

# Meditation for Everybody

**If you've considered taking up meditation but don't know where to begin, start here to find the technique that's right for you.**

**By Frank Jude Boccio**

A good deal of mystique has grown around meditation, yet it is one of the most natural of our human capacities. You've no doubt had moments in your life when you were not thinking or analyzing your experience, but simply "going with the flow." In these moments, there was no past or future, no separation between you and what was happening. That is the essence of meditation.

Contrary to a common misunderstanding, meditation is not a limiting or narrowing of our attention so much as it is a focusing on what is relevant. Our attention can be narrow, as in observing our breath, or broad, as in cooking a five-course dinner. When the mind is able to focus on what is relevant to what is happening now, we experience ourselves as being at one with what we perceive. This experience is deeply joyful, as we become freed from the illusion that we are separate from everything else in the universe. In fact, meditation isn't a *withdrawal from* life but a deeper, fuller *presence in* life.

Another popular misconception holds that meditation is merely about the mind. In fact, meditation causes real physiological effects that have been measured by researchers. It has been shown to decrease oxygen consumption, heart rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure and increase the intensity of alpha, theta, and delta brain waves—the opposite of the physiological changes that occur during the stress response. Most interesting, research done in Japan in the 1960s showed that veteran meditators not only experienced an increase in alpha waves (indicating a state that is both relaxed and alert) but could also maintain that state with their eyes open—something nonmeditators generally can do only with their eyes closed.

It is this ability to be both extremely relaxed and alert that best describes the meditative state. Countless practitioners over the millennia have discovered that they could achieve this state through the cultivation of focus and presence—in other words, concentration: not teeth-clenching determination but rather gentle attending to the object of attention.

## **Try It, You'll Like It**

Sample the following basic practices and you'll no doubt find that the possibilities are limitless. Pick a method and give it a trial run for a week or two before trying another. Suspend for the time being any judgment or doubt, and treat whatever negative reactions arise as mere thought patterns to let go. Then, if you like, try another method. Eventually, you will most likely want to commit to one and go into it wholeheartedly.

**CONSCIOUS BREATHING** is a basic yet profound concentration practice. Simply bring your attention to the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves your nostrils. Keep your awareness on the duration of each breath, and when the mind wanders from the breath, just notice that and bring your attention back to the sensations of the breath. If the mind seems very distracted, you may find it helpful to label each breath "in" or "out" and each thought "thinking." Try not to control your breath or visualize it; simply note the sensation just as you feel it.

**MANTRA RECITATION**, another effective way to cultivate concentration, has been used by many spiritual traditions. Mantras can be one word or syllable or a phrase. Christians often use the mantra "Christ have mercy," while the Hebrew Shma (hear) is used by many meditating Jews. Other common mantras include *Om*, *Amen*, and *Om mani padme hum* (meaning "The jewel is in the lotus"). If these feel too "spiritual" for you, choose a simple word like *peace* and see how that works. With mantra practice, you can just keep repeating the mantra silently, or you can synchronize it with your breath.

**VISUALIZATION** requires you to develop your inner vision by first gazing at a simple geometric shape (such as a circle or a triangle) and then closing your eyes, attempting to hold the image in your mind's eye. Eventually, you can work with yantras and mandalas (intricate geometric figures that have been used since ancient times as meditation tools) or you can visualize a spiritual guide or being that has meaning for you. You can also just imagine a peaceful space that you can rest in while meditating.

**LOVINGKINDNESS MEDITATION** (*metta bhavana*) strengthens concentration while also cultivating insight and transforming how we relate to ourselves and others. *Metta* is the Pali word for "love," and *bhavana* literally means "cultivation." In this practice—which was taught by the Buddha and is found in Theravada Buddhism and some Tibetan Buddhist traditions—you direct love and kindness first to yourself, then to loved ones, neutral people, difficult people, and all beings throughout the world.

To do this practice, it helps to center yourself with some conscious breathing first. Then, drawing your attention to your heart center, recite to yourself phrases such as, "May I be happy," "May I be peaceful," and "May I be free from suffering." When you have practiced with yourself for a while, you can bring the image or sense of one or more loved ones to mind, and direct the phrases and energy of love to them: "May you be happy," "May you be peaceful," and so on. Next, move on to neutral and then difficult people—it helps to work with those who have caused minor pain before working with the *really* difficult ones! Finally, try radiating lovingkindness to all beings.

**VIPASSANA** asks you to turn your attention to bodily sensations, then emotions, perceptions, and thoughts. Practitioners often label any thoughts, emotions, or sensations that come up—for example, "Having a fearful thought." This practice is sometimes referred to as choiceless awareness, as you do not pre-choose an object on which to focus. Instead, you pay attention to whatever arises in the field of awareness, without reacting by resisting or clinging to it. (The need for strong concentration becomes

obvious: Without it, it's difficult, if not impossible, to observe strong emotions without reacting to them.)

Vipassana, which is reputed to be traceable back to the Buddha but flourished in Southeast Asia, is said to produce a less reactive, more responsive state of mind when practiced over the long term.

**VEDANTIC MEDITATION**, part of the yogic philosophy known as Vedanta, has been described as using the mind to go beyond the mind, through the constantly repeated practice of self-examination and self-remembrance. This is not a particular form or technique, so it defies any generalizations. To practice self-inquiry (the most popular form of Vedantic meditation), simply trace your thoughts back to their source, keeping the question "Who am I?" alive at all times—not merely repeating it to yourself like a mantra but always keeping a probing, questioning attitude. For example, if you find yourself feeling bored at a given moment, you could ask, "Who is it who is feeling bored?" This line of inquiry is aimed at freeing the practitioner from a limited, egocentric identity and engendering a sense of oneness.

**MOVING MEDITATION**, of which there are many forms (such as hatha yoga, tai chi, qi gong, and walking meditation), can be an appealing way to engage in meditation practice if you're not eager to sit still for a long period. In walking meditation, you walk slowly back and forth along a path or in a circle, matching your breath with your steps. As the inbreath enters the body, you raise the heel, then the sole, and finally the ball of the foot. Step the foot forward as the breath continues. Then, with the exhalation, place the foot on the ground, shifting your weight onto it, and prepare to lift the other foot with the next inhalation. Remember, this is not an exercise in movement; it's a practice of mindfulness that uses movement to develop greater awareness.

### **Ahead: Inner Peace**

Many people are turned off by meditation because they start with a practice that either is too difficult for them or doesn't suit their temperament. Whichever technique you choose, remember that sustained effort is necessary; the mind is wily and resists settling down. (Just knowing that this mental restlessness is normal is a great relief to many who take up meditation and think it's just *their* mind that is so crazy!) Start out with five or 10 minutes each day and commit to practicing consistently.

Meditative awareness is not an intellectual exercise, but it brings a clarity that lays bare the workings of your mind. Having cultivated an alert and relaxed mind, you become free from reactive conditioning, more able to respond creatively, and more in harmony with the way things are. You may come to meditation to become free from the harmful effects of stress on your body and mind, and that's fine. But be prepared for your motivations to change as you grow in self-awareness and inner peace. Meditation doesn't just change you; it can transform your life. Indeed, what mindfulness practice gradually reveals is that ultimately, your entire life can be meditation in action.

**Frank Jude Boccio is an interfaith minister, a yoga instructor, a meditation teacher, and the author of *Mindfulness Yoga*.**