

YOGA

RELAXATION, POSTURES & DAILY ROUTINES



FLAME TREE
PUBLISHING

MEDITATION

The seventh step (or Dhyana) in the Eight Limbed yogic path, meditation is about cultivating a stillness of mind, training our attention inwards so we become more aware of ourselves and our place in the world and universe. Meditation has been proven to be a great comforter during times of intense emotional difficulty. The process is not so much about shutting out our thoughts (both positive and negative), but raising our ability to observe them, to then let them pass naturally and effortlessly.

Stress Free

Meditating is a great way to relax and unwind after work, or to help insulate yourself from the stresses of modern life. It's a simple practice, and many centuries old – people have been training their minds through meditation for thousands of years – but there's a lot of modern science to back it up. There are many types of meditation, but, in essence, it's simply training

our attention inwards, to permit thoughts and any mental chatter to pass by, without struggle. People all over the world meditate to ease stress, relieve anxiety, or to improve their general health and wellbeing. This can result in a more balanced outlook on life, which, in turn, can make you feel happier, brighter, more alive, more in control.









Clear Thinking

We all know how much difference it can make at work or at home if you wake up with a clear head. You get more done, life seems just a little easier, you feel happier, more vibrant. Meditation can cut through all of the mental noise to create a healthier, internal mindset, which brings results in many other areas of your life. This includes improved feelings of inner balance, heightened creativity, flexibility and better decision-making. Your new-found emotional resilience means you are also more able to break bad habits, to manage any painful conditions. In general, you feel calmer and more able to cope with life.

Key Benefits

These are just some of the other main benefits that a regular meditation practice can bring:

-  **Reduced stress**
-  **Reduced anxiety**
-  **Improved concentration**
-  **Greater peace of mind**
-  **Better emotional balance**
-  **Lower blood pressure**



Top Tip

Meditation is a great way to calm the mind and brush off stresses of work. Before a big meeting or presentation, take some quiet time to clear your mind and sharpen your thinking. You'll appreciate the extra clarity.

WHERE TO START

The best thing about meditation is that you can perform it pretty much anywhere and at any time. If you're starting out, it can be helpful to consult an experienced meditation guide (your yoga teacher will be able to advise you). Many yoga classes may also include an introduction to meditation, and a group meditation can be a very powerful experience. For the most part, however, meditation is typically a solitary practice, performed in a quiet location, where you can be alone with your thoughts.



Set the Scene

You don't need any special place or equipment to meditate, but if you want to practise regularly, it can help to find a quiet spot you can go to each day. This will help you associate a place you know is safe and peaceful with your daily meditation fix. Needless to say, try to avoid distractions such as loud televisions or noisy children where possible.

Home Space

If you want to create a more conducive environment for your meditation at home, this can be easily achieved with some subdued lighting, soft music and soothing aromas. Playing some calming mantra music can help set the scene, or you might want to burn an incense stick.

Top Tip

The more you meditate, the more the benefits accrue, so try to incorporate it into your daily life as much as possible, whether that's at home, at work, or out and about.



When To Meditate

The most common prescription for regular daily meditation is to do it twice a day, with one session in the morning, shortly after waking, and one in the late afternoon or before you go up to bed (not in bed, as you may fall asleep). This may not always be possible, however, so it's important to be flexible in order to sustain your practice and not give up.



Keep It Real

Seasoned yogis and spiritual gurus can spend hours on end in just one meditation session. For most of us, however, it's important to keep it manageable. Just sitting for a couple of minutes at a time may be all that is required to start you off on the right track. The most important thing is to keep your practice going on a regular basis, as this is when the benefits will start to come. Look for meditation opportunities in your normal day: you could be sitting on the bus; you could switch off the television 10 minutes earlier; or you could take some time out to meditate during your lunch hour.

CHOOSING A POSTURE

How you sit whilst meditating is not so important. What you must ensure is that you are comfortable in order to give yourself the best chance of success, and that your posture allows you to remain alert and aware. There are some meditation styles that involve holding certain positions, or mudras (hand gestures), but most simply require you to sit, either on a chair or on the floor. Lying down is not recommended, as you may end up asleep – which is not meditation!

Where To Meditate

It doesn't really matter where you meditate. You can do it indoors or outside, moving on a train at 70 mph, or sitting cross-legged in the park. Your meditation experience will be different every time. The most important thing is that you are taking the time to journey within, to still the mind, and to tap into your inner consciousness. If you can find time and space at home to establish a regular meditation routine, all the better.

What To Wear


Likewise, it's not important what you wear, as long as you're comfortable and not constricted when you sit down. If you're at work, overalls or a pin-striped suit and bowler hat are equally good. Meditation is for everyone, so don't be put off by images of spiritual masters with long beards and floating robes.


Classic Postures


Here are some of the classic seated meditation postures that have been used by generations of yogis:


Top Tip

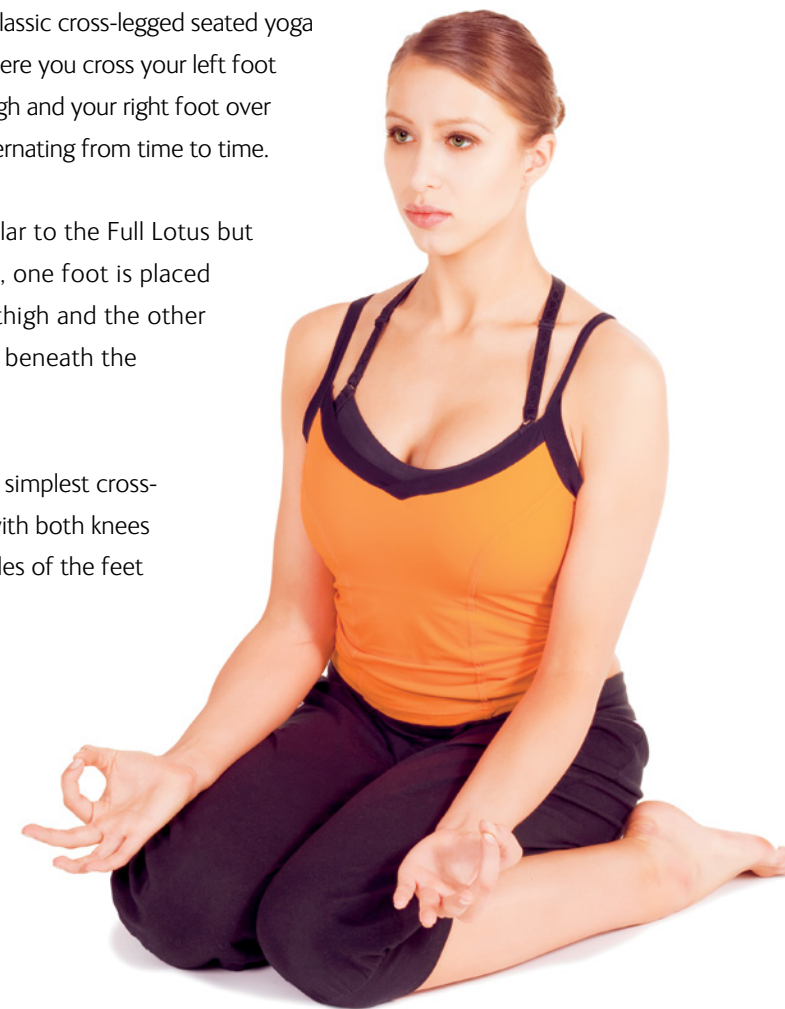
Meditation is for everyone, not just spiritual gurus. Try out a few different styles and find out what works best for you. Not all meditations are the same.

 **Full Lotus:** The classic cross-legged seated yoga position, this is where you cross your left foot over your right thigh and your right foot over your left thigh, alternating from time to time.

 **Half Lotus:** Similar to the Full Lotus but easier to execute, one foot is placed on the opposite thigh and the other foot on the floor beneath the opposite thigh.

 **Tailor Pose:** The simplest cross-legged position, with both knees on the ground, soles of the feet together.

 **Hero Pose:** This is a kneeling position (see right) where the buttocks rest either on the ground or on a block between your feet.



Hand Gestures

Some meditations require the use of mudras, or hand gestures, which carry special significance. Each mudra (there are dozens of them) has a meaning. The mudra is believed to enhance the meditation experience and to reinforce key messages.



MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

There are many different styles and types of meditation. Some focus on specific objects or sounds, or advanced breathing techniques, others involve holding more challenging physical positions. It can be helpful to explore this variety. Experience some of the options for yourself so you can find the one that suits you best. Personal preference is always the best gauge; no one technique is better than the other.

Types of Meditation

Given the wide range of benefits, it is little wonder that there are stacks of meditations out there, all with the goal of bringing you inner balance and harmony. None of these meditations is superior to any other, though some may be more popular, or more widely known, and others may have been around for longer. Typically, but not always, most meditations will start with some sort of breathing exercise, or observance. In all cases, the meditation experience is meant to invoke feelings of peace and calm, relaxation, clarity of thinking, vitality, a greater sense of perspective and renewed vigour.



Mindfulness Meditation

This popular form of meditation, which also encompasses many other types of meditation exercise, means being present in the here and now. The aim of this exercise is simply to pay attention, to be mindful, which in turn switches the mind's attention away from other distracting thoughts, such as events in the past or worries about the future. Mindfulness meditation is about simply being.

Top Tip

There is no right or wrong way to meditate, which is great news for beginners. It means you can never go wrong. You're taking time for yourself, to calm and balance your inner you. Go with the flow.

Breath Counting Meditation

Counting breaths can be a very effective way to quieten the mind for some people. It is also a good exercise for beginners, as there are no other spiritual or yogic connotations associated with it, plus it's very simple. Breaths are silently counted up to ten to prevent the mind from drifting too far, while focus and awareness is also centred on the actual process of breathing. If you lose count, then simply start again from one.

Body Scan Meditation

This form of meditation involves scanning through the whole body to still the mind and raise awareness of the physical condition. After observing the breath, the focus turns to one tip of



the body, such as the left foot, and then proceeds through the body, from the tip of the toe to the top of the head. The focus on each single part of the body also brings a sense of rest to the mind, especially while concentrating on all of the different parts of the head.

Mantra Meditation

In this meditation, a sound or word or phrase is chanted and repeated either out loud or in silence. The mantra could be a modern word, such as a positive affirmation to encourage personal growth and development, or an ancient Sanskrit phrase. The mantra 'Om' is often used in yoga, as it delivers a powerful vibrational effect on the practitioner and all around. In this case, the sound and its vibration become the object focused on during the meditation.

Top Tip

You've always got time on your side. It's great if you can meditate for long periods, but just taking a couple of minutes of quiet time can really help to recharge your batteries.

Transcendental Meditation

This type of meditation involves quietening the mind through the use of a simple word repeated over and over again inside the head, in silence. Ideally practised for 20 minutes twice a day, it is a simple, natural and effortless procedure performed whilst sitting comfortably with eyes closed. Transcendental meditation allows your mind to settle beyond your thoughts



into the source of those thoughts, a place of pure awareness, also known as transcendental consciousness, or the unified field, where you can experience your innermost self.

Trataka Meditation

A simple but powerful exercise in concentration, *trataka* means 'to gaze steadily at a fixed point'. During this meditation, the practitioner gazes upon a small object (such as a candle flame or a tiny black dot, both of which are commonly used), tuning in to any thoughts and feelings as they arise, and then letting them go. After a time, the mind becomes completely absorbed in the object, to the point that it may be seen clearly when the eyes are eventually closed.

Candle Meditation

This is performed while gazing at a candle flame, similar in some ways to *trataka* meditation. It is a good choice for beginners, who may find it easier to let go of their thoughts whilst concentrating open-eyed on a flickering external flame, rather than tuning in to a mantra inside their head. The gentle flicker of the flame can lead to a deeply relaxed meditative state in a fairly short time, soothing mind chatter and bringing a deep sense of peace and wellbeing.

Top Tip

Don't think of meditation as a selfish pursuit. Sometimes it can help to think how the exercise will ultimately benefit those around you, if it is making you calmer, more refreshed, more balanced, with greater energy levels.



Guided Imagery Meditation

Also referred to as 'guided visualization', this meditation is popular with beginners for its simplicity and ability to engage the mind, leading it away from the usual thought processes. It involves listening to a guide as they take you through a series of relaxing visualizations. These 'inner journeys' can use very vivid imagery and can often be tailored

to specific goals, such as helping you relax, or boosting confidence and self-esteem.

Five Senses Meditation

This meditation involves a brief relaxation before tapping into the five senses, through the sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin). Meditating on these five senses can help to bring greater focus and awareness of sensory experience, enhancing your inner feelings of calm and vitality. The meditation usually involves observing and using all of the senses, one after the other, through a combination of exercises, such as recalling or picturing visual objects, or concentrating hard on a sound or smell.



BREATHING EXERCISES

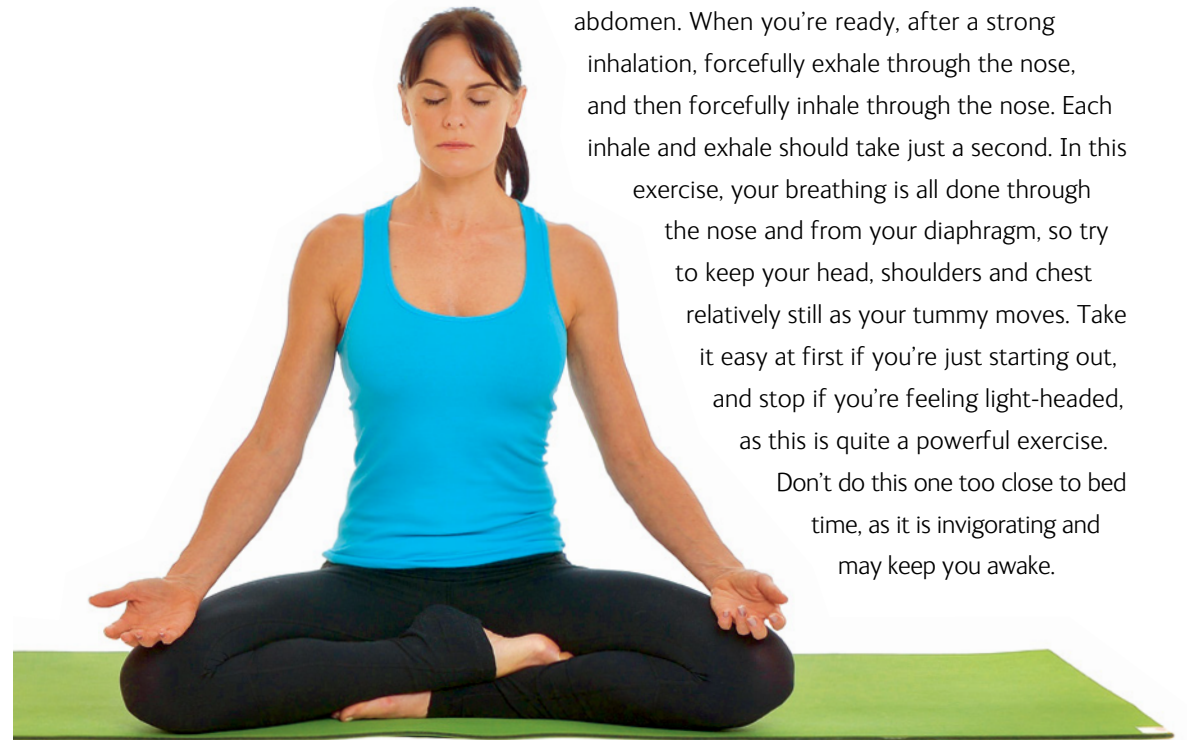
Try to remember that pranayama is so much more than breathing. Become more conscious of what you are doing. You are breathing with great awareness to invite the flow of prana, the force of life itself, deep into your whole being. There are many breathing exercises, some better known than others. Some may be found in beginner yoga groups, although others may be the preserve of more experienced practitioners. To fully learn and appreciate these techniques, it is always best to seek a trained instructor.

Bellows Breath (Bhastrika)

This is one of the most famous yogic breathing exercises. It's ideal if you're feeling sluggish and want to blow away the cobwebs. To get started, take a comfortable seated position.

Take a few full breaths that go deep into your abdomen. When you're ready, after a strong inhalation, forcefully exhale through the nose, and then forcefully inhale through the nose. Each inhale and exhale should take just a second. In this exercise, your breathing is all done through the nose and from your diaphragm, so try to keep your head, shoulders and chest relatively still as your tummy moves. Take it easy at first if you're just starting out, and stop if you're feeling light-headed, as this is quite a powerful exercise.

Don't do this one too close to bed time, as it is invigorating and may keep you awake.



Equal Breath (Sama Vritti)

This is a great exercise if you're looking to calm down or find a little peace. Take a comfortable seated position and close your eyes. At first, simply observe your breath as it is, your inhalation and exhalation, the rise and fall of the chest, and the various sensations as the air moves in and out through the nose. Then inhale slowly for the count of four, then do the same while you exhale. The inhalation and the exhalation should last for the same amount of time. You can continue this gentle breathing exercise for as long as you wish, or you might want to increase (or decrease) the number you count to as you breathe in and out.

Alternate Nostril Breathing (Anuloma Viloma)

This breathing exercise alternates between the nostrils. The right nostril breath links to the positive nadi (or 'energy channel' if you like), called Pingala, and activates the left side of the brain; the left nostril breath links to the mirroring nadi (Ida) and activates the right side of the brain. Sit comfortably. Inhale through the left nostril, closing the right nostril with your thumb. Hold briefly. Exhale through the right nostril, closing the left nostril with your index finger. Next, inhale through the right nostril, keeping the left one closed. Hold, then exhale through the left nostril, closing off the right. Repeat five times.



Did You Know?

The flow of healing prana, or life-force energy, in and out of the body can induce a wonderful sense of calm, eat away stress, and send your spirits soaring.

Skull Shining (Kapalabhati)

Great for bringing balance to your life and for detoxification, this rather forceful exercise may even give you a healthier, more vibrant glow (the Sanskrit phrase translates as 'shining forehead'). To get started, settle in a comfortable seated position..

Breathe in deeply through the nose. As you exhale sharply through the nose, pull your stomach in, bringing your navel

back towards your spine as much as you comfortably can. You can feel your abdominal muscles contract by placing your right hand on your stomach. Sustain this passive



inhale and forceful exhale rhythm for about 20 breaths. Take a short break of normal breaths before starting again and performing another two rounds.

Cooling Breath (Shitali)

A breath to cool the body, this one is good if you're feeling over-heated or trying to contain anger. Sit comfortably, then stick out your tongue a little way, and curl the sides in and up, to form a tube. The end of the tongue is just outside the mouth. Inhale through the 'tube', feeling the cooling effect as you do so, then exhale through the nose. Repeat five times.

Hissing Breath (Sitkari)

This is another exercise that is good for cooling you down if you're feeling over-heated, or to help your focus. In this exercise, the breath makes a hissing sound, hence the name. Sit comfortably with a straight spine. With your mouth open, touch the hard ridge behind your teeth with your tongue. Then, if possible, close the top and bottom teeth together. Inhale through the mouth (and closed teeth) to make the hissing noise. Exhale immediately after, slowly and steadily, through the nose. Repeat up to five times.

Victorious Breath (Ujjayi)

This noisy breath, also known as 'ocean breath' (it creates an ocean-like sound), can have a relaxing effect on the body and can be useful for conditions such as insomnia. Commonly used in Vinyasa or more flowing styles of yoga, it can also have a warming or heating effect on the body, and may be useful for coughs and fevers.

To begin, simply inhale and exhale through the mouth, deeply. Starting with the exhalation, begin to (very slightly) constrict the passage of air at the back of the throat. Then do the same on the inhalation (together, this should sound something like the ebb and flow of the ocean). Next, keeping the same breathing going, close the mouth and start to breathe through the nose instead; you should still hear the same loud breathing noise. Repeat five times, and work up to more after you have a little experience.

Top Tip

There are dozens of breathing exercises and all manner of variations of seating postures, hand gestures and mantras. Experiment with them, but, most importantly, find one that works for you.

Lion's Breath (Simhasana)

This is a great one for children, but for adults it can also be a good tension buster, stretching out the jaw and tongue during the forceful exhalation. To get the full lion effect, begin by kneeling, resting on your feet. Inhale through the nose. As you exhale, open the mouth wide, poke your tongue out and make a loud 'ha' sound, forcefully and very audibly. Return to a neutral expression as you inhale again. Repeat five times. For the detailed pose, see page 74 of the book.

Humming Bee Breath (Brahmari)

Start this exercise in a comfortable seated position, with the body relaxed and the spine straight. Close your ears with your index fingers, and inhale through both nostrils. Then, start to create a humming sound as you exhale. The inhalation should be deep and strong, and the exhalation slow, steady and continuous, while the noise is made. After a while, you can also try the same with the inhalation, although this is a harder practice to master for newcomers.

