

# A Beginner's Guide to Meditation

We all know Yoga is often described as a physical and mental practice that develops the body, whilst training the mind. In essence Yoga seeks to unify the elements of our being.

But where does meditation fit in with our Yoga practice?

Well put simply, meditation is described as the **actual experience** of this union. This is only achieved when body, emotions and mind settle – this in turn creates an inner stillness where the nervous system relaxes.

The word meditate comes from the Latin meditari, which means to think about or consider. Med is the root of this word and means "to take appropriate measures." In our culture, to meditate can be interpreted several ways. In the yogic context, meditation, or dhyana, is defined more specifically as a state of pure consciousness. It is the seventh stage, or limb, of the yogic path and follows dharana, the art of concentration. Dhyana in turn precedes samadhi, the state of final liberation or enlightenment, the last step in Patanjali's eight-limbed system. These three limbs—dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (ecstasy)—are inextricably linked and collectively referred to as samyama, the inner practice, or subtle discipline, of the yogic path.

Just as there are numerous styles of Yoga, so there are many ways to meditate. The first stage of meditation is to concentrate on a specific object or establish a point of focus, with the eyes either opened or closed. Silently repeating a word or phrase, audibly reciting a prayer or chant, visualising an image such as a deity, or focusing on an object such as a lighted candle in front of you are all commonly recommended points of focus. Observing or counting your breaths and noticing bodily sensations are also optional focal points.

## **The Use of Sound**

Mantra yoga employs the use of a particular sound, phrase, or affirmation as a point of focus. The word mantra comes from man, which means "to think," and tra, which

suggests "instrumentality." Therefore, mantra is an instrument of thought. It also has come to mean "protecting the person who receives it." Traditionally, you can only receive a mantra from a teacher, one who knows you and your particular needs. The act of repeating your mantra is called japa, which means recitation. Just as contemplative prayer and affirmation need to be stated with purpose and feeling, a mantra meditation practice requires conscious engagement on the part of the meditator.

### **The Use of Imagery**

Visualising is also a good way to meditate; one that beginners often find easy to practice. Some practitioners visualise a natural object such as a flower or the ocean; others meditate on the chakras, or energy centres in the body. In this type of meditation, you focus on the area or organ of the body corresponding to a particular chakra, imagining the particular color associated with it.

### **Gazing**

Another variation on the use of imagery is to maintain an open-eyed focus upon an object. This focus is referred to as drishti, which means "view," "opinion," or "gaze." Again the choices available to you here are virtually limitless. Candle gazing is a popular form of this method. Focusing on a flower in a vase, or a statue, or a picture of a deity are other possibilities.

Use this technique with your eyes fully opened or partially closed, creating a softer, diffused gaze. Many of the classical hatha yoga postures have gazing points, and the use of drishti is especially emphasized in the Ashtanga style of hatha yoga. Many pranayama techniques also call for specific positioning of the eyes, such as gazing at the "third eye," the point between the eyebrows or at the tip of the nose.

### **Breathing**

Using the breath as a point of focus is yet another possibility. You can do this by actually counting the breaths as you would in pranayama practice. Ultimately, however, meditating on the breath just means purely observing the breath as it is,

without changing it in any way. In this instance, the breath becomes the sole object of your meditation. You observe every nuance of the breath and each sensation it produces: how it moves in your abdomen and torso, how it feels as it moves in and out of your nose, its quality, its temperature, and so on. Though you are fully aware of all these details, you don't dwell on them or judge them in any way; you remain detached from what you're observing. What you discover is neither good nor bad; you simply allow yourself to be with the breath from moment to moment.

## **Physical Sensations**

Another way to meditate is to watch a physical sensation. Practice this with the same degree of detail as you would when watching the breath. In this context, you will look deeply at, or penetrate a particular sensation that draws your attention, such as how hot or cool your hands feel. The increased sensitivity you gained due to your asana practice may provide you with other points of focus: the strength of your spine or the suppleness you feel in your lower body, for example. Observing a particular emotion or any specific area of discomfort is also a possibility. Whatever you choose remains your point of focus for the whole practice. You may find that observing a physical sensation can be more challenging than observing the breath. For most beginners, mantras, chants, and visualizations offer more tangible ways to replace or calm the scattered thoughts of our minds, which seem to be perpetually on sensory overload.

## **Meditation Postures**

### **Sitting**

Although you can meditate, or become fully absorbed in any activity or position of stillness, sitting is the most commonly recommended posture. There are a number of classic seated poses, but Sukhasana (Easy Cross-Legged Pose) is obviously the most basic. More flexible people prefer Padmasana (Lotus Pose).

Sitting in a chair also works. It's no less effective and certainly no less spiritual, and it's often the best choice for beginners. The most important things are that your spine remain upright and that you feel steady and comfortable, the same two qualities necessary for performing asanas. To maximize comfort on the floor, place a cushion or folded blanket under your buttocks to elevate them and gently guide your knees

down toward the floor. This helps support the natural lumbar curve of the lower back. Some people prefer kneeling "Japanese-style." You can buy small, slanted wooden benches for this position.

Relax your arms and place your hands on your thighs or in your lap, with the palms in a relaxed position facing up or down. Roll your shoulders back and down and gently lift the chest. Keep your neck long and the chin tilted slightly downward. Depending upon which technique you are following, the eyes may be opened or closed. Breathing is natural and free.

## **Walking**

A moving meditation—highly recommended by many teachers—may be an enjoyable option for you. The challenge of this form is to walk slowly and consciously, each step becoming your focal point. Destination, distance, and pace are all incidental. Relax your arms at your sides and move freely, coordinating your breath with your steps. For instance, you might breathe in for 3 steps and breathe out for 3 steps. If that feels awkward or difficult, just breathe freely. Although you can practice walking meditation anywhere, choose a setting you particularly love—the ocean, a favorite park, or a meadow. Remember, getting somewhere is not the issue. Rather, the complete involvement in the act of walking becomes your meditation.

## **Standing**

Standing is another meditation practice that can be very powerful. It is often recommended for those practitioners who find that it builds physical, mental, and spiritual strength. Stand with your feet hip- to shoulder-distance apart. Knees are soft; arms rest comfortably at your sides. Check to see that the whole body is aligned in good posture: shoulders rolled back and down, chest open, neck long, head floating on top, and chin parallel to the floor. Either keep your eyes opened or softly close them.

## **Reclining**

Even though lying down is associated with relaxation, the classic Corpse Pose, Savasana, is also used for meditation. Lie down on your back with your arms at your sides, palms facing upward. Touch your heels together and allow the feet to fall away from one another, completely relaxed. Although your eyes may be opened or closed, some people find it easier to stay awake with their eyes open. A supine meditation, although more physically restful than other positions, entails a greater degree of alertness to remain awake and focused. Therefore, beginners may find it more difficult to meditate in this position without falling asleep.

## **The Benefits of Meditation**

Research has confirmed what the yogis of ancient times already knew: Profound physiological and psychological changes take place when we meditate, causing an actual shift in the brain and in the involuntary processes of the body.

Studies on meditators have shown decreased perspiration and a slower rate of respiration accompanied by a decrease of metabolic wastes in the bloodstream. Lower blood pressure and an enhanced immune system are further benefits noted by research studies.

The health benefits meditation produces naturally reflect the mental and physical effects of this process. At the very least, meditation teaches you how to manage stress; reducing stress in turn enhances your overall physical health and emotional well-being. On a deeper level, it can add to the quality of your life by teaching you to be fully alert, aware, and alive.

## **When and Where to Practice**

To establish consistency, meditate at the same time and in the same place every day. Choose a place that is quiet, one that is pleasant, where you'll be undisturbed. Traditionally, the morning is considered the optimal time because you are less likely to be distracted by the demands of your day. Many people find that a morning meditation helps them enter the day with a greater degree of equanimity and poise.

However, if a morning practice is a struggle, try an afternoon or early evening meditation.

If you are new to yoga and meditation, you may find adding 5 or 10 minutes of meditation at the end of your asana practice enough. When meditating independently of your yoga practice, a 15 to 20 minute time frame seems manageable for most beginners.