaning wisdom, a very interesting thing will begin to happen to you. As situations arise in your life which used to cause you to react negatively, you'll find yourself more and more quickly leaving behind the churning of your mind; the part that says, “This shouldn't be!” and directing your attention with curiosity and wonder at your inner sensations.

Since you're learning to experience the temporary nature of your feelings, you've nothing to fear and nothing to fix. The problem will take care of itself. In fact, if anything, you'll appreciate the opportunity to feel the emotion and get in touch with areas of your consciousness in places where you've become addicted to certain outcomes. You'll learn to laugh at yourself and have compassion for both yourself and the people or situations which generated your negativity...all in all, a pretty remarkable benefit for a reasonably meager investment of time.