

The Art of Meditation

The art of meditation has been practiced for thousands of years. It began as a devotional practice commonly associated with monks, priests, mystics, and other practitioners of spiritual disciplines. The meditative state has been described as one of perfect stillness: the silence of body, speech, and mind. The systematic practice of meditation enables one to go within and uncover that hidden center of the one Life, which is the divine birthright of every human being. Today information on meditation is widely disseminated and can be practiced by anyone who desires to find inner peace and happiness.

The Need for Meditation

The pace of life in modern industrialized and post-industrialized societies has become increasingly demanding and hectic. Sweeping technological changes continue to alter the way we live our lives. The pervasiveness of the modern media makes us susceptible to sensory overload by its relentless bombardment of news, entertainment, and information. Health practitioners are reporting increased levels of mental and emotional stress, even in young children. As the pressures of our world intensify, many people are turning to the practice of meditation as a means of leading a calmer life, achieving greater clarity of mind, and coming into touch with the spiritual core of their being.

In this search for inner peace, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is an *inner* journey. Just as the ocean contains quiet depths untouched by surface agitation, so does every human heart. The state of our emotions often resembles the churning of the ocean's surface: we feel as though we are being swept along by waves of anxiety, fear, restlessness, and anger. Against those powerful forces, we may feel as helpless as a branch being tossed by the waves. Our inability to empty our mind of worries and concerns creates further levels of stress. Through meditation we *can* learn to experience inner peace, even though our outer environment may be chaotic or stressful. In the depths of the human heart wherein lies our true Self, abide perfect stillness, peace, and beauty. Meditation is the means that takes us from the surface of life to its depths.

Types of Meditation

Over the centuries, many forms of meditation have been developed. Some aim at emptying the mind of all thoughts and thought processes. Others recommend concentrating upon a quote from Scripture or an uplifting aphorism taken from a spiritual book. Some methods make use of creative visualization, while still others

involve verbal chanting or the silent recitation of mantras. Another technique is to reflect upon certain qualities that we would like to realize in our own life such as patience, compassion, or non-attachment.

The Theosophical Society does not recommend any one particular style or technique, because what suits one person may not be suitable for another. There is no single right or wrong way to meditate. Members of the Society are free to explore different approaches until they find one that they are comfortable with. Once a particular method has been chosen, the important thing is to establish a regular daily meditation practice. And regardless of what approach is taken, the goal should be one of achieving greater clarity and equanimity in one's life, along with a deepening sense of attunement with one's spiritual center.

Preliminary Guidelines

Although styles of meditation differ, there are some basic guidelines that should be observed. The following preparatory steps are fairly common to all traditional forms of meditation:

1. Find a suitable time of day when you can meditate without being interrupted. It is preferable to meditate at the same time each day to establish a rhythm. Early mornings are recommended.
2. You will have better results if you practice meditation on an empty stomach. Trying to meditate after eating a meal is not an efficient use of your energies.
3. Sit comfortably in a chair with your eyes closed or half-closed. You should not slouch in the chair but keep your back erect.
4. Take a few moments to relax your body and release any tension that you may observe, such as in the arms, legs, or the neck. Taking a few slow, deep breaths is helpful. Remain alert.
5. Slowly withdraw your attention from the outer world of sounds, sights, and other sensory stimuli. You are turning from the outer to the inner.

Meditation on the Breath

An exercise that is helpful for beginning students is watching the movement of the breath. After following the preliminary steps outlined above, turn your attention to observing the flow of your breath. Let it flow naturally without counting or trying

to alter it in any way. If your attention should drift, gently bring it back. Sit quietly and continue observing the rhythm of the in-breath followed by the out-breath. Do this for 5 minutes. After a week's practice, you can try increasing the time to 10 or 15 minutes. It sounds simple but you will be surprised how easy it is for the mind to throw up thoughts or get distracted from the task at hand. Each time you notice that the mind has wandered off, gently bring it back to watching the breath. This is a very effective way of training the mind to stay focused on one task. After you become proficient with this exercise, you may want to proceed to more difficult forms of meditation.

A Theosophical Mantra

Some meditation techniques involve the use of *mantras*—short, pithy verses suitable for meditation. The lines of the chosen mantra should first be committed to memory. After following the preliminary guidelines listed above, silently repeat the first line of your mantra. Do this slowly. Give the words time to resonate within your consciousness. Notice the imagery they evoke. After you have reflected on its meaning, go to the next line of your mantra and repeat the process. If the mind wanders, gently bring it back. After you have gone through all the lines of the mantra, sit quietly in silence for 5-10 minutes.

A popular mantra used by many Theosophical groups around the world is the one below:

O hidden Life, vibrant in every atom,
O hidden Light, shining in every creature,
O hidden Love, embracing all in oneness,
May all who feel themselves as one with thee,
Know they are therefore one with every other.

Meditation Practice

The prospective student of meditation is advised to become familiar with some of the literature on the subject. An intellectual understanding of the process provides a strong foundation for success. In order for your meditation practice to be effective, it must be done on a regular basis. That means setting aside a few minutes each day for meditation. Like all worthwhile endeavors, achieving success in the art of meditation requires dedication and commitment. Intermittent practice will lead to failure and disappointment. Therefore the beginner is advised to schedule a set time for the practice and not deviate from that schedule if at all possible.

For Further Study

Basis of Meditation (audio CD), by Radha Burnier.

Discovering the Path of Least Resistance (2 audio CDs), by John Cianciosi.

Finding the Quiet Mind, by Robert Ellwood.

The Genesis Meditations: A Shared Practice of Peace for Christians, Jews, and Muslims, by Neil Douglas-Klotz.

Meditation: A Practical Study, by Adelaide Gardner.

Meditation: A Way of Knowing (audio CD), by Dorothy Abbenhouse.

Meditation: Its Practice and Results, by Clara Codd.

Meditation Class (8 audio CDs), by Ray Grasse.

Meditation Series, Pts. 1-6 (6 audio CDs), by Joy Mills.

The Meditative Path, by John Cianciosi.

The Search Within: A Course in Meditation, by Christmas Humphreys.

We Don't Have to Live with Anger (2 audio CDs), by John Cianciosi.