

MEDITATION: WHY?

by Mark Manson

Take a moment. Breathe. Focus your mind. Slow down and read each word. Become aware of yourself reading this sentence, this paragraph. You, sitting there, focusing on each word, one by one. Become aware of each sound as it echoes in your mind, the one you're hearing right now, and this one, and again and again and again. The voice in your mind reading this to you, is that you? If so, then who is doing the listening?

Ideally, the above paragraph forced you into some form of meditation. It forced you to become aware of your thoughts and mental processes, and then hopefully helped you differentiate your Self from the thoughts and sounds running through your head.

Meditation forces one to disidentify with mind and emotions. It is perhaps the easiest to learn and most available personal developmental tool on the planet. The disabled can do it. Children can do it. Stephen Hawking can do it. Anyone with conscious awareness can practice it. You can do it on a crowded bus. You can do it in a monastery. You can do it in your bedroom. You can do it now as you read this. Experienced meditators can even do it while they sleep. Its health benefits — mental, emotional, and physical — are innumerable and there are no side effects. You can learn to do it in as little as five minutes and once you learn you'll never forget. Doing it as little 10 minutes a day can make you happier and healthier, and doing it as little as 30 minutes per day could change your life.

Yet few do it regularly. Why?

It's hard to do. Really hard. No seriously, take a few seconds and close your eyes and try to think about nothing for 30 seconds. No seriously, try it. Just for 30 seconds. I guarantee you can't do it.

If you try, you'll soon notice that our minds are producing a constant stream of thought-vomit, and most of us identify so strongly with it that we don't even notice. Our mental energy is sapped by an endless stream of useless, unhelpful thoughts and opinions:

"I hope the Lakers win tonight. I wonder if Shannon will ever call me back. I really enjoyed our date together, but maybe I should have picked a better restaurant? Oh, that's silly worrying about that. I wonder if that new Sushi place near Dave's is any good? I should call him, I haven't talked to him in a while. He can be overly-negative though sometimes. Oh, I should buy a movie to watch this weekend, that will be cool. I wonder what though. I remember when I watched that one movie with Sara, my teenage girlfriend. God, we were young and naive. First kisses are awkward. But yeah, I should call Dave, I haven't called him in a while. I should call Dad too, he gets testy if I don't call him. Oh, today's Tuesday, Game of Thrones is on."

Chances are your mind sounds like this on a daily basis, and you're rarely aware of it. Few of us are. Meditation trains our minds to prune and hone our thoughts, to only focus on what's useful and important, to disregard the rest, and to separate our egos and identities from the thoughts and emotions running through our heads. This may sound like little, but it adds up and the life benefits are massive.

I got into meditation as a teenager and became serious about it in college. Since graduating, I've lost touch with the practice (got distracted with girls, booze, and work), but it's a goal of mine this year to reboot my meditation habit. Its benefits in my life were wonderful and I miss the clarity and consciousness I had when I practiced regularly.

If your mind is a muscle, then meditation is a way to take it to the gym. The stronger your control of your mind becomes, the more you're able to consciously control what your mind focuses on and how it processes new information. Strengthening your mind in this way has repercussions on every aspect of your life: your emotional health and self-esteem, your work performance, your discipline, your relationships, your overall happiness, your stress levels,

and your physical health as well. I attribute a lot of the success I've attained in other areas of my life to all of the meditation I did when I was younger. In everything I've pursued since that time, I've noticed that my mind is more focused than most and that I've always been able to strip away the unnecessary distractions and get right at what's important in any endeavour.

How to Meditate

There are dozens of styles and techniques. The beautiful thing is that none is right or wrong, simply different. Whatever forces you to focus your mind on your awareness and let go of any thoughts or emotions that arise is a form of meditation. Whether it involves mantras, counting breaths, yoga, chanting, rituals or whatever.

But to begin, I recommend people start with a basic sitting and counting of breaths. The process is easy.

Set aside 10 or 15 minutes. Get a clock or timer and set an alarm, because you are going to be tempted to get up or stop before the time is up. Go into a quiet room where there are no distractions. Toss a pillow on the floor and sit on it cross-legged. Don't worry if you can't cross your legs perfectly, just do it as much as possible while remaining comfortable. Plant your self firmly on the pillow and then make sure your back is straight. Relax your diaphragm and let your belly hang out (don't worry, no one's looking). Look straight ahead. You can close your eyes or leave them open, it doesn't really matter. I prefer leaving mine open, but to start out you can close them if it makes you feel more comfortable. You can put your hands on your knees or you can rest them in your lap, one on top of the other, palms facing up.

Now comes the hard part. Clear your mind. Think about nothing. Breathe through your nose into your chest until your chest is full. Your belly should expand out. Then slowly exhale. One. Do the same thing again. Each breath, count the breath. When a thought or distraction

arises, start the count over again at one. Thoughts and distractions WILL come up, and if you're just starting out, they will often come up without you even noticing them until they have been rattling around for a few seconds.

Don't judge yourself. Don't get mad. Don't get frustrated and say, "I suck at this." Just acknowledge the thought, let it go, and reset your counting. Chances are you won't get past two or three the first few times you meditate. It often takes people months to even get to ten.

Do this for the full 15 minutes. It's only 15 minutes, but I guarantee it will feel closer to three hours. By the fourth minute you'll be dying to get up and do something. Your mind will be going crazy. Chances are you'll start to let your mind go and just start thinking about the party last weekend, or the project that you're working on at work. That's fine. Don't judge. Just let go and start the count over again.

This is the most basic form of Zen meditation, which is the practice I followed for a few years. If you get through one session, congratulations. I imagine you will get up feeling much more relaxed, clear-headed, and will feel calmer throughout your day.

These sessions are easier to do and to keep up with if done with someone else, so you can keep each other accountable. Daily practices are best. Start with 10 or 15 minutes each morning when you wake up and slowly add time from there. Once you get to the point where you can keep your mind thoughtless for a full 10 breaths or so, there are other techniques or practices you can begin to add.

Benefits of Meditating

I've alluded to a lot of benefits of meditation. Of all so-called "spiritual practices," meditation probably has the largest body of scientific research backing up its utility and power. Numerous studies using MRI and EEG have shown that a regular meditation practice can rewire the neural patterns in the brain and even increase grey matter.^{1. 2} Below are some practical benefits psychologists and doctors have found to regular meditation:

- **Increases Self-Awareness.** Psychologists have noted that patients who practice meditation develop greater awareness of their actions and emotions. Some therapists prescribe meditation to their patients to assist them in their practice.³
- **Increases Focus and Discipline.** Practitioners of meditation are able to retain focus on specific tasks and are less likely to deviate from those tasks. Meditation increases one's ability in what psychologists call "self-regulation."⁴
- **Reduces Stress and Anxiety.** Mindfulness techniques have been shown to reduce anxiety and stress⁵ and have long been prescribed to patients who suffer anxiety disorders and panic attacks as a way to calm their nerves with relatively good success rates.⁶
- **Makes You Physically Healthier.** People who meditate on average sleep better, have lower heart rates, have lower blood pressure, and get sick less often.⁷
- **Increases Emotional Stability.** For people who are prone to outbursts of anger or sadness, meditation helps people regulate and control their emotions.⁸
- **Increases Memory and Helps You Think More Clearly.** Meditating trains you to remove all of the unnecessary garbage from your thought-patterns. This then frees up your mind to retain what is useful and important more efficiently.⁹
- **Gets You In Touch With Your Intuition.** Often referred to as your "gut reaction," your "instinct," or your "intuition," meditating gets you in touch with your unconscious decision-making processes. Daniel Kahneman refers to it as your "first brain." Malcolm Gladwell refers to it as "blink." Whatever it is, that instant, gut reaction that you have about some things, is often right. Meditation will increase that. This goes hand-in-hand with self-awareness.
- **Increases Your Ability to Empathize with Others.** Brain scans show that meditation activates the positive, happy, empathetic aspects of the brain. People who practice meditation regularly report an ability to empathize and care about the emotions of others and bond with them more easily.¹⁰

- **Lowers a Need for External Validation.** Meditating trains you to become more aware of what thoughts and emotions dictate your behavior, primarily where you're trying to receive your love and validation that may not be working. It forces you to become more aware of your needy and neurotic behaviors and put an end to them.¹¹

Meditation is by no means a cure-all for your problems. But I believe that it's a powerful tool. Meditation's purpose is to give you perspective and clarity on your internal issues. It doesn't fix them for you. Years ago, one of the most upsetting parts of my involvement in Zen was how many long-time practitioners I met who convinced themselves that meditation fixed all of their psychological and emotional problems, when it didn't. It helped them experience and become aware of those problems, but you still have to go out into the world and commit the actions to overcome them. Sitting in a room staring at a wall all day is unlikely to do that.

Meditation and Spirituality

There is a spiritual aspect to a meditative practice, for those of you into that kind of thing. I usually avoid spirituality on purpose. I believe spirituality is something that's experienced and lived, not discussed or taught. In my opinion, spirituality, by its definition, cannot be discussed. Just the resulting experiences of a spirituality can be described. Spirituality itself is transrational. It's like counting to infinity. Words can capture part of it but never fill it up.

One such way to experience that spirituality is through meditation. I'm no good at describing the experience with words. But if you've ever had a moment in your life where your sense of self — your sense of identity — completely dissolved and there was no longer differentiation between you, the sky, the water, the people around you, everything. If you ever stared at the stars so long you started laughing at how beautiful the fact that we even exist is. If you've ever suddenly realized that your fears and worries were illusions created by your ego and mind, and that good and bad were simply separate expressions of the same

grand unity of This, and that you never had to be afraid, ever, because you — your fears, your flaws, your failings, everything about you — was just another perfect expression of the same reality. Then yeah, meditation can help you get that back.

Footnotes

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RONALD'S MEDITATION STORY

I've meditated twice a day virtually every day since November 1974, when I was 31.

I was in the midst of a personal crisis. A friend, whose inner calm I admired and who had been meditating regularly for a few years, – recommended that I learn Transcendental Meditation.

So, I went to the TM Centre and paid my \$250. (A lot of money in 1974). And I was told to simply:

- sit comfortably for 20 minutes twice every day, with eyes closed
- repeat my private mantra silently (which the instructor gave me) That's all!

So – I went home and began meditating. I followed the instructions twice every day and nothing happened! I would feel agitated – impatient – irritable.

I would think of other things I would rather be doing.

I'd look at my watch often, wondering, "Is the 20 minutes up yet?"

But I persisted. I saw my friend's example, I'd spent the money, and I would persist.

Finally – after about six months of regular meditation, twice every day, I began to get into the meditative state. (It's similar to light sleep, but doesn't last as long). I would always come out rested and refreshed, and I've continued ever since.

Just do it!

WEIGHT LOSS

When we ponder weight loss, we usually think about burning calories or sweating off the fat. Of course, when you meditate, you sit very still, without making a move. Can meditation, therefore, be helpful in losing weight? Although you won't burn many calories during a typical meditation session, meditation may be one of your most important practices in your effort to lose weight.

Weight loss is not just a physical activity. Sure, if you eat less and you exercise more, you will lose weight. However, all of our actions begin in our minds. If you are going to walk for 45 minutes every day, you first have to decide to do it, and, at the right time, you have to think and then go for your walk. These are all mental activities.

Similarly, if you realize that junk food is only making your waistline expand, and you want to stop eating it, you first have to make a decision to change your eating habits, and then you have to walk past and not stop at the pastry shop on your way to work. Again, these are mostly mental activities.

If you are trying to lose weight you probably already "know" that you have to exercise more, and change some of your eating habits. You "know" this to be a fact, yet you are unable to do it. All people, whether fat or slim, have this same dilemma. We "know" many things intellectually, but we are not always able to put our best intentions into action.

Meditation is one of the best methods to take control of yourself. During meditation you will learn to make your mind stronger. A weight lifter typically exercises certain muscles, making them stronger and stronger. Similarly someone who meditates is exercising her "mental" muscle by directing her mind away from the noise of the world outside toward the calm within. Following the meditation instructions takes a bit of effort, but that effort will be rewarded.

If anyone meditates on a daily basis, she will not only become more able to concentrate during the meditation session, but also more able to put her good intentions into practice and make positive changes in her life.

It is not a question of mind over matter, or having to do anything that you don't want to do. Meditation is an activity that changes you from the inside out. Instead of forcing yourself not to eat the doughnut in between meals, the very desire to eat it will vanish. Instead of fighting with yourself to go out for a walk, exercise will become something that you enjoy doing. If you get into the practice of meditation, no one will have to twist your arm to make you live a healthy lifestyle; it will become your natural choice.

Therefore, while you will not sweat off any kgs during your periods of meditation, the daily practice of meditation could be one of the most important parts of your effort to lose weight and live a long, healthful and happy life.