

## Just Look

**P**eople often tell me ‘I can’t meditate with my eyes open’. They feel it’s impossible to relax unless they escape from the world and fall into a torpor. In fact, they only need to escape from their thoughts into the slower and more sensual world of the present.

If you can relax with your eyes open, you can meditate anywhere without being noticed. You can relax in a bank queue or a meeting or a waiting room, or while walking or at the gym or doing housework. If you have to close your eyes to relax, you can’t easily integrate it into your day. It remains something you can only do in private, like getting dressed or going to the toilet.

We all focus instinctively on visual objects. We look at lovely things that catch our attention during the day – a tree in full bloom, a healthy young body, a duck waddling by the lake. We stare absentmindedly at something when we get tired or bored. I suspect we’ve all been mesmerised at some time by the embers of a fire or flowing water. There is nothing unusual about looking at lovely objects, but it’s much more satisfying to do it consciously.

You can do this meditation for just a few seconds, as I commonly do, many times a day. Or you can focus on visuals for the whole hour of a long walk. For the exercise below, however, let’s assume that you want to relax while you’re waiting somewhere for a few minutes.

### 13. Just Look

*Relax your breath and your body.*

*Soften your eyes.*

*Let them blink as much as they want to.*

*Now focus on anything in front of you:*

*a leaf, a shadow, a shoe, the pattern on the carpet.*

*'Name' it, if you want.*

*Use your mind like a zoom lens.*

*Gently examine the detail of colour, shape and texture.*

*If you want, let your imagination play with the object.*

*Keep your eyes and your breathing soft throughout.*

*Feel your body relaxing.*

#### COMMENTARY

When you start, you may be tempted to go straight to the visual object, but I suggest you still spend a few seconds relaxing your posture and breathing first. Throughout the exercise, it helps to retain a background awareness of your body, to make sure you're actually relaxing.

I usually teach this meditation by putting several objects on a low table – flowers, a candle, some fruit, a piece of driftwood, a silk scarf. Some students are interested in none of these, and focus instead on a spot on the carpet or someone's shoe. Literally anything will do.

Once you've chosen your object, let your eyes soften. When you are tense, your eyes move rapidly in their sockets, which is partly why they feel so tired at the end of a busy day. Once your eyes settle on one thing, however, they can soften almost to the point of being out of focus. And when your eyes soften, your whole face is likely to soften in sympathy.

Now let your eyes go for a lazy stroll over the object and gently observe colour and shape and texture. Look for the subtle details that you didn't

notice at first glance. Let your mind absorb the features of the object like a photographic film, as if you were imprinting it in memory.

Don't blankly stare at the object in the hope that you'll go into a hypnotic trace. You focus best if your mind can get interested in the object. Remember you're doing something very ordinary. You're 'just looking' (though more carefully than usual), just as listening to sounds is 'just listening'.

### FURTHER OPTIONS

These instructions come with optional extras. You could silently 'name' the object repeatedly as you breathe out. This connects the breath and the object, and gives you more to hold on to. This is particularly good if you are in a place with many distractions, such as a supermarket queue or a lift.

So if you are looking at someone's shirt in a queue, you could say 'shirt', each time you breathe out. Alternatively, if the colour is more interesting than the shirt itself, you could say 'red'. You could even do both, saying the word 'red' on the in-breath and 'shirt' on the out-breath.

Alternatively, you could let your imagination play with the object, so long as you don't get too busy with it. Associations and images arise naturally whenever we look at something for longer than usual. This is just how the mind works. It goes through the memory bank and says 'this reminds me of that'.



You may look at a flower and remember that your grandmother had similar flowers in her garden. You look at a mango and remember the taste and texture of the last mango you ate. You could look at a small rock and imagine climbing it, as if it were a mountain. Or you see a face or an elephant in a design on the carpet. Enjoy these associations when they arise, but don't actively pursue them.



After three or four minutes, you may find you've relaxed so deeply that it is a strain to keep the eyes open. If circumstances permit, you can now close your eyes and focus on the memory of the object.

Very few people are able to imagine an object vividly, as if it was projected on a screen in front of them, but we can all remember something about it. Just to say the words, 'red rose' as you breathe would be quite enough to keep you focused. You may not be able to imagine that particular rose, but you know what roses look like – you've seen them thousands of times before. So you evoke or even construct a rose from the memory bank. Just a single petal would do. All you need is something to anchor your mind on.

## BORING MEETINGS

Usually while we wait, we have to be semi-alert. It's bad form to put your head on the table and go to sleep in a meeting or lecture or waiting room, so you settle your eyes down on something and let them soften. You focus on the grain of the boardroom table, or the pattern on a chair or a dress, or the angles of the furniture.

Don't stare at your object blankly, but gently explore it, as if it were fascinating and important. Usually the object is neither, but the state of mind that you're entering is important. If you can relax frequently during the day, you're likely to be healthier and more productive than if you run on high anxiety.

### Key Words

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'Name'theobject

Letyourimaginatioplay