

Introduction to Meditation

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Let me begin this essay with a story.

There was an old lady who lived in a village. Her kitchen window gave her a view to her neighbor's yard where a young couple lived. One day, she looked out the window to see the young wife hanging some sheets on a clothesline. What she saw disturbed her: the young woman was hanging sheets with dirt stains on them! The old lady said to herself, "Why is she hanging those dirty sheets? She is too young to be so lazy and not clean the sheets properly." The old lady walked away in disgust.

Over the course of the next few months, the old lady saw the young woman, through the kitchen window, hanging more dirty sheets and clothes. Each time she filled with anger at the laziness and disregard of the young woman. The old lady noted that, even at her old age, when she washed her sheets and clothes she made sure they were clean before drying. And surely she did not let dirty items dry to then be used by her family. The thought of the young woman spreading dirty sheets over her bed for her young husband to sleep upon greatly angered the old lady. Sometimes her anger built to the point where she started to go outside and confront the young woman; but each time she would stop, instead going into the living room to curse the young woman behind her back.

One day the old lady reached the point where she could take it no more. She stared with outrage to see the young woman hanging dirty sheets on the clothesline. Filled with fury, she stormed outside and yelled, "Why in the hell are you are hanging those dirty sheets! Don't you know how to properly wash!" The young woman looked at her confused and asked, "What are you talking about? The sheets are clean." The old lady looked at the sheets and, lo and behold, they were without a single stain. Embarrassed, she laughed and said she was joking, and quickly returned to her house. To make sure she wasn't losing her mind, she went back to the kitchen window to look at the sheets. They seemed dirty, but when she leaned close to the window to get a better view, she realized it was not the sheets that were dirty. Instead it was her kitchen window that had dirt stains: dirt that, without close examination, made it seem as if the sheets were filthy. She even looked to the sky to see that the white clouds appeared to be dirty as well. The old lady walked away, ashamed. She realized she had wrongly accused the young woman of laziness for so long when, in fact, her own dirty windows were to blame.

This story is based on a Buddhist parable I once read. It beholds a powerful lesson relevant to any practice of meditation. Often, for those not engaged in the never-ending practice of self-examination,

we are quick to project on others and situations faults that are, in fact, our own. In this modern age, many of us walk around with dirt on the kitchen windows of our lives, unaware that much of the dirt we see may be on ourselves, not in the world. I am not diminishing how much dirt exists in the world: there is plenty, particularly in an age where oppression, destruction, and domination are prevalent. But if we hope to better the world and our lives, it is important to distinguish which dirt is actually on us and which is in the world. One of the fruits of meditation is the ability (developed by consistent practice) to realize what is on our own kitchen windows, to develop a sense of “depth of perception.” Such realization grants us the opportunity to clean our own kitchen windows before we seek to deal with the dirt in other people’s yards.

This essay will focus primarily on breath meditation: it is the “easiest” and does not require specialized skills or a dogma of beliefs. It is probably the most widely practiced form of meditation and is (and has been) practiced in a wide range of spiritual and religious paths. The essay will give an overview of how to approach meditation: in its fullest practice it goes way beyond just sitting down and breathing in a relaxed manner. I will also explore some benefits of meditation, something those who embrace this practice can use as a measurement of how well they are utilizing / integrating a practice of meditation into their lives. At the end of the essay, I will share a guide for meditation.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Let me first dispel some myths. Meditation is and has never been limited to just Indian spiritual traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism.¹ Many people may be surprised that meditation was historically practiced among the prevailing Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Traditionally, houses of worship for these religions were built as quiet, dimly lit settings that served as a refuge from the “noises” of regular human interaction. These characteristics are ideal for meditation. Many ancient and indigenous spiritual / religious buildings also contained these same features, as meditation has a long human history. To speak to my spiritual tradition, many temples in ancient Kemet had rooms devoted strictly to meditation. Some of the paintings on the walls are there to assist meditators in guided meditations (such as visualization) designed for specific goals. And for some communities, nature provided havens for mediation: a clearing in a forest, a ledge on a plateau, an elevated mountaintop, a cave in the depths of a cavern. Meditation was common among a wide range of peoples, not just select spiritual traditions or mystic branches of certain religions as it is often presented today.

The present-day limited association of meditation to Indian spiritual traditions can be tied to a few factors. One is the European conquest and oppression of the world (by their ruling class), including the domination of European working and poor classes. When one oppresses people, they are not

¹ For those whose introduction to meditation is by an Asian practice of Buddhism, know that Buddhism (as it is more commonly recognized as the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama) started in India and spread throughout Asia. In this process, Buddhism was assimilated into the cultural practices of many societies, such that some schools of Buddhism present themselves in Asian cultural contexts, even to the extent of presenting Asian Buddhas.

interested in having the oppressed retain or acquire the benefits of meditation, such as: keen observation, clarity of perception, spiritual maturity, wisdom, insight, etc. (In fact, if you are not attaining these benefits you should examine your meditation practice.) A confused and imperceptive people have always been easier to dominate. Such a process of conquest was carried out in early Europe as many monarchs forced their citizens to convert to the ordained forms of Christianity -- sometimes at the threat of death. During the Inquisitions, thousands were killed for "crimes" such as heresy, blasphemy, sorcery, and other refusals to convert and / or abide by the ordained views of the Church. This resulted in the death, imprisonment, or emigration of many who practiced non-ordained Christianity and other religious / spiritual traditions, such as nature-based spiritual paths (sometimes called paganism), Judaism, and Islam. The ordained forms of European Christianity emphasized *rules and doctrines* over the *practices* of Yeshua (Jesus) who traveled from city to city to feed the poor, heal the sick, share parables and teachings to gathered crowds - engendering a sense of community and good will to others. Within the "ordained" environment, meditation in European Christianity was relegated to mystics. And as mystics were driven out of or went underground in European societies, so did the practice of meditation.

As European conquerors took ordained forms of Christianity throughout the world, meditation was eliminated in many places. The conquest of indigenous nations and cultures included the destruction of spiritual traditions that kept meditation (in various forms) in the forefront of people's lives. In place of their spiritual traditions, doctrine-oriented European Christianity was imposed upon these people. As a result, meditation "disappeared" in many parts of the world. A similar process of religious exclusion occurred in some of the Arab conquests of Africa: in these instances Africans were forced to abandon their traditional spiritual ways and embrace a form of Islam that Arab conquerors presented. These forms of Islam less often included meditation as an aspect of their practice, and meditation was limited to being a "mystic / Sufi thing."

Centuries later when European societies became more "religiously tolerant," meditation was re-introduced to them primarily in the form of Buddhism and Hinduism. The long reign of doctrine-oriented European Christianity made these old practices seem "new." But from a historical perspective, the only "new" thing about this re-introduction of meditation to European culture was the spiritual contexts in which they were presented: as Buddhist or Hindu, and sometimes Islamic via Sufism. This dynamic played out in similar fashions in many cultures under European oppression. Thus, there are African nations that have centuries' long ancient traditions of meditation just now being open to meditative practices decades after being decolonized.

I did not write the above to bash European Christianity, instead to show the centuries' long negative conditioning regarding meditation. For many who have been raised in Judeo-Christian societies (even if we are not Christian), we will have apprehensions about meditation simply because we have been fed cultural messages that demean it. Realizing this history, we should not fear or treat it as something foreign or Asiatic. Meditation was practiced in many forms throughout the world and, perhaps, it will help many in the world if it is practiced widely again.

Another common myth of meditation is the need to sit in a designated posture: even if the posture is uncomfortable and painful. Such is only relevant to certain specific forms of meditation, but not for meditation in general. The “stereotypical” meditation posture of sitting on the floor with legs crossed (the lotus position) is reflective of past cultural practices but is not mandatory. In many ancient cultures, normal sitting occurred on the floor, not in chairs. (Even today, there are parts of the world where this cultural norm of sitting on the floor continues). In fact, if chairs were common in ancient India (where Buddhism and Hinduism flourished), there is a good chance the stereotypical meditative posture would be to meditate in a chair. For certain spiritual lineages, there is a “passing of merit” to be shared by sitting in the same posture as a past great teacher: for example, the benefit a teacher cultivated through his / her years of practice can be tapped into by meditating in that same posture over time.² Those who “re-introduced” meditation to European cultures cannot be faulted for teaching their traditions and practices, but we should not limit meditation to those specific practices. A wider examination reveals that meditation has never been limited to sitting in the lotus position: there is laying down meditation (laying flat on one’s back or other posture), standing meditation, walking meditation, meditation on stools, meditation postures on one’s knees (much like contemporary prayer postures), and even movement meditation (running, jogging, dancing, etc.) and martial arts meditations (such as tai chi). Different meditation postures can be suited for different purposes, but there is no obligation to sit uncomfortably on the floor in pain - as sitting crossed legged on the floor can be for someone groomed to sit in chairs from childhood. And certainly, the breath meditation I will present later will prove more fruitful when one is in a relaxing position.

Another myth I will quickly dispel is that meditation is hard. My response to that is: it is as hard as you wish to make it. Meditation is a practice: and like most practices, it requires the development of skills and a consistent cultivation (of effort) over time to fully flourish. Many people who say meditation is hard have made their “practice” (or limited practice) hard. Imagine how difficult it would be to learn how to play a musical instrument if you only practiced once a month and, when you did practice, you quit if you encountered any hardship? If you want to make meditation “easy,” commit to the development of the necessary skills (such as learning to relax, breathe from your diaphragm, etc.) and a consistent practice. You may then discover the benefits that await you beyond any period of “growing pains.” Yet I will caution, the development of a meditation practice will eventually place you before yourself; if you do not wish to bring yourself face-to-face with who you are, meditation may not be a practice for you.

THE POWER AND BENEFITS OF FOCUSING ON BREATH

Breathing is among the few continuous (usually uninterrupted) actions the body partakes in. You can go long periods of time without eating, drinking, sleeping, and other necessary activities, but if you cease to breathe for too long your own body will render you unconscious so it can attempt to

² This “transfer of merit” often includes other components of meditation: such as chants, visualizations, rites performed before and after meditation. And sometimes, such a specific practice of meditation is incorporated into a larger spiritual practice that is required to receive the merit of others.

resume breathing. This speaks to the vital reality of breath to the physical body -- and mystic explorations will reveal how breathing is connected to our other bodies, including the mind (the mental body), emotions (the emotional body), and the experiential (experience) body. Who has heard the advice that when in a stressful situation (experience) one can regain one's composure (physical, mental, emotional, experiential, etc.) by stopping to take deep (relaxing) breaths?

Breath is essential to the human reality. From a spiritual perspective, the power of breath makes it a potent foundation in which to root a practice of meditation. (Note: you can, and some do, root meditation in other elements of reality, such as sound meditation focusing on sound.) You can contemplate how your own breath can affect your physical body, mind, emotions, and the tone of the experiences you encounter. With this realization, one can take a more focused approach to the breath to:

- 1) develop a fuller awareness of these bodies through breath;
- 2) use the breath as a way to cultivate these bodies; and,
- 3) for the mystic, see *how* the breath is connected to these bodies and other "bodies" in the universe in order to expand one's awareness.

For most of us, we are going to breathe. And for many, breathing is usually done unconsciously without any effort. With a little bit of awareness, cultivated over time, this same unconscious, effortless act of breathing can become a conscious act that informs you about you. In extreme situations, a constricted breath will reveal we are in a stressful state. And once that stressful state has passed, we will often notice the breath become more relaxed -- that is if we are aware of our breath. But there is so much more to be revealed about ourselves by our breath if we cultivate our awareness of it.

Let me share an example common to many young Black men in a number of American urban areas: being stopped by the police on the street for doing nothing out of the ordinary. Even before I embraced a practice of meditation, I was aware of the importance of stopping to collect myself and my breathing when presented with a potential conflict. For those who have never been stopped by the police for just walking down the street, when the stop involves a Black (or Latino, and sometimes Asian) male, before any words are spoke there is usually a tension that can quickly spark into conflict. In fact, a number of Black men have been arrested, abused, and sometimes killed not because they were doing anything wrong but, in part, because they reacted to a tension-filled stop in a way that escalated the tension -- even if their reaction was a justifiable anger for being stopped and wrongly suspected of a crime (real or imaginary). For this reason, when I conducted young men's group (therapy) sessions that addressed how to handle police stops, I always mentioned the importance of gaining control of one's breath as a way to stay calm and avoid escalating a police stop into a conflict. I would cite my own experiences of being stopped, and mention how I was able to avoid potential arrest and harm by making it a priority to focus on my breathing. When I stopped to take deep breaths, my anger would subside, my heartbeat would slow down, my actions and response to (often stupid prejudicial) questions by police were more steady and self-assured. And sometimes, to the disbelief of my young men groups' participants, my slowed breathing had a calming effect on the

police who, in many instances, approach police stops ready for conflict. In fact, the only times I've had police stops escalate into conflicts are when I was with someone who did not remain calm. And certainly an effective way to attain and retain calmness is by focusing on slowing one's breath.

If such an unaware approach to breath can have a calming effect on myself and others, how much so can this effect be increased with awareness? Awareness of the shift in one's breathing. Awareness of one exerting influence on one's breathing, to calm down. Even awareness of how this influence can (or is) affecting others. All this and more can become part of the domain of meditation. But it begins with focusing on one's self.

TO WALK WITH A RELAXED BREATH

One of the benefits of walking with a relaxed breath is the ability to cultivate a clear observation. Such observation allows one to see things as they are -- a mystic definition of truth. With this benefit alone, we can avoid the harms and conflicts that arise when we treat illusions, delusions, and misperceptions as truth. Yet there are more benefits to be gained from a clear observation, some I will share but more I invite others to experience for themselves by embarking upon a practice of meditation.

Imagine a glass of water with some dirt in it. When the glass is shaken up, dirt will disperse throughout the glass making the water cloudy (some say dirty). But when that glass remains in a state of rest for a period of time, the dirt particles settle to the bottom allowing the water above to become clear and transparent. Some embrace meditation as a way to have such moments of clarity. Some may even be able to carry the remnants of meditation (i.e. the relaxed breath) into their greater life to have a more expanded clarity in their everyday activities. Some will go even further, to use meditation as a way to purify their water: to take note of how cloudy the glass normally is compared to when the glass is at an extended period of rest. One can then use this as a means to observe what dirt must be scooped (removed) from the glass. The expanded clarity gained by removing dirt can then be used to examine the glass again, and behold: the previous removal of dirt will make it easier to see smaller grains of dirt that remain in the less cloudy water. Anyone who has scooped dirt from a glass knows that even after many scoops traces of the dirt will still remain in the glass. But constant scooping and re-examination will allow us to develop a very expansive clarity enabling us to attain purity -- for why walk with any dirt in your glass when you can have a pure glass of water (a pure life)?

Along with purity, the relaxed breath can be a means to cultivate silence. Compare the sound of rushed or excited breathing with the sound of relaxed breathing. Relaxed breathing is quieter. And for those who seek to be more observant, the less noise we make the better we will be able to observe. Do not limit noise to just sounds: there is the noise of thoughts, the noise of energy, the noise of experience, the noise of emotion, the noise of conflict, the noise of tension, etc. Observation of our noises allows us to be aware of them and then address them to cultivate inner silence. Different noises will have different causes which, if addressed at their roots, can be eliminated or minimized to a healthy state. An example: for an overly emotional person, it is probably not wise to eliminate the emotional body since it can serve a helpful purpose. A better aim is to see what is

causing the emotional body to operate in a way that is out of balance with the other human bodies (components of being) that it may serve a healthy role with the physical body, mental body, experiential body, heart, etc. And even while this aim is being achieved, the overly emotional person can be aware to not misinterpret or project their emotions on the situations they encounter, tendencies that occur unnoticed in an unaware overly emotional state.

Once we are able to cultivate inner silence, we are better able to embrace the practice of cultivating outer silence (beyond one's self) with others. It is almost illogical for a noisy person to seek to quiet others or have "quiet" relations (without noise) with others. Outer noises usually revolve around relationships (or sometimes the lack of relationships) and how people relate to each other. Just as there is benefit in having the components of one's being relate in balanced, beneficial ways, people are usually better able to identify means and barriers to such healthy cooperation with others in a state of silence -- as opposed to living in a mass of noise that makes it harder to observe, communicate, listen, etc.

The attainment of silence (inner and outer) is conducive to the process of "knowing one's self." And for communities of people who "know one's self," silence is conducive to communities "knowing their collective self." Knowledge of one's self leads to clarity of one's (or a communities') abilities, responsibilities, purposes, destinies, strengths and weaknesses, and so much more. Contemplate how much the quality of your life can be (or maybe already is) improved when you have an expansive clarity of these. And how much more the quality of our individual and collective lives can be improved when our communities have an expansive clarity of these.

There are more benefits that can be explored. But even with those described above note: the benefits available are conducive to being taken beyond the act of meditation itself. If we limit the relaxed breath, clarity, purity, silence, and other benefits of meditation to just the act of meditation we do ourselves a disservice. The first step with these benefits is clearly to cultivate them. But it should always be remembered that these can be cultivated to be taken into our everyday lives.

TIME TO MEDITATE

There are no hard and fast rules to meditation but certain things can help support a regular practice. My first suggestion for beginners, especially those who lack sufficient discipline, would be to seek a place to meditate. Many places of different spiritual and religious approaches (temples, houses of worship, etc.) have meditation sessions that are open to the public. And some of these sessions are not religious-specific: meaning a Hindu temple may have meditation sessions that are not centered on Hindu teachings but instead focus on meditative practices. Such an approach offers a few benefits: one being a set time and place to meditate. When I first embraced meditation, I attended a Buddhist temple that had weekly meditation sessions although I was not a Buddhist. A small part of the 90 minute session involved Buddhist chanting which was not mandatory -- something a Christian might not want to do as part of his or her faith. But having a regular place to go where others meditated and demonstrated ways to improve my practice was extremely helpful. Also, places that host regular

meditation sessions resolve issues of setting and atmosphere: they are often quiet, relaxing locations conducive to the practice of meditation. What you learn from such places can then be taken to your own practice if you see fit.

For those not able to or comfortable with attending an organized meditation session, I'll share a few pointers. Certainly a quiet place without a lot of activity is beneficial. It is generally better to seek places that are sense-neutral: settings that do not engage or excite the bodily senses. For example, a place with strong scents, such as incense or food, may not be conducive to meditation -- or even wearing a lot of cologne or perfume. If your sense of smell is engaged by a distinct scent, that adds another thing to be disengaged in order to completely focus on one's breath -- or whatever the focus of the meditation is. In the same manner, dimly lit rooms are usually preferred where the temperature is moderate (not too hot, not too cold). And preferably a place where one can sit in stillness without interruption is helpful. If at home, you may want to turn off all communication devices (such as phones) and maybe even put a sign on the door asking people not to enter. The less distractions present, the better; but don't let the lack of an ideal place prevent you from meditating.

As for time, I would suggest a time that best supports the place where you meditate. For some people, the quietest, least distracting time may be early morning; in other households, that time may be in the middle of the day or late at night. And there's no need to do it at the exact time every time you meditate, although for some people having a regular time as part of a routine better ensures consistency -- and consistency is important to the cultivation of meditation.

The question of how often to meditate is one with many answers. In my experience, the answer depends on the person. For beginners, I would suggest beginning with everyday at least once a day. If that proves to be too much, it's usually easier to scale back than add more later. Some people find meditating once a day to be sufficient (especially if their day includes other spiritual / religious activities), while others will benefit more by meditating multiple times a day. A good way to measure how much is appropriate for you is by assessing the quality of your meditation: are you improving in your ability to meditate with focus, are you digressing, are you stagnant? If there's a need for improvement, usually more meditating may be helpful. But there are times when a person is meditating too much and needs to be more relaxed and patient in their approach. The cultivation of meditation is a very personal thing and will vary from person to person.

The same applies to the length of meditation sessions. For some, a twenty-minute meditation will suffice. For others, an one or two hour session will be more beneficial. I would suggest starting with more time than less (but not too much), particularly when one looks at how much time is senselessly wasted in most of our everyday lives. If we can have a two hour conversation on something that enlightens the mind or fills it with trivial fluff, is it too much to meditate for an hour? And even if an hour seems long, it can be broken up into twenty minute segments with little breaks in between for those who need it.

As stated earlier, your meditation should be relaxing. There is no need to sit in the lotus position if it is or will become painful, sitting in a chair will suffice. And certainly the use of pillows or low sitting

devices (i.e., a stool) are acceptable. But whatever seating option you choose, it should be relaxed yet conducive to focus.

When meditating for an extended period of time, don't feel like you must be a statue. If you have an itch, by all means scratch it but let your movements be slow, focused, and with attentiveness. This way your scratching won't take attention away from your breath (or whatever is the meditation focus), and neither will the unscratched itch. The same applies to a leg falling asleep or something of that nature: attend to it with a slow, focused attentiveness. And if you are meditating in a group, take care to not be a distraction to others, even if that means you need to temporarily remove yourself from a room to tend to yourself.

Before meditating, you should probably go to the bathroom so you won't have to get up in the middle of the meditation to do so. It's usually better to not eat a half hour before meditating, especially with breath meditations that focus on breathing from your stomach (diaphragm) as opposed to your lungs. I usually wash my hands and face before meditating, to wash away any potential itches as well as approach meditation with a cleanliness. And sometimes doing a little stretching right before will help: remaining in a set posture for an extended period of time can sometimes lead to a stiffness that a little stretching beforehand can prevent.

People can sit in a circle or rows, but not be too close to each other, giving everyone a sense of personal space. And yes, different cultures have differing concepts of personal space, so the amount of appropriate space will be so influenced. It's usually helpful to give people an open space before them so their eyes can fall upon empty space while meditating. Give people a setting in which to focus on nothing but themselves when meditating. But don't let the limitations of a small, packed room stop people from gathering to meditate.

And with that said, I'll share the guide words I use with breath meditation. I learned these during my earlier stated time of attending meditation sessions at a Buddhist temple and made some minor adjustments over the years. A session leader, usually someone who has done the meditation repeatedly, can say (or read) the words aloud to guide others through the process of relaxation and focus. For new groups, someone can volunteer to read the guide words for other members. It's important to take your time with the meditation and nothing is to be forced: consistent practice and cultivation can achieve everything needed to be attained in time. Also, these guide words are a blueprint that can be adapted or changed as needed to suit your (or your group's) needs, including physical challenges.

The guide words begin with:

- * Sit with your back straight and uplifted. And relax your eyes. [Give people time to relax their eyes before moving to the next step. If necessary, explain to people to put their focus on their eyes and then allow their eyes to relax, to be without tension.]

- * Relax your ears.

- * Relax the top of your head.
- * Relax your nose. You can breathe into and out through your nose: slow, relaxing, deep breaths.
- * Relax your cheeks.
- * Relax your mouth.
- * Relax your chin.
- * Relax the back of your head.
- * Relax your neck.
- * Relax your shoulders.
- * Relax your upper arms.
- * Relax your elbows.
- * Relax your forearms.
- * Relax your wrists.
- * Relax your hands and your fingers.
- * Relax your back. It should be straight and uplifting, and without any tension.
- * Relax your chest. You can allow air to pass through your chest.
- * Relax your stomach (diaphragm). You can breathe into and out from your stomach, so that as you breathe in, your stomach increases; and as you breathe out, your stomach decreases. Slow, relaxing, deep breaths.
- * Relax your groin.
- * Relax your hips.
- * Relax your butt.
- * Relax your thighs.

* Relax your knees.

* Relax your lower legs.

* Relax your ankles.

* Relax your feet and your toes.

* And just allow your entire body to be relaxed, to be without tension.

* You can focus on your breaths. You can count your breaths, so that as you breathe in, you count that as one. And as you breathe out, you count that as two. And as you breathe in again, you count that as three, and so forth, until you reach ten. And if you reach ten, simply start back at one again. Or if you lose count, simply start back at one again, focusing on your breathing.

* And any sounds you may hear, acknowledge them and let them go. You can do the same thing to any thoughts that may pass through your mind: acknowledge them and let them go.

And meditate until you are done.

