

## Meditation And Health

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### Introduction:

To meditate is to turn inwards, to concentrate on the inner self. The entire process of meditation usually entails the three stages of concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana) and enlightenment or absorption (samadhi). The individual preparing to meditate usually starts off by harnessing his awareness, such as focussing his mind onto a certain object. Once attention gets engaged, concentration turns into meditation or dhyana. And through continuous meditation, the meditator merges with the object of concentration, which might either be the present moment or the Divine Entity. In some branches of Indian philosophy, direct perception from the inner self (mana) together with perception that is filtered through the five senses (pancha indriya) form a part of their valid epistemology (pratyaksha jnana). And this self-realization or self-awareness (as popularized by Paramahansa Yogananda), is nothing but the knowledge of the "pure being"—the Self.

Meditation is not necessarily a religious practice, but because of its spiritual element it forms an integral part of most religions. And even though the basic objective of most meditation styles remain the same and are performed in a state of inner and outer stillness, they all vary according to the specific religious framework within which they are placed. Preparation, posture, length of period of meditation, particular verbal or visual elements—all contribute to the various forms of meditation. Some of the more popular methods are, Transcendental Meditation, yoga nidra, vipassana and mindfulness meditation

### Body and Mind composition:

There's more to meditation than just closing ones eyes and an understanding of this technique demands an understanding of our mental realm. The subtle state of mind, which is the ultimate stage of meditation, requires a tremendous amount of energy to reach. An absolute harmony between our gross physical realm, sensual realm and our life energy is the prerequisite of a meditative state of mind.

Traditional perceptions of our mental make-up are uncommonly useful in understanding the workings of the mind. According to ayurveda and yoga, both the mind and the body are made up of the 'Five Great Elements' (Panchabhutas) of earth (prithvi), water (jal), fire (agni or tej), air (vayu) and ether or space (akash).

But in spite of such composition, they have absolutely opposite elemental structures.

While the body is made up of the heavier (sthoola, macro) elements of Priyivi and Jala, it functions through the lighter elements of Agni and Vayu. The pitta, Agni or Tej of the body controls all digestive processes and the Vayu lends its spark to the nervous system.

The mind, meanwhile, is composed of sookshma (micro, minute) the lighter elements, which lend mobility and pervasiveness to the mind. And our mental functions proceed through the heavier elements of fire, Prithvi and jala. The element of fire lends reason and perception to the mind, while water and earth lends it emotion and physical identification. But our mental functions proceed through the heavier elements of Agni jala and Prithivi. While Tej lends reason and perception

to the mind, jala and Prithivi lends it emotion and physical identification respectively.

**Techniques Of Meditation:**

**Atmosphere:**

The best environment for the practice of meditation is a quiet place with minimum distractions. It sometimes helps to set up a meditating room with special pictures, icons, holy books or even burning incense sticks and soothing music in order to infuse the atmosphere with spiritual energy. It is best to sit in a well ventilated room, which receives natural light.

**Attitude:**

The best attitude to follow while practicing meditation is that of a receptive observer. Try to observe either the mind or the immediate physical environment, without thinking anything in particular. Watch the mind slowly empty itself out.

**Posture :**

Assuming a certain posture has been central to many meditation techniques. Classic postures, integral to Hatha Yoga, are given in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, which codify ancient yogic healing practices. Other postures appear in the Kum Nye holistic healing system of Tibet, in Islamic prayer, and in Gurdjieff movements. Posture is considered very important in Zen Buddhist practice as well.

A major characteristic of prescribed meditation postures in many traditions is that the spine is kept straight. This is true in Hindu and Buddhist yogas, in the Christian attitude of kneeling prayer, in the Egyptian sitting position, and in the Taoist standing meditation of "embracing the pillar." People with misalignments may feel uncomfortable in the beginning when assuming these postures. The spine is put back into a structurally sound line, and the weight of the body distributed around it in a balanced pattern in which gravity, not muscular tension, is the primary influence. It is possible, although it has not been conclusively proven that this postural realignment affects the state of mind.

In the East, the cross-legged postures, with head and back in vertical line, are considered ideal for meditation. In the classic the Lotus posture, when the legs are crossed with the feet on the thighs, right feeling of poised sitting for meditation is imparted. These postures are difficult and even painful at first for those who are not familiar with them. For such

inexperienced individuals, two other traditional Eastern postures—half lotus posture and the Burmese posture—are usually much easier to follow. For those who prefer to meditate while sitting on a chair, there is the Egyptian posture.

**Time :**

It is always recommended that meditation be practiced daily, twice a day for best results. Beginners are recommended to meditate for about half an hour daily. Later when one gets used to the practice, one hour is ideal.

Hindu methods of meditation prescribes about a quarter of an hour for performing pranayama, the same for mantras and the same for silent or devotional meditation. What is emphasized is the regularity of practice at all costs.

**Meditation As A Therapy:**

Physiological research has shown that Meditation gives rise to a state of deep rest characterized by marked reductions in metabolic activity, increased orderliness and integration of brain functioning, increased cerebral blood flow and features directly opposite to the physiological and biochemical effects of stress. Taken together, these studies clearly distinguish the physiology of Transcendental Meditation from sleep or simple relaxation.

**Hypertension:**

A review of research on behavioral therapy for hypertension concluded that Meditation provides an optimal non-clinical treatment and preventive program for high blood pressure because the technique:

- produces rapid, clinically significant blood pressure reductions;
- is distinctly more effective than other meditation and relaxation procedures;
- is continued by a high proportion of subjects (in contrast to lower continuation rates for relaxation techniques and the frequent problem of poor compliance with anti-hypertensive drugs);
- has documented acceptability and effectiveness in a wide range of populations;
- is effective in reducing high blood pressure both when used as sole treatment and when used in concert with medication;

- reduces high blood pressure in 'real life' environments outside the clinic;
- is free from harmful side-effects or adverse reactions;
- reduces other cardiovascular risk factors and improves health in a general way.

However, all forms of meditation are not good for everyone, any more than all foods or herbs are. For this reason both yoga and ayurveda recommends a proper lifestyle and an integral approach to meditation that considers both our different faculties as well as our individual nature.

**Stress Control :**

Most of the people who get on meditation do so because of its beneficial effects on stress. Stress refers to any or all the various pressures experienced in life. These can stem from work, family, illness, or environment and can contribute to such conditions as anxiety, hypertension, and heart disease. How an individual sees things and how he or she handles them makes a big difference in terms of how much stress he or she experiences.

Research has shown that hormones and other biochemical compounds in the blood indicative of stress tend to decrease during TM practice. These changes also stabilize over time, so that a person is actually less stressed biochemically during daily activity.

This reduction of stress translates directly into a reduction of anxiety and tension. Literally dozens of studies have shown this.

**Pain Management :**

Chronic pain can systematically erode the quality of life. Although great strides are being made in traditional medicine to treat recurring pain, treatment is rarely as simple as prescribing medication or surgery.

Anxiety decreases the threshold for pain and pain causes anxiety. The result is a vicious cycle. Compared with people who feel relaxed, those under stress experience pain more intensely and become even more stressed, which aggravates their pain. Meditation breaks this cycle.

Childbirth preparation classes routinely teach pregnant women deep breathing exercises to minimize the pain and anxiety of labor. Few call it breath meditation, but that's what it is.

Meditative techniques are also a key element in the curing arthritis. Meditation may not eliminate pain, but it helps people cope more effectively.

**Cancer and Other Chronic Illness**

Meditation and other approaches to deep relaxation help center people so they can figure out how they'd like to handle the illness and proceed with life. An Australian psychiatrist who uses meditation with cancer patients, studied seventy-three patients who had attended at least twenty sessions of intensive meditation, and wrote: "Nearly all such patients can expect significant reduction of anxiety and depression, together with much less discomfort and pain. There is reason to expect a 10 percent chance of quite remarkable slowing of the rate of growth of the tumor, and a 50 percent chance of greatly improved quality of life."

**Respiratory Problems**

Asthma, emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) all restrict breathing and raise fears of suffocation, which in turn makes breathing even more difficult. Studies show that when people with these respiratory conditions learn breath meditation, they have fewer respiratory crises.

**Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Ulcers, and Insomnia**

Meditation can also improve irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, and insomnia, among other stress-related conditions. Eighty percent of the people who use meditation to relieve insomnia are successful.

Meditation can help prevent or treat stress-related complaints such as anxiety, headaches and bone, muscle and joint problems. Meditation also provides an inner sense of clarity and calm, and that, in itself, may help ward off certain illnesses.

The longer an individual practices meditation, the greater the likelihood that his or her goals and efforts will shift toward personal and spiritual growth. Many individuals who initially learn meditation for its self-regulatory aspects find that as their practice deepens they are drawn more and more into the realm of the "spiritual."

While working with many cancer and AIDS patients, physicians have observed that many are most interested in meditation as a way of becoming more attuned to the spiritual dimension of life. She

reports that many die "healed," in a state of compassionate self-awareness and self-acceptance.

**Benefits of Meditation:**

- Worries and struggles of the mind are smoothened.
- Fear is removed and a sense of joy permeates your daily life.
- Your thinking becomes exalted, and you achieve success in your actions.
- Your being is filled with a sense of peace and love. You attain a sense of fulfillment and perfection, and acquire the ability to create this sense in others.
- You come to realize that your own true Self permeates all living beings, and thus come to love each of them dearly.
- You attain the knowledge of your own immortal and blissful essence.

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