

# Meditation

Meditation has been practiced for over three thousand years for the purpose of training and calming the mind. As you may know, it originated as a spiritual practice within Hinduism and Buddhism, though it was later practiced in various forms in many other religions. Eastern philosophy has taught that the origin of human suffering is in our automatic, conditioned thoughts (the term “automatic thoughts” in cognitive therapy is similar to this notion). Nothing in life is inherently bad except that we think about it or react to it as such. The purpose of meditation practice is to learn to step back and simply witness your automatic thoughts and reactive patterns without judgment. If you are caught up in your mind’s automatic patterns, regular meditation practice can help you to become gradually freer of them. Acceptance and commitment therapy, described in chapter 19, borrows the principle of self-observation from meditation; it refers to the process of observing and disentangling from one’s thoughts as “defusion.” However, the process itself—learning to become a nonjudgmental witness of your ongoing experience—has been utilized in many cultures throughout the world for millennia. The goal of such practice in its many forms has always been to achieve a state of freedom or “liberation” from the suffering we create in our minds.

How does meditation help to achieve this freedom? In a word, you can say that it is by the enlargement or “expansion” of awareness. Awareness can be defined as a pure, unconditioned state of consciousness that you can experience deep within yourself. It exists “beneath” or prior to the conditioned patterns of thinking and emotional reactivity you’ve learned over a lifetime. This unconditioned awareness is always available to you, but most of the time it’s clouded over by the incessant stream of mental chatter and emotional reactions that make up your ordinary, moment-to-moment experience. Only when you become very quiet and still, willing to “just be,” observing your inner experience in the present moment and without judgment, and without striving to do anything, can this uncluttered awareness that underlies your thoughts and feelings begin to reemerge.

When you experience this unconditioned state of awareness, you simply feel a deep sense of peace. Out of this place of inner peace can arise other unconditioned states such as unconditional love, wisdom, deep insight, and joy. In itself, this state of inner peace is nothing you need to develop. You were born with it. It’s always there, deep inside of you. You can discover it if you simply become still and quiet long enough to allow it to emerge. The practice of meditation is one of the most direct, straightforward ways to do this.

Meditation practice allows you to expand your awareness to the point where it’s larger—or more “spacious”—than your fearful thoughts or emotional reactions. As soon as your

awareness is larger than your fear, you are no longer claimed by the fear but can stand outside of it (in your mind) and merely witness it. It's as though you're identified with a part of your inner being that's larger than the part that's constricted by fearful thoughts. As you continue to practice meditation and enlarge your awareness, it becomes easier on an ongoing basis to observe the stream of thoughts and feelings that make up your experience. You are less prone to get "stuck" or lost in them.

You might be concerned that increasing your ability to observe your inner thoughts and feelings sounds like becoming internally divided rather than more connected with yourself. In fact, the opposite is true. It's your reactive thoughts and conditioned emotional patterns that tend to pull you away from your own center—to lead you away from your deeper inner self and into what has been popularly termed "mind trips" or "personal dramas." To practice meditation is to cultivate greater self-integration and wholeness. As you deepen and enlarge your awareness, you begin to be in touch with more of yourself. Your reactive thoughts and feelings still occur, but you're not so strongly swept up by them. You're more free to truly enjoy your life because you don't get quite as stuck—or stuck as long—in any particular state of anxiety, worry, anger, guilt, shame, grief, and so on. Rather, you're able to simply acknowledge your reaction, allow it to move through your experience, and let it go. Your inner consciousness becomes spacious enough so that you can observe a worried thought, then take action if it's reasonable to act or choose to let the thought go if it's unreasonable. You begin to have more choice over what you think and experience. You are not quite so scattered by your mind's endless cascade of reactive thoughts and feelings. While these thoughts and feelings still occur, your relationship to them is different. Your inner awareness becomes spacious enough so that you can more easily step back and accept your thoughts and feelings rather than be carried away by them.

## Benefits of Meditation

Meditation was first popularized in the United States in the mid-1960s in the form of Transcendental Meditation or TM. In Transcendental Meditation, an instructor selects a Sanskrit mantra (a word or sound) for you, such as "Om Shanti" or "So-Hum." You are then instructed to repeat the sound mentally while sitting upright in a quiet place. You must concentrate completely—but unforcefully—on the mantra while letting any distractions just pass through your mind.

In the 1970s, Herbert Benson did research on Transcendental Meditation, which he published in his well-known book *The Relaxation Response*. Benson developed his own version of meditation, which involved mentally repeating the word "one" on each exhalation of the breath. He documented a number of physiological effects of meditation, including

- A decrease in heart rate
- A decrease in blood pressure
- A decrease in oxygen consumption
- A decrease in metabolic rate

- A decrease in the concentration of lactic acid in the blood (associated with anxiety reduction)
- An increase in forearm blood flow and hand temperature
- An increase in electrical resistance of the skin (associated with deep relaxation)
- An increase in alpha brain wave activity (also associated with relaxation)

Benson established that the positive benefits of meditation are not exclusive to TM, and that an individually selected mantra is unnecessary. His own “respiratory-one” method achieved the same physiological effects as Transcendental Meditation. He referred to the deep state of physiological relaxation induced by meditation as the “relaxation response.”

Since the time of Benson’s work, considerable research on the long-term benefits of meditation has established that it can alter personality traits, behaviors, and attitudes. If you suffer from an anxiety disorder, meditation can break up obsessional mental patterns and help you restructure your thoughts more productively. (Regular meditation has an even greater impact on repetitive mental patterns than the practice of progressive muscle relaxation, which is directed more to relieving muscle tension.)

Meditation has repeatedly been found to reduce chronic anxiety and worry. Often the dosage of tranquilizers or other medications can be reduced if you are meditating daily. Other long-range benefits include

- Sharpened alertness
- Increased energy level and productivity
- Decreased self-criticism
- Increased objectivity (the capacity to view situations nonjudgmentally)
- Decreased dependence on alcohol, recreational drugs, and prescription drugs
- Increased accessibility of emotions
- Heightened self-esteem and sense of identity

In the 1980s and 1990s, Jon Kabat-Zinn did extensive research on meditation as a method of stress management. Utilizing an approach to meditation he referred to as “mindfulness,” Kabat-Zinn developed a comprehensive program for stress management known as “mindfulness-based stress reduction” (MBSR), which has been taught at universities and clinics throughout the United States. (The term “mindfulness” refers to the basic stance of all forms of meditation: silently witnessing the ongoing stream of your inner experience with complete acceptance and without judgment. Some people prefer this term because it is a purely psychological concept without the “Eastern” overtones of the word “meditation.”) Two of Kabat-Zinn’s books, *Full Catastrophe Living* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, have been widely influential in bringing meditation or mindfulness practice into mainstream society.

More recently meditation practice has been shown to prevent relapse among people who have had three or more episodes of major depression (Segal, Williams, and Teasdale 2002). It is one of the few interventions, apart from medication, that have been empirically demonstrated

to help prevent recurrence of depression. At present, meditation and mindfulness practice are being used by many physicians and psychotherapists as an adjunct to treatment of a wide variety of physical and psychological problems. In short, meditation/mindfulness practice is a powerful psychological technique for calming the mind. Although it has origins in spiritual traditions, you do not have to adopt any particular spiritual perspective in order to practice and benefit from meditation.

## Types of Meditation

There are two broad types of meditation: concentrative and nonconcentrative. Sometimes these are referred to as structured and unstructured meditation. The concentrative approach emphasizes concentrating your attention during meditation by maintaining a specific focus on a particular object. Every time your mind starts to wander during a meditation session, you bring your attention back to a particular object of focus. For example, you might focus on a particular word which you repeat over and over, such as “one,” “now,” or “relax.” Another popular and widely practiced form of concentrative meditation involves focusing on the sensation of the breath. As you meditate, you simply keep bringing your attention back to the cycle of your breath, experiencing the rising and falling of your breath, preferably from your abdomen.

The nonconcentrative, unstructured approach to meditation does not narrow attention to a particular object. Instead the total content of experience—whatever comes up in awareness—becomes the object of focus. You simply witness whatever thoughts, feelings, desires, or physical sensations arise in your experience without resisting them or judging them in any way. You carefully pay attention in a way so that you are aware of the present moment, and all that is contained in your present experience, without any judgment.

The term “mindfulness” is sometimes used to refer to the nonconcentrative type of meditation, since mindfulness means to pay attention on purpose to whatever arises in the present moment, without judgment (Kabat-Zinn 2005). For the purpose of this chapter, mindfulness is understood more as an attitude, stance, or approach you can take in any form of meditation, whether concentrative or nonconcentrative. For example, you can maintain a mindful stance toward the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise in your experience while focusing on your breath or on a specific word. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental, accepting stance you can assume in any type of meditation, and in fact at any time in your ongoing experience outside of meditation. Meditation is a deliberate process that you set aside a specific time for. Mindfulness is a stance, approach, or attitude you can take in meditation practice as well as toward all of your waking experience.

## Learning to Meditate

Learning to meditate is a process that involves at least three distinct stages:

- Right attitude

- Right technique
- Cultivating mindfulness

Right attitude is a mind-set or mental stance that you bring to meditation. Such an attitude takes time and commitment to develop. Fortunately, the practice of meditation itself helps you to learn right attitude. Right technique involves learning specific methods of sitting and focusing your awareness that facilitate meditation. Cultivating mindfulness is the process of making a fundamental shift in your relationship with your own inner experience. It is to develop a nonjudgmental “inner observer” within yourself that enables you to simply witness rather than react to the ups and downs of everyday existence.

### *Right Attitude*

The attitude that you bring to the practice of meditation is critical. In fact, cultivating right attitude is a part of the practice. Your success and ability to persevere with meditation practice will in large part be determined by the way you approach it. The following eight aspects of right attitude are based on the writings of a prominent educator in the field of meditation, Jon Kabat-Zinn. His books *Full Catastrophe Living* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are* are highly recommended if you’re serious about undertaking a regular meditation practice.

### **Beginner’s Mind**

To observe your immediate, ongoing experience without any judgments, preconceptions, or projections is often referred to as “beginner’s mind.” In essence, with beginner’s mind you perceive something with the freshness you would bring to it if you were seeing it for the very first time. It’s seeing—and accepting—things as they actually are in the present moment, without the veil of your own assumptions or judgments about them. For example, next time you’re in the presence of someone familiar, consider seeing them as much as possible as they actually are, apart from your feelings, thoughts, projections, or judgments. How would you see them if you were meeting them for the first time?

### **Nonstriving**

Almost everything you do during your day is likely to be goal-directed. Meditation is one thing that is not. Although meditation takes effort to practice, it has no aim other than to “just be.” When you sit down to meditate, it’s best to clear your mind of any goals. You are not trying to relax, blank your mind, relieve stress, or reach enlightenment. You don’t need to evaluate the quality of your meditation according to whether you reach such goals. The only intention you bring to meditation is simply to be—to observe your “here and now” experience just as it is, perhaps using the repetition of a mantra or observing your breath to assist your focus. If you are tense, anxious, or in pain, you don’t strive to get rid of these sensations; instead you simply observe them and be with them as best you can. You let them remain simply as they are. In so doing, you cease resisting or struggling with them.

## Acceptance

Acceptance is the opposite of striving. As you learn to simply be with whatever you experience in the moment, you cultivate acceptance. Acceptance does not mean that you have to like whatever comes up (such as tension or pain, for example); it simply means you're willing to be with it without trying to push it away. You may be familiar with the saying, "What you resist persists." As long as you resist or struggle with something, whether in meditation or life in general, you actually energize and magnify it. Acceptance allows the discomfort or problem to just be. While it may not go away, it becomes easier to deal with because you cease to struggle with and/or avoid it.

In meditation practice, acceptance develops as you learn to embrace each moment as it comes, without moving away from it. As you learn to do this, you discover that whatever was there for a given moment will soon change—more quickly, in fact, than if you tried to resist it.

In life, acceptance does not mean that you resign yourself to the way things are and cease trying to change and grow. On the contrary, acceptance can clear a space in your life for you to reflect clearly and act appropriately. Energy is freed up to act when you are no longer reacting to or struggling with the difficulty. Sometimes, of course, it's necessary to go through a range of emotional reactions around a problem first before you can get to acceptance.

## Nonjudgment

An important prerequisite for acceptance is nonjudgment. When you pay attention to your ongoing experience through the day, you'll notice that you frequently judge things—both outer circumstances as well as inner circumstances (your own moods and feelings). These judgments are based on your personal values and standards of what is "good" and "bad." If you doubt this, try taking just five minutes to notice how many things you judge during that short time interval. To practice meditation, it's important to learn not so much to stop judging but to gain some distance from the process. You can simply observe your inner judgments without reacting to them, least of all judging them! Instead you cultivate a suspension of any judgment, watching whatever comes up, including your own judging thoughts. You allow such thoughts to come and go, while continuing to observe your breathing or whatever other object you have selected as a focus for meditation.

## Patience

Patience is a close cousin to acceptance and nonstriving. It means allowing things to unfold in their own natural time. It is letting your meditation practice be whatever it is without rushing it.

Patience is needed to make time to meditate for a half hour to an hour every day. Patience is also required to persist with your meditation practice through the days or weeks when nothing particularly interesting happens. To be patient is to stop hurrying. This often means going against the grain of a fast-paced society where rushing from one destination to another is the norm.

The patience you can bring to your meditation practice will help assure its success and permanence. Sitting in meditation regularly will help you develop patience, as it will help you cultivate all of the characteristics described in this section. The attitudes that help you develop your meditation practice are the very same attitudes that are deepened by the practice itself.

## Letting Go

Our minds are often like the monkey. We grab on to a particular thought or emotional state—sometimes one that is actually painful—and then we don't let go. Cultivating the ability to let go is crucial to meditation practice, not to mention a less anxious life. When you hold on to any experience, whether pleasant or painful, you impede your ability to simply be present in the here and now without judgment or striving. Learning to let go of things is assisted by learning to accept them. Letting go is a natural consequence of a willingness to accept things as they are. If you find that, prior to meditation, you have a hard time letting go of some concern, you can actually use your meditation as a means to witness the thoughts and feelings you're creating around the concern—including the process of "holding on" itself. The more minutely you observe the specific thoughts and feelings you have created around a problem, the more quickly you'll be able to expand your awareness around that problem and let it go. When the concern is intensely charged emotionally, it's probably best to release your feelings by talking or writing in a journal about them before you sit down to meditate. Cultivating all of the attitudes described in this section will help with letting go.

## Commitment and Self-Discipline

A strong commitment to work on yourself, along with the discipline to persevere and follow through with the process, is essential to establishing a meditation practice. While meditation is very simple in nature, it's not always easy in practice. Learning to value and make time for "just being" on a regular basis requires a commitment in the midst of a society that is strongly oriented toward doing. Few of us have grown up with values that cherished non-striving, and so learning to stop goal-directed activity, even for just thirty minutes per day, requires commitment and discipline. The commitment is similar to that which is required in athletic training. An athlete in training doesn't practice only when he or she just feels like it, when there is time enough to fit it in or other people to keep her company. The training requires the athlete to practice every day, regardless of how she feels or whether there is any immediate sense of accomplishment.

To establish a meditation practice, it's best to sit whether you feel like it or not—whether it's convenient or not—six or seven days per week, for at least two months. (If you find you're unable to sit that often at first, don't chastise yourself—just do your best.) You will likely find it easier if you set aside a particular time of day to do your practice, such as first thing in the morning or before dinner in the evening. At the end of two months, if you've practiced regularly, the process will likely have become enough of a habit (and sufficiently self-reinforcing) to continue. The experience of meditation varies from session to session: sometimes it feels good, sometimes it seems ordinary, and other times you will find it difficult to meditate at all.

Although the point is not to strive for anything, a long-term commitment to regular meditation practice will transform your life fundamentally. Without changing anything that might happen in your life, meditation will change your relationship to everything you experience, on a deep level.

### *Right Technique: Guidelines for Practicing Meditation*

There is a technique to proper meditation. Probably the most important aspect is to sit in the right fashion, which means sitting upright with your back straight either on the floor in a cross-legged position or in a chair with your feet flat on the floor. There seems to be a certain energetic alignment within the body that occurs from sitting up straight. It's not as likely to happen when you're lying down, although lying down is fine for other forms of relaxation (and for the body scan exercise described later in the chapter). It's also helpful to relax tight muscles before you meditate. One way to do this is through practicing yoga. In historic times, the main purpose of yoga postures was to relax and energetically balance the body prior to meditating. The guidelines that follow are intended to help make your meditation practice easier and more effective.

- Find a quiet environment. Do what you can do to reduce external noises and distractions. If this is not completely possible, play a recording of soft, instrumental sounds or sounds from nature. The sound of ocean waves also makes a good background.
- Reduce muscle tension. If you're feeling tense, take some time (no more than ten minutes) to relax your muscles. Yoga postures, if you're familiar with them, are an excellent way to unwind. Progressive muscle relaxation of the upper portion of the body—your head, neck, and shoulders—is often helpful (see chapter 4). If you feel too much energy or your mind is racing, doing some physical exercise first can make it easier to meditate afterward.
- Sit properly. Eastern style: Sit cross-legged on the floor with a cushion or pillow supporting your buttocks. Rest your hands on your thighs. Lean slightly forward so that some of your weight is supported by your thighs as well as your buttocks. Western style (preferred by most Americans): Sit in a comfortable, straight-backed chair, with your feet on the floor and legs uncrossed, hands on your thighs (palms down or up, whichever you prefer).

In either position, keep your back and neck straight without straining to do so. Do not assume a tight, inflexible posture. If you need to scratch or move, do so. In general, do not lie down or support your head; this will tend to promote sleep.

- Set aside twenty to thirty minutes for meditation (beginners might wish to start out with ten minutes). You may wish to set a timer (within reach) or run a background recording that is twenty to thirty minutes long so that you'll know when you're done. If having a clock or watch available to look at makes you more comfortable, that's okay. After you have practiced twenty to thirty minutes per day for several weeks, you may wish to try longer periods of meditation up to an hour.

- Make it a regular practice to meditate every day. Even if you meditate for only five minutes, it's important to do it every day. It's ideal if you can find a set time to practice meditating. Twice a day is optimal; once per day is a minimum.
- Don't meditate on a full stomach. Meditation is easier if you don't practice on a full stomach or when you're tired. If you are unable to meditate prior to a meal, wait at least a half hour after eating to do so.
- Select a focus for your attention. The most common devices are your own breathing cycle or a mantra. The structured meditation exercises below use both of these techniques. Other common objects of meditation include pictures, repetitive music or chants, or a sacred object.
- During meditation, it can be helpful to close your eyes in order to reduce outside distractions. Some people, however, find they prefer to keep their eyes slightly open—just enough to see external objects indistinctly. This can reduce the tendency to be distracted by inner thoughts, feelings, and daydreams. Try this if you are having difficulty with distractibility.
- During meditation, you will find you are often distracted by extraneous thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. When this happens, don't judge yourself. Just gently bring your attention back to whatever you have selected as your focus. If an unpleasant thought or feeling tries to capture your attention, try reminding yourself "This is just a thought" or "This is just a feeling." Just be present with the thought or feeling without going into it. Eventually, it will shift and pass. Good questions to ask to yourself occasionally are "Can I just be the space for whatever comes up?" and "Can I just be fully present with this?"
- Distraction, boredom, restlessness, sleepiness, and impatience are common reactions during meditation. When these states come up, just notice them, allow them to be as they are, and then return to being fully present in the moment.
- When you've finished with your practice for the day, open your eyes gently (if they've been closed) and stretch your body. Notice how you are feeling, but whether the feeling is positive or negative, don't judge it. If you feel good after your practice, refrain from setting any expectation that your next practice should be the same way. Let each practice session be a unique experience unto itself.

Ultimately, meditation practice has no goal other than just to be—to be fully aware in the present moment. However, an important benefit of regular meditation is the cultivation of mindfulness: the capacity to stand back and observe the ongoing stream of your experience without getting caught up in it.

You are unlikely to be aware of just how distractible your mind is until you first sit down to meditate. Using structured meditation techniques will build your capacity to concentrate in the beginning. Later you may want to drop these forms and focus more directly on simply observing the ongoing stream of your experience.

## *Cultivating Mindfulness: Meditation Exercises*

Mindfulness is paying attention without judgment to whatever comes up in the present moment of your experience. It is witnessing your immediate experience just as it is, without trying to change, react to, or interfere with it. A good way to appreciate mindfulness is to realize that it encompasses all of the attitudes described in the section on right attitude: non-striving, acceptance, nonjudgment, beginner's mind, patience, letting go, commitment, and self-discipline. Mindfulness is not something that you have to strive hard to attain. If you strive for it, it will tend to elude your grasp. By relaxing, letting go and simply observing the ongoing stream of your experience without judgment, you will begin to experience what mindfulness actually is. Words cannot teach the meaning of mindfulness nearly so well as direct experience.

Ultimately, mindfulness can change the way you deal with fear and pain in a profound way. As your practice strengthens, you can learn to relax and stay present even when fear and pain move through the present moment.

The following meditation exercises were inspired by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield, and other teachers of meditation. They derive from basic practices that have been used by students of meditation for many centuries. The exercises described here emphasize maintaining a focus on your breathing cycle—continually bringing your attention back to your breath each time you become distracted. It is probably best to do the exercises in sequence. Once you've gained some experience with meditation, you can incorporate aspects of both of the exercises into your daily practice.

### **Basic Meditation Exercise**

The basic instruction for this exercise is simple—to gently pay attention to your breath cycle. You simply observe your breath as it flows in and out. You give your full attention to the feeling of your breath as it comes in and your full attention to the feeling of your breath as it goes out. See if you can feel your breath from your abdomen or your chest. You don't try to deepen your breath or do anything with it (unless you are using a breath-counting technique initially to help you focus). The idea is simply to observe the process of your breathing without force or effort, experiencing all the sensations, gross and subtle, associated with it.

Staying with your own breathing cycle is simple, although it's not always easy. After two or three minutes, you're likely to find that your mind gets bored and wants to go on to do something else. Or your body will have had enough and want to shift your position or get up and do something. It's just at this point that the "work" of meditation begins. Instead of giving in to the impulse to do something else, you simply observe the impulse itself and then gently bring your attention back to your breathing, observing your breath from moment to moment.

The tendency to become distracted and stop observing your breath is inevitable. In five minutes, it may happen ten or perhaps fifty times. It's very important not to judge yourself when you get distracted. Simply notice that you did and then gently bring your attention back

to your breathing. If you don't like the fact that you're so distractible, simply notice your not liking it and then bring your focus back to your breath. If you're really enjoying how you feel, simply observe that and return to your inhalation and exhalation. Be aware that there is no such thing as a "good" meditation session or a "bad" one. Often you will notice that you feel "good" or "bad" about how a particular session went. Yet keep in mind that the whole point of meditation is to simply witness your experience in the present moment without striving to achieve anything or evaluating how well the experience went.

Here are the steps of the exercise:

1. Sit in a comfortable, upright position with your feet flat on the floor. Focus on your breathing as you breathe slowly from your abdomen. (If you can't feel your breath from your abdomen, try feeling it from your chest.) As you focus on your abdomen, let it relax and become soft. Let the sensations of inhaling and exhaling be the object of your focus. (This process is quite similar to the *Abdominal Breathing Exercise* in chapter 4.) Allow yourself twenty to thirty minutes for this exercise in a place where you are free of distractions and interruptions.
2. Keep in mind the basic attitudes that form the foundation of meditation: acceptance, nonstriving, nonjudgment, patience, trust, letting go, and so on. Let go of any expectations about how your practice will go. If you're feeling anxious, let go of any goal of trying to make your anxiety go away.
3. You may want to close your eyes, or you may prefer to leave them slightly open. If you find that closing your eyes causes you to feel sleepy, it may help to keep them open and focused on a particular spot in the room.
4. Focus on the place in your body where you can feel your breath come and go. This might be your abdomen or your chest. Just be with the place in your body where you are most comfortable paying attention to your breath. If you're not sure about this, your abdomen is a good place to start.
5. Just allow your breath to come and go without trying to control it. When your mind starts to wander away from the focus on your breath (which it will), let it do so without judging it. Then gently bring your attention back to your breath. Do this as many times as you need to during the course of your meditation. Recognizing when your mind wanders and then bringing your attention back to your breath is what normally goes on in meditation practice. You can expect it to happen many times.
6. If a fearful thought comes up and tries to capture your attention, it may help to remind yourself "this is just a thought" or "I am not my thoughts." Just breathe with the fearful thought or feeling without going into it. Eventually, it will shift and pass. With practice, it will get easier to let go of distracting thoughts, even fearful ones.

7. Distraction, boredom, restlessness, sleepiness, and impatience are common reactions during meditation. When they come up, just notice them, try to let them be, and return your attention to your breath.
8. Begin practicing this exercise for ten minutes and gradually work up to thirty minutes. It may take you a few weeks to become comfortable with a thirty-minute session, but that is a good time period to maintain for your practice over the long term. You may find it useful to set a timer or play a thirty-minute recording of meditative music so that you'll know when you're done. Some people prefer forty-five minutes or even an hour for their daily meditation practice. Experiment with what time period feels best for you; at least thirty minutes at least once every day is highly recommended.
9. When you've finished with your practice for the day, open your eyes gently (if they've been closed) and stretch your body. Notice how you are feeling, but don't judge that feeling, whether it's positive or negative. If you feel good after your practice, refrain from setting any expectation that your next practice "should" be the same way. Expect that you will enjoy some practice sessions more than others. Let each practice session be a unique experience unto itself.

### **The Body Scan: Sensing Your Body During Meditation**

The body scan is another very useful exercise in developing mindful awareness.

By bringing your attention slowly and deliberately to each part of your body, you are able to deeply reconnect with your body and foster increased mind-body integration. Many of us have an ambivalent relationship with our bodies, viewing them as an object and judging them as too big, the wrong size, or out of shape. We also tend to store negative feelings in our bodies, in the form of muscle tension, poor posture, or feelings of heaviness. The body scan exercise promotes making friends with your body, allowing feelings suppressed or held in your body to come to the surface where they can be released.

The body scan is best done by lying down or sitting back in an easy chair or recliner with your head supported. Start first by focusing on breathing from your abdomen for a minute or so, making sure you are in a comfortable position. Then begin the exercise by focusing on the toes of your left foot. Notice whatever sensations you're aware of in your left toes. Then, take a breath in and imagine breathing those sensations out through your left toes. Simply visualize your left toes and imagine breathing down through your left leg and foot and out through your left toes. While this may seem odd at first, it becomes easier with practice. Once you've experienced several exhalations through your left toes, continue the body-scan process with your left foot. Again, notice the sensations or tension you experience in your left foot for a few moments, then breathe those sensations or tension out through your left foot several times. Once you've completed the process with your left foot, continue on with each part of your body. A suggested order for proceeding through your body is provided below. Keep in mind that with each part, you want to focus on whatever sensations, tensions, or feelings you notice, and then breathe those sensations out of your body.

- |                   |                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Left toes      | 12. Left hand         |
| 2. Left foot      | 13. Left forearm      |
| 3. Left calf      | 14. Left upper arm    |
| 4. Left thigh     | 15. Left shoulder     |
|                   | 16. Right hand        |
| 5. Right toes     | 17. Right forearm     |
| 6. Right foot     | 18. Right upper arm   |
| 7. Right calf     | 19. Right shoulder    |
| 8. Right thigh    | 20. Neck              |
| 9. Pelvic area    | 21. Mouth and jaw     |
| 10. Lower abdomen | 22. Eyes and forehead |
| 11. Chest         | 23. Top of head       |

When you get to the top of your head, imagine breathing in and out through the top of your head. Some people find it helpful to use a recording of instructions for the body scan. Jon Kabat-Zinn offers an excellent series of recordings on mindfulness meditation, which includes the body scan. (See "Further Reading and Resources" at the end of this chapter.)

As you do these exercises, experience whatever you're experiencing in the present moment. The more you can let go and fully accept anxiety or worry being there, the more space you are going to be able to create around it.

## Maintaining a Meditation Practice

The motivation, commitment, and self-discipline necessary to establish a meditation practice was mentioned already in the section on right attitude. Learning to meditate can be compared with learning a sport like baseball, racquetball, or golf. A significant amount of time in training is necessary before you become proficient. This involves a commitment to keep sitting on those days when you don't feel like it or find it inconvenient to do. Setting aside a regular time to practice for thirty minutes to one hour each day makes this easier. The best times are generally first thing in the morning upon awakening or in the evening before you go to bed, provided you are not too tired. Other good times would be before lunch or dinner, or on a break at work. By setting aside a regular time, you build in a place for meditation in your life.

Besides your own personal commitment and self-discipline, there are several things that can greatly support your practice. Probably most supportive is to find a local class or group that meditates regularly. You may find such a class at a local hospital or college (adult education program) in your area. Or there may be a free-standing meditation group within driving distance. Programs in Transcendental Meditation, or TM (a specific form of mantra medita-

tion that has been around for many years), are offered in many areas. Having the support of a group with whom you meditate regularly will help motivate you at those times when it seems hard to keep up with your daily practice.

In some areas, you may be fortunate to be close to a teacher thoroughly grounded and skilled in the practice of meditation. If you are interested in finding a group or teacher in your area, you can contact the Insight Meditation Society or Spirit Rock Meditation Center, listed in the resources at the end of this chapter.

The Insight Meditation Society offers meditation retreats in various places throughout the United States. A meditation retreat generally involves being in meditation for eight to twelve hours per day (with hourly breaks), alternating between sitting and walking forms of meditation. Retreats can go from one to ten consecutive days, although a few go even longer. Doing a retreat is a powerful way to deepen your ongoing meditation practice. It is generally not recommended for beginners.

Finally, there are a number of excellent books and tapes that can support your practice. Jeffrey Brantley's book *Calming Your Anxious Mind* (see "Further Reading and Resources" at the end of this chapter) explores specifically how meditation practice can be helpful in dealing with anxiety, fear, and worry.

### *Common Concerns That May Come Up*

As you undertake to meditate regularly, you may have many questions and concerns. The following is based on a list compiled by Jeffrey Brantley in *Calming Your Anxious Mind*.

- *I don't have time to meditate.*  
Usually when you say you don't have time for something, it means that it doesn't have enough priority for you to give it time. It's likely that meditation and mindfulness, practiced regularly, will gradually transform your life and your ability to handle your anxiety. The question you have to answer is how much of a priority are you willing to give to meditation. How committed are you to giving it a regular place in your life?
- *Meditation is too boring.*  
Sometimes meditation can be boring. This is to be expected. The question in this case is whether you have unreasonable expectations about what meditation ought to be. If you are being mindful, the solution to boredom is to carefully witness your state of boredom when it comes up. By carefully investigating it, you may learn some things about the boredom. For example, boredom usually contains specific negative self-talk and judgments. By carefully investigating your thoughts and reactions around your state of boredom to see what's there—instead of just reacting—you may find yourself less bored.
- *When I sit still and meditate, it makes me more anxious.*  
Does meditation really make you more anxious? Or is it possible that by stopping and sitting still, you begin to become more aware of anxiety that was already present? When you're not distracted, any anxiety that was covered up by distraction is likely to come forward. Now you have the opportunity to work with your anxiety instead

of running from it or trying to avoid it. By accepting your anxiety—and making it the object of your attention and awareness—you have the opportunity to change the way you relate to it. You have the opportunity to just be with it until it shifts. You can allow your mind to become spacious enough to contain it, rather than to react to it.

One of the most important ways in which meditation practice can help you to better deal with anxiety is by training you simply to accept anxiety states instead of trying to run from them. The more you learn to accept and work with your anxiety as it arises, the less it becomes an “enemy” that you’re trying to combat. Ultimately, the less you struggle against anxiety, the easier it will be to deal with. So if you feel more anxious during meditation, just breathe with it and allow it to be. You will learn a whole new way to deal with anxiety and worry by doing so.

- *I’m too anxious and agitated to meditate.*

What if mindfulness practice does not seem to help you quiet down? What if you continue to feel highly agitated and distracted after ten or more minutes of meditation? If this happens, your body may indeed be too charged up to sit still. The best thing to do is to get physical. Try doing some form of aerobic exercise (see chapter 5) or take twenty minutes to do a sequence of yoga postures. After you’ve discharged the energy from your body, try sitting in meditation again.

- *I just don’t have the discipline to meditate regularly.*

While the goal is to meditate seven days per week, you may find yourself unable to do this at first. Don’t try to be perfect, just do the best you can. As you continue to practice, you’ll begin to experience some of the benefits of meditation and perhaps find yourself motivated to keep it up every day. It’s true that meditation practice takes discipline, just like learning to play the piano or mastering a sport. You need to make a commitment to yourself to practice regularly in order to keep meditating over the long term. However, don’t chastise yourself if you can’t do it every day at first. Do the best you can. Read books, listen to recordings, or, best of all, find a local group that sits regularly. All of these things will help you sustain your motivation to practice regularly.

## Meditation and Compassion

An important aspect of developing a capacity to observe your mind is to bring compassion into your observation. It may not be enough to learn merely to observe your reactive thoughts and feelings. Without cultivating compassion toward your reactivity, you may remain at war with it. To bring compassion and heart into your self-observation is to begin to make peace with yourself.

Many people, especially if they are perfectionistic, treat themselves as though they were a harsh drill sergeant disciplining a new recruit. If this seems hard to imagine, watch yourself to see how much time you spend criticizing yourself, putting yourself down, or pushing and driving yourself to do what you don’t really want to do. When you’re not pushing or criticizing yourself, you may fall into a more passive stance of fear—or of being a victim. Out of fear,

your mind constantly scares you with “What if this ...” or “What if that ...” When you fall into a victim stance, you may depress yourself with “It’s no use ...” “It’s hopeless ...” “It’s a lost cause ...” As soon as you start to feel less depressed, your perfectionism may keep you on a treadmill with “I should ...” “I must ...” “I have to ...” Notice how much you criticize, scare, depress, or push yourself, and you’ll learn quite a bit about your own mind. Unfortunately, all of the cognitive therapy in the world is not going to help if you are still basically at war with yourself.

Cultivating compassion in self-observation is fundamental to changing your relationship with yourself. Compassion allows you to move away from judgment, criticism, and even contempt and toward tolerance, acceptance, and love. Compassion depends on accepting yourself—and the rest of the world—as it is, an attitude that can be cultivated through meditation practice. Living with your limitations and embracing your humanness is something you can learn. For a more in-depth statement about the role of compassion in meditation, see Jack Kornfield’s book *A Path with Heart*.

## Meditation and Medication

Few, if any, books on meditation address the question of how prescription medications affect the experience of meditation. Some formal meditation training programs, such as Transcendental Meditation, request that beginners get off all nonessential prescription drugs before learning to meditate. My own observation, based on personal experience as well as the experience of clients, is that different medications affect people in different ways.

Two generalizations, however, might be made:

1. Benzodiazepine medications such as Xanax, Ativan, or Klonopin seem to increase distractibility, making it more difficult to focus during meditation. It has been found that the benzodiazepines tend to increase beta wave activity in the brain (rapid, nonsynchronous brain waves associated with thinking) and reduce the ability to enter into alpha brain-wave states (synchronous brain waves associated with relaxed states as well as meditation). While it’s certainly not impossible to meditate while taking a benzodiazepine medication, you may find it somewhat more difficult.
2. SSRI antidepressant medications (such as Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, or Celexa) do not seem to impede meditation for most people. There are a few people who report that meditation is more difficult while taking an SSRI medication. On the other hand, I’ve also heard reports that some people find it easier to meditate after taking SSRIs because they feel calmer and less subject to intrusive thoughts and feelings. In general, it seems that SSRI medications do not pose a significant impediment to cultivating a meditation practice.

Information is hard to find on the effects of tricyclic antidepressants (such as imipramine or nortriptyline) or other anti-anxiety medications such as Neurontin, Gabitril, or Buspar on meditation. It’s possible to evaluate the effects of such medications if you reduce your dose for

a few days while meditating and then resume taking your normal dose. Please consult with your prescribing physician before you try this.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to present meditation practice as one additional strategy you can use to help better deal with anxiety, fear, and worry. Though meditation is a powerful coping strategy, it in no way supersedes any of the other methods for dealing with anxiety and fear presented in this book. Abdominal breathing, exercise, working with fearful self-talk, facing fears through exposure, utilizing good nutrition, dealing with conditions that can aggravate anxiety, working on assertiveness and self-esteem, and, finally, relying on medication, if needed, can all be very helpful to your recovery from your anxiety difficulties, just as meditation can be. Ultimately, you will discover for yourself what role meditation plays in your journey to overcome anxiety by making time to practice it every day. You may find it to be a quite powerful tool, if you stick with it over the long run.

Keep in mind that “success” in meditation is just doing it. The more often you do it, the more quickly you will train your mind to be less reactive, more stable, and better able to observe. You will be training it to be able to take each moment as it comes, without valuing any one above any other. Working regularly with the resistance of your mind builds inner strength. Regular meditation practice will foster the development of the very attitudes that help facilitate the practice in the beginning: acceptance, patience, nonjudgment, letting go, and trust.

## Summary of Things to Do

1. To begin a meditation practice, follow the guidelines in the section “Right Technique” for the first week or two. You may want to begin with ten-minute meditation periods and gradually increase the duration up to thirty minutes. Make a commitment to yourself to practice every day. It’s best to find a specific time of day and a specific place for your practice where you’re free of distractions. Review the section on “Right Attitude” to help cultivate the proper approach to take toward your practice.
2. After a week or two—or when you feel you have gained some familiarity and comfort with meditation—try the meditation exercises in the section “Cultivating Mindfulness.” Alternatively, you may want to order professionally made recordings for meditation (see below). After you’ve spent time practicing one of the exercises several times, you will begin to work out your own preferred style of practice.
3. To support your practice, find a class or group that meditates regularly. If this is unavailable, you may want to work with recordings relevant to meditation and read some of the books on meditation listed below, perhaps starting with those by Brantley, Kabat-Zinn, Kornfield, and Goldstein.

## Further Reading and Resources

### *Books*

- Brantley, Jeffrey. *Calming Your Anxious Mind*. Second edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007. (Directly examines how meditation practice can help deal with anxiety and worry.)
- Goldstein, Joseph. *Insight Meditation*. Boston: Shambhala, 1993.
- Harp, David, and Nina Smiley. *The Three-Minute Meditator*. Fifth edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full Catastrophe Living*. New York: Delta, 2005.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. Tenth anniversary edition. New York: Hyperion, 2005. (Kabat-Zinn's books provide a good introduction to meditation and mindfulness practice.)
- Kornfield, Jack. *A Path with Heart*. New York: Bantam, 1993.
- Levine, Stephen. *A Gradual Awakening*. New York: Anchor Books, 1989.
- Salzberg, Sharon. *A Heart as Wide as the World*. Boston: Shambhala, 1997.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *Being Peace*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2005.

### *Meditation CDs and Programs*

A good collection of meditation CDs is available through Sounds True in Boulder, Colorado. You can call them at 1-800-333-9185 or go to [shop.soundstrue.com](http://shop.soundstrue.com) (click on "Meditation & Guided Practices" or "Music" for background music for meditation). Meditation programs and CDs by Jon Kabat-Zinn can be ordered by going to [mindfulnessstapes.com](http://mindfulnessstapes.com).

### *Meditation Retreats*

Two major centers for meditation retreats are the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts ([dharma.org](http://dharma.org)) and Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California ([spiritrock.org](http://spiritrock.org)). Contact either of these centers to find out about meditation retreats in other parts of the country.