

Getting the most out of meditation.

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 Mindworks®

Ready, Set, Sit!

Mindfulness. Awareness. Zen. Insight. Tibetan. Pure Land. Chanting. Mantras. Transcendental. Lovingkindness. When you start to realize how many types of meditation are out there, you may well wonder which is the best, and how to get the most out of it. The answer is both simple and complex: of all the many forms of meditation, the best is what's best for **you**.

What do they all have in common? First, a willingness to try and remain centered in the present moment without giving in to distraction. Second, an interest in exploring the experience of being centered. But there are also some significant differences in how meditation is practiced and where it leads, from feel-good to profound personal development to spiritual awakening.

It can be helpful to ask yourself why you're interested in practicing meditation in the first place. Is it for the mental and physical health benefits? Do you need some dedicated "you" time? Are you interested in developing more calm and focus? Are you serious about personal growth and transformation? Is meditation an avenue of expression for your "spiritual self"? Or are you mainly looking to delve deep and explore the mechanisms of consciousness?

Thinking about your motivation will help you understand what the different types of meditation can offer you. And trying different types of meditation on for size may well cause your motivation to evolve. Many people start to sit for one reason—say, stress reduction—and find that after a time their practice leads them to go further and deeper. Once you've found a good fit, there's much to gain from sticking with it rather than buzzing about from one method to the next. You're working directly with the mind and its infinite possibilities: there's no telling what you might discover if you stay put.





Why Meditate?

For the sake of simplicity, we'll group the main reasons why people meditate under four categories. Bear in mind that the list is not exhaustive, and that the categories and their benefits overlap.

- 1** To improve physical and mental health through stress reduction and relaxation.

- 2** To increase the mind's ability to concentrate and remain focused.

- 3** To cultivate empathy and compassion.

- 4** To develop insight and wisdom.

Let's have a look at which forms of meditation might help you reach your goals.

1.

To improve physical and mental health through stress reduction and relaxation.

Generally speaking, meditation has a positive effect on body and mind. While meditators have known this for centuries—even millennia—science has only just begun to take a closer look at meditation’s effects on individuals’ mental and physical health. The effects of meditation in the workplace, schools, prisons, rehab, the military, clinical and other settings have been documented in studies carried out all over the planet.

In an article published in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, Carnegie Mellon University’s J. David Creswell¹ takes a close look at the results of some of the better-organized studies. One of the many insightful conclusions presented in his comprehensive paper is that many of the health benefits attributed to mindfulness practice—whether mental or physical—are related to stress reduction.

When the goal is better health and stress reduction, people often turn to methods such as mindfulness, guided meditations, transcendental meditation, chanting and meditation in motion—yoga or t’ai chi, for example. Studies have shown that simply remaining grounded in the present moment and

focusing on the breath, following relaxing guided imagery and visualizations or silently repeating a mantra² activate the parasympathetic (rest and relaxation) branch of the autonomic nervous system, allowing the body to recover more efficiently from acute and chronic stress.





An article published on the Mayo Clinic website entitled *Meditation, A simple, fast way to reduce stress*³ gives a broad overview of the different forms of practice and possible positive outcomes. The authors list the potential emotional benefits of meditation as being:

- Gaining a new perspective on stressful situations
- Building skills to manage your stress
- Increasing self-awareness
- Focusing on the present
- Reducing negative emotions
- Increasing imagination and creativity
- Increasing patience and tolerance

Meditation is not a panacea. It may not help with your hay fever or bunions, but it can improve your overall health and help you relate more positively to whatever ails you. How? By gently and repeatedly bringing your mind back to the breath, guided meditation or mantra, you learn that you can be aware of physical or mental discomfort and not grasp it and wish that the situation was different, if only for a few minutes. You learn that you can just breathe and be present. How liberating is that?

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2.

To increase the mind's ability to concentrate and remain focused.

Modern life, with its endless distractions, quasi-constant multi-tasking and gushing streams of information, isn't exactly conducive to a settled, focused mind. And indeed the human mind is remarkably prone to wandering regardless of the circumstances. Just spend a few minutes meditating in a quiet spot and take an honest look at how long it takes for your concentration to fly the coop!

Meditation has been shown to cultivate the mind's capacity to remain focused. With practices such as mindfulness, Zen and meditation in motion, for instance, we develop awareness of the mind's errant ways and train in bringing it back to the breath, or movement, or physical sensations time and time again. With regular training, the mind becomes more compliant and naturally settles with less prompting. Improved concentration may be just one of the many perks of a settled mind, but it is indeed a great ally in these distracting times.

Meditation has effectively and quantifiably improved concentration in a great variety of settings. Nowadays, some form of meditation—"quiet time"—is often folded into school curricula from pre-school to college. An article that appeared in Atlantic

magazine states that "meditation in classrooms is skyrocketing."⁴ And according to another in Forbes, one study "found that children with ADHD who learned meditation with their parents twice weekly in a clinic setting, and kept practicing at home, had better concentration at school, among other benefits."⁵





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It's such good stuff that a piece featured on [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org) quotes the American Academy of Pediatrics as encouraging parents to “Share meditation with their children—and teachers to incorporate mindfulness training into their lesson plans. The simple act of teaching children how to stop, focus, and just breathe could be one of the greatest gifts you give them.”⁶

On the other end of the spectrum, meditation also helps with the memory loss and difficulty focusing that often accompany aging as brain function gradually declines. Based on research involving elderly populations, scientists now believe that a consistent mindfulness practice can help bolster mental acuity and decelerate memory loss. In fact, research has shown that regular 20-minute meditation sessions can boost memory and improve brain function for those living with early-stage dementia or other cognitive issues.⁷ And meditation not only supports memory and attention, it also enhances mental agility and alertness.⁸

3.

To cultivate empathy and compassion.

All forms of meditation center on presence and focusing. When you practice compassion meditation, your focus is well-being: the well-being of others as well as your own. Compassion is a virtue that can be trained and “muscle” through exercise and repetition. And as it so happens, focusing on others’ well-being actually—and quantitatively—makes you feel better too.

One very popular form of meditation is **metta**, a traditional, centuries-old practice also known as lovingkindness meditation. The word **metta** comes from an ancient Indian language called Pali.

In this kind of practice, meditators focus on mindfully sending wishes of love, well-being, gratitude and compassion out into the world. Often they will choose a specific person or group of people—or animals—and wish them well with words such as, “May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may your mind be at ease.”⁹ The words can be spoken out loud, chanted, or imagined in silence. The same wishes can also be directed towards oneself. This form of meditation may be presented as a guided practice.



Regular metta practice not only focuses the mind, it also increases the meditator’s feelings of compassion and benevolence towards others, as well as their sense of connectedness. Indeed, science has confirmed what meditators who fold metta into their practice have known forever: it increases well-being.¹⁰ From enhanced feelings of empathy to improved relationships to better resilience to helping with PTSD and other trauma-based conditions, regular lovingkindness meditation has been linked to a host of benefits, much like those arising from mindfulness and awareness practices.

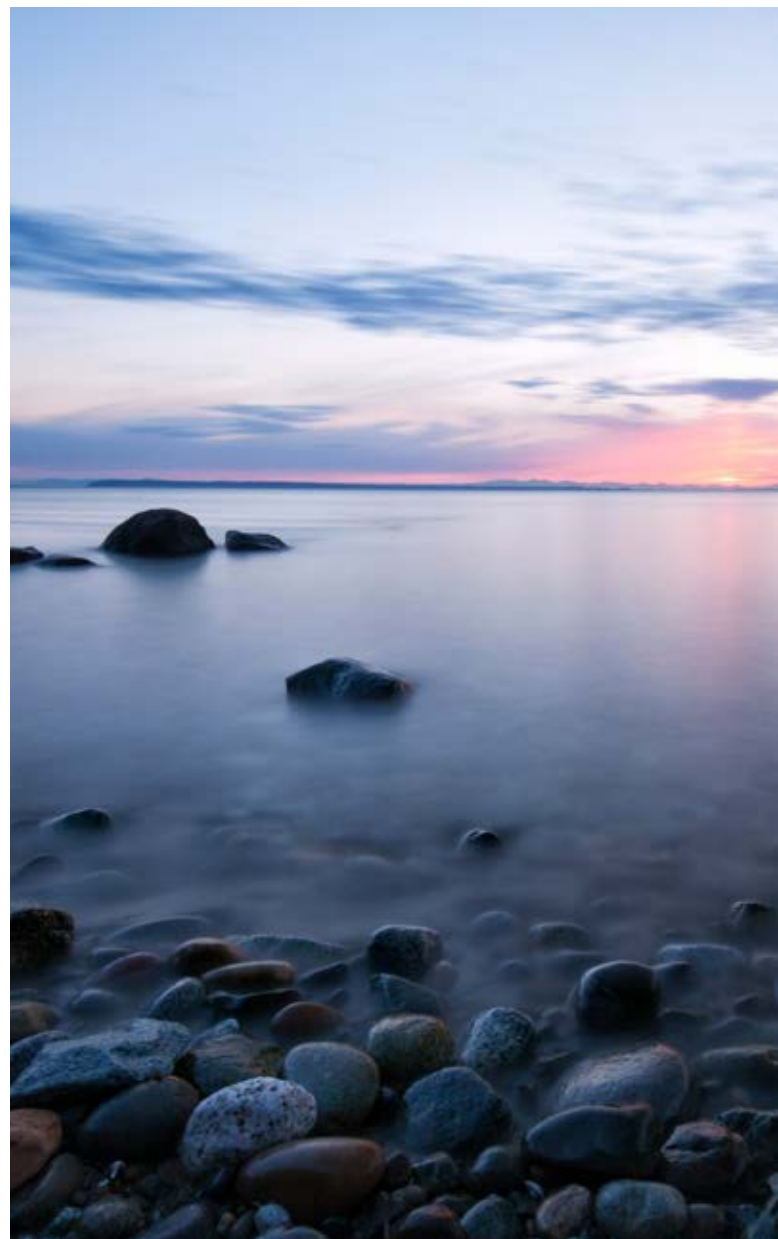
Well-being and Wisdom.

A quick recap before we continue. Let's look again at our categories. From another perspective, we might rearrange our four goals under two essential outcomes of meditation: **well-being** and **wisdom**. The first three goals above—a relaxed mind, improved focus/deep concentration and an open heart—are connected to the former, well-being.

Likewise, all of the many forms of authentic meditation practice have traditionally been regrouped under one of two main categories: **mindfulness meditation**, and **insight** or **awareness** meditation. These may also be designated by the Sanskrit terms **shamatha** (for mindfulness) and **vipassana** (for insight).

Mindfulness is the practice that leads to well-being. The final outcome, wisdom, can only be attained through awareness. We'll look more closely at wisdom and awareness in a moment.

Most of us are familiar with mindfulness in its many permutations. Remember: mindfulness is about training the mind to remain settled on an "object" or reference point such as the breath, physical sensations, a mantra, movement, wishes of well-being, etc. During our practice, when we've become aware of thoughts that are unrelated to the object, we gently and purposefully let them



go and mindfully bring our attention back to that object, whatever it may be. It makes no difference what the thoughts or emotions are—pleasant or unpleasant, fascinating or boring, based on the past or the future. There's no value judgment, censorship or applause. There's simply abiding in the present moment, the mind united with its object.



As the mind becomes more compliant, it wanders less and settles more readily—even joyfully! This naturally results in a sensation of peaceful well-being. Until we started meditating, we may not have noticed how uncomfortable our incessant mental ramblings could be. Indeed, research related in an article from *Science Magazine* entitled *A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind*¹¹ begins with the observation that:

“Unlike other animals, human beings spend a lot of time thinking about what is not going on around them, contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future, or will never happen at all. Indeed, “stimulus-independent thought” or “mind wandering” appears to be the brain’s default mode of operation. Although this ability is a remarkable evolutionary achievement that allows people to learn, reason, and plan, it may have an emotional cost. Many philosophical and religious traditions teach that happiness is to be found by living in the moment, and practitioners are trained to resist mind wandering and “to be here now.” These traditions suggest that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.”

For many meditators, the sensation of well-being that arises from a focused, peaceful mind is enough. For

others, well-being is certainly a welcome benefit of meditation practice, but the quest goes deeper. For them, the real goals are the profound insights and lasting positive transformation that translate as wisdom. Here is where all meditation is not alike.

Meditation as we practice it has ancient roots. Most of the forms of meditation that we’re familiar with today are based on practices that were developed long ago in the East. Meditation is an essential component of many transformative secular and spiritual paths whose goal is less about temporal well-being and more about cultivating the enduring wisdom born of deep insight and connectedness. Wisdom here can translate as spiritual wisdom, profound insights into the nature of mind and matter, or deep-rooted personal transformation: actualizing your potential and becoming the best human being you can be.

People have always interpreted their spiritual experiences according to their backgrounds and beliefs, but true wisdom seems to transcend such boundaries

While insight/awareness meditation can be practiced by anyone who has a solid basis in mindfulness, regardless of their spiritual beliefs, it does have its roots in the teachings of the Buddha. Which conveniently leads us to the fourth goal.

4.

To develop insight and wisdom.

A couple thousand years ago, the Buddha taught that knowledge, insight and goodness are the only reliable antidotes to dissatisfaction and suffering. True happiness, he said, can't be contingent on ever-changing external circumstances. In truth, the seeds of true happiness are already present within us. They simply need to be cultivated by adhering to a principled lifestyle and learning to temper, investigate and work with the mind. Wisdom begins with this process of looking inward and recognizing the innate qualities of mind. **Awareness meditation is the method that guides us in looking inward and discovering these innate treasures.** Through meditation, we realize that plenitude, spaciousness and joy are our mind's true nature—they've always been right there, awaiting discovery.

Once the mind has become comfortable with remaining mindful and letting go of distractions, we can use this stability to investigate the nature of our perceptions and sense of self. It's a more active, inquisitive form of meditation than mindfulness. To practice awareness in a way that can lead to deep insights about ourselves and our world, we need authentic teachings that help us understand the methods and to lead us to recognize our strengths and learning curves.



Experiences that arise from awareness meditation.

There are variations in the ways that vipassana or awareness is practiced in the different schools of Buddhism as well as how they have been explained and interpreted in secular presentations. In some traditions, it is very similar to mindfulness, while in others it has a distinctly different flavor. In all cases, the practice of awareness uses our innate curiosity to develop insights and wisdom.

During our formal practice, we investigate our experiences with impartiality and openness. **This can lead to life-changing insights and experiences.**

The insights may have to do with the nature of our sense of ourselves and the world, of the power of love and compassion, of selflessness, etc. Over the years, people have used different terms to refer to their experiences—light, awareness, clarity, emptiness, bliss, etc.—all while agreeing that the experience itself is beyond words.

Off the cushion, ordinarily our attention is focused on other people and things, the past and the future, and is tinged with preconceptions and expectations. But if we learn the right techniques, we can apply our meditation to many of our daily activities. Our actions, thoughts, feelings and emotions, however blissful or painful, can be used as objects of meditation and we can continue to learn from them. Our intent is not to control the mind, but to gradually experience the freedom of an inquisitive and open mind without barriers.

Again, this form of meditation takes practice and a willingness to look at yourself honestly; the full benefits can only be accessed if the meditator

is sincere and has a reliable guide. An article by Mindworks founder Bart Mendel¹² summarizes the profound benefits of awareness meditation:

When we practice awareness, we learn to work more deeply with the mind, leading to profound and abiding insights into its nature and the nature of the thoughts and emotions that arise within it. Based on our understanding, we can actually disrupt—and ultimately uproot—tendencies that cause us to react to situations in non-beneficial ways. Because we see the gaps in our mind, we learn not to respond with stress, panic, or anger. Our self-importance and attachment to coming out on top begin to decrease. This vital transformation can lead to remarkable changes in our lives:

- increased flexibility, understanding and tolerance
- more realistic expectations of oneself and others
- more kindness and compassion
- improved self-esteem and genuine confidence
- positive emotional responses and relationships

With awareness, we become more resilient, more open and tolerant—we recognize that we genuinely care about others. This interest in the well-being of others outshines our own fears and anxieties, which can take up a lot of space otherwise. And the beauty of it is, the more we focus on benefiting others, the better we feel!



Awareness meditation enhances well-being, too!

Because awareness takes us so much deeper than some of the “meditation lite” forms of McMindfulness that seem to pop up everywhere these days, its positive effects inform our other practices as well. Take compassion. The openness and flexibility gained through awareness naturally supercharge compassion and metta practices: it gives them more teeth.

This happens naturally because the deeper our insights, the more spontaneously and joyfully we let go of our assumptions and programming. That’s why awareness is so powerful: it leads us to the freedom of experience beyond our usual tendencies. As a result, we naturally become less defensive and individualistic; we’re less firmly locked into unhelpful habits. In fact, our old patterns may feel like old skin that we’re now free to shed, leaving us renewed and reconnected to our innermost selves, others and the world.

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Motivation, redux.

We've come full circle, back to the starting point. Choosing the form of meditation that's best for you is going to be a question of commitment, available time and guidance and, especially, **motivation**.

Even though we may think of meditation as being our “me time,” the benefits go deepest when our “me time” intention is to replenish our batteries so that we can have a more positive presence in the world. As Trungram Gyalwa, PhD, writes in his article *Meditation Benefits for Mind and Body*:¹³

We can motivate ourselves to practice by remembering that dissatisfaction and negative emotions are contagious—by their very nature, they tend to harm others. As the saying goes, misery loves company. It is even more important to remind ourselves that good intentions and feelings are also contagious in just the same way. Just think of others. Even a small gesture of kindness has a ripple effect. If you smile at somebody, they're touched and smile back at you.

Benefiting others starts with good intentions and taking care of our minds. And taking good care of our minds starts with meditation.



Bottom line.

Don't imagine that the measure of how "successful" your meditation is has to do with how long you can sit still and one-pointedly contemplate your belly button. It isn't. The measure of your practice becomes clear once your session has ended and you're back in the world. Is it easier for you to stay focused? Are you kinder, more patient, more flexible? Are you able to remain centered when faced with challenges? Do the insights that arise during your meditation have a positive effect on your relationships and everyday life?

Whether you're motivated by personal well-being, the development of positive qualities, stress reduction, access to wisdom and spiritual insights or simply a healthy curiosity about how the mind works and how to work with the mind, meditation can help you on your quest. If your goal is to be more effective in creating lasting positive change in your life and the lives of those around you, awareness is the answer.

You can develop both mindfulness and awareness in your formal meditation sessions and in your daily activities. Traditionally, these two methods are described as the two wings of one soaring bird—the combined practice is by far the most uplifting and transformative. And it takes no more time than any other daily meditation session.

So if you want to get the most out of your meditation, choose a tradition that teaches both mindfulness and awareness. Once you've found the one that really works for you, stick with it. Your commitment to regular practice—whatever the tradition—is the key to accomplishing your meditation goals.

About Mindworks Journey

Looking for an online meditation program that can unlock the full potential of your practice?

Mindworks Journey offers the skillful integration of mindfulness and awareness practices. The basis of our 9-module course is the natural progression from mindfulness to awareness to their synergy. Every member of our international team of teachers has walked the talk. With decades upon decades of meditation practice between them, they are able to transmit the essence of these profound teachings without jargon, dogma or cultural trappings.

Portions of this eBook have already been published on Mindworks.org

- 1 <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-psych-042716-051139>
- 2 <http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2009/issue61/>
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