

7 Myths of Meditation

by Deepak Chopra

In the past 40 years, meditation has entered the mainstream of modern Western culture, and been prescribed by physicians and practiced by everyone from business executives, artists, and scientists to students, teachers, military personnel, and -- on a promising note -- politicians. Ohio Congressman Tim Ryan meditates every morning and has become a major advocate of mindfulness and meditation, as he describes in his book, *A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit*.

Despite the growing popularity of meditation, prevailing misconceptions about the practice are a barrier that prevents many people from trying meditation and receiving its profound benefits for the body, mind, and spirit. Here are seven of the most common meditation myths, dispelled.

Myth #1: Meditation is difficult.

Truth: This myth is rooted in the image of meditation as an esoteric practice reserved only for saints, holy men, and spiritual adepts. In reality, when you receive instruction from an experienced, knowledgeable teacher, meditation is easy and fun to learn. The techniques can be as simple as focusing on the breath or silently repeating a mantra. One reason why meditation may seem difficult is that we try too hard to concentrate, we're overly attached to results, or we're not sure we are doing it right. In our experience at the Chopra Center, learning meditation from a qualified teacher is the best way to ensure that the process is enjoyable and you get the most from your practice. A teacher will help you understand what you're experiencing, move past common roadblocks, and create a nourishing daily practice.

Myth #2: You have to quiet your mind in order to have a successful meditation practice.

Truth: This may be the number one myth about meditation and is the cause of many people giving up in frustration. Meditation isn't about stopping our thoughts or trying to empty our mind -- both of these approaches only create stress and more noisy internal chatter. We can't stop or control our thoughts, but we *can* decide how much attention to give them. Although we can't impose quiet on our mind, through meditation we can find the quiet that already exists in the space between our thoughts. Sometimes referred to as "the gap," this space between thoughts is pure consciousness, pure silence, and pure peace.

When we meditate, we use an object of attention, such as our breath, an image, or a mantra, which allows our mind to relax into this silent stream of awareness. When thoughts arise, as they inevitably will, we don't need to judge them or try to push them away. Instead, we gently return our attention to our object of attention. In every meditation, there are moments, even if only microseconds, when the mind dips into the gap and experiences the refreshment of pure awareness. As you meditate on a regular basis, you will spend more and more time in this state of expanded awareness and silence.

Be assured that even if it feels like you have been thinking throughout your entire meditation -- you are still receiving the benefits of your practice. You haven't failed or wasted your time. When my friend and colleague David Simon taught meditation, he would often tell students, "The thought

I'm having thoughts may be the most important thought you have ever thought, because before you had that thought, you may not have even known you were having thoughts. You probably thought you *were* your thoughts." Simply noticing that you are having thoughts is a breakthrough because it begins to shift your internal reference point from ego mind to witnessing awareness. As you become less identified with your thoughts and stories, you experience greater peace and open to new possibilities.

Myth #3: It takes years of dedicated practice to receive any benefits from meditation.

Truth: The benefits of meditation are both immediate and long-term. You can begin to experience benefits the first time you sit down to meditate and in the first few days of daily practice. Many scientific studies provide evidence that meditation has profound effects on the mind-body physiology within just weeks of practice. For example, a landmark study led by Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital found that as little as eight weeks of meditation not only helped people experience decreased anxiety and greater feelings of calm; it also produced growth in the areas of the brain associated with memory, empathy, sense of self, and stress regulation.

At the Chopra Center, we commonly hear from new meditators who are able to sleep soundly for the first time in years after just a few days of daily meditation practice. Other common benefits of meditation include improved concentration, decreased blood pressure, reduced stress and anxiety, and enhanced immune function. You can learn more about the benefits of meditation in a recent post, "Why Meditate?" on the Chopra Center blog.

Myth #4: Meditation is escapism.

Truth: The real purpose of meditation isn't to tune out and get away from it all but to tune in and get in touch with your true self -- that eternal aspect of yourself that goes beyond all the ever-changing, external circumstances of your life. In meditation you dive below the mind's churning surface, which tends to be filled with repetitive thoughts about the past and worries about the future, into the still point of pure consciousness. In this state of transcendent awareness, you let go of all the stories you've been telling yourself about who you are, what is limiting you, and where you fall short -- and you experience the truth that your deepest self is infinite and unbounded.

As you practice on a regular basis, you cleanse the windows of perception and your clarity expands. While some people do try to use meditation as a form of escape -- as a way to bypass unresolved emotional issues -- this approach runs counter to all of the wisdom teachings about meditation and mindfulness. In fact, there are a variety of meditation techniques specifically developed to identify, mobilize and release stored emotional toxicity. If you are coping with emotional upset or trauma, I recommend that you work with a therapist who can help you safely explore and heal the pain of the past, allowing you to return to your natural state of wholeness and love.

Myth #5: I don't have enough time to meditate.

Truth: There are busy, productive executives who have not missed a meditation in 25 years, and if you make meditation a priority, you will do it. If you feel like your schedule is too full, remember that even just a few minutes of meditation is better than none. We encourage you not to talk yourself out of meditating just because it's a bit late or you feel too sleepy.

In life's paradoxical way, when we spend time meditating on a regular basis, we actually have more time. When we meditate, we dip in and out of the timeless, spaceless realm of consciousness... the state of pure awareness that is the source of everything that manifests in the universe. Our breathing and heart rate slow down, our blood pressure lowers, and our body decreases the production of stress hormones and other chemicals that speed up the aging process and give us the subjective feeling that we are "running out of time."

In meditation, we are in a state of restful alertness that is extremely refreshing for the body and mind. As people stick with their meditation ritual, they notice that they are able to accomplish more while doing less. Instead of struggling so hard to achieve goals, they spend more and more time "in the flow" -- aligned with universal intelligence that orchestrates everything.

Myth #6: Meditation requires spiritual or religious beliefs.

Truth: Meditation is a practice that takes us beyond the noisy chatter of the mind into stillness and silence. It doesn't require a specific spiritual belief, and many people of many different religions practice meditation without any conflict with their current religious beliefs. Some meditators have no particular religious beliefs, or are atheist or agnostic. They meditate in order to experience inner quiet and the numerous physical and mental health benefits of the practice -- including lowered blood pressure, stress reduction, and restful sleep. The original reason that I started meditating was to help myself stop smoking. Meditation helps us to enrich our lives. It enables us to enjoy whatever we do in our lives more fully and happily -- whether that is playing sports, taking care of our children, or advancing in our career.

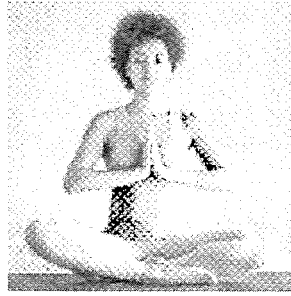
Myth #7: I'm supposed to have transcendent experiences in meditation.

Truth: Some people are disappointed when they don't experience visions, see colors, levitate, hear a choir of angels, or glimpse enlightenment when they meditate. Although we can have a variety of wonderful experiences when we meditate, including feelings of bliss and oneness, these aren't the purpose of the practice. The real benefits of meditation are what happens in the other hours of the day when we're going about our daily lives. When we emerge from our meditation session, we carry some of the stillness and silence of our practice with us, allowing us to be more creative, compassionate, centered, and loving to ourselves and everyone we encounter.

As you begin or continue your meditation journey, here are some other guidelines that may help you on your way:

- Have no expectations. Sometimes the mind is too active to settle down. Sometimes it settles down immediately. Sometimes it goes quiet, but the person doesn't notice. Anything can happen.
- Be easy with yourself. Meditation isn't about getting it right or wrong. It's about letting your mind find its true nature.
- Don't stick with meditation techniques that aren't leading to inner silence. Find a technique that resonates with you. There are many kinds of mantra meditation, including the Primordial Sound Meditation practice taught at the Chopra Center. Or simply follow the in and out of your breathing, not paying attention to your thoughts at all. The mind wants to find its source in silence. Give it a chance by letting go.
- Make sure you are alone in a quiet place to meditate. Unplug the phone. Make sure no one is going to disturb you.
- Really be there. If your attention is somewhere else, thinking about your next appointment, errand or meal, of course you won't find silence. To meditate, your intention must be clear and free of other obligations.

Deepak Chopra is co-author of Super Brain: Unleashing the Explosive Power of Your Mind to Maximize Health, Happiness, and Spiritual Well-Being and founder of The Chopra Foundation



Beginning a Mindfulness Practice

Formal Practice. This involves setting aside a specific time each day to sit silently with mindful awareness of your breath, sound, or walking.

Informal Practice. This involves bringing mindful awareness to your daily life activities.

Beginning a formal practice:

1. Find a special place that has enough space for a chair or floor cushion.
2. Make the space as inviting as possible by having flowers, a plant, or rock.
3. Establish a special time of day. If you're a morning person, try sitting before breakfast. If you're an evening person try sitting about a ½ hour after dinner. Find what time of day works best for you.
4. You can begin with practicing 2-5 minutes a day and then slowly increase the time that you practice each week as you feel comfortable doing so.
5. Find a buddy through a local group in your area. A buddy is not essential to start, but it can help you feel more connected to others who share this interest.

Integrating informal practices into your daily activities:

1. Bring mindfulness into your morning routine. Become aware of the intention to brush your teeth. Feel the sensation of the toothbrush against your teeth. Notice the flavor of the toothpaste. If your mind wanders to the day's activities, bring it back to brushing your teeth.
2. Try eating a meal without reading the newspaper or watching television. If possible, try eating silently. Before you eat, allow yourself to breathe in and out three times and bring your awareness to the food in front of you.
3. Perform a chore mindfully. For example, when washing dishes take time with each dish being washed, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of your hands. Don't think about finishing or what you'll do next once you're finished. Focus solely on the doing.
4. While waiting in line at the store, waiting for a medical appointment, or if you're stuck in traffic, take this time to take a pause and bring attention to your body and breath. Notice if you feel any tension in your body. Take three calming breaths. You'll feel tension in the body release and your heart rate will slow down.
5. Visualize or journal each day about at least three things that you are grateful for in your life.
6. While waiting at a red light send well wishes to another driver beside you. "May you be healthy, may you be happy, may you be at ease." When we express feelings of compassion toward others it increases our experience of positive emotions while decreasing negative emotions.

Information retrieved from: www.thankyouformeditating.com and www.beginningmindfulness.com

Hints, Reminders, and Suggestions for On-Going Practice

(adapted from Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society)

Mindfulness begins with non-judgmental observation of life, from moment to moment. When you notice your mind is being judgmental, like pushing away things it doesn't like or holding on tight to things it does like, simply observe this is happening. You don't have to "do" anything, rather allow yourself to be, and notice what's happening. Mindfulness is the opposite of tuning out, it's being present with whatever is there.

Silent Practice

It's helpful to sit quietly, even if it's just for a few minutes, each day. By doing it everyday, whether you feel like it or not, you allow a sense of strength and balance to develop which goes beyond moods, turmoil, busyness, and particular experiences, in your life. If you notice resistance or avoidance of silent awareness, bring your attention to the resistance itself and observe (don't judge) it. Use any of the guided meditations (or the insight timer) as often as you like, to reinforce your practice.

Body Scan

When you notice tension in specific areas of your body, bring your non-judgmental awareness, spaciousness and curiosity to the sensations and watch how the sensation may change. You can do this any time, anywhere. Scanning your body allows you to develop a sense of being comfortable with your own being, in your own skin. It gives you an intimate knowledge of how your body and mind are connected, and the more you practice this, the earlier in a cycle of "hot" feelings, you'll be able to sense what is going on. Body scan practice is also really wonderful for falling asleep!

Mindful Walking

It's helpful to catch yourself every once in awhile as you're walking, and just slow down a little and pay attention to your movement. Notice the way you carry your body, the feeling in the feet, the legs, the chest and head as you walk. Be open to the sights around you. Try it while shopping, walking in the school hallways, walking down the street, up the stairs. Working in this way can help you get to your arrival point with clarity rather than preoccupation.

Mindful Eating

Are you eating to nourish your body and keep it finely tuned? How often do we eat and not even taste the food? Even one bite during any meal, can help you reconnect with the moment. You might try, once a week, eating a meal in silence, just to experience the eating itself. You might consider not watching TV or listening to the radio while you eat.

Mindful Yoga

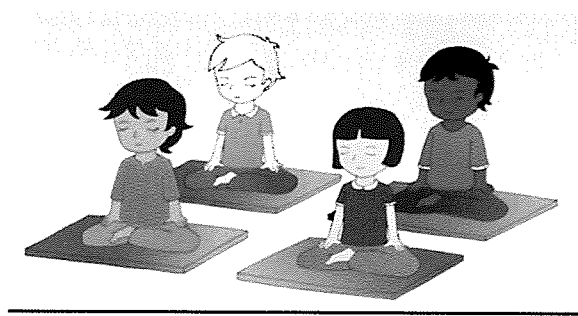
Any type of yoga-type stretching and relaxing is helpful to reconnect you to the present moment. Keep the movements slow and focus on the actual body sensations and your breath.

Coping with Stress

- Be mindful of physical, mental, and emotional cues informing you a particular situation is stressful. Remember the possibility of a measured, thoughtful response rather than a knee-jerk reaction. Be mindful of breath or sound at these times.
- Notice judgmental feelings of liking/disliking or wanting/rejecting. When they're present, be aware of how they get expressed in your activities and behaviors. For example, when we judge others in a negative way, how does that impact our interactions with that person? When someone flatters you, what is your reaction?
- Be aware of how much our moods and reactions to events and situations influence how we feel physically.
- Notice how much the mind dwells in the past or anticipation of the future.

By being with yourself, by watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge, because it is there, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of awareness; it removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence. Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1971

Mindfulness-Based Exercises and Activities



- **Breathing Exercises**

Elementary level students can be engaged in breathing exercises through blowing bubbles or blowing on a pinwheel. Older students can be engaged in belly breathing exercise either sitting (with their hand on their belly) or lying down with the use of a cell phone on their belly.

- **Journaling/Drawing**

Journaling is a powerful tool that helps students to process and make sense of their experiences. Students can gain valuable insight and increase self-awareness by reflecting on their feelings and emotions. Teens or adolescents can be provided with journal prompts about specific topics such as presence, feelings/emotions, gratitude, compassion, or kindness. Younger students can be asked to draw pictures as a way of expressing their thoughts and feelings. For example, they may be asked to draw a picture of themselves displaying feelings/emotions that they may experience in various situations or a picture of something that they are grateful for.

- **Snow globes/mind jar**

Students can be reminded when they are anxious or frustrated that the thoughts in their mind can resemble the snow floating in the snow globe. Adults can shake a snow globe and ask students to breathe in and out slowly as they watch the snow settle. Taking the time to breathe slowly while watching the snow settle can help students to quiet their mind and return to a calm state. Elementary level students can be engaged in a project to create their own mind jars that can be used either at school or at home.

- **Bell counting**

You will explain to students that they will listen as you ring the bell and try to determine how many times you ring the bell within a given period of time. Start by ringing the bell lightly for this exercise, and then at random intervals. Start with one minute and build on longer time as you repeat the exercise in the future. Then, ask students how many bells they counted. You don't have to keep track of how many times you rang it since this isn't a test. Their answer doesn't need to be accurate. Some kids will volunteer that they lost count or that their mind wandered. You may ask them if they noticed how often their minds wandered during the

exercise and how long it took for them to notice that their mind wandered. The emphasis of this exercise is to discuss the nature of minds and assure them that a wandering mind is completely normal rather than focusing on whether their bell count was accurate.

- **Inspirational stones**

Students can be engaged in a project to create their own inspirational stones. Students can be asked to think of a word or phrase that inspires them or gives them strength. Students can paint the word/phrase on the rock using paint or sharpies and then decorate it with markers or glitter glue. Students can be encouraged to hold their stones while breathing mindfully and reflect on the qualities of their chosen word or phrase. For example, if a child makes a “peace” stone they may be asked to breathe and reflect on how they might display “peace” with their friends or in their school community.

- **Worry Boxes**

A worry box is a simple, yet powerful strategy of acknowledging and coping with worry and anxiety. Using the worry box, children can put their worries in a safe place and move on with their day, hopefully feeling more calm and free.

To create a worry box, all you will need is a box and something to decorate it with (paper, glue, glitter, stickers, tape, markers, etc). Once the box is complete, anyone can use it by writing or drawing their worries on pieces of paper anonymously and dropping them inside the box. They can choose to talk about it or not, leave it in the box or not – they are in control of their worries!

- **Creative coloring**

Students can be given coloring books that have mandalas or other creative designs. When students engage in coloring these creative designs it can help them to bring awareness to the present moment and let go of any thoughts about tomorrow or yesterday.

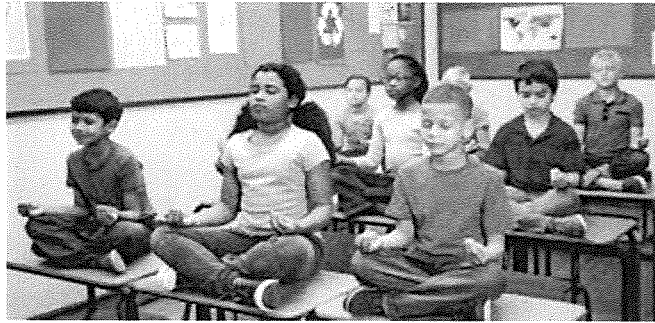
- **Use of meaningful stories**

Share stories with students about kindness, empathy, and dealing with difficult emotions. Students can be engaged in discussion with regard to the meaning of the story and how story’s lesson might be applied to situations and/or challenges that they face in everyday life.

- **Mindful movement**

Moving the body mindfully is a great way to engage students in being mindful. Mindful movement teaches students to direct their attention to the feeling of the movement using various repetitive movements. It increases their self-awareness and self-regulation. Yoga cards can be used with children to engage them in yoga poses and other mindful movement exercises.

Bringing Mindfulness Into the Classroom



Connect with each student in the morning as they enter the classroom.

Smile, greet, and make contact with each student when they enter your classroom or office. Statements such as “I’m glad you’re here today” conveys the message to all students that they are appreciated and valued.

Facilitate a morning circle.

Morning circles can help to create a sense of community. It also allows students the opportunity to feel heard by being able to share with others about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. A specific question can be posed or students can just be encouraged to share something positive or challenging that happened the previous day. If you notice that a student is having a particularly difficult morning, then this is an opportunity to spend a little more time individually with a student after the circle has ended to listen to their concerns or to either refer the student to a school-based clinician for additional support.

Build a community with classroom jobs.


Assign classroom jobs such as, picking up pencils, straightening shelves, watering plants, etc . . This builds a sense of community and encourages students to develop a sense of care for their classroom environment.

Have a gratitude basket.

Set up a basket with a special notebook and label it “gratitude basket.” Encourage students to write little notes of thanks and appreciation to one another using the basket. You can also use the basket to write notes of appreciation for students. At the end of each week you can then share the notes of appreciation with the entire class. This activity can create a classroom culture of gratitude and helps students to learn to look for the “good” that is happening all around them each day.

Offer compassionate presence

We cannot meet every individual need of each student. However, we can always meet the need for relationship. When we cannot meet a specific need, we can communicate this in a



way that still honors the need and supports the relationship. If a student has a problem that is out of their control or our control to change, we can still validate their feelings while being fully present and giving them our caring attention. Example: “I know that must be really hard for you.” “I can only imagine how upsetting this situation must be for you.”

Child interview.


This strategy is helpful when you have a child in your classroom whose behavior may be challenging or confusing to you. Find a convenient time to speak with this student alone and tell this student that you would like to learn more about him or her. Spend some time doing a lovingkindness practice with focus on this student. Ask the student age-appropriate questions about her or his life. This is an opportunity to create a safe opportunity to demonstrate your care and interest in the student’s life. Over the next few weeks, notice if there are any changes in your relationship with the student.

Sample Questions:

What do you like to do in your spare time?

Who are the people in your family? Tell me about them.

Tell me about your favorite TV show (book, song, sport, artist, etc. . .)



What’s really important to you?


Who do you most admire? Why?

Transitions.

Transitions can be challenging. It can be helpful to prepare students for transition by setting an alarm or bell for yourself about 12 minutes before a scheduled transition. At that time you can write a message on the board or give a verbal reminder that a transition is coming up shortly. Next connect individually with each student who has difficulty with transitions by tapping them on the shoulder and sharing any specific information that may help with the transition. Finally, play some soothing music (or use another signal) that lets the students know that the transition is imminent so that they can begin finishing work or putting away items.

Peace Corner

Sometimes students need to cool off or take some time for themselves. Designate a small corner in the classroom as a “peace corner.” This can be a place where students can go to feel calm or to destress. The corner can include pictures of peaceful places or perhaps a shoe box that contains calming items, such as a stress ball, mandala coloring pages, a stuffed animal scented with lavender aromatherapy, etc



Taken from: *Mindfulness for Teachers-Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom* by Patricia Jennings.

Mindfulness Resources for Mental Health Professionals

Mindfulness Training/Workshops

Mindful Schools

1260 45th Street, Suite B

Emeryville, CA 94608

<http://www.mindfulschools.org>

Mindful Shenandoah Valley

1794 Cedar Creek Grade

Winchester, VA 22602

540-542-6139

www.mindfulvalley.com

Recommended Books

Full Catastrophe Living-by Jon Kabat Zinn

Wherever You Go, There You Are-by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Integrative Body-Mind-Spirit Social Work-Ann Empirically Based Approach to Assessment and Treatment-by Mo Yee Lee, Siu-man Ng, & Pamela Pui Yu Leung

The Mindful Therapist-by Daniel Siegel

A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook-by Rob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein

Mindfulness Skills for Kids & Teens-A Workbook for Clinicians & Clients with 154 Tools, Techniques, Activities, & Worksheets-by Debra Burdick

Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents)-by Eline Snel & Jon Kabat-Zinn

Children's Story Books

What Does It Mean to Be Present? By Rana Diorio

No Ordinary Apple: A Story About Eating Mindfully-by Sara Marlowe

Visiting Feelings-by Lauren Rubenstein

Each Breath A Smile-by Sister Susan

Peaceful Piggy Meditation, Peaceful Piggy Yoga, & Moody Cow Learns Compassion-by Kerry Lee MacLean

Steps and Stones-An Anh's Anger Story-by Gail Silver

Is Nothing Something? Kids' Questions and Zen Answers About Life, Death, Family, Friendship, and Everything in Between-by Thich Nhat Hanh

Online Resources

www.mindfulteachers.org

Offers helpful information and resources for classroom teachers and school-based staff.

www.tarabrach.com

Offers free, guided meditations, recommended books, and information about workshops and retreats held in DC, MD, and VA.

www.mindful.org

Offers information and articles on mindfulness in relation to various mindfulness practices, work, home, family, and health.

www.headspace.com

Headspace is led by Andy Puddicombe. Learn how to meditate, beginning with 10 minutes a day.

Mobile Apps

Stop, Breathe, and Think-free web and mobile app for youth which provides meditations on compassion and mindfulness.

Insight Timer- free app that has guided meditations, a meditation timer, and meditation groups that allow you to see how many individuals in online communities are meditating at the same time.

Mindfulness for Children- this is an app for children that includes both breathing and visualization exercises. Children can learn breathing exercises that they can use at school, during sports, or anytime they are feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

MindShift-free mobile app for teens developed by AnxietyBC, with mindfulness and other coping skills for anxiety.

Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame-With sections for both parents and children, this Sesame Street app teaches young children how to calm down and solve everyday challenges.

Yoga Introductory Lessons- Yoga introductory lessons is a great tool to teach children to center and calm themselves, and there are many poses that are easy to learn for daily practice (available on Android).