



MEDITATION THAT WORKS

Tips for Finding the Right Practice

by April Thompson

More Americans than ever before are seeking the benefits of meditation, which notably improves mental, physical and spiritual health. Choosing from its many styles and traditions can be daunting for a new meditator, as is figuring out how to incorporate such a practice into a busy life.

Universal Appeal

“Meditation is for people of all spiritual backgrounds. As a tool to develop awareness, it can enhance what you already believe and practice,” assures Diana Lang, the Los Angeles author of *Opening to Meditation: A Gentle, Guided Approach* and a spiritual counselor who has taught meditation for 37 years.

For Jackie Trottmann, a Christian author from St. Louis, Missouri, there is no contradiction between a meditation practice and her faith; rather, they complement one another. For her, “Prayer is like talking to God, whereas meditation is listening to God. Before I came to meditation, I had been

doing all the talking.”

She came to meditation during a trying period working in sales and marketing. “When a friend gave me a meditation CD, I popped it in after a stressful conference call and felt instantly calmed. Ten years later, meditation has gone beyond quieting the mind; it’s sunk into my heart and spirit,” says Trottmann, who went on to publish her own CDs at *GuidedChristianMeditation.com*.

“I came to meditation tired of habitual suffering and stress, and wanting to be happier,” says Bill Scheinman, a coach in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which he refers to as “mindfulness practice without the Buddhist jargon.” The Oakland, California, instructor has taught mindfulness in settings ranging from corporations to prisons, drawing from a range of meditative disciplines and 23 years of intensive practice.

Begin Modestly

“Millions are seeking more mindfulness through meditation, but don’t know how

to go about it,” says Sean Fargo, a Berkeley, California, meditation instructor and former Buddhist monk. “The key is to take baby steps, like going to the gym for the first time. Start by practicing a few minutes a day; just pay attention to something such as the sensations of breathing, without judgment.”

“Having taught meditation to tens of thousands of people, I would say the most common issue is that beginning meditators don’t think they’re doing it right. It’s important not to judge yourself or have loaded expectations about the experience,” notes Lang. She suggests starting wherever we are right now, adding, “Whatever book, class or teacher you first stumble upon is a clue.” But that doesn’t call for rigidly adhering to a particular type of meditation forever.

Assess Benefits

“Shop around and try different things, but at some point, you will begin to discover what works for you,” advises Scheinman.

In trying to decide which meditation practice is right for us, “Go with what feels juicy,” says Fargo, who founded *MindfulnessExercises.com*, offering 1,500 free mindfulness meditations, worksheets and talks. “You’re more likely to do what feels alive and enlivening.”

The act of meditating can be uncomfortable, but the challenges are part of its power. Scheinman remarks. “If you establish a daily practice, eventually, you will become more clear-headed, kinder and happier. That’s how you know your practice is working—not how you feel during meditation itself.” Consistency is key. It’s not effective to only meditate when you feel good, he says.

Overview of Options

Mindfulness practices go by many names, from *vipassana* to MBSR, and can be done sitting or walking, but all are focused on cultivating moment-to-moment awareness. “Mindfulness is about being aware: deliberately paying attention to body sensations, thoughts and emotions. Focused attention is on the body, heart and mind,” explains Scheinman. Guided visualization differs from most forms of meditation in that the meditator is intentionally creating a mental image, typically one of a peaceful, beautiful place.

Typically, the goal of a guided visualization is deep relaxation and stress reduction.

Mantra meditations involve continuous repetition of a word, phrase or sound, drawing spiritual power from the sound's vibration, as well as its meaning. Many mantras are uttered in a tradition's native language, such as *shanti*, meaning peace in Sanskrit. Teachers like Lang prefer to use mantras in English that meditators can more easily grasp, such as, "Love is the way."

Breathing meditation. Meditation experts say our ever-present breath is a sound foundation for a meditation practice, as well as an easy place to start. "Tapping into the power of our breath is vital; it cleanses our system," says Trottmann.

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