A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MEDITATION

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I think you should give meditation a serious try.

Or multiple tries. Actually, I think you should keep playing around with it till it becomes one of those really-hard-to-replace elements in your life that’s up there with eating, sleeping, touch, and sunshine.

No matter how awesome you are now, odds are that meditating will make you exponentially more awesome.

I know, I know. You’ve been hearing about how great it - and this weird related thing called mindfulness - is for years now, right?

Not quite sold?

Maybe you’re not the “meditating type”, or you’d really like to do it, but you think you’re temperamentally unsuited because of how your mind works.

I’d like to suggest that a slightly different mindset, playing around with several approaches, and a bit of perseverance might just make all the difference.

I’m about to roll out the hard sell. But buying costs you nothing, and just might revolutionize your life.

—I’m Kind Of A Superhero

Meditation keeps making me more awesome.

Not only has it brought an amazing about of spaciousness and clarity to my thinking, but it’s made me happier, more productive, and more focused.

When hard situations crop up in my life, I’m often told that I’m handling them in an unusually sane manner. “You’re being really mature about this,” and, “I’d be
totally falling apart in your shoes,” are some of the things friends and acquaintances have told me in the last year as my life has gotten rocky.

It’s been a crazy time for me, with the death of my father, the surprise ending of a romantic relationship, and my own near death and the loss of most of my worldly possessions in a flash flood.

But even as life seemed to want to stomp me down, I’ve been taking the experiences in relative stride while maintaining the equilibrium to react in a rational and proactive manner.

Part it it may be temperament, but I honestly feel that my temperament has been, in a large way, forged by meditation and mindfulness training.

My first attempts to meditate started 13 years ago after I read Jon Kabat-Zinn’s, “Wherever you go, there you are,” in college.

I gave meditation a try, and my first reaction was that I just couldn’t do it. Not only did my mind refuse to quiet down, but my ego seemed to hate the idea that something worthwhile could be found when the incessant voice in my head stopped its droning. My first attempts to quiet my mind actually caused me to feel anxious and stressed out.

But I kept returning to it again and again, and eventually I started to find peace amidst the stillness, and, inexplicably, that there was a deep undercurrent of joy waiting beyond the realm of conscious thought, if only I would clear my mind.

Over the years, my practice of meditation has been intermittent. I’d go months with daily meditation, and life would be good. But inevitably, something would disrupt my routine and I’d let it fall to the wayside. On several occasions, my life has just been so good that I felt like I could let meditation slide for awhile.

In every case, my life has been degraded by the absence of meditation, although I often take awhile to realize this. When I’m not practicing regularly, my mind tends to focus less on possibilities and more on the most depressing aspects of my
current situation. I laugh less, my focuses is poorer, and inspiration seems to knock less often.

Whenever I return to it, it’s like I’ve forgotten that I have super powers. Everything we do is filtered through the brain, so if it’s working just a little bit better, our whole life gets better.

Some of the meditation benefits I’ve noticed:

**Some Of The Meditation Benefits I’ve Noticed:**

- Better memory
- Steadier emotional states
- Better physical performance
- More prone to happiness
- Easier to learn anything
- More creativity
- Improvements in concentration
- More productivity.
- It’s easier to see the possibilities in any situation instead of focusing on the sometimes depressing current reality.

**If You’re Not The Meditating Type**

Sometimes, high off an awesome meditation session, I’ll tell people of my love for meditation and its benefits and hear in return that they don’t meditate because they see themselves at failures at it, or temperamentally unsuited for the pursuit. Their mind wanders, or perhaps more accurately, it bounces around like an insane monkey, jumping from emotionally-charged subject to emotionally charged subject.
Meditation only serves to bring into focus just how crazy and out of control, their thinking is, which makes them feel helpless. So they go on with their life and ignore the whole meditation idea.

But, as is the case with many things, a slightly different way of looking at the subject can make all the difference.

What I like most about meditation is that it can begin and end with a single breath, a single moment, a single point of clarity and peace amidst even the most hectic of lives. If you can find that peace, even for just a moment, you have succeeded. And you can build on that success whenever you’re ready.

You may have grandiose visions of meditation being about sitting in stillness for hours or reaching states of enlightenment, but often the reality is more about getting in your reps than it is about achieving some lofty end goal.

The very act of bringing your mind back from its fixation on the past or future and into the present moment is really what matters. If your mind wanders again a few moments later, that’s fine.

If you were training to hold 100 lbs over your head for 30 minutes and couldn’t currently do it, would you beat yourself up every day because you could only hold the weight up for 10 seconds? Would you stop trying to hold the weight up because you weren’t at the 30-minute mark?

No. You’d realize that in order to eventually hit your goal, which is arbitrary, you have to keep doing reps of throwing the weight overhead and holding it there. If you keep doing this, ten seconds becomes one minute over time, and one minute builds to two.

It’s the same with meditation. The very act of disciplining yourself to sit down, set a timer, and meditate for a few minutes is really the important thing. Your mind will wander, and that’s fine. The “rep,” or the positive, constructive action, comes about when you realize your mind has been wandering and you exert your willpower to bring it back to the present moment.
What I find works best for me is starting off my day with 10 to 20 minutes of meditation, which I’ll talk about later. This sets the stage to make my day as productive and happy as it can me. It also makes it easier to make healthy choices for myself.

But inevitably, living life tends to spin up the emotional wheel, so to speak, and after awhile you may find your mind racing again and your ability to concentrate disintegrating.

Taking a moment to quiet your mind and follow your breath - even for just one breath, or three, or ten - can bring a you back to a more centered mental state. I feel that these mini meditation breaks, spread throughout the day, can reconnect you with your morning meditation practice and the peace and focus that flows from it.

The Voice In Our Head, And What’s Beyond It

We all have a voice in our head. Usually it's a mental projection of what we perceive to be “us”, and it’s usually far more active than we realize.

When you really stop and think about it, how often are you free from mental commentary of one sort or another?

We've lived with this chatter for so long that some people may not even realize that it’s there. But its is, and, for most people, it's almost always going, droning on and on.

That voice has an opinion about almost everything, and it will be happy to share it with you and get you to voice it to others if you let it. It’s worse than the most compulsive, incessant busybody you could imagine, but it’s stuck in your head.

Have you ever stopped to think about who exactly is the “you,” amidst this chatter? Where does that voice come from? Is it really the type of person you want to be?

The voice wants to examine everything and then compare you to it. Bob’s got a better job. George is a scumbag without the values of someone classy like you.
Claire’s got a better golf swing. George has more money.

Some are better than you: they’re happier, they’re healthier. If only you could be like them and achieve what they have.

Some are worse: they’re misguided, and they believe the wrong things. Good thing you’ve found the better path that makes you superior.

And so we buzz through life on what amounts to autopilot, driven by thoughts that do not really belong to us, rarely ever present in the only moment we have - this one. And this one. And this one. We’re buffeted along by the next thought, rampages of emotion, or strong urges.

Because of this constant narration, we rarely see things how they truly are, but instead through a tinted lens which takes away the best joys in life.

How Long Does Your Happiness Last?

I’m sure you’ve had some happy times in your life.

There was that time you received a lot of money, accomplished a long-held goal, or fell in love. They were breaks in the monotony of wanting. You could allow yourself to believe for a time that you’d finally made it.

But after awhile, the newness of those accomplishments faded. Soon you began to look forward to the next thing. The voice in your head tells you’ll be happy, “if only,” you get this one more thing. But there is always the next thing. And that’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with wanting more, but if you’re always putting happiness off till you get the next thing, you’re never really happy.

Because the luster of where we’ve arrived at tends to fade away in the opinion of the voice in our head, if we really want to be content, we need to find satisfaction in the moments we’re in, regardless of what we have or don’t have.

The lure of what’s over the horizon is something of a trap. It’s fine to dream and think good thoughts about your future, but it’s another thing entirely to let yourself be unsatisfied with who you are right now.

Meditation and mindfulness are the way off of this unsatisfying treadmill.
At any given time we can be in one of two mental states.

Lost in thought.
Present in the moment, perhaps peripherally aware of thoughts floating by like clouds across the sky, but still present in the moment and content.

**Living Now, But Perceiving Another Time**

“How can I not be in this moment?”, you may ask. “I’m right here, doing this.”

But pay attention and you’ll realize that for most of your life you’ve actually been reliving your past, fretting about your future, or perhaps delving into some alternative reality that never was.

The mind continuously pulls us out of the present to glory in past victories, tell stories about how we’re not good enough because of our upbringing, or to dread/look forward to the future.

The antidote to this is mindfulness.

**Meditation Vs Mindfulness**

Meditation is to mindfulness what pushups and running are to fitness. Meditation is an exercise to improve your ability to stay mindful, and, therefore, makes your life better. When you strengthen your ability to remain focused, you can stop wandering around on autopilot for longer and longer periods of time.

Just as doing pushups will make you stronger and more able to do pushups, a meditation practice will help you develop the ability to concentrate on the present moment for greater stretches of time, and under more difficult circumstances. When you start off, you may barely be able to go 10 seconds without the mind wandering in even the most sterile and distraction-free environment. After years of practice, however, I’m sometimes able to go for walks on busy city streets and not think a thought for blocks at a time.
While meditation tends to be a stand-alone activity in which we focus inwardly, mindfulness is more of an expansive frame through which we can go about our lives. You can be mindful while playing a sport, having a discussion, studying, typing up a report for work, or gardening, for instance.

When your attention is not caught up in the drama of thought, but instead focused intently on the present moment - where you are right here and now - you are being mindful. If the voices in your head have most of your attention, or you dream of the past, future, or all the other things you could be doing, you’re not present in this moment.

When we’re mindful, we’re better able to function in life. Multitasking presents fewer distractions, and we’re better able to stay on task while working or being creative. Frankly, it just feels wonderful to keep yourself focused.

But mindfulness is not a skill that is achieved once and kept forever. You can get stronger doing pushups, but if you stop, you’ll eventually lose the muscle mass you put on. Similarly, you can train your perception to a keen edge for awhile, but if you stop practicing mindfulness for months, you’ll find that your mental equanimity degrades, and your attention is harder to keep on one task.

If you normally, “live mentally,” for much of your time, you’ll be way more prone to depression, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence. You’ll also be more likely to self-sabotage your own efforts. Want to lose weight? That diet that was working so well, no matter how logical, effective, and satisfactory, might not stand up against the voices in your head reminding you that you’re a fat person who has a history of obesity, bad genes, and a lack of willpower. Why not get a second helping? You deserve it.

Mindfulness will help you achieve your goals by staying present and maintaining perspective (not to mention making you feel awesome).

**Mindfulness Vs Conditioning**

If you continuously bring mindfulness to your day to day activities, which tends to happen to an ever increasing degree as your meditation practice improves, you start chipping away at whatever previous conditioning you have.

A belief about reality is really just a thought that you keep thinking. In other words, much of what we perceive to be true, whether or not it’s objectively true, is only
considered true because the voice in our head obsessively tells us it is and because the thoughts we repeatedly think that reinforce our beliefs.

Mindfulness makes you more and more aware of the voice in your head and the stories it spins. You’ll come to recognize that it’s not doing you any favors, and it’s really more of a whiny child than it is you. As you distance yourself from it, you create space between you and your thoughts, and that space allows you to make better decisions and take more skillful actions. You’ll also likely find that you’re hearing less and less from that whiny voice as times goes on.

This frees you to create new beliefs about yourself and ditch your old conditioning since you’re no longer reinforcing them by repeatedly thinking of them.

The voice will flare up from time to time as things get tough in your life, but loud or quiet, you can call it out for what it is.

### Setting Up To Meditate

There is no one best way to meditate. However you can make it happen is the best way to do it.

I’ve sometimes been able to meditate while walking or doing the dishes, but honestly, I think these are more upper-level skills that blur with mindfulness, and there are way more distractions to navigate.

It’s far easier, and will yield better results when you’re starting out if you sit down alone in a quiet space.

**Body Position:** We’re often told that we must sit in a lotus position with some sort of specific hand alignment. While I do find that its a bit easier to concentrate while sitting with my back straight, I’ve had amazing meditation sessions lying down in bed. If you’ve woken up because of an alarm and you’re still sleepy, make sure you sit up rather than meditating lying down in bed so you don’t fall back asleep.

If I’m sitting up, I actually enjoy sitting in a straight-backed chair with my legs crossed in front of me on the seat of the chair (either lotus or half lotus, aka “Indian style”). However, if you find this uncomfortable, you can just sit in any chair with your feet touching the floor. I also like to meditate in bed with my back against the headboard. If you meditate on the floor, boosting your butt up with a pillow may make it more comfortable.
Hand position has never really made a difference for me. I’ve had my hands are cupped in my lap, over each knee, folded over my chest, or whatever else has been convenient.

**Time:** You can meditate anytime, but I personally find it easiest to meditate first thing in the morning. I think this is because my mind hasn’t gotten wound up on the activities of the day and the thought patterns that go with it. It also creates some nice groundwork for the day to come.

**Eyes:** Although it’s possible to meditate with your eyes open when starting off you’ll probably want them closed to keep distractions to a minimum.

**Relax:** Take a moment to take a few breathes and let go of any specific areas of tension you may feel in your body.

**Setting A Timer:** I personally find setting a timer makes my morning meditation dramatically easier. If I don’t, my mind keeps wandering to how much time has passed, and wants to open my eyes and check the time. The thing is, I’ve reached the point where I can sometimes meditate for over an hour and feel great but at the same time my mind harps on about productivity and getting started on my day if I haven’t previously decided on how much time to spend. The timer just gives me one less thing to think about.

**How Much Time To Meditate:** Any amount of time you’re willing to meditate is time well spent. However, my experience is that the mind tends to settle down into meditation more and more as time passes. It’s kind of like a jar of water with sediment in it. When shaken, the dirt is spread throughout. But if you stop shaking it the sediment will sink to the bottom of the jar over time and the water will become clear.

I usually find the minimum amount of time for a morning meditation to bring noticeable benefits is 10 minutes. After about 10 minutes most of the sediment has settled down, and meditation becomes easier and more productive. After about 20 minutes I’ve usually hit my stride.

When you’re first starting out, you may find it takes longer for your mind to settle, or that you don’t see much benefit the first few times because your mind never quiets. This is fine. Don’t give up. Clarity will come with time.
The Technique

Ultimately, meditation is about maintaining concentration on an anchor in the face of whatever thoughts or other mental stimuli arise. Mental distractions will come, and the key is not getting caught up in them, but instead staying focused on your anchor and returning to it again and again as your attention wanders.

Virtually anything can serve as an anchor for concentration. Classically, various aspects of breathing have been used, and the breath remains one of the most potent anchors to this day. You’ve always got your lungs with you, and they’re always intermittently breathing so your observation of their function can keep you grounded in the moment.

I suggest you play around with different areas of focus. Some people like to place their concentration in their nostrils and feel the air coming in and out of them. Some people may like to place their hands on their stomach and feel it rise and fall.

Although hard to explain, I personally like to keep what I think of as “mental brackets,” focused around my nose. You can think about it like creating the borders of a TV screen around a mental projection of your nose. For whatever reason, when I do this I seem more likely to notice when my attention has wandered because the mental brackets are no longer focused on my nose.

Steady sounds can also serve as great anchor points. If you’re inside, the sound of a fan or air conditioning unit might work. Outside, the sound of a fountain, stream, or the ocean may do it for you. I also enjoyed listening to the sound of crickets and other insects chirping when I meditate at night.

Sooner or later your attention will wander away from your anchor point. Maybe your thoughts go to what you’re going to do when you stop meditating, the dinner you want to make, or that tough project at work that’s due next week. It’s all totally ok, and you shouldn’t stress about it. Don’t get annoyed, but merely return your thoughts to your anchor and continue. The fact that your thoughts have wandered doesn’t make you a failure. It’s just another opportunity to strengthen your focus by returning it to the present moment.

…And that’s it. Keep going till your timer goes off.

If you find your mind becoming more unsettled as the day continues, return your focus to the breath for a few moments, or a minute or two, and you’ll likely find
your mind settles down again.

**Guided Meditations And Audio Recordings.**

Guided meditations can broadly be divided into two types.

The first, and probably the most rare, uses the voice of the speaker as a simple anchor. You attempt to play close attention to the speaker as he or she talks about whatever, and, if your attention wanders, you bring it back to the voice. The content of the talk is of far less importance than the fact that you’re concentrating on the speaker’s voice and clearing your mind of everything else. Often, the topic revolves around being present.

In some ways, these can be harder than standard meditation because the speaker’s words may spur your mind to race off and think about what he or she is talking about. However, some people who struggle with regular meditation find that these types of meditation work a lot better when they’re getting started.

The second type, which is most common, isn’t really what I would consider a meditation at all. These usually ask you to consider things, mentally list things, be grateful, and generally do a lot of thinking. Their goal is usually to seed your mind with positive thoughts, to relax you, or to get you to interact with your emotional self in a more positive way. These are certainly awesome goals, but I’m not sure they’re really meditations in the mind-clearing sense so much as very worthwhile exercises that also involve the mind.

I value meditation because it quiets my mind and allows me to focus. From a mental place of stillness, positive thoughts find far greater receptivity, so the second type of guided meditation is actually a great thing to listen to right after you’ve cleared your mind.

But when your mind is already cluttered with out-of-control thoughts, many of them negative or frantic, positive thinking usually finds a mixed reception at best.

Why add yet another voice to your head when you’ve already got more mental
noise than you can handle?

But, with that said, I have found a handful of guided meditation audio programs to be useful over the years.

I’ve also enjoyed meditating to audio recordings of water, instruments, and other relaxing sound effects.

Sometimes, if I’m in the mood, I open up the “Insight Timer” app, which includes not only a useful timer but also a number of free meditations of various lengths and types.

If you’d like to sample what I consider to be an excellent example of the first type of guided meditation, check out, “Nothing here but you.” The content of the talk, the richness of the speaker’s voice, and the pacing make it a really effective 19-minute meditation that sometimes works for me when regular meditations is a struggle.

Reframing Success

One of the biggest reasons why people give up on meditation is because they see themselves as failing at it. They try to meditate a few times, but their mind keeps wandering and they can’t stop it.

Particularly with Type A personalities, the repeated wandering of their mind is categorized as a failure on their part, and one which they can’t seem to do anything about. So they give up and decide meditation is not for them.

The best way to overcome this is to redefine just what success is for you.

I’d like to suggest that meditation success isn’t an arbitrary amount of minutes spent without thought. In fact, you should assume that your mind will wander because it will, particularly in the beginning.

Instead, I consider myself to have succeeded at meditation for the day if I’ve set my timer for 20 minutes with the intention to keep bringing my thoughts back to the present when they wander. Some days this is dramatically harder than others.
But as long as I put my time in, I have succeeded. This really takes the pressure off and leads to better meditation because all I have to do is put in the effort to succeed.

**Have At It**

That’s all you need to know to get started with meditation.

I highly suggest you commit yourself to a one-month trial of meditating for 20 minutes a day. Do it that long and you’ll likely be seeing significant benefits by the end, and wish to continue.

After your month, please send me a message and let me know how it went.