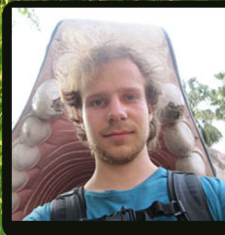


GETTING STARTED WITH MEDITATION E-BOOK



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Disclaimer:

If you have a history of mental illness, then please consult with your health care provider before learning meditation. This is not to say that meditation will be harmful to you, but it's better to be on the safe side.

Meditation could confront you with strong, intense or negative emotions. With skillful practice, experiencing these emotions can be beneficial and contribute to your mental health. However, with unskillful practice, they can be overwhelming, unpleasant and even harmful to your mental health.

Please be aware that I make no claim to be any kind of psychologist, therapist, counselor or medical professional. Anything I say or write should be understood as my own opinion and not an expression of professional advice or prescription. You are entirely responsible for how you choose to understand, misunderstand, use or misuse any of my writings or communications.

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Hello there!

If you are reading this, you are probably curious about meditation and want to give it a try. Perhaps you heard about the benefits, or tried it in a yoga class. Or perhaps you already meditate and are just looking for some tips or instructions.

In any case, this guide is for you! It contains everything you need to get started: basic instructions, necessary background knowledge (to ensure proper understanding), answers to common questions (which people have after a first few sessions) and tips (to avoid common mistakes).

Enjoy!

Mark Marijnissen,
13 July 2012.

If you are not excited yet, here is a list of benefits you can expect from practicing meditation – even when you practice only 10 minutes per day!

- It boosts productivity at work
- It gives insight which facilitates personal growth
- It increases emotional intelligence
- It increases emotional resilience
- It transforms your personal relationships
- It boosts your confidence
- It helps you break addictions
- It reduces stress and anxiety
- It boosts your immune system

All in all, you become happier, more focused, calm and kind. This all might seem too good to be true, but I'll explain every benefit after I've give the instructions. But first, let me give a helpful analogy of meditation:

Meditation is like physical exercise

View meditation as the mental equivalent of physical exercise. Physical exercise is for physical health, and mental exercise is for mental health.

This is how I run, or go lift weights: At first, I find it difficult to go to the gym and create a habit. My mind comes up with tons of excuses, because running feels very uncomfortable: I sweat, I am out of breath and my muscles ache. Afterwards, I feel tired. I don't immediately lose weight or become stronger, but over weeks and months, I slowly notice improvements. While running always remains uncomfortable in some way, it can feel great in other ways. It feels good to release my energy, and after a session, I can feel energized. However, my running sessions vary greatly. Some days I have difficult and painful runs, and other days I have energizing and awesome runs. Still, every run benefits my health and helps me make progress.

Meditation is exactly like that. It's difficult to create a habit. It gives emotional discomfort instead of physical discomfort. Your mind will make up excuses not to practice. Some sessions are nice and easy, with lots of concentration and calm. Other sessions are difficult, where you feel scattered and restless. Although you might feel good immediately afterwards, just like energy after a run, the real benefits accumulate slowly over time. Every session, no matter how bad you think it is, contributes to that.

You don't expect weight loss after a single run. Similarly, you can't expect meditation benefits after the first try. I strongly recommend that you try meditation for 10 minutes per day, for two weeks straight. This is enough time to notice benefits. By postponing judgement, you give meditation a fair chance. Also, there is no need to start practicing like a maniac. You will only burn yourself out. You can compare this to an extreme diet: the weight-loss is temporary and you regain the weight when you stop. Therefore is it better to focus on creating a long-term habit.

Meditation Myths:

I want to clear up some common misunderstandings about meditation first, so you have a proper understanding before you start practicing. Just skim through the list, and make sure you read the items you think are true!

A good meditator has no thoughts.

Untrue! You can't help having thoughts, you can only notice them. Some people use force to clear their mind. In reality they are just distract themselves and are unaware of their thoughts. The mind just naturally and spontaneously creates thoughts out of nowhere. Some days you have many thoughts, some days only a few. This is why the amount of thoughts hardly tells anything about your meditation skills. Your ability to notice thoughts and redirect attention is a much better indicator (although this ability can also vary a lot from day to day!) You might discover that meditation indeed tends to quiet the mind. In a session, the thoughts you notice become more subtle and less distracting (but not necessary less in amount). It becomes easier to have a steady focus on your object of attention.

Meditation makes you feel relaxed.

Partially true! Meditation is not a relaxation exercise. However, a relaxed attitude is important, and relaxation may come as a side-effect. However, even if you become less relaxed, it is a good sign, because you are dealing with pent up, repressed emotions that were lingering below the threshold of awareness.

Meditation is a spiritual, esoteric or religious practice

Untrue! Meditation is a very down-to-earth, practical mental exercise. It does not require you to perform any rituals or worship any god.

However, sometimes meditation is embedded in a Buddhist tradition with religious elements, such as rituals and deities. I would argue that these rituals and deities are not to be taken literally as dogmatic truths. Instead, they serve as practical tools to invoke certain experiences helpful for your meditation practice. (Just like imagining a cute kitten might cheer you up).

In any case, at the core of meditation, you do not need to believe in anything. In fact, meditation actually might make you believe less! When you observe your own experience, you discover everything is much more ephemeral as it seems, and you might reconsider some beliefs you held for absolute truths.



Instructions

Last page of this book contains a summary.

General information

When should you meditate?

Meditate once or twice a day, preferably on a fixed time. A fixed time will help you create a daily habit, and eventually, your mind will automatically calm down on those times.

Before lunch or dinner are excellent times. Since you need to concentrate when meditating, it's important that you don't feel sleepy. After dinner is not recommended, because you are less attentive, and you might experience an after dinner dip.

If you are not too sleepy, you can meditate when you wake up: this is a great way to kickstart your day. Similarly, you can meditate before going to bed. This will help you feel more rested in the morning. It even helps you remember your dreams!

Pick a time and stick to it, unless it turns out you feel too sleepy at that time.

Where should you meditate?

Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed, and which has few distractions. If possible, dedicate this spot solely to the purpose of meditation. Try to make it a special place by decorating it with a candle or some incense. This will help your motivation to practice daily! Eventually, your mind will associate the place with mediation, and it will calm down when you enter the place!

How long should you meditate?

Even 5 minutes will make a difference, but I recommend starting with 10 minutes. After you get some experience, you can increase the time with 5 or 10 minute increments up to 60 minutes. However, keep in mind that is better to have more short meditations, than a single long one. I find 20-30 minutes an ideal time.

What do you need to meditate?:

You only need a timer and a meditation cushion. If you have no cushion, you can use a chair or pillow instead. I also recommend having a notebook so you can keep a meditation journal.

Starting your meditation:

When you go for a run, you start with some warm-up exercises so your body is prepared for the run, and your muscles are less sore. Likewise, a good start of your meditation will make the rest of the session much better.

Each of the following six steps have a specific purpose, and they should take only a few minutes to do.

1. Decide the technique

Decide what you are going to practice before you start. This helps against doubt during the meditation. Sometimes you might think: "This is not working, I am doing it wrong" and you feel tempted to try something else. Before you know it, you switch technique every minute, and you forgot to actually practice! This is why it is better to continue your practice and label this doubt as just another thought.

2. Decide upon the duration. Set the timer.

Set your timer (10 minutes to start with). This way, your mind is not distracted by thoughts about the duration of your meditation.

3. Dedicate the next minutes to meditation

Dedicate the next minutes to meditation. You can do this by silently acknowledging to yourself: "In the next few minutes, nothing is more important than meditation. Whatever worries I have, they can wait for 10 minutes". Use your own version of these words. By consciously giving yourself a break, it becomes much easier to let go of any important thoughts you are preoccupied with.

4. Check your body: Assume a good posture.

Your posture should be comfortable, relaxed and attentive. There is no need for a full lotus posture, all you need to do is sit upright with a straight spine. Try not to slouch, as that makes you less attentive. You can also lie down, but this is not recommended as this makes you sleepy.

Carefully assume your posture. Try wiggling in all directions to find a good balance. Then straighten your spine. Imagine it is being pulled up by a string attached to the top of your head. Make conscious effort to relax your body; make sure you drop your shoulders. Acknowledge any parts that feel tense or uncomfortable.

5. Check your mind: A good attitude.

Notice how you are feeling. Sometimes you automatically relax when you just notice that you feel stressed, hurried or tense. If you can, try to adopt a patient, curious and kind attitude. Try to feel spacious - like the blue sky, or a vast ocean, or as steady as a mountain. Imagining these images help find that spacious feeling.

6. Check your surroundings: acknowledge any distractions.

You relaxed your body, you relaxed your mind, now just acknowledge your surroundings. Especially notice loud, distracting sounds. Once you have listened to a distracting sound, it becomes easier to just let it be. Without consciously acknowledging these distractions, your mind will subconsciously try to push it away (i.e. it tries to not hear that loud sound), instead of being not bothered by it.

Let's Meditate!

These are the instructions:

1. **Direct attention** towards your breath.
2. **Connect** with your breath and notice subtle sensations.
3. **Notice, label** and **observe distractions**, then redirect attention towards your breath.
4. Balance the amount of **effort**

I will now explain these instructions step by step:

1. Direct attention towards your breath

Direct attention to the physical sensation of the air flowing in and out of your nostrils. Don't force your breath. Just follow your natural breath as it is, whether it is shallow, deep, fast or slow.

2. Connect with your breath, and sustain attention

You have two different ways of relating to the world: through your thoughts and through sensory experience. Usually, we are in "active thinking mode", which consists of judging, analyzing, evaluating, planning, thinking and responding to the world. In meditation, you need to switch to "passive observing mode", in which you just passively observe sensory experience, and notice all the different flavours and subtleties.

At first, you might only have a vague sense of breath going in and out. Just keep directing attention towards your breath. Eventually, you will notice more. You might notice the texture of the air, the temperature, the speed. You might notice a faint tingling sensation on the skin of your nostrils. Keep focusing on subtle sensations as much as you can.

3. Notice, label and observe distractions

The mind is like an untrained puppy. It runs around, breaks your expensive vase and pees on your carpet. This can be really, really annoying. But each time it runs away, you patiently say: "Sit!". You do this persistently, and with a very kind and gentle attitude. You don't train the puppy with force or frustration, because then he will become scared and vicious. You can't blame the puppy for running away all the time - it's just his nature! He just has a lot to learn.

In the same way, sooner or later, your mind will wander. That's just its nature. Here is how you train your mind-puppy:

1. At some point, you **notice** that you don't feel the breath anymore. Even if this takes a while, don't feel frustrated or dejected! Distractions are a part of the meditation.
2. **Label** the distraction just as "distraction". Alternatively, you can use a neutral word to describe it, such as "past", "worry" or "planning". Be non-judgemental and use a neutral, matter-of-fact (internal) voice. Describing the distraction helps noticing it with more clarity.
3. **Observe** the distraction for a moment, then redirect your attention back to your breath. If the distraction is gone after labeling it, then just immediately return to your breath.

Just like training the puppy, you are patient, persistent, gentle and kind. This matches the dedicated yet relaxed attitude you assumed when starting the meditation.

4. Balance the amount of effort

The skill of meditation is to find the right amount of effort.

If you use too much effort, you force yourself. It is easy to stay concentrated if you mentally shout: "BREATH. BREATH. BREATH". However, your mind narrows down, and all this effort prevents you from observing from what is actually going on. This is why you adopt a calm and relaxed attitude, instead of a tense and forceful one. On the other hand, if you use too little effort, you might fall asleep or get lost in distractions.

Start by labeling your distractions with a normal, internal voice. If you are able to sustain attention on your breath for a while (>3 minutes), decrease the effort:

- Use a more quiet internal voice - up to the point where you don't label the distractions anymore. You acknowledge them only with a silent mental notice.

However, you probably find yourself being distracted. If you are distracted for very long times (>5 minutes), increase your effort:

- Use a louder voice, up to the point where you actually speak the labels out loud.
- Also label the breath itself. Use "breath" as a label. Don't forget to observe the breath for a few seconds after each label!
- Alternatively, label your breath by counting from 1 to 10. If you lose count or reach 10, simply start at 1 again. Again, remember to actually experience the breath after each count! If you can successfully count to 10 for several times, you can stop counting.

The right amount of effort highly depends on your state of mind. When your mind is dull, sleepy or scattered, you need more effort. Conversely, when your mind is alert and lucid, you need less effort. Additionally, your mind will calm down *during* meditation, so you need check your amount of effort *every once in a while (!)*.

Warning: Don't micro-manage the right amount of effort! If you are continuously monitoring your effort and obsessing over it, you become tense and forced. Meditation should be a simple exercise: Just sit down, feel your breath and notice any thoughts. Don't worry about doing it right, you will develop a feeling for it over time!

Experiment with effort by using extremes (i.e. way too much force and totally relaxed). Reflect afterwards how it affected your mind - this will help you a lot!

Ending your meditation

As you end your meditation, see if you can keep meditating while you carefully resume your daily activities. Usually, these are so distracting that you quickly get enveloped in them - but sometimes you can keep concentrating and noticing distractions!

Also, congratulate yourself: You just did another meditation! The biggest challenge of meditation is not "doing it the right way" but just "doing it". Don't underestimate this, so take a moment to feel good!

Finally, I recommend keeping a meditation journal. Just write down your experience in a few words. Even a short reflection on meditation has benefits: It motivates, it keeps your meditation practice more fresh, and it is easier to adjust your practice.

Here are some examples on what you can journal about:

- How was my mind, today? Sharp or dull? Scattered or focused?
- How much effort did I use? Was it too much, too little or just right?
- How quickly did I notice distractions? Was I distracted for very long periods (>5 minutes)?
- Did I fall asleep?
- Was I kind towards myself, or did I get tense and frustrated?
- Did I keep it simple, as opposed to changing, managing and complicating my meditation?

You can read the FAQ if you have any questions about your meditation experience. If you notice any benefits from meditation later in the day, be sure to write them down too! The next section elaborates on the benefits of meditation:



Benefits of Meditation

Benefits of meditation:

Meditation is often used as stress-reduction, or to give some peace and calm in order to deal with depression or anxiety. However, that is only the tip of the iceberg, as meditation does much more!

It boosts productivity at work:

Practicing to concentrate (while noticing distractions) helps you become more focused (and less side-tracked) when you are at work.

It gives insight which facilitates personal growth:

You get to know yourself: as notice of your everyday (thought) patterns and habits, you learn to stop and pause, so you can break the habit by changing your reaction.

It increases emotional intelligence:

You notice your emotions quicker, and you will notice more subtle emotions. This will help you react wisely: before they spin out of control and before you suppress them.

It increases emotional resilience:

You notice (difficult) emotions during meditation with a non-judgemental and kind attitude. This trains maintaining balance of the mind: you neither avoid nor get carried away by these emotions. Also, this helps letting go of lingering negativity, which brings relief and calm.

It transforms your personal relationships:

With less stress and more peace, you have more space and empathy for others. The increased emotional intelligence helps you communicate and create more authentic connections. Some meditations are even specifically designed to cultivate feelings of gratitude, compassion and loving-kindness!

It will boost your confidence:

You are more kind towards yourself, and you will also notice and stop the negative thought habits that make you feel insecure (such as judging, criticizing and doubting yourself)

It helps you break addictions:

Everybody has addictions (some quite harmless): you snack, smoke, crave attention or seek relief in sex. Meditation helps you notice these cravings (or unmet needs) sooner – and you can also resist them better, as a result of the increased emotional resilience!

It reduces stress and anxiety

It boosts your immune system

This might seem quite a list, but they are just stem from three core skills. Shinzen Young calls them Concentration, Clarity and Equanimity.

Concentration is the ability to direct and sustain attention on your object of choice. This can be narrow (breath at the nostrils) or wide (all body sensations). It is trained each time you notice a distraction and return to your breath. This fundamental skill helps you observe what is happening. You will get less carried away, and you will be able to stay with more intense emotions.

Clarity is like switching youtube from low-quality to HD: You just notice more subtleties and details. Compare your drunk mind between your sober mind: when sober, your mind has definitely more clarity! Clarity is what leads to insights that facilitate personal growth, helps you break addictions, notice more emotions, etc. Clarity is trained when you focus on subtle and faint sensations. Mantra and visualisation meditations barely practice clarity, because you focus on self-generated objects, rather than observing the subtle sensations that are already there.

Equanimity is the ability to maintain composure under stress. It is the ability to neither ignore (suppress) nor multiply difficult emotions. It is acceptance of what is happening, going with the flow, as opposed to trying to control our experience by wishing things to be different (desire) or running away from it (aversion).

There are many ways in which we lose this composure: We distract ourselves (ignore), we worry (multiply), we fantasize (multiply), we shut down (ignore), we act indifferent (ignore). How often do you try to escape that uncomfortable feeling of restlessness, by mindlessly browsing the internet, watching TV, or snacking sugary food? How often do you have trouble sleeping at night because your mind can't stop thinking about the same things over and over again? It is a good exercise to make a list of your top activities you use to distract yourself, and then refrain from doing them for a week. You will feel short-term restlessness and discomfort, but in the long-term, this will lead to more peace and calm.

Equanimity is different from indifference, because indifference stems from ignoring what we don't like. Equanimity fully embraces experience. You can compare it to the following: When a little kid falls off his bike and hurts his knee, he will cry. When an adult falls, he feels the same pain, yet he does not cry anymore. Developing equanimity is like that. When you are able to stay calm under more intense emotions, you do not feel less, you actually feel more..!

Equanimity is trained when we label our distractions in a non-judgemental and matter-of-factly way. Labeling thoughts helps us disidentify from them and observe them from a distance. When we do this with unconditional kindness and patience, we slowly unlearn the ancient human habits of judging, worrying, criticizing, shutting down, etc. We stop reinforcing these habits when we stop reacting with more thoughts and emotions. We let go of old emotional wounds by just experiencing them. As we become better friends with ourselves and our experience, we tap into a feeling of openness, vulnerability, calm and peace. It uncovers a soft, caring and nurturing side in us, which makes us more gentle and loving. At the same

time, this balanced mind will make us feel strong, centered and grounded - ready to take action!

Without an unconditional kind attitude towards yourself, equanimity. This is why a proper attitude is super-duper important in developing equanimity and practicing meditation! However, it's easy to judge your non-judgemental attitude, or be harsh on your attempts to be kind. When this happens, your good attitude turn against you! That is why unconditional kindness is key. It can be very difficult to notice these meta-levels of subtle judging and harshness, but that is perfectly normal. Don't worry about it! Remember you are only human and every little bit of kindness and not-judging helps!



FAQ

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions:

The following section contains common experiences, and gives some specific advice on how to deal with them. It is meant as a reference guide. You can just skim through the list right now, and come back if you have any questions after a meditation session.

I have trouble connecting with my breath; I can't feel my breath!

If you have trouble getting in touch with the physical sensation of breathing, just patiently wait. It can take a while to get out of "thinking mode". Especially if you have a job that requires a lot of logical thinking, such as computer programming. You can also try taking a few deep breaths - this will give you a more intense sensation that is easier to focus on. Go back to normal breathing after that.

I can't stop controlling my breath!

Consciously following the breath can feel as if you are controlling it. If this is the case, don't worry. As long as you don't deliberately speed up or slow down your breath, you are doing fine! Simply find the breath that feels the most relaxed (i.e. with the least amount of effort) to you.

Watching my breath is boring, I don't notice any subtle sensations!

Boredom itself is a distraction you can acknowledge and label. However, there is another trick: If you find yourself getting bored, try to be curious. You can ask yourself a few questions: How hot is the air? Is the air flowing in colder than the air flowing out? Can I feel the first touch of my breath? Is there more airflow in my left or in my right nostril?

How do I handle boredom, tension, or any other reaction I have to meditating?

Sometimes there is not only the distraction, but also a reaction towards it. For example, you might get bored or frustrated while labeling distractions. Realize that this reaction in itself can be labeled as just another distraction. Shinzen Young calls this "Recycling the reaction". Note that it is often tricky to notice these meta-thoughts, as they are often more subtle in the background!

Where do I focus on between two breaths?

Nothing, really. You just try to do nothing and wait for the next breath to come.

Meditation does not work, it only gives me more thoughts!

I explained earlier that meditation is not about having less thoughts. Also, it is not meditation that creates more thoughts - these thoughts were already there. Meditation just makes you aware of them, by increasing the clarity of your mind! This is a sign you are meditating properly!

I can't meditate, I have too many thoughts!

Getting distracted is part of the meditation. It is a common misconception (see above) that you are supposed to have no thoughts. As long as you are noticing distractions, you are doing fine!

Meditation does not work, it only makes me more restless!

In the same way lifting weights weakens your muscles before you get stronger, so can meditation confront you with repressed emotions, before they get cleared out of the way. Meditation does not cause these emotions, it only makes you aware of them.

The difficult emotions that arise during meditation are too intense!

It is important that you maintain equanimity when observing difficult emotions. Make sure that you don't start worrying or multiplying these emotions. Remain calm and relaxed, and you just observe the physical sensations in your body. If you feel too overwhelmed or carried away, you can calm down by distracting yourself. Do this by focusing on your breath again. You can switch back and forth between your breath and your difficult emotion. This way, you keep a balanced mind, and you can gently explore and process this emotion. If it really becomes too much, open your eyes or stop the meditation.

I feel my breath, but I am aware of my thoughts at the same time!

As long as you stay in contact with your breath, you don't have to label these thoughts as distractions. However, if you want, you can just label them for what they are: "background thoughts" or "subtle thoughts". It can also help to start labeling your breath every few seconds. This helps you focus on your breath more.

Meditation is so relaxed! / I have no thoughts at all!

You probably have fallen asleep. If you are unconscious, you are not aware of your thoughts!

- Were you sleepy?
- Were you aware of your breath? Did you notice (very) subtle sensations? (If not, you were sleeping)
- Did the timer scare or surprise you? (If yes, you were sleeping)
- Did you feel very alert and attentive? (If not, you were sleeping)
- Did time just fly by? (If you don't feel very calm and concentrated, you were sleeping)

I have no thoughts at all! (But it's not so relaxed!)

You probably use too much effort. Make sure you meditate with a relaxed and patient attitude, try to feel spacious and light.

I got a headache!

Some people tense their facial muscles when concentrating very hard. In that case, relax and use a little less effort. Other people have the habit of looking to their object of attention (visualizing). When you focus on your nose, for example, this can strain your eye-muscles and give a headache. Make sure that you don't visualize: open your eyes - they should not move!

I fall asleep when I meditate!

If it is just a one-time drowsiness, increase your effort and try to maintain awake. You can also try opening your eyes, splashing water in your face, or do a walking meditation. Really, just anything to stay awake! If it happens more often, then try a different time. If you still keep falling asleep after all these suggestions, I think you need a good night sleep!

I got so distracted, I forgot to notice distractions!

If you are distracted for very long periods of time (>5 minutes), simply set a timer to 3 or 5 minutes. This way, you get reminded to practice and your distractions are limited to a short time. Don't worry about it - your concentration will improve over time! (If it doesn't, contact me because you might be practicing wrong!)

I saw a purple flash in the shape of a diamond. What does it mean?

Absolutely nothing! It is just another distraction. Label it as such and focus on your breath.

It is very important that you don't search for special sensations. Meditation is about observing whatever arises, without judgement, without desire, without aversion. This also means without personal preference. As soon as you try to control your experience towards something special, your mind will become less focused, less observant, and you will become dissatisfied and frustrated when these special sensations don't come.

Suddenly: my thoughts stopped / I became very lucid / I observed everything very clearly / I experienced the breath for real / I felt so peaceful and calm

That is a sign you are very concentrated. It will happen occasionally. For inexperienced meditators, this is very difficult deliberately achieve. It takes years of specific concentration practice to do this (After many years, I still can't consistently do it!).

From my own experience, I have discovered that a key element is to use the right amount of effort. When starting your meditation, you use quite a lot of effort to direct and sustain attention. Your mind calms down, but because you are quite busy making effort, you don't really notice that. After some time, you suddenly drop all your effort. If the timing is right, your mind has calmed down and you have build sufficient momentum. This will make your mind "stick" to the breath without making effort. You experience a sudden and dramatic increase in clarity, along with a possible disappearance of a feeling of "self".

If you are interested in this, check out books about the "Jhana's", such as "Focused and Fearless" by Shaila Catherine. These contain elaborate descriptions of different stages of concentration and how to achieve them. Note that this phenomenon is related to concentration-style meditations (e.g. Jhana). Be careful though - it is easy to fall into the trap of "sensation-hunting!" (see above). The benefits of meditation will also come without these experiences, especially if you focus more on observing-style meditations (e.g. Vipassana).

Suddenly: my sense of self disappeared and only breath remained.

This, too, is a sign you are very concentrated. It will happen occasionally. I recommend reading Shinzen Young's information about experiencing "the void" if you are interested in this phenomenon.

My experience or question is not listed here!

Please contact me, I would like to hear about your meditation experience and tell you my thoughts about them!



More Meditations

Spice up your meditation with some variety!

Meditation is available in many different flavours. Again, we can make an apt analogy with physical exercise: some exercises might increase strength, while others increase endurance or flexibility. However, they all contribute to your health. Likewise, different meditations have different effects, but they all contribute to your mental health. Some might focus more on embodiment and being present, while others focus more on concentration, or connecting with your emotions.

Experiment with different variations to discover which one you like the best. Different exercises will help you grasp the essence of meditation better, and might prevent you from getting stuck or misunderstanding a certain aspect.

Also, you will notice that meditation practice can get dull, mechanical or habitual after a while. Trying a different exercise is a great way to get some inspiration and refreshen your practice!

Here are some ideas:

1. ***Listen to sounds.*** I love continuous sounds, such as noise in a public area, or the humming when traveling in a car or train.
2. ***The Body-Scan:***
 - Focus on your body, part for part.
 - Move to the next part as soon as you notice any sensation. This can be the touch of your clothes, hot, cold, itching, tingling, whatever – any sensation is good!
 - If you don't feel any sensation, just patiently wait!
 - If your mind is dull, use big parts, such as your entire head, arm, chest. This makes it easier to detect a sensation. If your mind is very focused, use small parts.
 - Check that you are not looking at those body parts – you need to feel, not visualize. (Check by opening eyes – if they move you were visualising)
3. ***Eat slowly.*** Focus on the sensory experience of smelling and tasting food!
4. ***Walk.*** Focus on your movement, or on how your feet touch the ground. Experiment how different paces make you feel. Start with your natural pace, try slightly slower, and faster. Don't walk too slow, it's not a balancing exercise.

5. Try *mini 3-minute meditations* throughout the day.
6. Notice the end of your breath and label it with "**Gone**".
7. **Meditate in daily life**, for example when waiting or traveling. Pick a sensory sensation and use that as object of attention, while you notice distractions. For example: Do a walking meditation while vacuum cleaning, focus on the sensation of water on your hands while taking a shower, or listen to the sounds when doing the dishes.

There are also meditations designed to generate positive feelings such as loving-kindness or gratitude. They are absolutely awesome and you should definitely try them. However, their instructions are a little more complicated, so I did not include them in this beginners guide. I'm happy to help you out if you are interested (either by explaining or by pointing you to some good resources).

Thanks for reading!

Thanks for reading this guide. I hope you find it useful! If you like this guide, please help me out! I am developing two interactive meditation apps. I think they are going to be awesome, but unfortunately, nobody knows about them. My biggest challenge is to increase visibility of the app, and you can help with that! Here is a short description:

"Tap your Thoughts" (working title): *An interactive guided meditation of the instructions in this guide. The app asks for your input, and the guidance reacts to that! To keep you motivated, you unlock meditation tips and quotes after each meditation, and you are rewarded for consistent daily practice with new meditation bells!*

"Meditate Together!" (working title): *A global meditation - imagine people from all around the world meditating at the same time! Every day at fixed times you are invited to join a short meditation (3 minutes). Your photo is displayed in a virtual room. Never practice alone anymore! Feel connected with your friends, or connect with new meditators, and discuss afterwards!*

If you have any tips, suggestions or connections for using the press, let me know - this is unexplored territory for me and I can use every bit of advice.

Show me some love!

- Introduce yourself by taking a short (5-min) questionnaire: questions.marknis.com
- Subscribe to my e-mail list at www.marknis.com. (To notify you with only important news, such when app is ready, that's all!)

Help me spread the word about my app: Tell others!

- Share this guide, point people to www.marknis.com to get it.
- E-mail this guide directly to a friend.
- Like my facebook-page: www.facebook.com/interactive.meditation

Contact

Any feedback on this guide is welcome, as well as advice and tips on marketing these apps. Or you can just say hi, ask questions, or write about meditation!

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www.facebook.com/interactive.meditation

Futher resources on meditation

It is easy to find more information, as there is so much out there. Some information is low quality, or riddled with crazy spiritual nonsense, or has religious baggage. I will highlight a few of my personal favorites which I think are good and should help you get started:

My favorite teachers, at the moment, are Pema Chodron and Shinzen Young.

Shinzen Young is a modern meditation teacher, who has reformulated the best of all meditation traditions in a completely new system. Throughout his articles and videos, he explains meditation in very straightforward and practical terms. Shinzen Young gives practical tips where other instructions remain vague, and he has helped me understand traditional buddhist techniques in more profound ways.

- www.shinzen.org: Website (with lots of free articles)
- Shinzen's Youtube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/expactcontract>

Pema Chodron is an American nun in the Shambhala and Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Her books have a way of explaining the Buddhist philosophy in a way I can relate to. She is able to describe common human experiences, and set them in a new perspective. I find myself becoming more soft and peaceful when I read her books. Common themes include fearlessness, groundlessness, courage, kindness and compassion.

- *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for difficult times.*
- *Comfortable with uncertainty: 108 Teachings on cultivating fearlessness and compassion.*
- *The places that scare you: A guide to fearlessness in difficult times.*

SN Goenka's silent 10-day vipassana retreat

If you want to get more hands-on experience with meditation, I recommend taking a retreat or following a course. No matter where you are in the world, there is probably a retreat from Goenka nearby. (See www.dhamma.org). Although Goenka's evening discourses are a old-fashioned, authoritarian and seem to appeal to a different audience (Indian culture), the course itself is very well-structured. The instructions are good and match your experience quite well: Each day you hear exactly what you needed to hear.

8-week mindfulness course

You can follow a 8-week course in mindfulness, or **MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction)**. However, the quality of the course can radically differ, depending on the teacher and course material. There is no reliable authority that ensures quality of these courses yet. In any case, they are a great way to get started. These mindfulness courses attempts to help with common psychological problems such as stress and anxiety. They cover less “advanced” meditation techniques, but emphasize integrating meditation in daily life instead. You will learn a wide variety of tips and meditation techniques to do so.

Join local meditation groups

You can also find local groups who have group-sittings. Sometimes these sittings are guided, and often they are free (donation-based). They are a great way to meet fellow meditators, who you can give you support, motivation and guidance. In the Netherlands, they have several Wake-Up groups (www.wkup.org).

If you search information about a specific subject, don't hesitate to ask me, as I might be able to point you to some good resources!

Summary of instructions:

General Information

- Practice **once or twice a day**, at fixed times, when you are not sleepy.
- Create a **special meditation spot** (make it special with candle or incense)
- Get a **timer**, a meditation **cushion** (or pillow or chair) and a **journal**.

Starting the meditation

1. Decide the **technique**
2. Decide upon the **duration**. Set the timer to 10 minutes.
3. **Dedicate** the next minutes to meditation
4. Check your body: Assume a good **posture**. Sit upright with straight spine, relaxed and attentive
5. Check your mind: A good **attitude**. Patient, curious and kind.
6. Check your surroundings: **acknowledge any distractions** (especially loud sounds).

Meditate

1. **Direct** attention towards your breath.
2. **Connect** with your breath and notice subtle sensations.
3. **Notice, label and observe distractions**, then redirect attention towards your breath.
4. Balance the amount of **effort**
 - to **decrease** effort, use a **quieter voice** (until you only notice and stop labeling)
 - to **increase** effort, use a **louder voice** or also label your breath or **count your breath**

Ending your meditation

1. **Feel good** that you did another meditation.
2. Try to **maintain concentration** and awareness.
3. Write a few words in your **journal** (and read the FAQ).