

# Starting a Meditation Practice

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We all keep hearing about the benefits of meditation. We will get to know and better understand our innermost feelings. We will react more positively to the constantly changing and often upsetting conditions of life. Eventually a state of harmony and balance will become a part of the practitioner's life. We all want balance; we want to be happy and content, peaceful and serene, enjoying the comings and goings of life and our friends and family.

When we first try to meditate, it seems as if we should be able to clear the mind of all thoughts, sit for long periods comfortably and emerge refreshed and slightly elevated in being. Then reality hits: the mind just won't cooperate and thoughts come in as fast as mosquitoes by the lake. It's not so easy to sit still, our knees start to hurt, and there's an itch somewhere that just has to be scratched. When we finally stop or give up it may be with a feeling of failure instead of satisfaction. So you decide you really weren't the type of person who likes meditation anyway.

There are many strategies that can help you through your first meditation sessions. Here are a few of them.

1. Find place to meditate. It doesn't have to be large - just enough space to place a blanket and pillow or chair. Choose a private place, where you won't be disturbed. Turn off the phone or make sure someone else will answer it. You can light a candle or place some flowers on a cloth to help set your intention.
2. Be comfortable when you sit. Have clothes on that don't bind at the waist and will keep you comfortably warm. If you are going to sit on the floor, sit on a blanket or soft mat with a pillow to elevate your tailbone. Sit in a simple crossed leg position, or try sitting on your shins with a pillow or yoga block between your feet and under your tailbone. You could also sit on a chair, but try not to lean back, and if need be elevate your feet on a pillow so that your thighs are parallel to the floor. If you have to, you can meditate lying on your back, but stay out of bed. That's the place for sleeping and your mind is well aware of it. Of course, if you have to be in bed for some medical reason, do meditate there - it will work.
3. Pick a time of day to meditate and stick to it. Even if you find reasons not to meditate, do it anyway. Mornings are a good time for many people, before you eat or do anything that gets your mind going for the day. Some people prefer to meditate in the evening before bed. It is a personal choice; see what works for you and your schedule.
4. Decide how long you will sit. You can set a timer so you don't have to look at the clock every few minutes. Work progressively: At first just sit for 5 or 10 minutes, and after a week or two increase the time to 15 or 20 minutes if you are able. You can work up to meditating 45 minutes to an hour each day. Or it may be that 5 to 15 minutes each day is enough for you right now. Remember, it is

your practice and you need to arrange it around your needs, schedule and lifestyle. But once you have a plan really try and follow through with it. You can re-evaluate it each week and see if you need to make changes. Consider it a very, very important appointment with your closest friend – **yourself** - and don't stand your friend up.

5. How to do it? Start by sitting comfortably, with a long spine, shoulders drawn slightly back and down. Rest your hands on the thighs, closer to the hips than the knees; this will help to keep the back upright. Place your hands palms up with the fingers curling slightly in relaxation. Gently press your thumb and forefinger together in the mudra or seal of wisdom. Breathe slowly and gently, taking note of how the breath feels as it enters and leaves your body. Feel the rise and fall of your chest with each breath. Continue in this way for several breaths, always coming back to the breath and how it feels when your mind starts to wander.
6. Once you have settled in, are breathing gently and sitting comfortably, you can start with a simple gazing exercise. Gently close your eyes and as slowly as you can move your head to the left. When it gets as far as it can comfortably go, open your eyes and gaze briefly up to the left. Close your eyes and as slowly as you can, and I mean really, really slowly, move your head to the right. When it gets as far as it can comfortably go, open your eyes and gaze briefly up to the right. Close your eyes and very slowly bring your head to center, then slowly lower your head toward your chest and then gently open your eyes and gaze briefly toward your nose. Close your eyes and raise your head very slowly as far as it can comfortably go and then open your eyes and gaze briefly toward your eyebrows. Close your eyes again and bring your head back to center, take a long slow inhale and exhale. You should feel very calm and relaxed.
7. For the rest of your time in meditation you can concentrate on your breathing. The breath is like an anchor: Every time your mind begins to wander you can gently “note” that you are thinking and draw the mind back to your breath. Counting the breath is an especially effective way to keep the mind focused mainly on the breath and the body relaxed. As you inhale gently through the nose count to 8, pause for 4 counts, and exhale through the nose for 7 counts. Continue counting and breathing until your timer rings. If your mind is wandering, just gently draw it back. Remember this is a “practice” with no intention for perfection. Your mind will wander. If you find your mind continues to go back to one thought or issue perhaps you need to spend some time looking at the thoughts that are in your mind, and you may find an answer there.
8. When the timer goes off take a few gentle breaths and slowly open your eyes.
9. May you be filled with loving kindness  
May you be well  
May you be peaceful and serene  
May you be happy and safe  
Namaste.