

WHAT IT IS
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What I am finding out is that many people have no idea what meditation actually is, although they think they do. There are hundreds of opinions on what meditation is in this country, and most don't jibe with the authentic types of meditation taught for thousands of years in Asia.

In a word, basic meditation is about mindfulness and it is quite simple. Do you know what it is and understand how it works?

There is also a fairly precise posture to sit in that really helps, but not if you are too busy to learn it or self-conscious about using it. So let's put the posture aside for the moment and just focus on the essential technique of learning the habit of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is just that, being mindful, and not distracted. Mindfulness is useful in everything we do, and not just for sitting on a cushion. The Zen Buddhists teach mindfulness well. The reason we learn to meditate is not only to sit quietly for a time each day, but also to gradually bring the meditative habit and technique to bear on all aspects of our day-to-day life. If we are going to be (or have to be) there anyway, why not also be present?

And meditation is not just for the "spiritually inclined," whatever that is. If you mean by spiritual, burning incense, lighting candles, and looking at lava lamps, then meditation does not depend on any of that. Shamata meditation (and its sister Vipassana meditation) is designed, ultimately, for one thing: to allow us to rest in the true nature of the ordinary mind. And it is a deep rest.

Awareness of the ordinary mind apparently isn't all that common because most of us obscure it with all our busy thoughts and attachments, etc. We ignore it, which is what ignorance is about. If learning to rest in our ordinary mind is somehow "spiritual," then you can say that meditation is spiritual or sacred. What do you hold sacred? Many divide the world into what is sacred and what is profane (in their opinion), while others consider everything sacred. Sacred is as sacred does.

The goal of the basic technique of Shamata meditation is very simple, to build a habit of allowing the mind to rest on an object, like: whatever we are doing at the moment, "AND" to not get distracted. If we attempt to do this and wake up to find ourselves distracted, daydreaming, and our mind no longer resting on the object, then we gently bring the mind back to focus and rest again on the object of meditation. We do this every time we are distracted, again and again and again. That is the technique to build the habit of meditation.

Over time, we develop a habit of staying on focus. Eventually that habit becomes (excuse me) habitual. We no longer have to try to do it. Our muscle memory takes over and we just can do it. We remain aware of the object of meditation for as long as we wish, as long as we need to for the task at hand. We rest there. That is the bare technique.

In time, the habit we have acquired of resting our mind on the object gradually becomes portable. Just as we learn to stay on focus when sitting on the cushion, we gradually find that in other areas of our life we begin to be able to do the same thing, to stay focused on whatever we are doing. This is the great value of meditation training, that it expands like circles in water into

which a pebble is dropped.

And when we are distracted in life (just as on the cushion), we also gently bring the mind back to whatever we are doing. We strengthen the habit. This, then, is basic meditation, in itself of great personal value in life.

Originally we learn the technique on-the-cushion, but later we use the technique off-the-cushion more and more of the time. The more we meditate in life situations, the better we get at it, the more we enjoy it, and seek out other situations in which to rest our attention. This is basic meditation and, by itself, it is very useful, practical in the extreme.

With basic meditation as a base, once we have stabilized the mind, we can begin to learn another form of meditation called Vipassana, "Insight Meditation." With insight meditation we are no longer concerned about letting the mind rest. We already have that.

Vipassana is a much more active looking into and at the nature of the mind itself. A couple of possibly useful analogies for these two kinds of meditation (Shamata and Vipassana) are:

It is like threading a needle with shaky hands. Basic resting meditation (Shamata) removes the shakiness, so that we can thread the needle. Vipassana meditation is actually threading the needle.

Or...

We have some goldfish in a muddy bowl of water, which we have never seen. Shamata meditation settles the mud in the water, which then allows us to see the brilliant and vivid goldfish (Vipassana). The goldfish represent the true nature of the mind.

These two types of meditation are a tag-team. They work together, usually by learning Shamata first and Vipassana second. That is how I learned it. Some schools teach both at once, but I never learned it that way, so can't really comment on it. I can say this:

These two methods are interdependent and reinforce one another, as in: the more I get into Vipassana meditation, the better my Shamata meditation is, and vice versa.