

Go within (*pratyahara*), focus (*dharana*), and meditate (*dhyana*)

I have grouped these three limbs together because I consider them intimately related. Meditation techniques abound in numerous cultures. In yoga, the concept of meditation can vary, but many consider it a state when our mind becomes calm and still. Some consider it a cessation of thoughts, while others consider it merely a peacefulness of thoughts, letting them pass slowly by.

Buddhists often refer to a monkey mind, one that ricochets wildly from one thought to the next without any continuity, let alone resolution. In *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Patanjali describes the concept of *citta*, or disturbances in the brain. In fact, he defines yoga as “the restraint of mental fluctuations.”

Two of Patanjali’s eight limbs of yoga are linked tightly with meditation: withdrawal from senses (*pratyahara*) and concentration (*dharana*). These two concepts can guide you into a meditative state. Withdrawing from the senses means tuning out the sounds of traffic, the smell of a nearby bakery, and the texture of your clothing. We can easily close our eyes but not so easily shut down the four other senses, which partially explains why aspiring yogis in ancient India lived solitary existences in remote, unadorned dwellings. A yoga pose practice should heighten our senses, becoming acutely aware of our breathing and our muscle stimulation, but at the end of each session we spend our time in a final rest for time to withdraw and focus inward.

Withdrawing from the senses completely might seem dangerous—what if your smoke alarm sounded and you failed to respond? My response is I doubt it. Perhaps a devout meditation practitioner might truly not hear a smoke alarm, but for most of us our reptilian brain—the brain stem responsible for self-preservation—would prevail.

Withdrawing from the senses is a valuable practice. The amount of information people process daily continues to increase exponentially, particularly for young people riveted to their cell phones following their friends’ endless message flashes. This is all the more reason why at least weekly, but preferably daily, we should shut down our channels of bombardment and go within.

The next limb, concentration, is something you will easily recognize. Usually concentration involves staring at an object. For example, Tibetan Buddhist monks create elaborate paintings known as mandalas specifically for meditation. In yoga pose classes, teachers instruct students to incorporate a *drishti*, or a gaze at a particular object, to help them concentrate. However, audio input works just as well for concentration. Repetitive drumming can provide an excellent object for concentration.

Many people chant sounds or words, called *mantras*, repeatedly to induce a meditative state. These chants can also enhance concentration. Chanting the sound of AUM or OM, which represents the fundamental sound of everything around us, is often used. You can break down the chant of AUM into four parts: 1) the mouth opens wide for the “ah” sound, 2) the lips round for the “oh” sound, 3) the lips draw together for the “mmm” sound, 4) then we listen for the sound that follows—often thought of as the echo of our AUM.

Concentration and withdrawal from the senses can happen simultaneously. For example, in staring at a candle you can focus so intently that you fail to notice your neighbor’s stereo playing in the distance. In fact, concentration aids withdrawing from the senses in my experience. By focusing our attention as completely as we can on one object, we can tune out distractions both external and internal. When a certain thought drags our brain in one direction, we can easily return to concentrating. Note that you do not need to concentrate on something external either—many people meditate by focusing on an image in their mind.

In the yogic definition, meditation happens after we concentrate and withdraw from the senses and empty our mind of thoughts. I see it as happening more concurrently, in that during the process of concentrating on an object and ignoring our sensory overload we are meditating.

I once asked one of my early yoga teachers how to become better at my meditative practice in final rest, or corpse pose (*savasana*). I told her I could only clear my mind of thought for maybe all of 30 seconds. She replied that if I could clear my mind of all thoughts for 30 seconds that I was doing wonderfully.

For years, I had thought the goal of yogic meditation was to clear your mind. However, one day a guest yoga teacher in my Seattle Punk Rock Yoga class disagreed with me, telling the students,

“Kimberlee says the goal is to clear your mind, but I see it as expanding your mind, and letting in all the possibilities.” I will never forget that for two reasons: 1) I was thrilled that she felt comfortable enough with my class and with her convictions to disagree with me, and 2) this statement really changed how I viewed my own meditation practice.

You can think of meditation as simply emptying your mind, but there is a more realistic way of defining meditation as not dwelling on any one thought, particularly negative ones. I am certainly guilty myself of stewing about things for far too long. One of the goals of my meditation is to burn through these thoughts and try to push the anger of the past into the past. Visualizations like an ocean wave sweeping away dark thoughts can help. I also like the technique of releasing a thought with the next exhale; if a thought enters your mind you can imagine yourself blowing that thought away.

When beginning a meditation practice you should focus on releasing negative thoughts, but even positive thoughts can cloud the mind. For example, closing your eyes and giggling while remembering an amusing sitcom you watched recently is not meditation. There’s nothing wrong with remembering these things, but it’s not bringing you towards enlightenment or any sort of insight.

Personally, I have found practicing more active and guided meditations, particularly shamanic journeying, useful. In this Native American form, a shaman, or spiritual healer, will guide participants on a journey to what is considered the spirit realm. The leader will usually burn sage or sweet grass to help induce a meditative state, and will continually drum to help the practitioners stay focused. Leaders will suggest a mechanism, such as a canoe and a river, and guide participants through a journey. Animals have an important role in Native American spiritual systems, so participants will note what animals they encounter and the leader will then explain the significance of each animal in a vision.

Other traditions include guided meditation. For example, Dr. Robert Thurman, a popular American Buddhist scholar, has led a meditation called the jewel tree at countless gatherings. In Christian meditation, practitioners concentrate on a single thought, usually a Biblical passage, to better understand their religion’s teachings. Many forms of moving meditations exist. Labyrinth walking may be more a modern phenomenon but it has roots as a Christian practice in the Middle Ages. Martial arts forms such as tai chi also provide a meditation in motion. Dance has long served as a meditative form,

such as the whirling dervishes of a Sufi order in Turkey who spin their way into a trance-like state. Many modern dance teachers offer meditative dance forms, such as Gabriel Roth's 5 Rhythms method. I find my swimming provides an excellent moving meditation, as I will often silently chant a single word repeatedly. In the chapter, "Tap into your energy centers (*chakras*) and energy channels (*nadis*)," I will introduce a meditation you may find useful that involves the *chakras*.

Yoga pose classes are often called a moving meditation, and I agree. At the end of yoga classes, teachers offer a final rest, a time for meditation. Many people practice a seated meditation after practicing yoga poses, but meditation can be practiced without the poses as well. In the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, you will find recommended poses for seated meditation; however, finding a comfortable seated position that you can hold for several minutes without fidgeting works fine. I recommend keeping your back against a wall and sitting on a pillow to elevate your hips—both assist with posture.

Breathing is integral to meditation, and not just in the yogic tradition. Maintaining a breath rhythm helps the brain move from the beta wave pattern—characterized by alertness and activity—into an alpha pattern—characterized by relaxed, creative thought. We spend the majority of our waking time in the beta state, which enables us to grocery shop and house clean, but it is also our anxiety state. Some advanced meditation practitioners claim to enter theta waves, the dream-state we pass through on the way to deep sleep, and delta waves, the state of deep sleep. Personally, I find that goal unnecessary, as we enter those states while sleeping anyway. However, most people do lack enough time in alpha state, a state of relaxation where thoughts flow in a stream of consciousness, or what psychologist and author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls flow. Though he describes this concept in terms of work—enjoying a state of total concentration where time, physical discomfort, and other normal concerns fall to the wayside (in yogic terms, withdrawing from the senses)—I see a definite correlation between his definition of flow and the alpha wave state we can reach through meditation.

In fact, a study released in 2004 of Buddhist monks demonstrated that sustained long-term meditation practice can not only alter the brain wave patterns during meditation but also can affect brain wave patterns during a resting state. In the study, monks practiced a non-referential meditation characterized by not concentrating on a single object but rather on a general sense of compassion. Researchers

found their gamma oscillations—a high frequency brain wave thought to provide intense focus—to be higher in the monks than in the control group both before, during, and after the participants meditated. That meditation can account for such a fundamental difference in how our brain works is astounding.

However, finding the time and commitment to meditate can be difficult. Start with a realistic goal of once a week and pick a realistic time—don't say you will meditate every Monday morning right before work if you are typically frantic at that time. Mornings are, however, preferable to evening because our brains are fresh and not rehashing thoughts of the day. Traditionally, yogis would practice their yoga poses and meditation before dawn. The best way to start is to set aside an extra five minutes after practicing yoga poses, or, if you don't want to work on any yoga poses, dedicating five minutes at the same time every day to meditation.

A very simple meditation involves closing your eyes and following your breath. You can count the pace of the breath in your head (inhale 1-2-3-4 and exhale 4-3-2-1) or just concentrate on the word “inhale” as you breathe in and “exhale” as you breathe out. The words “in” and “out” work well, too. Eventually you can drop the words or the counts and just concentrate on the sensation of the breath. When thoughts enter your mind, release them with each exhale. Try this for a few minutes every day.