

Mistaken ideas: Dispelling 10 Myths about Meditation

An excerpt from Padme Nina Livingstone's [Let's Not Call It Meditation: Practical Guidance for people who think they can't sit still and quiet the mind](#)

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Let's Not Call It Meditation

www.healingwithawareness.com

It used to be that when meditation was suggested people would have a blank look in response. Now, people often respond by declaring that they can't meditate. They say they can't quiet their busy minds, can't sit still, or don't have time. Meditation has been written about and suggested by doctors and yoga teachers, including Deepak Chopra, H.H. Dalai Lama, Wayne Dyer, and Andrew Weil. Many people have read the books, tried meditation and decided they can't do it!

“Bringing awareness and correct information into our personal myths will dispel them...”

The very feelings that arise from fearful thoughts of failure when trying something new, often keep us from asking a question that would dispel misunderstandings. We also tend to find others who share the same interpretation of their experience, or what they have heard from others!

This is how myths are created. A person makes up a story, shares it, and somewhere along the line, people begin to believe it, share it as true with others, and feel that they are “right”. Just think about the phenomenon of urban myths! (If you are new to this form of story telling, go to Google, type in urban myths and you'll find dozens of listings!) “Stray doggie adopted by tourists turns out to be a sewer rat.” “Palm Beach golfer is devoured by large crocodile.”



When shown in the light of correct information, these myths are shown to be false.

Bringing awareness and correct information into our personal myths will dispel them as well.

Here's a list of myths recorded in response to years of hearing different answers to the question, “Have you tried to meditate?”

Please see if you find yourself in the list. Notice how you greet the information. Notice if there's self-judgment or openness. Notice if there's a willingness to try again...and maybe “stick with it” this time around.

1. “I can't stop my thoughts.” My mind is so busy, I can't get it to quiet down.”

This is the biggest myth. It's usually based on the assumption that people who meditate don't have busy minds, and can more easily concentrate than “I” can.

Thought happens. Everyone has thoughts...including meditation teachers. It is just that over time, with practice, the basic relationship with thought changes. Learning to focus inwardly, we can wonder about what's going on with all these thoughts.

We can name eight different kinds of thought that we experience...fearful thoughts, planning thoughts, remembering thoughts, loving thoughts, informational descriptive thoughts, creative thoughts (inspiration), and open-ended inquiring thought (Who am I? What is this?). There is also the experience of “no thought”, when action occurs spontaneously with no thought present.

Thought is basic to our human experience and meditation is not about intentionally stopping thought.

It is essentially about developing a new relationship with our thoughts ...to come to know who we really are.

2. Another misunderstanding, is that in order to meditate we have to control our thoughts, and be able to stop them by an act of will. Actually, when we are aware and curious, we begin to notice thoughts coming and going. They are continually passing through the mind as clouds pass across the sky. Sometimes the sky is stormy, sometimes clear and bright. Clouds change their form and move on, without us having to “do” anything with them. Trying to control thought would be like trying to catch a cloud in our hands.

“Trying to control thought would be like trying to catch a cloud in our hands.”

When we try to stop our thoughts, it doesn't work. We are pushing. Pushing creates stress, and aren't we are trying to find a new way of being with the stress we already have in our lives?

Do we see the space between clouds as they drift across the sky? Can we notice the space between thoughts?

Thought is not bad or good. It just is. It is essential to develop a new relationship with it!

3. ” I can't sit still. I always have to be moving”. “I couldn't possibly sit still for hours on end!”

Picture this. It's 1958. A hot summer day, a 9 year-old wiggly girl, and her 12 year-old brother have been sitting for hours in the back seat of the family sedan as it rolls across the American prairie on summer vacation. No air conditioning, windows wide open. The brother tells his sister that he bets she couldn't sit still if she wanted, and they get into an argument. The mother turns around and bets the wiggly worm that she can't sit still for one minute. Mom times it on her watch. The little girl really tries and can't.

I was that little girl. I probably would have been given medication nowadays, but back then, I just was in constant motion. And when it came time for me to meditate, the body didn't want to do it! The energies in the body were so intense, that it took everything I had just to stay with the experience. I remember feeling like there were thousands of ants creating havoc inside me. And that still happens when I am really tired! The body often has its own story to tell us when we listen, and the story is not always easy to be with.



What made me continue? Why didn't I just get up and say “To hell with this?”

The year was 1976. I had been in psychotherapy and understood enough of my family history. There was more pain in my relationships than I wanted, and I was looking for help. I had read two books (they may have been the only two books on Zen meditation available at the time!) that gave me the information I needed. D.T. Suzuki's *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* and Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen*. Suzuki gave me the new information I needed about the mind, as well as helpful information about changing my habits. Roshi Kapleau taught me how to begin a meditation practice. Both made it clear that bodily sensations were part of it all, and that if I wanted to have the clarity and wisdom that they had (which they both assured me was already there to discover for myself!), I needed to experience sensation without “doing” anything about it. So, I sat with the feelings, and they passed. Whew!

Just as thoughts come and go, physical sensations come and go. Nothing stays the same. Einstein was once asked to put into words the one thing he had learned in his life... (I may be paraphrasing here) his response was, “Something is moving.” That means all the time!

When we sit still physical sensations arise. Muscles tighten, muscles relax, antsy feelings arise, tears form and drop, sensations come and go. It is all part of the experience and can give us clues to how the mind and body work, if we are curious and willing to explore.



We can stay with the antsy feeling and experience it just as it is... no pulling away... simply noticing and wondering into the sensations. We may come to notice how the sensations change, the qualities of discomfort, and just be with whatever is happening without having to do anything ...not even name it! We may even notice that when we are quietly deeply curious about something there's no experience of thought. We may truly understand what is meant by "being open".

This kind of quiet work with the body's experience helps us learn to deal with our daily life without separating from what is happening. When a boss is criticizing our work, and we feel uncomfortable, we may have more clarity and presence. We may be able to hear what is being said to us. We may be able to stay with the body's reaction. We can learn to be with whatever is happening and handle internal chaos and pain with more honesty and compassion. In an argument with a partner, we may be able to listen to the other's feelings with compassion, and not run out the door when things get uncomfortable!

And, oh, by the way, most meditation centers have rounds of sitting interspersed with walking rounds. The longest sitting rounds I've heard of are 60 minutes long, with 15 minutes of walking meditation in between. Our meditation group sits for 25 minutes, with a stretch in between 2 rounds, or 5 minutes of walking, depending on the space we're in.

4. "I can't possibly sit in a full lotus posture."

This myth is an easy one to dispel. We can sit in chairs! And there are other postures one can use, if sitting on the floor is important to you. People in meditation centers usually have access to all different shapes and sizes of pillows to help support the body in the posture. And you can still sit in a chair. If you can lie down and not go to sleep, you can meditate lying down. People even meditate in a standing posture. The body's ability and comfort levels with different postures may change over time.

5. It helps to have a good posture. Sitting with an erect back helps the energy flow better, and allows blood and oxygen to get to the brain easier than when we are slumped over. If you sit in a chair, it is good to have the feet resting on the ground. If the chair is too tall for your legs, resting the feet on a book or two can help. (There are full instructions in awareness meditation for beginners at www.healingwithawareness.com.)

"Everyone has thoughts...including meditation teachers."

If you are sitting on the ground in a lotus, half lotus or Burmese posture, it is best to have the knees grounded, by being in contact with the floor. Supporting the knees with pillows or being flexible enough to get into a folded leg position, the knees provide a base that helps bring a physically grounded feeling to the meditation time. You can also sit on a meditation bench or pillow, with your knees close together and the bottom of your legs beneath you.

If you go to Google and type in "meditation postures", you will find illustrated positions to try out. It can also be helpful to get one on one advice from an experienced meditation or yoga teacher.

6. "I don't want to be a monk (nun). " "I have a family."

You don't have to leave the "world" to have a meditation practice. It is in our busy stress-filled life that meditation gives its greatest rewards. Many who spend years away from the world in monasteries,

eventually test their understanding and compassion in practical everyday life out in the world.

Each time we bring one moment of clarity to a chaotic situation at work, one peaceful response in the face of violence on the street, one compassionate word in answer to an angry teenager, or one honest remark in the midst of confusion, we help heal the craziness of our lives and the world. Do we notice when someone is honest, compassionate, or present in a difficult situation? Do we appreciate it? This is why it's so important to become more aware in our chaotic world.

7. "I don't have the time." "I'm way too busy." "I couldn't possibly fit one more thing into my day!"

Here's what people do that "get it." They make the time. They get up 10-60 minutes earlier to sit in the morning. They meditate while the young ones are falling asleep. It actually helps children fall asleep. My husband and I found that when we sat quietly in our daughter's room after reading time was over, our quieter minds helped her mind quiet down as well. People leave home for short periods- from a weekend to ten days for retreats. Retreat participants find they feel refreshed and able to handle the worldly stuff easier after retreats.



We make the time when we care enough.

8. "Only special, ([try adding your word for this myth] strong, Buddhist, rich, other) people meditate. "I'm not like you. I can't meditate".

A good question to ask oneself is, "What is the belief that keeps me from just sitting down and finding out what so many other people have found essential to their mental health for centuries?" "What is my resistance really all about?" Bringing curiosity to resistance is awareness in action!

9. "I don't have a space in my apartment." "I don't have an extra space for meditation."

If there's a chair, meditation can happen. Actually, since we can practice standing meditation (check it out on Google!), all we need is a closet! Just kidding. We really don't need a big space, although it can be helpful to leave our meditation chair in its own special place to help us remember to use it (ditto for meditation cushion, etc.)

10. "I'm not Buddhist." "I'm Christian (Jewish, etc.)"

11. Awareness has no religion. Honesty, clarity, compassion are how we express who we are in the world. Formal religions give us guidelines of loving behavior, but in the end, we have to figure out how to do that in our own way, through our own life experience.

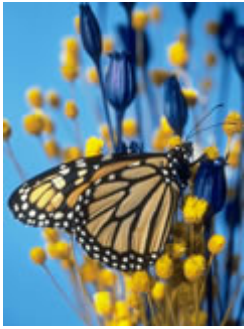
"Bringing curiosity to resistance is awareness in action!"

Meditation is a way to study the human condition as it expresses in each of us. It is a way of practicing being more aware. It helps us because we're discovering who we are by searching our own hearts and minds. We are quietly, listening, breath-by-breath, moment-to-moment, being with what's going on, with open active curiosity. No one else is there telling us what's real and what's not. We're learning through our personal inner experience what's loving and what's not.

12. "I don't have time to read about it." "I don't read anymore."

When I first started to practice, my meditation teacher told us that reading could get in the way. I didn't want to anyway, so that was OK with me. I just sat and sat, and went to retreats, and listened to talks

about practice.



A couple of years ago, I developed an appetite for spiritual poetry, magazines, and books. By reading spiritual writings that supported my experience, I realized that I was receiving support and nurturing. That was why I hadn't read before. I had to find out for myself! I wanted to understand my own mind better before reading what others had to say. I needed to have my own experience in order to glean the wisdom in what I read.

Reading can be helpful, of course. Information about how the mind works, poetry that takes us beyond our linear experience of the world, writings about healthier ways to think about the way the world works, can help us. It's also important to remember that unless one finds out for oneself- and we can find out through our own experience- it's just a concept. Our understanding will ripen to wisdom only when we go beyond the concepts and unite our aware personal experience with correct information.

13. "I can't do it."

Anyone who wants to meditate can do it. Perhaps we need to start slowly. Perhaps sitting for 5 minutes in the morning when we get up will grow to 10 minutes and more. It helps tremendously to have the support of others engaged in this inner work. Find a group to sit with on a regular basis if possible. It can also help to have the personal and/or group guidance of a meditation teacher. There are many teachers available for you to choose from through their books, appearances, and CDs. It has been said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. Be open, and notice who appears.

A certain amount of faith is necessary to explore this inner world. This faith is based on information we resonate with as true, and want to find out about. We may hear that another has found freedom, or hear another talk about the possibility of inner joy and peace, but unless there is a deeply felt personal interest in finding out for oneself, we continue to live with the same unconscious pain-producing habits. We must have the willingness, curiosity, and energy to find out about a new way of living... and correct information to help us find the way.

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