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How To Calm The Mind

Meditation can seem very complicated. People variously meditate to relax, to heal cancer, to think more clearly, to find their inner selves, to play better tennis, to get rich or to fall asleep! Meditation also comes in many flavours – Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and New Age – and frequently promises heaven and earth.

Yet most practices are very similar beneath the surface. You could say they are a thousand different expressions of the same underlying principles. We can define meditation as ‘any practice that relaxes the body quickly and calms the mind.’

In fact, body and mind are so closely connected you can regard them as one organism. As a result, you could relax either the body or the mind for the whole system to relax. Yoga, massage and warm baths are all ways of relaxing the body. Meditation on the other hand calms the mind, which thereby relaxes the body as well.



THE OVERACTIVE MIND

Why is it so hard to calm the mind? For most of us, our minds never seem to settle down. We get swamped by an endless stream of hopes, worries, plans and inner dialogues. Of course, we all have to think but most of us think too much. To relax at all, we need to weaken the habit of incessant thought.

It is actually the emotional charge behind our thoughts that stirs us up. Worry may be driving our thoughts about work. Anger or irritation may underpin our thoughts about family. Desire may be driving our planning for the weekend. None of these emotions is inherently bad but they definitely stop us relaxing.

These emotions pump out adrenalin, which stimulates the nervous system into some degree of the ~~fight~~—or—~~flight~~ response. Adrenalin sends signals throughout the body saying, ‘Prepare for action! We’ve got to sort this thing out. This is no time to relax.’ Thinking is not just a head trip: it reverberates through your whole body.

Thinking is like putting fuel on a fire. An overactive mind literally fires us up. Adrenalin raises our stress response and makes us burn energy fast. You could be trying to relax by doing nothing on a pleasant Sunday afternoon, but if your mind is overactive you’ll still feel stressed. A bricklayer, ‘just doing what he is doing’, would be more relaxed.

Unfortunately, we do have a lot to think about. We face the ongoing demands of work, relationships, maintaining health and preparing for the future in an accelerating world. We even face a bewildering excess of *good* things: so much we can do and see and buy every day. These stimulate the flow of adrenalin in much the same way that worry does.

Furthermore, we often feel deeply troubled beneath the surface of our busy lives. Despite our optimistic hopes, we know we’re trying to find happiness in a dangerous and irrational world. The pain and mistakes of our past will still echo through us. We know that sickness, misery and death are all around, and they creep closer to us as we age. We feel the rapid degradation of the planet, and the avarice and arrogance of the people in power. This dark undercurrent of thought and feeling can make us perpetually on edge and afraid to relax at all.

thoughts +
emotion →
adrenalin →
more thoughts

TOO MUCH THOUGHT IS TOXIC

Thinking promises to give us solutions, but in fact the more we think the worse we think. Thinking stimulates our nervous system, but it also exhausts us since we burn through our reserves fast. Nearly a third of our body's daily energy expenditure occurs in our brain. A tired, over-stimulated mind is easily distracted and can't follow a line of thought coherently. Our minds fixate on small things and we lose all sense of proportion. We react to a red light or a lost sock as if our world is collapsing.

Eventually you become tired enough to fall asleep at night, but the thinking doesn't stop just because you're unconscious of it. If you wake someone from sleep, they can tell you exactly what they were thinking about. Chronic thinking can wreck the quality of our sleep for years. In time, it can be as damaging for our health as chronic smoking or drinking.

Meditation lets us choose when and how much we think. We don't try to ignore our problems. We just don't dwell on them more than necessary. We do have some control about how we react to the stressors around us. Some people fret to death over a broken fingernail. Others can be peaceful in a war zone or a refugee camp.

We don't have to fume at the red light: we could breathe gently and wait. We could be seriously ill, but it doesn't help to panic about it as well. Work pressures could be huge, but you don't need to think about them twenty-four hours a day. In the worst of times, you can still find moments of beauty and love. Meditation lets you be as calm and clear-minded as is possible in any situation.

HOW DOES MEDITATION WORK?

To relax at all, we have to weaken the habit of incessant thought. Usually when our thoughts irritate us, we try to block them out or finish them off, but neither option works well. Trying to block thoughts takes effort and makes you tense, and every thought comes with a hook leading to the next thought. We need more subtle options.

Meditation gives us two distinct ways of cooling down the overactive mind. These are called 'focusing' and 'awareness'. Focusing is obvious and effective, and it may be all you need for the spot-meditations in this

book. It is the heavy engine that drives meditation. Awareness is more subtle but let me briefly describe it first.

We can't avoid noticing a thought that appears in the mind, but we don't have to engage it in conversation. We can simply notice it and let go our grip on it. The thought may then fade or remain, but either way we don't throw fuel on the fire. We call this the art of 'just watching', or 'being an observer', or 'pure awareness'. In time, you'll find you can step back from all your thoughts and feelings and simply 'watch them with detachment'. You can let the stream of consciousness flow by you while you watch from the bank.

'Just watching' your thoughts might sound easy in principle, but the mind is reluctant to be so passive. Even a calm mind is naturally curious and the stream of consciousness is full of 'important' things to deal with. In order to divert us from the temptations of thought, and in lieu of doing nothing (which is impossible), we do something as simple as possible: we focus on just one thing or one activity to the exclusion of all else.

FOCUSING SHIFTS YOU FROM THINKING TO SENSING

In particular, meditation asks you to focus on the sensations of the present – sight, sound, smell, taste or touch. If you focus on the breath, or on the sounds around you, or on the food you are eating, you marginalise the thoughts relating to the past and future. Your blood-flow literally drains away from those parts of the brain involved in cerebral thought. You enhance your sensory awareness at the expense of thinking.

While you try to 'be here', your mind will often detour back to thinking, but even intermittent focus on a sensual object will relax you. By focusing, you hold one thing in the foreground, while letting your habitual thoughts burble along unattended in the background. Those thoughts won't die but they become weaker and less troublesome. If you don't feed them, they don't stimulate a stress response.

There is nothing imaginary about this mental shift from thinking mode to sensing mode. You can read the shift on an electroencephalograph after just twenty seconds of sustained sensing. Thinking produces 'beta' brain waves, which are fast, erratic and of low amplitude. Sensing produces 'alpha' brain waves which are slower, rhythmic and of high amplitude. Something very real is happening in your biochemistry.



Subjectively we feel that shift in other ways. Thinking is busy and active, involving concepts of past and future. It is usually powered by some variant of fear, anger or desire. It is a high-energy state, exciting but also exhausting. Your body will be tense and you will tend to hold your breath.

Sensing is quite the opposite. It is more passive and keeps you in the present. It is emotionally looser, burns less energy and feels more sustainable. It is relaxing and more pleasant. Your body will be soft and your breathing loose.

Thinking:	Sensing:
is active	is more passive
involves past and future	is in the present
is complex and fast	is simple and slower
has high emotional charge	has low emotional charge
is stimulating	is relaxing
burns energy	conserves energy
tightens the body	lets the body soften

GOOD FOCUS IS THE KEY

The basic meditation strategy —focus on something sensual and let the thoughts go —is relatively clear, but it needs practice. Doing something sensual is not the same as focusing on it. We can easily eat a peach without tasting it at all. The mind is very fast and could be anywhere.

Focusing means paying careful attention to one thing. When eating a peach, you feel your teeth breaking the skin, the juice on your tongue and saliva flowing. You notice how fresh it is, you savour the mixture of taste and smell, and even hear the sounds you make as you eat.

When you focus well on breathing, for example, you actually feel your body expand and contract. You follow each breath to the end and catch that little pause before the in-breath starts. You enjoy the gentle ebb and flow of the breath as it massages your body from inside. This is good focus. You bring the moment-to-moment sensations of the breath into focus, like focusing a camera.

Your mind becomes slower when you focus well. Sensing slows us down from the volatility of thought to the immediacy of just feeling, just seeing, just hearing. When busy, your mind can easily speed at the rate of three or four thoughts a second all day long. If, on the other hand, you focus on just one sensation or activity for even fifteen seconds, you slow down the speed of the mind enormously. Focusing the mind is like tying a horse to a post, as the old texts say.

Some meditators have trouble with the idea of focus, associating it with knitted brows and grim determination. They confuse relaxation with sleepiness. They feel that you shouldn't focus at all but just 'let everything go' and gradually space out. In meditation, however, you focus quite gently. You use just a little effort to stay on track but you don't need to force it.

Focusing is completely natural and we do it every day. It occurs whenever something attracts our attention – a flowering bush, a snatch of music, a beautiful body walking by. A child absorbed in a toy is focused, sensing and present.

Everyone can focus to some degree. You couldn't get home without it. Meditation just enhances this natural ability. Eventually we want to focus because the results are so satisfying. When you focus well, the body relaxes rapidly and the mind becomes clear and still. You don't get that effect if you just space out and drift away.

Key Words

Be here
Focus on the sensations of the present
Shift from thinking to sensing
Let thoughts go
Just watch

Focusing is the simplest way to divert your mind from thought and to 'be present'. The only major difference between meditations is what you focus on. In the exercises to come, I'll ask you to focus in many ways on the breath, the body, sights, sounds, tastes and various activities. These all work on the same principles: if you consciously focus on the sensations of the present, and disengage from your habitual thoughts, you automatically relax.