

The Breath and Thoughts: Learning to Relax

If someone mentions “meditation,” what comes to mind? Monks, contorted postures and incense? If you imagine meditation as something mystical or complicated, it’s time to try a new perspective. Meditation is a wonderful tool for relaxation and can be as simple as breathing and attending to your thoughts.

Getting started

In his tape *Wherever You Go There You Are*, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn refers to meditation as “mindfulness.” He offers several creative strategies for cultivating mindfulness and attending to the present moment. A meaningful first step for meditation is to tune in to *this* moment, right *now*. Try focusing on some of the following items below. Don’t judge them as good or bad. You don’t have to change them either, or worry about them—just notice them.

- Your breathing. Is it fast or slow? Deep or shallow?
- Your body. What is your posture right now? Is anything tense or uncomfortable?
- Your surroundings. What do your senses notice at this moment?
- Your thoughts. What thoughts run through your mind?
- Your feelings. What emotions are you feeling?

You may even want to tune in to your desire to judge, control or change some of these objects of focus. Learning awareness of your habits of judging and controlling prepares you to practice letting go of such tendencies and just being with the object of your attention. More detailed exercises with two items from the list above may help you relax significantly.

Breathing

So, you notice your breathing, now what? Attending to the breath alone can distract you from stressful thoughts and calm you down. Sometimes, however, you may want to practice a style of breathing that is deeply relaxing. Dr. Andrew Weil, in his tape *Breathing: The Master Key to Self Healing* describes how to use the “Relaxing Breath”. According to Dr. Weil:

- Breathe abdominally—your belly expands as you inhale and flattens as you exhale.
- Inhale through the nose quietly.
- Exhale through the mouth noisily, “whooshing” air around your tongue, through pursed lips.
- Inhale for a count of four, hold the breath for a count of seven, and exhale for a count of eight.
- Start by doing the above breath cycle four times, twice a day.
- Build up to a maximum of eight cycles, twice a day.

Thinking

As you practice mindfulness and breathing for relaxation, you may become aware of the ever changing and oftentimes emotional nature of your thoughts. Just like breathing, thinking is another function of the body. You may choose to exert a *little* control over your thoughts by adding an exercise in imagination. Here are some suggestions.

- As you sit and observe your thoughts, picture them flowing through your mind like leaves floating down a stream.
- If a persistent negative thought or worry distresses you, inhale and picture the breath going into your mind, wrapping itself around the worries. Exhale and blow those pesky thoughts right on out! If you believe in a Higher Power, imagine those thoughts drifting up to your Higher Power, where he or she can dispose of them.
- Picture a box with a lid in your mind. Mentally enclose your thoughts in that box. If you are attached to a particular worry or some other negative thought, promise yourself that you can open the box *later* and consider that thought again when you feel calm.

Practice, practice, practice!

As simple as meditation is, you may find it difficult to tune in to the present moment. It may annoy you to watch your breathing. Meditation may not be relaxing or even advisable for some individuals. If you are being treated for a psychiatric disorder, ask your doctor whether meditation influences either your disorder or the effect of medicine you might be taking. If this is your circumstance, take comfort in the fact that there are other healthy ways to relax.

On the other hand, if any of the suggestions listed appeal to you, give them a try. For more detailed exercises, find a tape or book about breathing or meditation that appeals most to your personality and set aside time each day to practice. A few resources are listed below. Have fun learning to be mindful wherever you can!

Resources

Calm My Anxious Heart by Linda Dillow. NavPress, 1998.

Wherever You Go There You Are by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Audio Renaissance Tapes, 1994.

Meditation for Beginners by Jack Kornfield. Sounds True, 1996.

Breathing: The Master Key to Self Healing by Andrew Weil, MD. Sounds True, 1999.

Sources:

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