

**The
Guidebook to
OPTIMUM
HEALTH**

**Why Exercise and Nutrition Alone
Are Not Enough**



Carl Massy





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CHAPTER 35:

Meditation

There is an incredible volume of research and material available on meditation, and a matching amount of interest in the medical and scientific community on its positive effects. Even the Dalai Lama encourages long-term meditating monks to participate in scientific research. The overall conclusion? Meditation has amazing benefits for both the body and mind. I've been meditating daily anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour for the last four years (at the time of this writing) and meditation is one of the Top 3 Daily Rituals I recommend everyone adopt (along with physical activity and a Green Drink) to get the very best out of themselves.

Why meditation is so great

The body cannot perform at its optimum and self correct if it's not given the opportunity to do so. It's like an engine running at full capacity non-stop. It will eventually wear down without downtime and maintenance. Meditation is just the thing to balance out our fast-paced lives.

Cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson, author of *The Relaxation Revolution*, has studied and written about meditation for decades, actually coining the term *relaxation response*—which is exactly what meditation induces in our bodies. According to Benson, the relaxation response is characterized by the following physiological responses: decreased metabolism and muscle tension, decreased oxygen consumption, heart rate, blood pressure and rate of breathing; a calming

in brain activity, an increase in attention and decision-making functions of the brain, and changes in gene activity.

Can you spell ‘good for you?’

Some of these effects are associated with sleep as well. But where it might take hours to experience these effects via sleep, with meditation it takes only minutes for the body to wind down and start doing the necessary self-healing work. Not only do you get the benefits of sleep more quickly, meditation is more active than sleep. You actively focus your attention in meditation, which makes it like a workout for the brain.

Matthieu Ricard, author of *Why Meditate* says, “Over the course of the last ten years, I have participated in several research programs intended to document the long-term effects of meditation practice on the brain and on behavior. This research has shown that it’s possible to make significant progress in developing qualities such as attention, emotional balance, altruism, and inner peace. Other studies have also demonstrated the benefits of meditating for 20 minutes a day. These benefits include a decrease in anxiety, a decrease in vulnerability to pain, a decrease in depression and anger, as well as strengthening the power of attention, boosting the immune system, and increasing one’s general well being. No matter what point of view you approach it from—whether that of personal transformation, the development of altruistic love, or physical health—meditation emerges as a factor essential for leading a balanced life, rich in meaning.”

Another reason why meditation is so good for us is it positively affects the expression of the genes in our DNA. “In the long-term practitioners [of meditation], the genes that controlled metabolism, stress, aging of the body were activated,” says Benson. “Genes that were controlling the immune system and inflammation systems of the body were quieted down. There was little change in the control group. With this finding there could no longer be any separation between mind and body. The mind could quiet the body at the genetic level.”

Meditation studies by Sara Lazar, PhD, of the MGH Psychiatric Neuroimaging Research Program, found increased grey-matter density in the hippocampus of meditators (a brain area known to be important for learning and memory), and in structures associated with self-awareness, compassion and introspection. Participants also reported reductions in stress.

Bottom line, meditation shows us we have a lot more control of our consciousness and health than we're lead to believe!

The 'how to'

ALL the thoughts we have are about the past or future.

Thinking about that statement you're already in the past, dwelling on a moment gone by. If you're truly present, in the now, you aren't thinking, you're just feeling the moment, experiencing what you're experiencing. It really is a peaceful place to be. Interestingly enough, the past/present nature of our thoughts is stressful to the body. They're literally telling the body it needs to be somewhere else and some *when* else in time.

When you bring your attention into the present moment to feel the breeze on your skin, or the smell of the air before a storm, or lose yourself in the brightness of the colors around you, you feel relaxed and connected. As far as 'doing' meditation is concerned, it's less about doing and more about increasing the gap between your thoughts and hanging out in the nothingness (thoughtless) zone, simply being, as long as possible.

Let me start off with the basic physical practice and then I'll answer some common questions people ask. Here are the basics of how to meditate:

The Setting

1. Find somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed and where the light

isn't too bright. Do NOT take your cell phone with you!

2. Sit rather than lay down, as you are less likely to fall asleep.
3. Maintain a straight posture without being too rigid. You don't want to lean backwards or forwards, just comfortably with minimal back arch.
4. I recommend practices where the eyes are closed. There are different practices where the eyes are left open, but they require some coaching. By closing your eyes you're reducing a lot of brain activity associated with visual stimulation and mental visual.
5. Sit in the same place every day if possible. This will create an association with the physical space and cause the brain and body to automatically start moving into a deeper relaxed state as soon as you sit down.
6. The best times to meditate are soon after waking and before going to bed, as your brainwave activity is already likely to be reduced to a low beta or high alpha brainwave state at these times. The next best time is whatever time you can do it. It's FAR more important you do it than wait for the 'perfect' time.

The 'doing'

1. Relax your belly and focus on breathing deeply and fully—and that means with your diaphragm. Your stomach will move with the inhalations and exhalations.
2. Focus on your breathing. This is one of the most simple and effective ways to relax your mind and body. If you can, breath in and out of your nose. Connecting to your breath is connecting to life – literally. Because if you disconnect from breathing for more than a few minutes you stop being connected to life permanently.
3. You can place your hands in a number of different positions. The most popular is with the thumb and index finger touching while the back of the hands rest on or near the knees.

4. When thoughts come, (and they will!) let them pass you by without directing your attention to them. Simply watch your breath.
5. For many of us, sitting in a cross-legged posture (like you would see ancient and modern yogis or monks doing) is uncomfortable. However, if you put a pillow under your butt, it changes the positioning of your hips enough to make it more comfortable. If you can't sit cross-legged, then sitting in a chair is perfectly fine.

How long should I meditate?

There are a number of different opinions about this. Dr. Benson says between 10-20 minutes is sufficient to create the relaxation response. Most teachers say around 15 minutes is enough to experience the major benefits from meditation. Some sources suggest twice a day for about 20 minutes. Of course, if you really want to make significant changes to your emotional and psychological wellbeing, you can meditate for 1-2 hours at a stretch, or longer if you're so inclined.

From my personal experience and reading, I suggest that you aim to get to a point where you're meditating for **about 15 minutes every day**. Sometimes you might do more and sometimes less, depending on the circumstances. There are times when 40 minutes fly by, and others where eight minutes is a stretch.

If you are new to meditating, take my advice and don't sweat the length of the meditation. Doing it is what counts. It might only be three minutes. The most important thing as a beginner is *getting in the habit of showing up*. You want to create a habit of sitting down to meditate. Extend your practice to 15 minutes over time, but be prepared for this to take several weeks to achieve on a daily basis.

Am I doing it right?

One of the first things is to suspend all judgment about whether you are doing it 'right.' The aim is to have no judgment about your meditation. Just do it

because it's great for you. Forget trying to figure out whether your meditation was Zen-like or not. You just can't judge. You might think your meditation session was all over the place, but the actual brainwave activity might show great symmetry between the two hemispheres of the brain. It's safe to assume all meditation is good meditation.

Also, I've had clients who have been meditating for a whole week say to me, "I can't understand why I still have these random thoughts popping up in my mind." Welcome to Meditation 101. Rome was definitely not built in a day or even a year or even five years—and neither is the creation of a 'still' mind. It takes as long as it takes for the monkey chatter in your mind to calm down and dissipate.

Remember. It's not so much about the thoughts that pop into our mind—it's about what we focus our attention on. In meditation you're aiming to focus on your breath and the space between your thoughts, holding your attention on the emptiness. When an unannounced thought pops up and you are drawn to it, notice you are being drawn, say "oh, well," and then take your attention back to your breath.

Useful Resources

Most quality yoga classes start and end with meditation and breathing exercises, so yoga classes are a great way to learn meditation. You also might want to check out some meditation classes to get a better idea of the tips and strategies to help you with your practice. There are many different kinds.

Several years ago when I committed to doing a 365-days-a-year meditation practice, I realized I needed help and ended up purchasing some guided meditation audio recordings (MP3s), which I still use occasionally. I have a number of guided meditation recordings that range from 14 minutes to one hour. Some have background sounds like waterfalls, rain, Tibetan bells or the like. CDs are extremely useful if you live somewhere that is noisy or you live

in a house in Bali that is designed to let in the outside environment along with the next-door neighbors' kids doing *School of Rock* practice.

There is also new audio technology available which assists you in attaining deeper brainwave states through subliminal sounds. Essentially the sounds are at different frequencies outside the range of our normal hearing. I have definitely been able to go much deeper in a meditation when I used a meditation CD recorded with subliminal audio technology. One my favorite organizations in the wellness industry is *The Entheos Academy* (spear-headed by the very cool Brian Johnson) and they have a line of guided meditation resources called *Blissitations* – so check them out.

A final word on meditation

Here is a final quote from Jon Kabat Zinn, Ph.D, author of *Wherever You Go There You Are* and a meditation teacher who is passionate about bringing mindfulness into mainstream medicine and society.

“Meditation does not involve trying to change your thinking by thinking some more. It involves watching thought itself. Another way to look at meditation is to view the process of thinking itself as a waterfall, a continual cascading of thought. In cultivating mindfulness, we are going beyond or behind our thinking, much the way you might find a vantage point in a cave or depression in the rock behind a waterfall. We still see and hear the water, but we are out of the torrent.”

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