

This is an essay I wrote almost twelve years ago, describing the ins and out of meditation. My understanding of practice has evolved considerably from then, but the essay has a certain directness about it!

HOW TO MEDITATE.

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First you have to ask yourself: "why meditate?" There's no point starting a long-term project like meditation unless you have a damn good reason for doing it.

First and foremost, the answer to "why meditate?" would be: I want to meditate because right now my brain is fried.

Most of our brains are fried. We work all day, we worry, we stress. We get bumped around on the bus, someone cuts us up in traffic. Our partner makes us feel guilty and our children make us feel inadequate. No wonder our brains are like omlettes.

But we don't look after our minds like we're conditioned into looking after our bodies.

We're such a body-obsessed culture at the moment that no one asks why we need to go the gym, why we should exfoliate or why anti-oxidant face masks are the bee's knees. Of course we do need to look after our bodies - they're the only ones we've got. But what about our brains? No one longs for a long hot Radox bath for the brain after a hellish day at the office. But that's exactly what meditation offers.

Meditation is a long hot soak for the mind.

That would be the first answer to the question: why meditate? We want to meditate because we want to rest and relax the mind. Let it unwind and rejuvenate. Let it run in neutral for a while. Let it chill.

As it happens that's just one of 1001 reasons to meditate. But that's the most pressing for most people.

First off the bat then we want to calm the mind.

Which is why we traditionally meditate somewhere quiet.

CALM: Giving your brain a long hot bath.

In itself this is probably benefit enough. Sitting somewhere quiet for 20 minutes, twice a day is enormously soothing. The body and mind and emotions all get run ragged all day long by a constant stream of stimuli, so what we're aiming for is quiet, stimuli-free space. A quiet room is best, though I've meditated on the top of the Royal Festival Hall, in parks all over London and even in a public loo. Somewhere you won't be disturbed.

Don't worry about sitting cross-legged or chanting or incense or mantras. That's all detail. The important thing is generating calm.

So un-plug your phone, make sure people don't burst in (hang a hotel "Do Not Disturb" sign on your bedroom doorknob) and settle.

You can sit on a chair for starters. The important thing is to be comfortable - which in practise means having a straight back. Don't slouch in a comfy chair - you'll wiggle and ache - but sit up straight on a regular chair, loosen your neck, let your spine fall into its natural curve. Take a few deep breathes and enjoy the sensation of quiet and calm.

The important thing to remember at this early stage is why you're doing it. This isn't like a diet or a gym workout. It's not some unpleasant thing you have to do in order to get a good result. You should enjoy the stillness, enjoy the novelty of being quiet and having sat yourself down. Lots of meditation guide books point out the fact that it'll hurt or be uncomfortable and to get the benefit you have to persevere. This is true, of course, but first get into the habit of enjoying meditation. You'll never do it if the idea fills you with dread. Just sit down and say to yourself: Aaah, quiet and calm, how lovely.

Don't stress about "turning your brain off" or emptying your mind of thoughts.

It's impossible to empty your mind of thoughts. Your brain thinks. That's what it does. Just as your lungs breath and your heart beats, your ears hear and your eyes see, your mind thinks. That's its natural function.

However just as on a blindingly bright day, it's nice to close your eyes or in a deafeningly loud bar it's nice to go into a quiet back room, when your mind is jam- packed with competing thoughts, it's nice to calm it down.

This is the main thing I noticed when I began sitting those 20 minute sessions. My head was chattering all the time. Not only was there a melée of thoughts and plans and panics, there was also a substrata of random noise. Weird attenuated voices giving a nonstop running commentary. I was amazed at these controlling voices which completely steered my moods and mind, almost unconsciously. I noticed with amazement, for example, that it was very often a female voice that filled my head, not a male one. Or it was a weird distorted version of a voice I'd heard earlier in the day, on a loop.

I don't think I was becoming boarderline schizophrenic. They were subliminal noises in my head, but when I quietened down, they become quite noticable.

After about 10 minutes there would always be this seemingly magical moment when they'd subside and that feeling of spaciousness would sink down on me. I realized that, in fact, this wasn't magical but a natural effect of zero-stimulation.

When your mind's constantly being stimulated then it reacts and some the energy of that reaction spills forwards into the next reaction and everything gets over-energized. When you stop stimulating by sitting in a quiet room, that energy ebbs away and all the whitenoise that it accidentally creates also fades.

And so you end up with a quieter mind. Thoughts still pop up - as they're inclined to - but they don't swamp the mind so much. With a little practise you can even catch them cropping up and

disappearing again. And this is enormously pleasant. This is the big Radox mind bath. You can feel a lot of mental stress and abrasiveness drop away and your head feels a lot better lubricated.

FOCUS: sticking with it.

So, the long hot soak effect is generated by calm. But the real benefits of meditation come when you combine calm with focus. If calm is the bath tub, then focus is a gentle lesson at mechanics. Mind mechanics: taking the mind apart, checking it for rust and grime and re-assembling it so that it works with extreme precision.

Focus really takes the benefits of meditation into overdrive. Sitting in a quiet room for 20 minutes is nice but it's not going to change you. It's not going to make your life happier, your relationships to others more genuine and your body healthier. This part of meditation requires a certain amount of will power.

That's why you have to do those 20-minute sits regularly. It's like pills. The doctor can prescribe the most incredibly effective pills for your heart problem, but if you don't bother taking them then you'll stay ill.

That's why everything I say in the next few pages will remain completely useless unless you actually sit down and do it. Say to yourself (if you really want to have a go, that is) I'm going to do 20 minutes twice a day for a month and that's that. All that means is not watching 20 minutes of tv a night and setting the alarm 20 minutes earlier in the morning...

OK, that still might seem like a lot, but believe me it's really worth it. I really gained so much from that relatively small commitment. [see WHY DO IT below]

Well, when I began meditating I had a cheesy tape that I bought from a bookshop which explained how it was a completely clinically-proven method for reducing stress and required no spiritual aptitude whatsoever.

So I sat myself down in my chair and focussed on a 2 syllable mantra for 20 minutes twice a day.

Even 10 minutes seemed like an eternity. I kept looking at my watch certain that I'd been there for half an hour. But no, it was just 10 minutes.

For the first few days, though, I stuck with it. I meditated early in the morning before breakfast and I meditated on the Tube home, eyes closed. And I began to enjoy the feeling of spreading warmth I felt. I wasn't sure what I was meant to be feeling but I'm now certain that I only persisted because I felt something rather pleasant and new. So always look for the nice aspects of the 20 minutes and its after-effects.

I'm pretty certain that everyone will feel better after a 20-minute sit. Things are brighter, less frazzled. You feel more open - that's the word that always popped into my head - and things seem to hang together more.

WHAT TO DO DURING YOUR 20 MINUTE SIT.

First up, remember why you're doing it. Calm and focus. You want to generate that long, deep soak with calm and you want to understand the workings of the mind with focus.

Get your self comfortable. Back straight. Turn off phones. Warn people that you're strictly off limits. Take a few deep breaths, then go..

The actually meditation method is awesomely simple. Follow a simple object in your mind. This will generate both calm and focus at the same time.

The object can be anything but the most tried-and-tested objects are the breath (because it's always there and it's pretty central to biological life) or a 2 syllable, neutral word or mantra. There's no fancy philosophical thoughts, no brain strain. Just following a simple object. But you have to follow it. If you just let your mind wander during a 20-minute sit that's not really doing anything apart from giving your legs a rest. You need that simple mental landmark so you can see how things work in your mind.

So you chose an object to concentrate on. I started off with a two syllable sanskrit word that my meditation pack suggested to me. It was meaningless to me and therefore neutral. And I'd say it over and over again.

This sounds dull but there are 2 very interesting aspects to it.

1. Investigating the stuff in your brain.

Try saying a word silently in your head. Say "Shan-tee" in your mind. Actually do it before you read any further.

OK. What is happening?

Are you hearing a sound trace in your mind? Where are you hearing it? Can you alter the tone of voice saying them?

Now try picturing the syllables spelled-out as you say them. Where do the pictures form? Where is the "mind's eye"?

There, you have now noticed two elements of your mind you probably never contemplated before: silent sound and eyeless vision.

In other words, this simple exercise starts you investigating your mental landscape. Upon examination, what you previously lumped together as "thought" may actually be composed of mental snapshots flashing up on your mind's eye. How much "thinking" is actually a silent mental voice on your inner ear? How do these two elements differ from a clear planning thought like: "I must remember to phone Dad"?

When I began meditating, I'd never done anything like this before. I'd thought about psychology, but I'd never actually experienced it. I found the experience strangely compelling.

Just noticing the quality of these mental effects seemed to be a great leap forward in knowing my mind a little better.

2. Seeing how the mind wanders.

The second, and perhaps more important aspect, is what happens when your mind strays. This applies whether you're following the breath or a word.

When you start meditating, your concentration is always straying. If you decide to count your breath, you count to 5 before you return to 1 and start again. Sometimes you barely make it to 2 before you're thinking about Thai food, or an argument with your Bank Manager. Your mental muscles are a bit flabby, they can't really hold anything in focus. Later on when you've been exercising those muscles, it's easier. You might make it to 4.

But the important thing here is to remember that it's not all about mental training, it's also about being curious as to where the mind wandered off to. You were meant to be saying "one in- breath, one out-breath" to yourself and suddenly you're thinking about your Auntie Gill and her sex life. How did that happen? With a calmer, curious mind, you can often trace back the train of thought and see how you got into Gill's knickers. Having noticed that, then return to in-breath number one.

One of the greatest benefits of meditation is that you strengthen your mind so you can put the brakes on trains of thought and slow them down enough to be able to hop off. Rather than being swept away by a chain of connected thoughts, you're able to reassert control in your mind.

And when you think about it, most of our problems in life come from thoughts getting blown out of proportion, teaming up with emotions and then swamping the mind. It's a fine skill to be able to reign them in.

STRUCTURING YOUR MEDITATION

Remember commit to 2 x 20 minutes every day. Preferably as soon as you get up (have a shower to shake off the dream dust) and sometime in the evening (when the kids are in bed and there's nothing good on telly.)

For the first 10 minutes you'll probably be just calming your noisy mind. Follow the mantra or the breath over and over. Don't get annoyed if you can't focus. Just smile at yourself and continue returning to the mantra.

If all goes well at some point (usually about 10 minutes in) there'll be a moment of relaxation, of dropping away, increasing stillness. This is nice feeling, enjoy it. Just continue breathing. Enjoy just sitting there.

And for the last 10 minutes (or as long as you want) you might be calm enough to investigate the stuff of existence. But don't worry if you're not. Sometimes you need a whole 20 minutes to calm yourself. Stick with that.

If however, you do manage to calm yourself and investigate methodically, work through 4 areas: body, feeling, sense, thought. It's nice to have this structure to work through. That way when your mind wanders you've got something to return to and you're less inclined to slouch off.

First, the body.

Run your mind over the body using the breath. As you breathe in feel the air flowing in through the nostrils into your head cavities. Be aware of the feeling behind your eyes, in your sinuses. Explore the sense of your torso. There's usually lots of vague feelings of tension and heaviness. For me, it's often in the neck and shoulders, sometimes in the belly. It's a really nice chance to actually be aware of what your body really feels like. Don't think it, feel it.

Second, the feelings.

You've already been feeling the aches and pains of the body, but we're also concerned with mental feelings. Do you feel happy or sad, calm or agitated, dull or bright. This is actually quite a difficult field to explore. We're not very good at pinpointing feeling in anything more than a vague way. Which is fine. But try your best. Step back and know if you're actually feeling really ratty or - despite what you think - actually rather happy.

Then, the senses.

There's something very soothing about concentrating on sound. It's actually one of the easiest acts of the meditation, so if you're having difficulty focusing on the breath or the body or the feeling, try and concentrate on what you can hear. No room is completely sound proof. There's always some external noise to listen to. Just let it happen, notice it start and finish. Don't get carried away with it. If there's no external noise to speak of, listen to your breath from inside your head. Do that "popping" thing with your ears and seal them up so you can hear from the inside. Follow the breath like that.

Some people meditate with their eyes closed, so being aware of seeing is little tricky. But at this point open your eyes and be aware of the shapes and colours, the brightness or dimness of the light. It's very difficult not to be swept away with visual things. Because our sense of sight is the most pronounced of all, it's hard to unplug it, to let it just be. But try, experiment.

When I started I found it almost impossible to meditate with my eyes open. I wasn't able to calm my mind at all. Now I prefer to meditate open-eyed. It helps me root myself in the reality of "now" rather than float off into daydreams. Experiment whatever's better for you.

Taste doesn't really get exercised that much while meditating (unless you just ate a mackrel fillet before your started and it's repeating on you) and neither does smell. But get used to being aware of them and you'll find that off the meditation cushion they'll become much more acute.

Fourthly, those thoughts.

We've already come across these as we watched the mind wandering from the meditation-object. But it's worth really exploring these wild phenomena of the mind. It's a good idea to label them. Start off simply with: that's a thought about the past, or that's a thought about the future. Past/future: that covers quite a lot. Then you can categorize further: work-thought, sex-thought, family-thought. Or you can try and combine feeling with thought and get a sense of the thought's effect. Ie. Does the thought make you feel angry, is it a sad thought, a worried thought, an agitating thought...?

It's very good exploration to trace this connection between thoughts and feelings. Very often thoughts just float up from nowhere, completely randomly and then disappear. (I often get odd memories from my Junior School sports day for example). Sometimes they float up and get infused with a feeling. I remember that I have to phone my ex-landlord and get my deposit back. This thought doesn't just sink, my mind picks it up and infuses it with anger: "Goddamn, how long is it now!? I'm going to take legal action! The bastards", suddenly there's a whole raft of thoughts, glued together by the feeling of anger.

What's useful here is to step back from the thoughts and examine the feeling. If you feel that electric buzz that flushes up the front of your chest and settles in your neck, then you're experiencing pure feeling. The act of noticing it seems to magically disconnect the whole circuitry and the thoughts stop piling up and the "angry" feeling starts to fade.

This labelling and "knowing" thoughts is quite a tricky business. You may not get it straight away or for quite some time. Your mind needs to be quite relaxed and calm to notice these connections. But trying to label the thoughts is a great start. It alerts you to how repetitive your thoughts are. The same old scenarios about the office, the same old re-hash of that break-up, the same old grumbles about your bank account.

If nothing else, this makes us aware of how much we need to clean out our mind and let some fresh air in. Meditation works like mental dusting in this respect.

WHY DO IT?

Meditation is an endlessly beneficial process. It starts off as a simple relaxation technique but if you do it properly it will start to change your whole way of living.

A list of benefits that I've felt in no particular order:

1. I sleep better. My mind's much more able to shut down at night.
2. I worry a whole lot less. Seeing how much worry is to do with out-of-control thoughts and feeling piggy-backing on each other allows me to smile and let them fade.

3. I work better. I cease to elevate "work" into some overwhelming, smothering thing. It remains a thing that I do and when I'm doing it I can concentrate on doing it well, but when I stop my concentration moves with me.

4. I can concentrate better. Because there's less mental dust in my head, I notice things more and take them in more accurately. My memory's improved 100 fold and it takes me less time to do stuff because I'm paying attention.

5. I feel a lot more self-confident. Knowing more precisely how my mind works, what all the stuff in my mind does, means I'm less in thrall to the outside world. I care less what other people say because I know what I feel and how I think.

6. My friendships have blossomed. Being less pre-occupied by worry and stress, I'm able to concentrate on the people around me and be open to them. Being less insecure about myself, I'm able to help other people with their problems or be delighted in their successes.

7. I need less. The more I meditate the more satisfied I get with just sitting there, feeling my body and my breath. I'm able to see through cravings for chocolate or the latest Maharishi pants or the complete hard-back volumes of the Buddha's teaching because I know from experience that once acquired all these things become a bit dull and superfluous.

8. I'm richer. Simply because I spend less money. Meditating is a simple pleasure and it makes me less inclined to invest in disappointing pleasures like booze, fashion and drugs. I also seem to get more work because I don't appear so needy at interviews.

9. I'm friendlier. Allowing space and fresh air into my mind makes me feel better about myself but also gives me space to step back out of bad habits. Living in a big city it's easy to become habitually greedy, habitually nasty or habitually unfriendly. By strengthening your mind muscles in meditation you can catch yourself lapsing in the daytime and step back: be nice, smile, say hello, allow yourself to have a conversation.

10. I've been more places. Or rather I've been more places and actually remembered them instead of just charging through with tunnel vision. Meditation trains you take time to listen and see and smell and contemplate. So when I'm travelling around the country, I actually take some of those place in. I'm more present wherever I am.

11. I get angry and grumpy less. I get less obsessive about things. Using the space of meditation to see how anger or obsessive desire crop up in the mind means I can see through them more easily. I still get furious and I still get smitten but they pass much more quickly, and I'm more likely to smile at them than get swept along by them.

12. I'm happier. This is perhaps the root reason for any meditation. Getting happy. The reason I am happier is not because my circumstances have changed but because the way I handle the same circumstances has changed. Meditation has taught me to be happy with the way things are right now. That doesn't mean complacency, but it does mean a certain radical honesty about the starting point for any action, which is a genuine recognition of the way things are.

The list is endless. And this is after 2 years practise. I imagine the benefits will probably grow exponentially as I continue.

Different people get benefits at different rates. But even after a week I wager you'll feel a marked uplift. That's what you have to hold onto and that's what'll keep you going. It starts out as a little bit of a mental BandAid and eventually it becomes the single most important project of your life.