

The Art of Meditation
Class 1: Introduction to the course

When considering the purpose and benefits of meditation, most people will say it is a method to relax, to counter stress. That is true ... but that is the Western way of looking at meditation; whereas in the East the goal is to gain enlightenment. What is enlightenment? Enlightenment is to see the true nature of the world ... one aspect of which is to see soul - our inner self - as our inner God (God is not external). In the state of enlightenment we are in union with the true nature of ourselves.

Not surprisingly there are many types of meditation, with differing techniques. Most involve concentration on either our breath or body parts, or on exercises ... note that yoga asanas (postures) *are* a meditation. Some methods use trinkets like crystals or candles and diversions like incense or music. Others use chanting and the repetition of mantras. Some meditations are of a religious nature - in fact, most religions use meditation in some form or another ... as prayer, for instance.

To me meditation is a secular process ... namely that of stilling or emptying the mind. This is a difficult undertaking. I would say for most of us it is a journey, rather than a destination; those who achieve it we call masters, gurus or saints. Incidentally, some say it is impossible to still the mind; yet, in my meditation that is what I strive for ... I believe it is a good practice to achieve a relaxed disposition.

The issue with that higher goal - enlightenment - is that it's a long-term process; in fact it is a way of life that goes on for the rest of our life. One does not easily gain enlightenment by meditation alone; enlightenment is the result of conducting life in a manner that involves the principles of living ethically, with spiritual awareness. But - again - it is what I strive for in my meditation ... as well as in my daily life.

This definition of meditation - to empty the mind - denotes it to be a Zen practice. In Zen the world, and our lives - both material and spiritual - are reduced to the bare minimum, the essence of what is and what we are. There are no external trappings, no rituals, no 'holy' books, no embellishments. It is the same with my meditation ... no trinkets, no music, no diversions - just simple, true meditation.

There are three stages in meditation: 1) when we begin to meditate, our mind usually is wildly dashing all over the place (that is most likely why you are here); 2) we strive to tame the mind with using a mantra and with (initially) observing our breath (as we progress, the breath will again be automatic and un-observed); 3) finally we advance toward true meditation, where the mind observes stillness.

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Let me also mention movement meditation: In many monasteries monks engage in a walking meditation. They'll walk from one end of the room to the other and back, in a quiet, measured manner ... probably accompanied by chanting and/or praying; you can observe Rad doing movement meditations as part of his Kung Fu training. Anyway, you can meditate when washing the dishes or while walking to the shops.

But wait, there's more: We can also engage in the opposite of movement meditation ... where we do nothing, literally nothing; maybe as we're waiting at the bus stop, or we may just sit on the porch and look at the sunset. I am very much in favour of these meditations ... to complement my formal meditation practice, where I have my eyes closed and sit straight upright. What's important with these informal meditations - as ever - is that we strive not to think as we engage in them.

Let's talk about this sitting upright thing. It's true to say this is not a necessary requirement - we can meditate in any position that suits us. But here's the problem: It's of great importance for true meditation that our body is relaxed and motionless, only then can we be oblivious to the body ... which is necessary to truly meditate. Thus it is against the principles of true meditation to be conscious of the body or body parts or - even worse - to keep changing the body position to be comfortable. This is where yoga comes into the equation. Yoga exercises stem from the need to render the body motionless and to lose awareness of the body during meditation. And that is where the (half-) lotus pose comes into its own: The position enables us to achieve what is required ... oblivion of our body. In the half-lotus pose I can lock my body into position without having to move for those twenty minutes. If you're not clear on which exercises complement the half-lotus pose, check out ZEN-flex.

So, it's up to you ... depending on what you are comfortable with or can tolerate and where you want your meditation to take you, you can sit on a chair or lean against the wall - even lie on your back. But I would like to think that throughout this course you'll practise to sit cross-legged, with a straight back and erect spine. It should be your goal to achieve this by the third or fourth week, at the latest.

Obviously with this meditation course there is a strong 'home-work' component, please make time every morning to meditate; in the beginning probably only for five or ten minutes, but toward the end of the course for the full twenty minutes ... or indeed longer (and indeed also in the evening). Use your mantra (any word/phrase you are comfortable with) ... or use Ohm, as you breathe out tension and anxiety. Breathe in goodness - and as you breathe in, perfect your position again, stretch your torso up, straighten your spine; do it every time, make it a habit which - after a while - you shall lose awareness of. Do not engage with your thoughts ... let them pass. Be in the moment - don't dwell on the past, don't think of the future. Strive to 'just be', here and now. Try not to think ... still your mind.

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