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Ten Meditation Tips for Beginners and for People who “just can’t meditate”

1) Even when it’s hard, it’s easy!

No, that’s not a Zen koan, though granted, it certainly looks like one. It’s just one of life’s paradoxes, like how standing is more tiring than walking. And this one isn’t even a paradox, but rather an observation about a common misconception.

I frequently hear people lament, “I’ve tried it, but I just can’t meditate. My thoughts just keep racing. I can’t shut them off!” If that describes you, either as a newcomer to mediation or as one frustrated from the experience, I have good news—you were meditating! Yes, seriously, for real.

You were noticing your thoughts. In fact, you couldn’t *stop* noticing your thoughts. And that’s what mediation is—noticing your thoughts. Or put another way, you realized that *you* were not your thoughts—and that’s awareness. Now, admittedly, your awareness was parked on top of those thoughts—but in your frustration you have already separated your thoughts and your awareness. Now let’s work on getting them farther apart.

2) You can’t slap down the waves.

Imagine watching a pond, waiting for it to become still, so you could gaze into its depths. You watch patiently for a little bit, giving it a good try—but then get tired of this approach, reach out and start slapping down the waves to speed up the process.

Obviously, that approach is only going to further agitate the pond, not still it. Similarly, often people sit in silent frustration thinking “No thoughts! No thoughts!” and trying not to think, while those rascally thoughts keep parading through the mind. This only stirs up the mental pond.

Just watch your thoughts. If there are a lot of them, fine. Just watch. If you start thinking about the thoughts, just watch the new thoughts running after the older ones. If noise or distractions come in, just notice and watch. You have to wait for the pond to still. And on windy days, it isn’t going to do so. So just watch the waves. You are meditating. And in time, the pond will still.

3) Watch your breath.

There are many ways to meditate. Don’t worry about that. As often as you think of it during the day, just watch your breath. Be aware of the feeling of air inside your lungs and airways. Feel the expansion and contraction. Notice the shifts in your body. Just be present. Just breathe.

If you feel the need for something more formal, you can count your breaths on each exhale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4 and so on. But that's not necessary—you'll probably find you keep losing count! So just count one, one, one, one, one, one, one on each exhale. It's easier to concentrate on *something* rather than sitting there trying to not think, and watching your breath keeps you in the moment.

During the day, whenever you focus on your breath, whatever you're doing at the time, you can return to being present, especially after you get used to the practice. You can also consciously slow your breathing, taking long, slow, full breaths. This sends a message to your brain that you are now relaxed—and your brain will start relaxing. Try it!

4) **Go for a walk.**

Not working for you? Go for a walk.

Meditation doesn't have to be sitting. In fact, Zen meditation practice typically rotates between sitting meditation (*zazen*) and walking meditation (*kinhin*), one step after each full breath. The idea is to be completely mindful of each step. Instead of worrying about or listening to the cacophony of thoughts racing around in your head, be totally where you are, attentive to what you're doing.

Ever wonder why the Tea Ceremony is performed with such attention to small, ritualized details? Or the other Zen arts do the same? When we consistently pay attention to the small details, we cultivate a mind and attitude of daily calm, which then carries over to an instinctual, effortless attention to the large details as well.

When you're washing the dishes, if your mind races, say to yourself, "I'm washing the dishes, I'm washing the dishes, I'm washing the dishes," over and over, keeping yourself in the activity. If you're mowing the lawn, say "I'm mowing the lawn, I'm mowing the lawn, I'm mowing the lawn," keeping yourself aware in that experience.

Just notice what you're doing. After a time, the mind will recognize its attempt at distraction is futile, and give up. Don't be in a hurry to get to that point—just notice.

Incidentally, exercise helps too. Oxygen and blood flow more efficiently, endorphins are produced, the lymphatic system eliminates wastes, the heart and lungs work more effectively—all of which produces a greater sense (and reality) of well-being, which in turn relaxes the mind. Choose exercise you enjoy doing—having fun is allowed! Meditation isn't punishment.

5) **The Morning Reading**

Start your morning with some spiritual (not necessarily religious) daily reading meaningful to you. It will focus your day. Never start the day without it. Taking 15 minutes to do your daily reading and to sit quietly for a bit while watching your breath will do wonders for your day. Very quickly, you'll learn that "bad" days come on days you skipped your morning meditation. Start the day like this daily, without fail.

There is a wealth of 365 books. Taoist, Buddhist, Zen, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and so forth, or Codependent, Alcohol Anonymous, etc., or Nature, Philosophy—pretty much whatever is important to you, there's a 365 book for it. Choose a subject area that's spiritually important to you, that resonates with who you are and how you feel about the world, and use it every morning.

6) The Evening Octopus

Just before bedtime (or some convenient time in the evening), sit quietly, with your eyes closed, and just watch what's going on in your mind. What are the things that happened to which you're still attached? One by one, as you notice these entanglements, visualize carefully picking up the tentacle of each attachment, pulling it away and setting it aside. Then notice the next one and remove that too. Keep at it until you've removed all the conflicts, projections, and revisitations of things already past, and can sit in relative mental peace. Don't worry if you don't get them all at first—keep at it, each and every evening, and they will begin to lessen and then slowly vanish.

Whatever your day was like, this will bring you back to a place of focus before retiring for the night. You will also find that as you go through your day you'll begin to notice as you pick up entanglements, and eventually, learn not to pick them up in the first place, since you'll only have to disentangle yourself later. Even better, you'll no longer have mental arguments with people who aren't even there! Nor worry about things that haven't happened and aren't likely too either.

7) Daily Practice

Whatever spiritual/philosophical/religious/or-not inclinations you choose to follow, and whatever method of mediation you choose, do it every day, without fail. This is a crucial point. There's no real magic in sitting still and watching your breath, or reading your daily meditation, or whatever else you choose. But day after day after day after day, the impact of that builds in a way that doesn't happen when it's more-or-less every day here-and-there.

So choose something that is this significant for you. Don't try to adopt views or beliefs you aren't really sold on—pare those down to what you DO actually believe in your heart-of-hearts, the deeps of your soul and spirit. If that's not much—that's also fine. Quantity is not important here; bottom line truth for you is. When you get to such clear fundamentals for you, then you'll find you *want* to practice them daily—as soon as you start, you'll find you're looking forward to it.

8) The Master Mind

Napoleon Hill, of *Think and Grow Rich* fame, talked about having a Master Mind group, both the physical/real-people kind, and the spiritual kind. In fact, he stresses this as a key point.

One way is to have “chats” with your subconscious, setting it after the things you are striving to achieve—including balance and peace of mind. You can also create a committee in charge of various aspects of your life—one entity in charge of finances, another in charge or romance, another in charge of health, and so forth. Still another way is to invite people (living or passed) you admire, whether Benjamin Franklin, Nikola Tesla, Mahatma Ghandi, Mother Teresa, Clara Schumann, or your grandmother and grandfather.

The common point is the same—your subconscious mind doesn't know the difference between “reality” and make-believe; thus, imagination becomes reality, and you will find yourself responding as if they were really there, sharing in their insights. As a music student, I used to put the most famous musicians in the corner whenever I thought a piece was ready—and I *always* heard new things to address when under the pressure of their “presence.” Try it!

9) For sitting practice—don't lie down.

Now, if you're physically unable to sit, then of course, lie down. But if you're able to do so, sit up.

First, lying down is conducive to sleeping, and that's the message you're sending your brain—sleepy time. Sleep is important, but that's not the focus here. You want to be mindful, not unconscious (no, dreams don't count for this).

Second, you don't have to sit in lotus position. In fact, if that's not comfortable for you, it's going to work against you, not for you. [Of course, if you're able to use the lotus position, by all means do so—it's a very useful posture, and clearly sends the message "mediation time."]

DO sit in a straight-back chair, or in any sitting approach that allows support for your back and head to be straight (vertically). This will help your breathing, as well as encourage balance with a minimum of muscular strain. Be comfortable—if you need cushions, use cushions. You DO want to be relaxed. Using the same place each day helps as well, as does using the same time each day.

What you actually do then doesn't much matter, whether watching a candle flame, counting breaths, visualization of a special place, or just letting thoughts drift away as you watch the calm growing. But you should be able to do it comfortably for a time—and at first, 15 minutes is long!

10) Use a positive daily mindset to keep yourself present in the Now.

Along with your meditation, take a look at your thoughts throughout the day.

I have a friend who says, "Did you have a bad day? Or did you have a bad moment and milk it all day?" That first negative incident doesn't need to set up the cascade for a day of such incidents. Just as easily, we could look for *positive* things to appreciate, allowing *those* things to cascade through the day. Sure, sometimes we go through tough times. But it's never true that *everything* is bad. Focus on those better things to set the positive cascade trend in motion.

I used to see gratitude as the last step of a process, but I've come to realize that it's actually the very first step. We're always trying to get *to* something, and yet, that something is always further away. Imagine instead of traveling around space through linear time, imagine you were traveling around time through the same space. You could go to any time you want, just jump there, no waiting. But—every time you go to, there you are, worrying about "one day." Nowhere can you go to be done or at peace. This is how most of us live our lives.

Instead, love the moment. Be grateful for all that's present. Life in rich experience, savoring every element, being truly there in the Now. This is where life happens, and if we're going elsewhere, we aren't living, now or then. Be here. Now.



Meditation is not what you think.