

“What you put attention on grows in your life.” Maharashi Mahesh Yogi

The following six-step sequence describes how I limber-up prior to my daily sit-down or dedicated form of meditation. Doing this sequence in a relaxed and mindful way facilitates a reduction in body stiffness/aches, a relaxing of physical/emotional tension and promotes quieting of the mind.

The exact type and number of repetitions is based on what seems to work best for you. For example, if you tend to have tension and stiffness located in your neck, you might want to increase the number of neck rotation repetitions. [Note: this is not empirically-tested. It was taught to me in the late 1980’s by a Russian psychiatrist who was a Tai Chi practitioner; I have found it to be very beneficial as a segue into my daily sit-down meditation.]

*Physical accommodations:* if you have any physical condition that makes it difficult or impossible to do any or all of the following while standing, do those that can be modified to be accomplished to at least some degree while sitting or other forms of limbering up. *How* you limber up is your choice; *to* limber up in some way is highly recommended.

1. *Head tilt:* Feet spread, hands on hips, tilt head back as far as is comfortable and pause; then tilt head forward and down and pause. +/- 5 times.
2. *Waist rotation:* head down and upper torso forward and down. Complete a 360-degree rotation to the right 5 times; complete a 360-degree rotation to the left. +/-5 times.
3. *Torso twist:* swing both arms all the way around to the left, and pause; torso twist and swing both arms all the way around to the right, and pause. +/-5 times
4. *Arms rotation:* Arms outstretched to each side; rotate 360 degrees to the front, and then rotate 360 degrees to the back. (this is limbering up the shoulders). +/-5 times
5. *Neck and head rotation:* Feet spread, hands on hips. Rotate neck and head 360 degrees to the right +/-5 times; and then rotate neck and head 360 degrees to the left +/-5 times.
6. *Toe pointing:* [In my younger days, I used to call this “toe-touching”...☺] Feet spread, hands on hips, tilt head backward as far as is comfortable and pause; then lean forward and down, “toe pointing/touching” and pause; repeat sequence +/-five times.

Again, the objectives are to promote limbering-up physically, and provide a relaxing transition into meditating.

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## FAITH-BASED & SECULAR MEDITATION

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*Nānā ka maka; ho‘olohe ka pepeiao; pa‘a ka waha. “Observe with the eyes; listen with the ears; shut the mouth.” Thus one learns.* (Pukui, 1983, p. 248—native Hawaiian proverb)

Material herein is excerpted from my book [*Faith-Based & Secular Meditation: Everyday and Posttraumatic Applications* [NASW Press, September, 2019] My meditation is anchored in mantra-based Transcendental Meditation (TM) beginning in 1977-78, plus TM Siddhi residential-based training, and evolving over the years to incorporate Christian faith-based mantras, breath-based forms, and elements of mindfulness.

**Can we teach well that which we do not know well? As the Buddha said: “One should do what one teaches others to do. If one would train others, one should be well-controlled oneself. Difficult, indeed, is self-control.” “You yourself must strive. The Buddhas only point the way.”** This is my attempt to point out some ways. **The best/ideal way to learn and grow your meditation:** from a master teacher/a meditation sensei or a disciple of one; and supported by a meditation/spiritual community or sangha of meditators. *This workshop is not focused on one “pure” form of meditation. There are many paths to consider.* *Hawaiian proverb: “All knowledge is not taught in the same school. One can learn from many sources.”*

### WHAT IS MEDITATION?

**Western saying:** Don’t just *stand* there. *Do* something. **Eastern saying:** Don’t just *do* something. *Stand* there.

**“Why must we read?” Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) (1964, pp. 162–163)**  
*You rebel and ask why you must do something only when you don’t like to do it. But reading, playing, laughing, being cruel, being good, seeing the river, the clouds— all this is part of life; and if you don’t know how to read, if you don’t know how to walk, if you are unable to appreciate the beauty of a leaf, you are not living. You must understand the whole of life, not just one little part of it. That is why you must read, that is why you must look at the skies, that is why you must sing and dance, and write poems and suffer and understand, for all that is life.*

**Medical dictionary:** “Meditation is a practice of concentrated focus upon a sound, object, visualization, the breath, movement or attention itself in order to increase awareness of the present moment, reduce stress, promote relaxation, and enhance personal and spiritual growth.”

*All forms of meditation emphasize awareness: in all meditations there is a dwelling upon something...* **Alan Watts** (1997, p. 95): “Meditation is the discovery that the point of life is always arrived at in the immediate moment.” *There is the process or technique of meditating; how to be fully present in the moment of the now.* “Simply watch everything going on without attempting to change it in any way, without judging it, without calling it good or bad. Just watch it. That is the essential process of meditation...When we dance, the journey itself is the point... And exactly the same thing is true in meditation...the discovery that the point of life is always arrived at in the immediate moment.”

\*At its most basic level is a strategy & technique, to reduce stress and promote relaxation

\*Facilitates *being more fully, more completely, in the present moment* -- irrespective of what else is going on *now* (the present), or what *might* happen (in the future), or what *did* happen (in the past).

\*For adept meditators, regular meditation facilitates “transcending” beyond routine daily experience.

Finally, meditation is *not separate from life*. The Buddha said, “If you are standing on one shore and want to cross over to the other shore, you have to use a boat or swim across.” To a Buddhist, praying without also practicing is not real prayer.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, in Merton, 1969). (Christianity is very similar ...)

**VARIETIES OF MEDITATION:** One way to classify meditation forms is along two dimensions:

\***Faith-based, or secular/non-faith based** \***Concentrative, or opening-up of awareness directed**

### **FAITH-BASED VS SECULAR MEDITATION**

**Secular Meditation:** Does *not* have any religious, spiritual or faith basis. It is a technique, from a non-religious perspective, to minimize stress and maximize relaxation, i.e.: the relaxation response (Herbert Benson, 1975), secular Buddhism (Rick Heller (2015), aka *agnostic/atheist/humanist meditation*).

**Faith-Based Meditation:** *With a Spiritual/Religious Core or Thrust. There is a belief or faith in the existence of a force, a presence, a higher power that is beyond what exists here on the planet earth....* “Meditation is listening to the Divine within.” Edgar Cayce

Benson (1985): “*the missing factor—faith*” in meditation. *how a strong faith (what we believe or believe to be real) enhances the benefits of the relaxation response.*

\***Is a long-standing practice in many of the world’s religions**, i.e., Hinduism, Islam, Sufism, Jewish Kabbalah, Eastern Orthodox Catholic church, Taoism, Buddhism & a central element in Christian “contemplative” prayer. \**Can include any religious element that the meditator chooses* to include...

\***Scripture of Martha and Mary, Luke, 10: 38-42:** ... it is essential **to be still** in order to receive the Lord ...

\*Is there a **complementary relationship** between meditation and prayer? (Madisyn Taylor, Daily OM)

\***Directions for Centering prayer** (*contemplativeoutreach.org*). Notice similarity to mantra meditation):

\*Choice of a mantra; \*How to sit & focus \*Dealing with distracting thoughts; \*End of the prayer session.

St. Macarius (third century A.D.) said: “**There is no other perfect meditation than the saying and blessed name of our ‘Lord, Jesus Christ,’ dwelling without interruption in you. “This practice is called ‘interior recollection’ -- abandoning distractive thoughts and humbly invoking the name of Jesus with all your heart.**” (Thich Nhat Hanh, in Merton, 1969)

**Richard Baxter, the Puritan theologian (The Saint’s Everlasting Rest, 1650), described a Protestant and evangelical approach to meditation.** For a description of Christian meditation from an evangelical Anglican theologian perspective, see Toon, 1993; see Saxton, 2015, for an elaboration of the Puritan practice of biblical meditation.) Baxter’s 360-plus-year-old guidance about meditation from Sanders’s (2010) detailed accounting (Sanders reprints key sections of the 13th chapter on meditation from Baxter’s *The Saint’s Everlasting Rest*). *Baxter references the biblical David’s description of the blessed man who meditates both day and night as per scripture. Meditation instructions by Baxter included these maxims:*

- **Meditate frequently, at specified times, at least once daily.**
- **Choose the most “seasonable” time that one might be most fit for contemplation**—which may be different for different people. Considerations included what time of day fits the person and whether one is in a troubled state; Baxter also wrote that regular meditation should be in a private or solitary location.
- **Prepare one’s heart and mind with great solemnity in order to be able to best contemplate God.** This is accomplished by putting aside all negative and positive thoughts of one’s life situation in order to most fully receive God and his glory and to fully comprehend the presence of God and his greatness (Sanders, 2010).

**Thomas Merton (1956, 1958) describes a similar prerequisite for entering contemplative prayer or meditation that involves “a kind of inner upheaval.”** Merton elaborates that this upheaval is not actually a

disturbance per se. Rather, *this upheaval is “a breaking out of routine, a liberation of the heart from the cares and preoccupations of one’s daily business”* (p. 48).

These elements of meditation are relevant today to most if not all Christians and others of faith, and clearly illustrate some of the similarities, and distinctions, of faith-based and non-faith-based meditation.

**Conversely: there are Christian denominations and writers who consider meditation to “blank the mind,” to be dangerous, occult, unbiblical and not to be condoned [i.e., Matt Slick, [carm.org/centering prayer](http://carm.org/centering_prayer)]. Yoga is described as having demonic roots [e.g., Hinduism, which is demonic--as all false religions are demonic]. Thus, Yoga positions can open you up to demonic powers, and cause “demonic trances.”**

## **THE PATH OF CONCENTRATIVE FORMS (“SHUTTING DOWN”) OF MEDITATION**

Awareness is restricted to the object of the meditation or the repetition of a word(s), e.g., there is **an attempt to restrict awareness to a single, unchanging source of stimulation or attention for a definite period of time, a “one-pointedness of the mind”** -- constantly bringing back one’s wandering mind to this one focus.

**Instructions how** to restrict one’s concentration range from *active assertion* of will to stick with the target object of attention (a candle, image, word or words...) and to resist any wandering, to a *passive mode* -- “simply regenerating the target object when it is lost in the flow of awareness.”[What I was taught in TM...]

### **\*Mantra-based meditation is one of the most common concentrative forms of meditation**

- *The actual selection of a mantra varies, e.g., traditional type such as Hindu- or Buddhist-based, vs a more “generic” mantra-type. You do not have to be Hindu to practice mantra-based meditation.*
  - \*The generic instruction: select a mantra that is easily repeated, pleasant sounding and/or that might have special significance. I instruct clients to choose their own mantra. Preferred: a single-word (i.e., “joy,” “peace,” “love,” “faith,” “hope,” “shalom,” “serenity,” or a short phrase (i.e., “Peace begins with me,” “This too shall pass,” “My Lord, my God.” \* Or a mantra with No meaning: “Om,” “Aum”...*
- *TM instruction dealing with distractions: neutral awareness of distractions and gently return...*
- **The impact of the mantra can be altered:** *changing the length of time that each syllable is repeated, pause time between repetitions, how “loudly” you think the mantra, repeating the mantra silently or out loud, and meditating alone or in the presence of others.*

### **\*My initiation into Transcendental Meditation (TM) in 1977 and my evolving to have two mantras.**

#### **\*Steps to introduce clients to meditation (only after you personally have a familiarity with meditation)**

1. *Selection of one’s mantra: faith or non-faith/secular based (or: description of breath, mindfulness, hybrid)*
2. *Stretching/limbering up;*
3. *Centering or calming breathing from the belly*
4. *Description of distractions and how to deal with distractions while meditating*
5. *Sitting posture, placement of feet, eyes closed/partially open or open, positioning of hands*
6. *Accommodations for disabilities/other special needs re posture, hands, breathing, eyes closed or open...*
7. *Initially practicing silently while I demonstrate out-loud alternative ways to repeat one’s mantra...*
8. *Ending of the practice meditation and discussing the client’s experience*
9. *Getting sleepy or nodding” during meditation, and brief resting or lying down after meditation session*
10. *Very brief summary of the four stages of meditating*
11. *Discussing timing—when to do strategic meditating: early morning and later in the day/early evening*
12. *Length of dedicated or strategic meditations -- and why to aim for a specific length of time*
13. *Very brief introduction to “spot” or “tactical” meditating (described in more detail later)*

**Pad and pen tactic** to address distractions while meditating & intrusive thoughts while trying to sleep.

### ***Important aspects of breathing:***

**“Put your own oxygen mask on first.”** (Airplane instruction to passengers with children)

**“By rebalancing our inhalation and exhalation, you make a transformational discovery. Rather than allowing our responses to an event affect our breathing, we can learn instead to let our breathing change our relationship to the event. The breath is the invisible bridge between our mind and our body. Meditation is not about the breath. It is about watching our mind. We simply use the breath as a landmark of the present moment. Because the breath is never in the past or future, but always happening right here and now.”** (Cyndi Lee, 2004, p. 28)

- **Abdominal/diaphragmatic/belly/deep breathing** versus **more shallow** breathing. Demonstrate.
- Focus on **breathing in** through your nose and **out** through your mouth.
- Have a **specific focus with** the breathing, i.e., “breathing in calmness” and “breathing out stress.”
- **Pranayama** -- breath extension or control. Ex: **alternate nostril breathing.**

**\*Breath-counting** is a concentrative form of meditation. Two very contrasting examples:

- **“7/11” breathing** (Mark Tyrrell). A very rapid form of breath-counting. Demonstrate.
- **“2-4-2-6”**: A classic, **deliberate meditation breath count** (Brown & Gerbarg, 2012): Demonstrate.

**A client recently shared:** *“I have been doing 5-8 breathing (her modification of 7-11) while I’m doing stuff—like folding the clothes. This helps with my anxiety--it seems to help take my mind off of my thoughts, off of my thinking; and I can focus on what I am doing. My brain does not feel so bombarded with my thoughts.”*

### **THE PATH OF ‘OPENING-UP OF AWARENESS’ FORMS OF MEDITATION**

Perhaps the most popular form is **mindfulness** meditation; while Buddhist in origin, *it does not necessarily require the study or practice of Buddhism* (see also “the Witness” in Yoga, “right-mindedness” in Zen). Mindfulness refers to *the skill of attending fully to an experience* (e.g., thought, emotion, action, sensation), *in the moment, as it is happening, in an open and accepting manner...* and enhances awareness of an experience as it is occurring, without attaching judgment to the experience, such as it being positive or negative, beneficial versus detrimental, healthy versus unhealthy...*Note:* many meditation schools/traditions emphasize combining *two* major foci of meditative awareness or attention – *both* the concentrative or “shutting-down” form *and* the self-observation through opening-up of awareness. (Naranjo & Orenstein, 1971, p. 200-201).

**Thich Nhat Hanh, *Stepping Into Freedom. An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training* (1997):**

**“Gathas”** (“gah’tuhs”) are integral in the training of Buddhist novice monks and nuns, as translated by Thich Nhat Hanh from the work of Chinese master Duti from the 15<sup>th</sup> century (*Stepping Into Freedom*, 1997, pp. 3-4). **“Gathas are short verses to recite during daily activities to help us return to mindfulness...Practicing with a ghata can help us to return to ourselves and to what is going on in the present moment...As you silently recite the first line, breathe in; and as you silently recite the second line breathe out. When the gatha is finished, continue your activity, and you will find that your mindfulness has increased...When we practice well, the gathas are with us continuously, and we live our whole day in awareness.”**

**Mindful forms of meditation** include: \*walking, \*eating, \*sitting meditations; \*yoga; \*body scans (moving from one part of the body to the next; focusing attention on movements making up a larger activity, i.e., attending to steps when walking from car to house, or walking the dog, washing dishes, gardening, brushing our teeth, eating...). **Allow our minds to become filled with awareness of whatever we are doing /observing**  
\*Example: **mindful breathing:** *simply focusing on your breathing in- and out- (demonstrate)*

### **METTA MEDITATION: FAITH BASED OR SECULAR**

**“Forgiveness, openness and understanding flow naturally when there is compassion.”** Mooji Heller (2015) translates metta, from the Pali language of ancient India, as “loving-kindness” or “friendliness.”

\*The purpose of metta meditation is “to cultivate this feeling [of loving kindness or friendliness]” (p. 11).

\*Once you cultivate this feeling, accessing it becomes increasingly possible, even in “circumstances where it may not be your first inclination”. Most importantly, **learning to cultivate metta toward others, you are able to “extend the practice by having goodwill toward anything, to include your own troubling thoughts and feelings.”** (p. 11). Eventually you develop the ability to live your life in a very positive way, *with loving attitudes toward yourself and others.* **Case Study: Ricky and BMW/Mercedes/Lexus Drivers**

\*Heller (2015, p. 44) offers beautiful examples of exercises of sympathetic joy for others, i.e.:

*Take a walk down a busy street. Look at people’s faces—briefly, without staring.*

*If you see someone who is smiling, be happy for them. Notice how it makes you feel about yourself.*

#### **BREATH MEDITATION: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN FAITH- AND SECULAR- MEDITATION:**

*This . . . is universal. You sit and observe your breath. You can’t say this is Hindu breath or Christian breath or Muslim breath. Knowing how to live peacefully or harmoniously you don’t call this religion or spirituality. It is non-sectarian.* (p. 32) Charles Johnson (2007)

#### **BREATH & PANIC ATTACKS:**

*Rather than allowing our responses to an event affect our breathing, we can learn instead to let our breathing change our relationship to the event. The breath is the invisible bridge between our mind and our body.”* (Lee, 2004, p. 28) [

*“Take a deep breath.” This common advice, unfortunately, is only one-half of the necessary advice--because breathing in more than breathing out absolutely feeds and increases our anxiety – my balloon metaphor.*

**Extremely important: If you breath out more than you breath in, it will be impossible to have a panic attack or significantly increased anxiety. This always will be the case—if you begin breathing out more than breathing in before the anxiety has risen so high that there is no turning back.**

**10-Point Scale.** Helpful to being aware that your anxiety is rising and an intervention is *needed now*: I use a 10-point scale of anxiety (that I have adapted from J. Wolpe’s (1969) 100 point SUDs scale):

- What is your *baseline* level of anxiety (or other troubling symptom)?...
- If you know your baseline of anxiety, you can “check” or “scan” yourself at any time...
- If your *current* level of anxiety is *above* your baseline of anxiety, it may be prudent to *immediately engage* in a “spot” or “tactical” meditation to arrest the rise of or lower your level of anxiety...

**“HYBRID” COMBINATIONS OF MEDITATION FORMS:** [Describe & demonstrate]: various combinations of mantra, breath-counting, breath awareness and mindful meditating, i.e., combining mantra and breath awareness/breath counting, and mantra or breath counting, with a daily activity:

#### **HOW LONG SHOULD EACH MEDITATION SESSION LAST?**

*“I don’t have enough time to meditate.”* (One of two major excuses *not* to meditate regularly or sufficiently. The second most common excuse, “too many thoughts” will be discussed shortly)

Many meditation masters mention time and being too busy, i.e. **‘You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes a day -- unless you are too busy. Then you should sit for an hour.’** [Zen Proverb]

**“If you’re too busy to meditate twice a day, you’re just too busy.”** [Maharashi Mahesh Yogi]

*There is an array of advice regarding how long a meditation session should be. TM devotees meditate 20 minutes, twice daily.* Common recommendations vary between 10 minutes and an hour or so, and in some as little as a minute or two...begin with shorter times, progress to longer lengths of regular meditation times.

**Very important:** decide *how long* you are planning to meditate *before* you start -- because...

**WHAT YOU PUT YOUR ATTENTION ON, “THE GOLDEN MEAN”, BALANCE & THE NOW**  
“What you put attention on grows in your life.” (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi). Awareness *is like a spotlight*; it illuminates and nourishes the object of your awareness [Fritz Perls: awareness *in and of itself* is curative.]

**The Golden Mean:** In philosophy and many religions, the golden mean is the desirable middle between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency—most religions advise against extremes, e.g., \*Buddhist: the concept of “the Middle Way”; \*Confucius: “doctrine of the mean” \*Taoism: “Way of the golden mean” \*Islam: “...the best choice is the middle ground, the golden mean”  
\*Christianity emphasizes moderation, i.e., “whoever fears God will avoid all extremes” (Ecclesiastes 7:18)  
The practice of meditation: \*Promotes “balance” and reduces “extremes” of emotions/thinking/actions.

**“Anxiety is the gap between *now* and *then*.” Fritz Perls (1971, p. 3)**

**You are *here*, at this moment, but your attention is on something *that will or might happen later--in the future, or on something that had happened in the past. To focus on that future or past event or possible event -- rather than being fully present in the moment of the now -- is what creates anxiety.***

\*Or, as Gary Mack (Mind Gym) said: “*Fear lives in the future.*” \***Billie Jean King: “*This point is all ...*”**

\***A monk was traveling in a horse-drawn wagon with a companion ... when we arrive in several hours: will the journey be any shorter, and will the danger that we are going to face be any less?”**

### **MAINTAINING THE FOCUS OF YOUR MEDITATION**

**“Smile, breathe and go slowly. Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.”** Thich Nhat Hanh (1997, p. 8) (I add: “Feelings and thoughts come and go like clouds...”)

**The two major excuses to not meditate regularly: too many thoughts, and not enough time.**

Many masters and proverbs speak to the dynamic and issue of thoughts and reactions in meditation, i.e.

**“The mind is like the wind that blows one way and then blows another. So does the mind turn and the thoughts depart.”** (Hawaiian proverb)

**“There is no need to believe or disbelieve your thoughts. Just don’t enter into anything. They don’t disturb you. You get distracted. Nothing exists in itself as a distraction. It is you who gets distracted. Why?”**(Mooji)

- **It is not the absence of thought that is essential to meditation; it is our attitude and reactions towards our thoughts or towards anything else that distracts us from the meditation focus—attaching to...**
- **Reminder: TM: Attitude of “neutral awareness” re distractions & gently returning to your medit...**
- I describe *developing a “gentle rhythm” between (a) awareness of a distraction, and (b) gently returning to your meditation focus.*
- **Two music metaphors** of mine that clients find very helpful to maintain a meditation focus: **playing the base guitar in a band, and playing the piano.** (Describe...)

**Counseling Case brief:** *After we had a brief (+/- 5 minutes) meditation during a session because she was particularly stressed that day, a chronically anxious client said “Now that I have meditated, my mind is more relaxed, but my body is still very tense.”*

[This comment was not at all surprising. **Stress is not only located “in your mind” or “in your thoughts” or “in your emotions.”** Over time, stress/anxiety *also* accumulates and *becomes entrenched physically in your body.* \*The exact physical location of accumulated stress and anxiety varies within each of us, i.e., such is manifested as *tenseness or physical anxiety* in one or more areas: the head, jaws, mouth, lips, other facial muscles (wrinkled brow or forehead), shoulder(s), back, chest, stomach, legs...

## FOUR PHASES OF MEDITATION PRACTICE

**Phase I:** *Releasing of immediate (or of very recent) stress* (Maharashi Mahesh Yogi says that when meditating, “thoughts are stress being released.” So, if this is so, let them go...:) And every time you begin a new meditation, you initially will immediately be releasing immediate stress.

**Phase II:** *Once immediate or relatively recent stress has been released, meditation begins to facilitate the release of some of the stress that has been accumulating physically in your body.*

**Phase III:** *Peace, calmness, quiet begin to accumulate physically in the body—a “reservoir of peace, calmness” physically that you “carry within you.”* Such begins to permeate thinking, emotions and body.

*For many meditators, this is the extent of the meditation experience; it becomes an effective stress reduction & relaxation practice to facilitate the enhancing of one’s daily functioning, coping and stress management.*

**Phase IV.** *“Silence is not an absence, but a presence. Not an emptiness but repletion. A filling-up.”* LeClair (2009, p. 34). *For adept/advanced meditators, a further ability is attained in which it is possible to have yet an additional depth or levels of experience: **Transcendence**.* At such moments, if you are religious or spiritual, you might experience what feels like an **intimate or profound connection with God/a higher power/life force and/or experiencing “being beyond the confines of your physical body”** and closer in touch with a more transcendent life force. Almost all forms of meditation describe such a state:

*“...just watch your mind as if the mind is nothing but a traffic of thoughts or a film—a movie passing on the TV screen. You are just a neutral observer. This is the discipline. And if this discipline is complete, watching comes very easily, and watching is meditation. Through watchfulness mind disappears, thoughts disappear. And that moment is the most blessed moment: when you are fully awake and there is not a single thought, just a silent sky of your inner being.”* Osho (2011, p. 9).

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**Note:** *If your meditation “is not working:” please do not blame the meditation. Meditation has been around for several thousand years. Perhaps it is my meditation teaching that is lacking. Perhaps you need to look at you, and how your meditation practice can be adjusted to be more effective for you.*

*Such factors include: \*neutral awareness of distractions; \*how you are breathing; \*frequency; \*length of each session; \*length of time meditating; \*the form of meditation you practice...*

Also, *profound physically embedded/accumulated anxiety/tenseness might require additional strategies* to relieve such, i.e., Yoga, physical activity, chiropractic manipulation, massage, anxiolytic medication.

With regular and proper meditation technique and practice, *you can hope to move towards at least beginning to enter phase III, moving back and forth b/w phases II and III. And with even more practice and mentoring by a meditation master, some of you will be able to attain enhanced/greater ability to “let go” and at least dip into Phase IV --transcending moments that are quite exhilarating and profoundly calming. Fully entering into Phase III and even just beginning to enter phase IV, can be a life-enhancing journey, increasing your ability to (a) minimize the negative effects of stress and (b) maximize the positive effects of peace, balance and joy...*

## USE OF EXTERNAL STIMULI TO ENHANCE MEDITATING

Some find “external” stimuli helpful, i.e.,

*\*Music/Bells/Chimes/Constant Sounds/White Noise \*Beads/Stones \*Guided” meditation \*Incense/candles \*Applications (“Apps”), i.e.:*

- ***Breathe2relax:** a portable stress management tool (no cost): detailed info on effects of stress on the body, and instructions/practice exercise to help learn the stress management skill of diaphragmatic breathing.*
- ***Calm – meditate, sleep, relax, breathe** (calm.com): is free for iPhone and iPad and has been highly praised by several of my clients. It includes verbally guided meditation sessions accompanied by optional background scenes and sounds—beaches, meadows, pouring rain...*
- *Several websites offer independent descriptions/evaluations of highly recommended apps, such as Headspace, i.e., “The Eight Best Apps for a Calm, Focused Mind,” Huffpost.com, 12.12.13. See also:*

“The 10 Best Meditation Apps” at [independent.co.uk](http://independent.co.uk) -- all available to buy from the Apple Store ([itunes.apple.com](https://itunes.apple.com)) or Google Play (<https://play.google.com>).

*Do any of you have a favorite meditation app or two that you would like to mention?*

### **“SPOT” (“TACTICAL”) MEDITATION OUTSIDE OF DEDICATED/SIT-DOWN MEDITATING**

*“Enjoy the way as much as the destination.”* Sakshi Chetana (2011).

*“The West had made people too time conscious, not knowing where they are going, but speeding to get there because time is short.”* Osho

**A full-length meditation is not always practical; “tactical” or “spot” meditations can be very helpful. [Spot meditations do not substitute for the regular practice of full-length meditations.]** Case examples:

\**While driving and getting stuck in a traffic jam or at a railway crossing* \**At the dentist*

\**Being late: to meet someone or late for an appointment or meeting...*

\**Finding yourself “stuck” in a meeting or social situation or with someone you do not want to be with*

\**Calming tactic to better engage in interacting with your partner:*

*“When the war inside of you, meets the war inside of me, the words are only a gun... When the peace inside of you, meets the peace inside of me, the war is over before it can start.”* Bob Sima (2014)

\**Mindfully using a grocery cart in a busy supermarket as a buffer to alleviate anxiety:*

*“Nobody goes there anymore, it’s too crowded.”* (Berra with Kaplan, 2001)

### **POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS AS A SPOT/TACTICAL MEDITATION MANTRA/FOCUS**

*Utilizing positive affirmations as a mantra: These range from single words to very short phrases.*

**Tips to enhance the impact of affirmations:**

\*Use the present tense (not a future tense). Ex: “I am strong.” (vs: “I will -- or I want -- to be strong.”)

\*Use “I”, to maximally anchor the affirmation to yourself. Ex: “I am worthy.” (vs “People are worthy.”)

\*Make the affirmation as a positive statement, **avoid “not” or negative** statements, i.e.,

*Gary Mack’s description of advice to golfer Lee Trevino struggling with hitting tee shots into water...*

\***Use meditation principles to enhance affirmations;** e.g., when aware of any distraction to focusing on your affirmation words, neutrally note “distraction” -- and gently return to your affirmation.

○ When feeling *fear*, consider a mantra: “courage,” “strength,” “I am fearless,” “God be with me.”

○ When feeling *anxiety, anger or irritation*: consider mantras like “calm,” “peace,” “love,” “peace begins with me,” “Let go, let God.”

○ When feeling *sad*, mantras like “joy”, “happiness”, “this, too, shall pass,” “tomorrow is a new day.”

○ When feeling *self-critical*, mantras like “I am worthy,” “I deserve,” “I deserve to \_\_\_\_\_.”

\***Alternatively, longer phrases, favorite sayings, and prayers** can be used to focus on in a *meditative-like* manner, i.e., reciting the abbreviated or full version of *The Serenity Prayer*.

### **IS THERE A COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAY FOR MEDITATION AND PRAYER?**

**“Be still, and know that I am God.”** Psalm 46:10 (NHEB)

There is a further, perhaps more profound aspect of the relationship between meditation and prayer. For faith-based meditators, *it is possible to consider that there is a common pathway* for meditation and prayer. In other words, *meditation and prayer can converge and travel together as complementary and mutually enhancing companions*, i.e. meditate *before* prayer to facilitate you being “quieter” and more receptive while praying.

This relationship between meditation and prayer could be considered an *optional or added benefit* that providers can consider and inform faith-based clients about. For example, *all* of the meditation traditions that I am aware of espouse and practice *acceptance and compassion*. **Thich Nhat Hanh (1969) described how Buddhists and Christians both understand that God is within our hearts. This is described:**

\***In Christian Gospels, “as a mustard seed planted in the soil of consciousness.”**

**\*In Buddhist sutras, “as the seed of enlightenment that is already in everyone’s consciousness.” Thus, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that both “prayer and meditation help us touch the most valuable seeds that are within us, and they put us in contact with the ground of our being” (Hanh, 1969, p. xi).**

### **THE CREST OF A WAVE AND ITS HOLLOW**

Madisyn Taylor (DAILY OHM, 2010) describes how **prayer typically includes asking for something and expressing “our innermost thoughts and feelings to a higher power. . . Sometimes, we plumb the depths within ourselves and allow whatever comes to the surface to flow out in our prayer.”** Also, there are times we use prayers that are written by someone else but “that express what we want to say.” **Meditation** characteristically “has a silent quality that honors the art of receptivity.” It facilitates allowing ourselves to “fall into a deep silence.” Being immersed in this deep silence, we find that we are as if on “an island of tranquility,” apart from and not swept up into the noise, challenges, and busyness of daily life. Once we are in this silent place, Taylor wrote, we actually are able “to hear the universe as it speaks for itself, responds to our questions, or sits with us in its silent way.”

Thus, meditation and prayer are “*natural complements to one another, and one makes way for the other just as the crest of a wave gives way to its hollow.*” *An interplay between reaching out and receiving:*

*There are times when we need to reach out and express ourselves, fully exercising our insides, and times when we are empty, ready to rest in quiet receiving. When we allow ourselves to do both, we begin to have a true conversation with the universe.* (Taylor, 2010)

### **POST-TRAUMATIC APPLICATIONS OF MEDITATION STRATEGIES**

***“Wood already touched by fire is not hard to set alight.” (African-Ghanaian proverb)***

***“The gift is next to the wound.” (African proverb)***

I have been working with trauma survivors since serving as a Social Work Officer on an Army psych team in Vietnam, 1968-69. **Of course, repetition/practice & longevity are no guarantee of success...**(Lombardi...) Also: because trauma-focused work *is inherently anxiety and stress provoking: do we not have a duty to first insure clients are taught or learn one or more self-calming techniques (like meditation) to be able to use outside of the therapy session—before* engaging in trauma-focused interventions? My approach combines elements of existential, Gestalt Therapy, CBT and systematic desensitization.

#### **GESTALT THERAPY**

**\*“Lose your mind and come to your senses.” (Perls, 1971, page 69);**

**\*“I have one aim only: to impart a fraction of the meaning of the word now. To me, nothing exists except now. Now = experience = awareness = reality. The past is no more and the future is not yet. Only the now exists.” (Perls, 2006, p. 14);**

#### **COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY**

***“How do you learn how to cut down trees? By cutting them down.” African proverb (Afritorial, 2012)***

**Techniques include:** \*scaling of awareness from 1-10, \*focusing on helpful cognitions/eliminating unhelpful cognitions, \*positive behavioral or action changes, and \*homework -- along with meditation.

#### **SYSTEMATIC DESENSITIZATION**

***“You’re scared to go get scared.” (Advice given to client by her father)***

***“A bird is safe in its nest – but that is not what its wings are made for.” (Sri Amit Ray, 2014, p. 1)***

***There is a space between a stimulus that we are exposed to, and what our response to that stimulus might be. It is in that space between stimulus and response where we have the freedom, and the ability, to choose what our response is. And it is within our response that we find growth.*** (Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*).

This is where systematic desensitization is relevant – when the trauma survivor has developed marked or severe habituated responses to memories/experiences associated in some way with the original trauma. *Such reoccur, time and again, and are so immediate, that, the space between stimulus and response is bypassed before the survivor has the ability to choose a response.* However, systematic desensitization, coupled with

meditation, enables the survivor the opportunity for a “successful” or more “positive” response to what heretofore have been a series of re-traumatizing responses. *Also, meditation can complement any other trauma-focused treatment--EMDR, Prolonged Exposure, Cognitive Processing Therapy...*

*“Always do what you are afraid to do.”* (Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1888, p. 245)

**Step One.** Client identifies a *progressively-increasing-in-anxiety hierarchy or series* of situations or actions, that are related to the traumatic or anxiety provoking event.

**Step Two.** The client is taught relaxation or coping techniques and skills. **Wolpe** postulated: *it is impossible to be both relaxed and anxious at the same time. [I use breathing & meditation to facilitate this.]*

**Step Three.** The client repeatedly uses the learned relaxation/coping skills to reach a state of relaxation or calmness when *introduced, in turn, to each* of the progressively-increasing-in-anxiety situations--**begins with exposure to the situation lowest on the hierarchy of severity of anxiety: There is an alternation between:**

\*Being exposed to each higher-level anxiety producing situation and

\*Using the learned relaxation strategy to overcome the anxiety that has been generated -- *before* moving on to the next higher anxiety-producing situation. (Wolpe, 1952, 1961,1969)

\*This procedure continues until *all* of the situations on the hierarchy of severity of anxiety are able to be completed *without* a significant rise in anxiety.

## MEDITATION RESEARCH AND EFFICACY

*Meditation is the medication to cure the illusion of a separation.* (Bob Sima, 2016)

**There are many research studies (1000+) on meditation, especially Transcendental Meditation and Mindfulness** (I identify +/- one hundred research findings in my book). **There is scientific criticism of a number of these studies** about the research methodology (i.e., small numbers, lack of randomized controls/lack of being able to rule-out other factors that might explain the study results...).

Even so, the findings *overwhelmingly are very positive on a range of factors* (i.e., Ospina et al, 2007; Sedimeier et al, 2012, Hussain & Bushan, 2010). **Positive findings** include:

\***physiological** (i.e., lower blood pressure/standing heart rate/oxygen consumption, reduced heart attack risk, **positive physiological brain changes (reduces the amygdala—lowers exaggerated emergency responses** and reduces emotional (over)-reactivity; **enhances neuroplasticity**—the ability of the brain to adapt ...),

\***psychological** (i.e., lower anxiety, depression, anger symptoms, PTSD symptoms...),

\***cognitive** (i.e., cognitive abilities, short-&-long-term memory, performance on intelligence tests...), and

\***performance and socialization** (improved self-actualization, relationship satisfaction, social functioning).

## MEDITATION IS NOT FOR EVERYONE: ISSUES, CAUTIONS, LIMITATIONS

There is *a remarkable rarity* of documented negative findings or negative side-effects regarding meditation in research studies and in my practice.

**My overall experience: the most common issue regarding meditation is “it just is not working”.** Such oftentimes is associated with: \*not taking the necessary repetitive and **regular time and effort** to become habituated in the first place with the process of meditating, and/or \*finding it too difficult to calmly sit still long enough **to be able to let go of** intrusive thoughts **or** to concentrate on the focus of the meditation.

**A frequently effective remedy is to change/modify the type of meditation focus.** Thus, I introduce clients to **five** forms: (1&2) faith-based & secular mantra, (3) breath-counting, (4) breath mindfulness, and (5) hybrid.

**Most clients report strong preference for one or two types of meditation.** But, *they need to experience (and not just read or hear a discussion about) each* to discover which is more suitable. Some clients have found *more than one type* of mediation to be beneficial, and they *vary* which meditation type to utilize, or combine two – such as mantra with breath awareness. **Caution: jumping around** ...there are many paths...

**In an extremely small minority of clients, additional issues can be problematic:**

- **Persons with active psychosis symptoms** (i.e., hearing voices, hallucinations, living in an alternate reality than that which most of the world lives in...). *Obsessive practice of meditation might exacerbate pre-existing psychosis symptoms and be associated with increasingly retreating to an inner world..*

- **Persons with very strong religious/other beliefs that meditation is “evil”/dangerous, etc.** . For such persons, briefly discuss if the person is open to consider a form of secular meditation. If not, it is *very* inappropriate to attempt to “force” meditation on such persons—or on anyone with strong objections.
  - **Marijuana/other drugs and Meditation.** “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” (Yogi Berra) Heavy usage of higher potency marijuana (or other drugs), might induce a conflict *between* drug-induced highs *and* the ability to fully benefit **from the process** of meditating, [My personal experience...]
  - \* **A partner disapproves of, might be concerned with, or not fully supportive of, their partner meditating at all, “meditating too much” or “meditating at the wrong time.” Solutions:**
    - fully explaining to the partner what meditation is and what its purpose is,
    - the partner observing that meditation seems to be having a positive impact, and
    - deciding with the partner when the best time to meditate might be (**my example: coming home...**).
  - **Meditating “too much.”** It is *extremely rare* for someone to “meditate too much”—to where *you ignore or increasingly remove yourself* from regular living responsibilities/social interactions.
  - A few clients report becoming *confused/unsettled* at the repetitive nature of repeating a mantra and/or breath count, or becoming light-headed/dizzy...(i.e., some focus *too much* on *inhaling properly*...)
- However, the research and I have almost always have found the opposite to be true. Regular meditation is highly associated with being responsible, engaging in activities and with others, feeling more balanced, reducing anxiety and mood symptoms, and positive physiological measures.**
- Finally: There is extremely little likelihood of meditating too much—most people I have observed or heard about do not meditate as much/regularly as they could to attain increased or maximal benefits.**

**My experience over many years with clients who present a wide range of presenting issues):**

- perhaps 20-25% find meditation to be helpful and a very welcome “tool” or practice.
- only one client found meditation to have a *negative* impact (she had dissociative identity issues)
- 75-80%: have neither particularly effective *nor* troubling experiences – typically, most were unable or unwilling to expend regular/sustained effort necessary to develop and habituate their meditation skills.
- **Most “risky”:** There have been some negative anecdotal outcomes reported , i.e., being overwhelmed by very strong emotions/memories, be extremely anxious over not feeling “grounded,” etc., for some *who go to several-days-in- length meditation retreats or who meditate repeatedly for several hours at a time.*
- **However: such adverse reactions have not been reported otherwise when meditating in moderation.** Indeed, Benson (*Relaxation Response, 1975*): reported *never* observing or even hearing of an adverse reaction by anyone who meditated for 20 minutes or less twice daily.

**IN CLOSING: P.S.: “So, what is a good meditator? The one who meditates.”** (Allan Lokos, p. 41)

**At a minimum, through practicing meditation regularly, you can develop a practical dynamic in your daily life to be able to better focus** -- and minimize competing thoughts intruding and interfering with your preferred current focus, i.e., to apply the meditation technique of maintaining a focus on a work task, while simultaneously being aware of yet maintaining a neutral awareness about distracting thoughts...

I have found meditation to be a most appealing and helpful coping strategy and enhancement for a number of clients and others with a wide range of symptoms and life issues. And the *pieces de resistance*?

\* **Meditation: is available 24 and 7.**

\***is compatible with any therapy or counseling intervention.**

\* **Almost all forms of meditation do not require another person to facilitate its being practiced.**

\* **It is absolutely free.**

\***Meditation is effective in helping us to fully savor life in the present moment, and enhances our experience of the profound interconnectedness that exists among all living creatures.**

[How many other interventions have these five characteristics?]

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*You rebel and ask why you must do something only when you don't like to do it. But reading, playing, laughing, being cruel, being good, seeing the river, the clouds—all this is part of life; and if you don't know how to read, if you don't know how to walk, if you are unable to appreciate the beauty of a leaf, you are not living. You must understand the whole of life, not just one little part of it. That is why you must read, that is why you must look at the skies, that is why you must sing and dance, and write poems and suffer and understand, for all that is life.* Jiddu Krishnamurti (1964, pp. 162–163)

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