

TOOLS FOR MENTAL FITNESS

A SHORT GUIDE TO MEDITATION (VERSION 3.2)

✧ Are you mentally fit? ✧

Why meditate? Because your mind is not as fit as it could and should be. You wouldn't run a marathon without first training your body. Yet you try to complete the mental marathon that is college or your career without training your mind. You might be getting your work done, but you could do better work with less cognitive strain and more enjoyment during the process.

INTRODUCTION

Physical fitness has caught on in recent years. But how's your *mental* fitness? Do you experience high levels of stress? Do you find yourself getting easily distracted? Do you overreact to little things? Do you procrastinate? These are signs of low mental fitness and all can be addressed through certain meditation techniques. More generally, research has found that meditation is associated with improved concentration, improved functioning of the immune system, decreased stress, greater levels of psychological well-being, and a greater ability to control anger and other negative emotional patterns. In other words, the mental fitness that comes with meditation has the potential to greatly improve the quality of your life if you give it the chance. My goal for writing this guide is to introduce you to the fundamentals of meditation so that you can begin to use it today to lead a more productive, enjoyable, and fulfilling life.

MEDITATION: WHAT?

The term "meditation" unfortunately carries a lot of baggage that scares some people away. Many religious traditions utilize some form of meditation practice, but this doesn't make it inherently religious. What's religious about paying attention to your breath? You can think of meditation as mental exercise. Just as there are many different forms of physical exercise (e.g., resistance training, Pilates, MovNat) that have different methods aimed at reaching different goals, there are different forms of meditation designed to reach different goals. The meditation practice described here might more appropriately be called *attention training* and is designed to strengthen the mind and undo harmful thought patterns. It does so through the simple practice of repeatedly returning one's attention to the breath. This non-religious form of meditation is the one that has been most often studied in scientific research.

MEDITATION: HOW?

I will now go into some detail on the meditation practice. Afterwards, I will provide a list that summarizes the main steps in the process so that you can begin meditating yourself. In order to meditate, find a comfortable place to sit. (It's helpful if the chosen place is quiet, but not necessary.) Sit with good posture, allowing a natural curve in your spine, and with your hands resting lightly on your lap. Sitting still is important in that mental activity often mirrors physical movement, but it is fine when first beginning to meditate if you need to move or adjust your posture—simply do so in a calm, intentional, and controlled manner. That is, notice the impulse to move and instead of mindlessly acting in response, you can calmly and intentionally adjust as needed.

Now take a moment to notice what's in your awareness. You might be aware of different aspects of the room you're in; of the sound of air conditioning; of occasional thoughts; of your breath. Now direct your attention towards your breath. Notice that this doesn't mean the rest of your world suddenly disappears. Your attention should be lightly resting on your breath so that you still have a background awareness of the room and its sounds. When paying attention to your breath, you can focus on how it *feels* as air enters and leaves your nose, your throat, or your stomach as it expands and contracts (you can choose to focus on whichever is most comfortable). Simply notice the changing sensations as your breath comes in and goes out. When you find other thoughts, emotions,

or physical sensations entering your awareness, notice them and gently let them go to return to your breath, allowing the distractions to pass on their own. This is basically the meditation practice: Lightly watch your breath, notice distractions and let them pass on their own, return attention to the breath. Repeat again and again.

You will find, especially in the beginning, that your mind is a very busy place, and it's quite easy to forget about your breath amidst the many thoughts. This is natural and not a problem. Your task is to notice (as soon as you can) when your mind wanders, let the distraction pass, and then gently return your attention to your breath. Notice the thoughts, emotions, and sensations when they come in and let them pass, without adding to them, engaging, or following them. In a given meditation session, you will likely need to let go of distractions and return to your breath many times, and this is fine. This act of returning your attention to your breath is what strengthens your attention. It's like one more repetition at the gym.

THE KEY: LETTING GO

Notice that when distractions arise, the goal is to let them go and return to the breath. My research has led me to the conclusion that *letting go* is one of the most important components of the meditation process. Let's practice letting go: Bring a random object to mind such as a rock. Picture a rock and think to yourself, "rock, rock, rock, rock..." Now stop trying to think rock and just watch what happens. Eventually, once you have stopped fueling the image by intentionally thinking

“rock,” the image and associated thoughts will naturally dissipate. Did you hear that? The thoughts will naturally pass and disappear! This may not be a big realization for you, but it’s something that you’ll want to remember during meditation and when trying to apply the skills you learn from meditation to your daily activities.

We tend to respond to our thoughts as if they were solid entities that required some sort of response. Thus, if we find ourselves thinking “What if I don’t finish this project on time?” we feel the need to respond to this question. This then results in a long internal narrative in which we try to convince ourselves that we will finish the project on time, or that it won’t be so bad if we don’t, etc. But the point is this: random thoughts will inevitably arise and we are *not* trying to forcibly stop them. We do *not*, however, need to respond to and build upon these random thoughts. Imagine thinking “What if I don’t finish this project on time?” and then allowing this thought to just pass on its own without commentary. It isn’t easy, but ultimately this thought is the same as the “rock” thought in that it too will pass if allowed to.

Our thoughts drive many of our harmful mental habits. Stress, for example, is fueled by thoughts. If we can let go of the thoughts, the stress has no fuel and will eventually die out. This might make perfect sense to you, but letting go of thoughts is surprisingly difficult to do when in the heat of a stressful moment. Consider meditation an opportunity to practice letting go of thoughts. The mental stability and strength that results

from repeatedly letting go of thoughts and returning to the breath will then make it easier for you to let go of thoughts in your daily life when it counts the most. This is not to say that we should let go of all thoughts at all times. The heightened awareness that comes from meditation practice gives us the opportunity to notice thoughts and then decide whether or not to pursue them or let them go. During meditation practice, since any thoughts serve to distract you from the breath, all thoughts are treated in the same manner: notice them and let them go.

LABELING “THINKING”

It is completely normal for random thoughts to occur even while your attention is resting on your breath. Some thoughts are more difficult than others to let go of. Most difficult are the mental stories we get caught up in. Such stories typically mean that we have become distracted and our attention has been directed towards weaving some random story together about what we did or should have done, what we’d like to be doing, what we plan to do in the future, etc. When you catch yourself becoming caught up in such stories, it can be helpful to label this mental activity with the word “thinking.” Saying “thinking” to yourself interrupts the mental story and gives you some distance from the thought so that you can return to your breath. When labeling “thinking,” do so in a non-judgmental and accepting manner. You shouldn’t say “thinking” to yourself in an angry or disappointed tone. Instead, it should be like looking through a photo album and seeing an old friend. You say to yourself, “Oh,

look - there's 'thinking!', and then you move on. Our thoughts aren't flies to be mindlessly swatted at. They are fascinating products of the brain that deserve our genuine acknowledgement. But then, once you have labeled the mental activity as "thinking," you can let all of these thoughts go as you return attention to your breath.

Labeling thoughts as "thinking" is a valuable technique but it can become its own source of distraction. If you find yourself obsessing over whether or not to use the label, simply drop the labeling. Labeling is helpful as long as it does not become its own barrier to letting go of thoughts and distractions.

With this general understanding of meditation in mind, see below for other practical details about how to meditate.

ADDITIONAL MEDITATION DETAILS

Meditate every morning. It's best to meditate at the same time every morning if possible. The morning is the best because it prepares your mind for the day to come and it tends to be easier to carve out some time for meditation in the morning before other obligations pop up (even if this means waking up 10-15 minutes early). If you tend to be groggy when waking up, then perhaps you can meditate after washing up, exercising, or whatever other activity you do regularly that wakes you up. Be very clear about exactly when you plan to meditate every day—write it down somewhere. You may also wish to set some sort of reminder in the beginning. Plan to meditate every day with the knowledge that

it's fine if you have to miss a day here and there for some reason. But if you plan on meditating only a few times a week, you'll be quicker to miss those sessions as well and it will take you longer to see the benefits of meditation. You can, of course, meditate more than once in a given day and I encourage you to do so, but if you're only going to meditate once, try to make it in the morning.

Timer. Always set a timer when meditating to ensure that you don't lose track of time and so that you don't need to keep your eye on the clock. Keep the timer out of sight during the meditation. It's a good idea to start meditating for 10 or 15 minutes. After meditating regularly for a week or two, I suggest lengthening your sessions to between 20 and 30 minutes to benefit more from the practice.

Find a comfortable sitting position. Find a place where you can sit comfortably. It is important to sit upright for this meditation, and you can do so in a chair with a back, sitting cross-legged, or with a meditation bench or cushion. If you sit cross-legged, be sure to elevate your bottom at least 5 inches by sitting on cushions, with your legs resting on the ground. This will relieve pressure on your knees and back. It is important to find a comfortable sitting position. If your position hurts after only a short period of time, you may need to find a new one.

Note pad. Sometimes during meditation a brilliant idea hits you or you remember an urgent task that needs completing. Instead of forgetting such thoughts or repeating them to yourself for the remainder of the meditation

in order to not forget them, it's ok to keep a pad of paper (or note-taking app on your phone) nearby. Jot the valuable thought down and then release any residual thoughts to return to the meditation practice.

Hand position. There are many different possible ways to hold your hands during meditation. I suggest simply resting your open hands on your legs. To determine where to put them, allow your upper arm to hang and raise your hands and forearms. Let your hands fall on your lap and allow them to rest here during the meditation.

Eyes. Keep your eyes open during meditation. Gently rest your gaze on some point or object *below* eye level, about 5 - 6 feet in front of you. Rest your eyes lightly on this point, allowing your field of vision to expand around it. This is often referred to as a “soft gaze.”

Watching the breath. Rest your attention on the physical sensations associated with your breath as it goes in and out. Let it move naturally, without trying to change its rate yourself. The goal is to simply pay attention to the movement of the breath and how you feel that movement in your body (e.g., the expansion and contraction of the stomach, or the breath entering and exiting your nose).

Transitioning from meditation to other activities. You want to bring any meditative composure resulting from your meditation into your next activity and the rest of the day if possible. When your alarm alerts you that the meditation is over, don't just jump up and mindlessly immerse yourself in the next task.

Notice your mental state and then calmly and intentionally begin the next activity.

Challenges that arise during meditation.

Various challenges will arise during your meditation practice. Think of these as additional opportunities to strengthen your mind. They may entail unpleasant thoughts, desires to stop meditating, and even itches. Regardless of the problem, the solution is always the same. Notice the experience in an open and non-judgmental way, let go of it, and return to your breath. Some distractions may linger longer than others, but eventually they will dissipate. For example, an itch can be very uncomfortable, but if you leave it alone long enough, without adding to it with extra thoughts about its discomfort, the itch will disappear. This type of practice is very important because it prepares you for dealing with other uncomfortable situations in your daily life, teaching you to be aware of them without immediately acting on impulses. At first, you may only be able to sit with the itch for 20 seconds (at which point, it's alright to calmly scratch it if you must), but with practice you'll develop a higher tolerance for these types of “uncomfortable” stimuli. One of the most satisfying experiences is to watch an itch vanish on its own without scratching it. I encourage you to give it a try.

Another challenge during meditation can be fatigue. If you find yourself falling asleep during meditation, first make sure your eyes are open during the practice (it's easy for them to close without your noticing it). If they are still open, you might try raising your gaze. If this isn't enough, stand up for a little while

and continue to meditate. This should help you stay awake, though you should also stand with your hands resting on something such as a chair, to balance yourself in case you nod off again. You can then return to your seated position once some energy has returned, or you might prefer to remain standing for the remainder of the session. Fatigue is a common obstacle to meditation and the important thing is that you not allow fatigue to prevent you from meditating. If you decide not to meditate when tired, you'll find yourself tired every time you begin to meditate. Meditate even when tired and over time your fatigue during meditation will lessen.

Finally, another tricky obstacle is our intellectual side that tries to figure out what we should or should not be doing during meditation. It's common to have a running commentary on how the meditation session is going, what we should be doing differently, etc. This commentary should be treated like all other thoughts: notice the thoughts, label them as "thinking" and let them go, and return to the breath. After applying this technique, your clever mind will probably come across some other objection or concern and begin thinking "but what if..."—again, let go of this thought as well and return to your breath. "Notice the thought, let it go, return to the breath" is really all you need to remember. Regardless of the thought's content—even if the thought claims to be helpful to your meditation—notice it, let it go, and return to the breath.

Mini meditations. Imagine yourself at work, it's the middle of the day, and you can't concentrate (despite having meditated in the morning). In this situation, it's a good idea to try letting go of any distracting or destructive thoughts, and you might do so with the help of the "thinking" label. If this fails to put you back on track, you can do a short, mini meditation on your breath. Sometimes as little as 5 minutes of meditation is all that's needed to give you a quick boost in concentration and productivity. If you find yourself wasting time, 5 to 10 minutes of meditation is well worth the gains in productivity that will likely result. Such short meditations will be most effective and helpful if you have a longer daily meditation practice as well.

Summary of meditation steps:

1. Notice what's currently in your awareness (e.g., your external surroundings and internal experiences)
2. Lightly direct your attention towards the sensations of breathing (you still have a background awareness of your surroundings)
3. Notice any distractions and let them go (either by just allowing them to pass on their own or by helping the letting go process by labeling them "thinking")
4. Return your attention to the sensations of breathing
5. Repeat #3 and #4 again and again

FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T MEDITATE

Meditation sounds like an easy process, but it's often surprisingly difficult. Many are disturbed to find that their mind wanders much more than they were aware. The good news is that this is normal! Over time, it will become easier and easier to notice when your mind has wandered so that you can let the distractions go and return to your breath. Even if you spend the whole meditation with your mind wandering, you'll still benefit from the meditation. There's no such thing as a "good" or "bad" meditation—any time spent meditating with the intent to return to your breath (regardless of your success with this) will move you in the right direction, because your mind still gets the chance to work through things and at least begin to settle down. Sometimes the waterfall of distracting thoughts is the mind's way of venting before it settles. Regardless of the quality of your meditation, it will become increasingly easier to notice the thoughts and emotions you're experiencing in your daily activities as the meditation strengthens your ability to pay attention. One of the key goals of meditation is to simply become more familiar with your mind. We've spent most of our lives ignoring what happens in our mind.

Doing Nothing

We have been socialized to believe that we should always be doing something. How often do you just sit somewhere, and notice what it's like to be there, in that moment, without thinking something through, or watching TV? Meditation is a valuable technique for the many reasons outlined above, but it too is another thing to do. Allow yourself to sometimes just be there, wherever you are. Let thoughts pass and return to the experience of being in that moment. At first it might feel strange, as if you are wasting time, but you will quickly realize that this is not the case. Go ahead and give it a try—I give you permission to just do nothing.

It's now time to become familiar with it so that we can ultimately use our minds in a more beneficial manner.

Many people tell me that they've given meditation a try but just "can't do it." What specifically can't you do? You can't make your mind blank? Well, good news—a blank mind is not the goal. Thoughts will always be there

—sometimes more, and sometimes less. The important thing is that you learn to let them come and go, without allowing them to pull you away from your breath (or other daily tasks). Perhaps you can't get your mind to quiet down? A settled mind is a *long-term* goal, but not expected right away. That's why you need to meditate in the first place!

"Meditation" does not mean sitting still while your mind is settled—this is the goal, not the path. "Meditation" means working and becoming familiar with the current state of your mind—whatever it is—in the manner described in this document. As long as you have the intention to notice when your mind has wandered and to return to the breath, you ARE meditating, and thus you CAN do it, regardless of how well you think it went. Even if you spend the entire session caught up in one distracting story after another, if your intention to return to the breath is there, it will become easier with

practice. So stop evaluating your meditation sessions and just do it! Trust me, you'll start seeing the benefits after a while if you give the meditation process a chance. Think about how many years you have spent building up these unproductive and harmful mental habits—it's no surprise that it might take a little while to see significant changes in them.

MINDFULNESS: APPLYING MEDITATION TO LIFE

Meditating on the breath is like batting practice—it strengthens your attention and ability to let go of thoughts so that you can then direct these towards your ongoing experience during daily activities. One way to think about it is that once your meditation session ends, your task is to “meditate” on whatever it is you're doing. If you're reading, this is your new point of focus (as opposed to your breath) and whenever you notice your attention straying, notice it and let it go (labeling it “thinking” if helpful), and return to your reading. This is the path to becoming increasingly present and in control of what you are doing with your mind. But this is not to say that you shouldn't have different thoughts running through your head. They will inevitably be there now and then. Mindfulness is about becoming aware (and appreciative) of your thoughts and other distractions, and choosing whether to follow them or return to the task at hand. Our thoughts typically hijack our experiences and pull us away from what we're doing without our permission. Mindfulness gives you a choice to make: “Do I follow this thought to see where it leads me or return to the task at

hand?” Either choice is fine. The important point is that it's you, not the thought, making the choice.

Mindfulness can be defined in different ways, but one basic definition is intentionally holding something in mind without becoming distracted and wandering away. Thus, you might choose to focus on thoughts related to some project or new idea. Or you might deliberately bring some past action to mind to reflect on what went well or what you might change in the future (note that this is different from the unintentional, ruminative processes in which we obsess over some past action in an entirely unproductive manner). Or, you might simply wish to hold in mind your ongoing experience as it changes from one moment to the next (this is how mindfulness is typically defined, but don't dismiss the other applications just mentioned). So many rich moments in the present are lost because we're caught up thinking about other things. Mindfulness brings greater awareness and mental control to both our most enjoyable moments and to routine activities (e.g., work, chores), making it easier to fully experience and appreciate each moment. This means that it's no longer necessary to reach for our phones for entertainment during our “dull” moments. Over time you'll notice the basic contentment that can be found in even the most mundane activities. The next time you notice yourself reaching for your phone when bored, pause and notice what's going on in your mind at the time. Maybe the phone isn't needed.

As you gain more experience with meditation practice and develop mental stability, directing your attention towards things like habitual emotional patterns will bring you insights into their causes. For example, imagine a man getting inappropriately angry whenever people talk about some particular topic. Where did this reaction come from? By trying to pay attention to what the mind is doing during those emotional episodes, this person might over time realize that when such topics are brought up, he flashes back to a prior negative experience he had and is reacting to that past experience in the present moment. Negative patterns such as these lose their hold on you once you start to understand exactly where they're coming from.

CONCLUSION

If asked why we work so hard, most people would likely respond that it's to bring happiness to our own lives and to those we love. This makes the assumption that happiness comes from external conditions (e.g., the financial stability that comes from hard work). It is important that basic needs for food and shelter are met, but beyond this well-being comes from the mind. Meditation provides us with a tool for examining our habitual mental processes so that we can let go of those that get in the way of our productivity and well-being. Meditation may not change the external circumstances in which we find ourselves (e.g., a high-pressure job, a "bad" boss), but it will definitely change the way in which we internally react to them. Ultimately, our success and happiness

depends on how we relate and respond to our world, but how many people actively work at improving this?

We are all pressed for time and we all find it difficult to start new routines like meditation. But think of all of the people who have convinced themselves that it's worth it and will now never go back—do you really want to miss out on this? To start, you just need to get in the habit of meditating daily and paying attention to where your mind is during the day. When beginning a meditation routine, you can begin with 10 or 15 minutes of meditation a day. I know you're busy, but we're just talking about 10 minutes. Figure out a time to do it every morning, maybe set some sort of a reminder, and do it.

NEXT STEPS

This document is not a comprehensive explanation of meditation, but rather is intended to be a quick and easy introduction to its practice. To learn more about meditation and related practices, see the suggested reading list on the following page. In addition, I highly recommend looking into local meditation centers and finding a meditation teacher to guide you through the inevitable challenges that come with getting to know your mind.

I hope you found this document to be informative and useful. Feel free to send it to others who might also be interested. Please contact me with any questions at jarmanms@vmi.edu. Good luck incorporating the meditation practice and principles into your life!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Jarman is a psychology professor at the Virginia Military Institute. His research integrates meditation with topics such as problem solving, leadership, entrepreneurship, and social change.

Meditation Book Recommendations:

- *Mindfulness in Plain English* (2002), Bhante Henepola Gunaratana
- *Turning the Mind into an Ally* (2003), Sakyong Mipham
- *When Things Fall Apart* (2007), Pema Chodron
- *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (2009), Chogyam Trungpa
- *Running with the Mind of Meditation* (2012), Sakyong Mipham
(a wonderful explanation of applying meditation to exercise)
- *The Healing Power of the Breath* (2012), Richard Brown & Patricia Gerbarg
(these research-based breathing techniques are excellent complementary practices to do in addition to your meditation)