

Meditation for Beginners



Frequently asked questions

How long should I sit each day?

If you are new to meditation, you might want to experiment with the length of time you sit and practice. Try starting with 5 minutes once or twice a day and build up time until you reach a length you are comfortable committing to.

Sitting for this chosen length of time can increase your confidence in your ability to relax and stay with a daily meditation, however, if you didn't sit for as long as you wanted, or missed a session for any reason, try not to beat yourself up about it, but treat yourself with kindness, and try again.

Each day you choose to commit to your meditation practice you will notice the benefits, for example, you may be less reactive and calmer, which will encourage you to increase your sitting time.

My life is hectic right now, how does anyone find the time to meditate?

This is simply a matter of prioritising. The more you realise that meditation provides you with essential training for life, then you will see it less as a new hobby, and more a necessary part of your daily routine, like taking a shower. Modern day life means we are all so much busier these days, so even if you only manage five minutes in the morning when you wake up, or before you go to bed at night, the power of consistency will make a massive difference to you.

Is it better to meditate in the morning or at night?

It depends on the person. I personally started meditating at night, and after a few years moved into the morning, which I now prefer.

Meditating at night does help you get a better night's sleep, and if you are a night person, you may find yourself more alert when practising at night.

All things being equal, however, meditating in the morning is better. The main reasons are:

- You can focus better – you are well-rested, refreshed, and probably have fewer things going on in your mind.
- You also set a better tone for the rest of your day.
- You make sure it gets done. Leaving it for the night when you are tired, hungry and still have to cook tea can leave you open to excuses for putting it off.

Do I need a special place to do meditation?

It's helpful to find a relatively quiet place where you won't be disturbed. It can also be beneficial to use the same place each time because the association of that place has the potential to help you to settle into your meditation more quickly.

However, many people meditate on public transportation, in their offices at lunchtime, and in public parks. I even tried a spell in the tranquillity room at my gym. As part of the "art and science" of meditation, you can creatively experiment with what works for you and use that feedback to decide on an optimal meditation location.

Though it isn't necessary or required, decorating your dedicated meditation space with memorable pictures, candles, flowers, or other personal objects that bring you joy can help refresh your intentions for practice.

If I choose to practice sitting meditation, does it matter if I sit on a traditional cushion or in a chair?

Not really. But you may find that sitting in a traditional cross-legged posture helps (it's been done that way for thousands of years for a reason). The most important things are to be comfortable, so you can completely relax, and to keep your spine straight so you can stay alert and awake (and so you don't hurt your back).

Similar to finding a meditation place, you can experiment with different postures. One posture is not better than another. The important thing is to respect your body and do your sitting, standing, walking, or lying down meditation in a way that balances relaxation and alertness.

That said, here are some helpful tips for sitting posture:

- Sit in a way that allows the spine to be upright and relaxed, following its natural curves.
- Allow the shoulders to relax back and down.
- Place the hands on the thighs or in the lap (perhaps resting on a small cushion or towel) and allow the arms to relax.
- Allow the back of the neck to lengthen and the chin to slightly tuck in.

Should I keep my eyes open or closed?

Meditating with closed eyes has the advantage of helping you move into deeper states of meditation. However, beginners may find that the mind wanders more if the eyes are closed, or you are more likely to fall asleep. Meditating with your eyes open helps your mind be more present and alert, and may make integrating the meditation state in your daily life a bit easier.

So, both are possible. In some traditions the eyes are closed during meditation (mostly the Hindu based practices); in others, the eyes are kept half-open, with the gaze resting in a place in front of you (usually in Buddhist and Chinese traditions).

What if I can't follow the breath?

If you can't follow your breath, you might use your hand on your belly as a way of further stabilising your attention. Alternately, you can choose another meditation anchor, like sounds, body sensations, or the breath combined with body sensations.

My mind is always busy, lost in thought. How do I quiet it?

This is very common to see in the meditative process; it is natural and there is nothing wrong. Understand too, there is no need to get rid of thoughts; this is not the purpose of meditation. Instead, we are learning to recognise when thinking is happening, so we are not lost in a trance—believing thoughts to be our reality, or becoming identified with our thoughts. Because we are so often lost in thought, it is helpful first to simply notice this fact. Here are several suggestions which can help to refocus your attention:

- Anchor your attention in the body or breath over and over. This is like tethering the busy thinking mind to the “here and now.” Even though it pulls away, you patiently and gently bring it back again and again.
- Commit to not judging the arising of thinking. Rather, respond to thoughts with acceptance and friendliness.
- When you find you're lost in a compelling thought, mentally whisper “a story but not true.” Remember that your thoughts are real—they are happening—but they are not reality, they are just a mental representation. You don't have to believe your thoughts!
- You can experiment by giving your busy, lost-in-thought-mind a way to cooperate with being present by silently whispering “Breathing in 1” with the in-breath. “Breathing out 1” with the out-breath. Follow with “Breathing in 2”, “Breathing out 2” up to 8, then counting backwards to one. The words are pointers to the direct feeling of the in-breath and out-breath connecting the mind and the body to steady and calm the mind. You can experiment with the words and pacing that work for you.
- Just like a body of water stirred up by the winds, after being physically still for a while, your mind will gradually calm down

What percentage of the time does your mind wander during meditation? How much is “normal”?

This varies from person to person and depending on how long you have been practising. More important than the amount of time you are distracted is how many seconds it takes you to get back to your focus.

In general, however, do not think much of quantifying the quality of your meditation practice. I know it's hard because we always want to know “how well we are doing”, to then either feel proud, or bad about ourselves. This is not helpful, and this is not meditation. Simply follow the practice to the best of your ability. Keep your interest and your effort alive. Practice every day. This is enough for you to reap most of its benefits.

What can I do if I get sleepy?

Sleepiness is another very common experience in meditation which can have several causes. First, sometimes we are tired and just need more sleep. Second, sometimes we are so accustomed to lots of stimulation and a fast-paced life that when our body gets still, the mind thinks, “Oh, it must be time to sleep!” The third cause is an imbalance in energy. You can be too relaxed without sufficient alertness, so the mind begins to sink into sleepiness. To arouse energy, you can pay more attention to the in-breath, sit up straighter, open your eyes, continue practising with standing meditation, or shift to walking meditation. A fourth cause can be unconscious avoidance of a difficult experience that is close to awareness. One simple inquiry can be, “What would I have to feel if I wasn’t feeling sleepy right now?”

Whatever the cause, mindfulness can notice what sleepiness feels like in the body and mind and notice when it decreases. And most important, notice if you’re judging the sleepiness. If so, see if you can let go of the judgment. Our habit is to judge our inner states, and that just interferes with a simple mindful presence.

I can’t sit still. I feel so restless. What can I do?

Physical restlessness is also very common as we practice, and like sleepiness can be an imbalance in energy. In this case, too much energy brings agitation, so more relaxation is helpful.

First, simply notice restlessness mindfully and let it be present without judgment. Then you might scan through the body and see where there are areas of tightness, tension, or discomfort and intentionally relax around those areas, making room for rather than fighting the restlessness. You can also experiment with focusing your attention on the out-breath, even allowing it to be longer than the in-breath; relaxing with the in-breath, relaxing with the out-breath. Patience and kindness are vital in relating skilfully to restlessness in the body or mind so you can imagine how you would help a child who is feeling restless. You might silently whisper, “May you be at ease.” With gentleness, explore accepting your experience as it is.

Most importantly, as with sleepiness, notice the tendency to judge what is happening, and let your intention be to let go of judgment, and simply witness your experience with acceptance, friendliness, and curiosity.

Do I need to be still to meditate? What about meditating while walking, running, or while engaged in simple chores?

No, you don’t need to be still to meditate—but it helps. A lot. Nevertheless, there is plenty of benefits to be found through bringing what the Buddhists call “mindfulness” to your activities whenever you can, and walking, running, or dishwashing are great opportunities to try it. Just pay attention to whatever you’re doing, bringing your awareness to every nuance of what you’re feeling and how you’re moving, absorbing yourself fully in the present moment and remaining undistracted by your thoughts.

If sitting feels too hard, switch to walking practice and bring the attention into the sensations of walking. You could begin with a moderate pace to match the energy and gradually slow the pace down. As with the busy mind and counting, you give the restless body a way to participate in the practice.



If you find yourself daydreaming, bring your attention back to your body—to your footsteps, to the sound of your shoes on the pavement, or to your relaxed and steady breathing as you scrub stubborn grime off a pan. Eckhart Tolle calls this awakening to “stillness” and finding one’s “inner purpose.”

What if I can't feel anything in my body?

Many people are somewhat disconnected from the direct experience of their body. Mindfulness of body and breath is training, and it takes practice to recognise sensations and open to the felt sense of what's going on inside you. Notice if you are judging yourself about not feeling anything in your body, and remember you are in good company. Also, trust that it's possible to awaken embodied awareness. Start simply, by scanning through your body and noticing where you feel neutral or slightly pleasant sensations like the contact where your clothes meet your skin, feelings in the hands or feet, coolness or warmth. Sometimes tensing and relaxing a body part helps to make the sensations more obvious—increasing the blood flow makes it easier to feel tingling, pulsing, heat, etc.

Often, we cut off from body sensations and emotions because they are intense, unfamiliar, or unpleasant. Instead, see if it's possible to become curious about the life of the body, just as it is. Let your intention be to befriend whatever you experience with a patient, gentle, and accepting presence.

What do I do when the body itches during meditation? Or when my mind keeps playing songs?

Feel the itches and hear the songs. Label it mentally “body itching” or “memory of songs”; or simply, “sensation”, “memory”. Then guide your attention back to your meditation focus.

One of the beautiful gifts of meditation training is not to react. Showing us that what we perceive is one thing, what we think/feel is one thing, and what we choose to do with it is another.

When it happens, see that you have a choice. And exercise your power. Your awareness will get more acute, and your self-control will be more powerful. Your body and mind are trying to distract you from the practice. Hold firm. You are the master here.

How do I deal with pain—in my legs, back, etc.?

Bringing mindfulness to physical discomfort is similar to bringing presence to emotional difficulty. Let your intention be to meet the unpleasantness with gentle attention, noticing how it is experienced in the body and how it changes. Allow the unpleasantness to float in awareness, to be surrounded by soft presence. To establish that openness you might include in your attention sounds and/or other parts of the body that are free from pain. Breathe with the experience, offering spacious and kind attention. Be aware of not only the physical sensations but how you are relating to them. Is there resistance? Fear? If so, let these energies be included with a forgiving and mindful attention.

If the physical unpleasantness is intense and wearing you out, direct your attention for a while to something else. It is okay to shift your posture mindfully or to use a skilful trick like phrases of loving-kindness or listening to sounds in a way to discover some space and resilience. You don't need to “tough it out.” That is just another ego posture that solidifies the sense of separate self.

In a similar vein, you don't have to “give up.” Instead, discover what allows you to find a sense of balance and spaciousness, and when you are able, again let the immediate sensations to be received



with presence. When you are feeling more resilient and have the energy to deal with the pain, you can start by meeting the edges of your pain with your breath, working your way in slowly like a masseuse with gentle hands.