



## Introduction to Meditation Practice

Many, if not most, of us emerge from families in which our primary caregivers – or their parents – endured formidable challenges in their youth navigating harsh developmental years in other countries. Even if not subject to unduly harsh conditions in their countries of origin, they had to acclimate to significantly changed societal conditions upon emigrating to the United States. Once in America the industrial revolution placed a premium on productivity and instilled the “dream” the immigrants could find “happiness” largely through goal-directed behavior.

While the cultural mindset emphasizing commercial productivity has led to endless conveniences and avenues of fun and enjoyment, it has simultaneously conditioned people to lock into executable vision and goal-directed behavior as the blueprint to happiness. Over time, many of us have unconsciously come to equate “happiness” and even self-worth with our ability to effectuate envisioned goals.

This future-oriented, productivity-driven orientation to life has marginalized the value of quiet and stillness. As a result, many “high achievers” have become fundamentally disconnected from their felt, present-moment experience often embodied in one’s “emotions.” This disconnect from present-moment experience has produced a situation in which many people have come to largely rely on achieved outcomes for happiness and self-worth.

The challenge posed by such a conditional view of happiness is that we eventually begin to suffer anxiety from the fear that desired outcomes might not materialize. In addition, we begin to suffer depression resulting from our fundamental disconnect from felt present-moment experience.

If fortunate, we find some therapeutic experience offering a roadmap back to our felt, present-moment experience. We become able, through practice, to qualitatively differentiate our present-moment experience from thought-driven, outcome-oriented ideas about how life needs to manifest in order for us to find happiness. We are introduced to the practice of conscious attention to our present-moment experience.

## Addressing Some Common Misconceptions Related to Meditation Practice

1. ***The “goal” of meditation practice is to “stop thinking.”*** By creating a quiet, still experience in meditation we become more connected with our felt, present-



moment experience. Within this presence we become able to witness the impermanent nature of our thoughts. We become de-fused from these thoughts. We begin to cultivate “space” between our ephemeral thoughts and our present-moment experience that is always here and now. Thinking does not cease; what dissipates is our attachment to these thoughts and the ability of our thoughts to trigger reactionary behavior.

2. ***I do not have time to meditate.*** Regular meditation practice is likely to free up appreciable bandwidth and time previously expended agonizing over and concocting strategies to ensure your ability to effectuate outcomes you previously considered necessary to “happiness.” You will come to more effectively harness the ability to focus attention on tasks at hand since you will be less exhausted by persistent, future-oriented concerns that previously drained your energy.
3. ***Meditation is a “Buddhist” thing, and I categorically reject organized religion.*** More than 2,600 years ago, an individual in India named Siddhartha Gautama discovered and developed concrete practices which he found to significantly reduce his suffering as a human being. He began offering these teachings and practices to others who similarly found welcome relief in their lives. While his teachings over time evolved into an organized religion, Buddhism does not ask that you “believe” anything. It simply offers a range of practices that have led to the reduction in suffering for countless numbers of human beings.
4. ***If I lessen attachment to my ideas and sense of self, then what will be left? An underlying precept of Buddhist practice is its rejection of any sort of static, crystallized “self.”*** Through practice we come to more deeply appreciate the impermanent nature of all “things,” including our thoughts. This leads to appreciation of our “sense of self” as a constellation of ideas arising out of conditioned experience. When we come to internalize the ephemeral, non-static nature of “the self,” we experience a significant reduction in behavioral reactivity as, simply put, there is no “self” that we need to defend and protect.
5. ***I cannot sit in the lotus position.*** Meditation practice does not require that we sit in any specific position. What is important is that we find a posture that is comfortable and yet erect and alert enough to support sustained attention (versus simple “relaxation” or sleep). Similarly, we can practice with our eyes closed or open. If the eyes are open, we want to have an easy, soft gaze versus focused attention on a specific object in our environment so that we remain able



to merely witness our thoughts and bodily sensations as they arise and dissipate rather than fixate on one particular element of our experience.

### Getting Started in Practice

Below are a few practical suggestions for beginning a meditation practice:

1. **Identify a regular time and place to sit.** It is not so important when beginning a practice how much time you spend meditating. What is important, however, is the creation of some type of regular time and place to practice. This will help you associate a specific time and place with your meditation practice. Forming this association will help mitigate distraction. In addition, this “ritual” will help cultivate a sense of reverence for the practice which will, in turn, strengthen the likelihood of establishing practice as an ongoing, important part of your life.
2. **Hold yourself accountable.** Employ some objective means of tracking your daily practice. There are many apps such as Insight Timer that can be used for this purpose. Accountability increases the likelihood that your practice will evolve into a regular habit.
3. **If you “fall short” of your expectations, use this as an opportunity to practice self-compassion.** Many of us have come to internalize a high level of discomfort around perceived “failure.” If you come up short of your expectations, simply notice the arising of self-critical thoughts as phenomena that arise and dissipate on their own. We want to avoid “shooting the second arrow” whereby these thoughts reflexively lead to a stream of thought of how inept we are, how we never be “good meditators,” etc.
4. **Be patient and savor “small victories.”** As a byproduct of earlier conditioning, we may have internalized the notion that unless things are done “all right” (i.e., perfectly), then they are “all wrong.” This perfectionist mindset will quickly extinguish motivation for sustained motivation practice. If you stick with practice, your attachment to perfectionistic ideals will dissipate over time. You will bring yourself more in line with life and conditions as they unfold and suffer far less anxiety and dis-ease.