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10 Misunderstandings and Myths About Meditation

by Melissa Eisler

When I first considered starting a meditation practice, I was a little intimidated by a few of the pre-conceived notions I had about what meditation was, and what sort of prerequisites I needed in order to start. A lot of the misunderstandings I carried were actually preventing me from meditating. I simply didn't think I was "qualified." But hearing the consistent buzz of the benefits eventually won me over.

Many of my students have since come to me with the same misunderstandings and myths about meditating. So let's set the record straight—here are 10 of the most common myths about meditation that I've heard and have held. I'm hoping that with a clearer set of expectations, meditation will seem suitable—and totally doable—for you, too.

Myth #1: You Must Clear Your Mind.

A lot of people think that meditating is all about clearing the mind, and to them, that is the very notion that might seem too difficult or daunting.

Truth: Clearing your mind does seem difficult and daunting ... because the mind is nearly (if not completely) impossible to wipe clear. It is the human mind's nature to jump around like a monkey, linger on thoughts, get stuck in cycles, and simply ... think. That's its whole job. And in meditation, you can expect your mind to wander and get lost in thought. The practice of meditation is to observe what happens in the mind in a non-judgmental way, and when you "catch" it wandering (notice I said "when" and not "if,") to then bring it back to the present moment. Again and again and again and again.

Myth #2: Meditation Is Time-Consuming.

I used to think that I didn't have enough time to meditate. That would be my favorite excuse before I began a consistent practice—if I didn't have at least 20 or 30 minutes, I didn't think it would be worth sitting at all.

Truth: You really only need a few minutes a day to begin to feel the benefits of a meditation practice. The truth is, no one has enough time to do all of the things they want to do in a day.

Actually, many people find they create more time in their day because if they meditate, they are able to be more present, productive and efficient with tasks at-hand. Peter Bregman, author and leadership consultant wrote in the [Harvard Business Journal](#), "Meditation makes you more productive. How? By increasing your capacity to resist distracting urges." He continued, "Our ability to resist an impulse determines our success in learning a new behavior or changing an old habit. It's probably the single most important skill for our growth and development. As it turns out, that's one of the things meditation teaches us. It's also one of the hardest to learn."

Start with five minutes a day and see for yourself.

Myth #3: You Have to Feel Relaxed in Order to Meditate.

If I waited until I felt relaxed before I meditated every day, my practices would be few and far between.

Truth: Meditation is actually a very effective technique to alleviate feelings of stress and overwhelm. It's true that if you meditate regularly, you'll become more adept at coping with inevitable life stress, but you don't have to feel at ease in order to sit down and meditate. Hopefully you'll feel more relaxed when your meditation is over though. So if you're in a turbulent state of mind, you likely have the most to gain from meditating.

Myth #4: You Have to Sit Cross-Legged on the Floor.

There are a lot of images of the Buddha sitting cross-legged on the earth under a Bodhi tree, yogis sitting in full lotus pose, and gurus in India sitting on straw mats with their eyes closed. This can seem uninviting if sitting on the floor is uncomfortable or unappealing to you.

Truth: There's absolutely no need to try to look like Buddha when you meditate. As long as you're comfortable—and your spine is reasonably straight—you're in the right position for your meditation. You may find that sitting in a chair or on a pillow, cushion or yoga mat works best—or you may find that sitting cross-legged on the floor *IS* the position you feel most comfortable in—but you can make that call once you try it out. The only real rule here is to be comfortable.

Myth #5: Meditation Takes Years of Hard Work to Get it Right.

What is “right” anyway, when it comes to meditation? What constitutes a good meditation versus a bad one? I always thought that meditating should be a totally blissful experience if you're doing it right, and if negativity entered your meditation, you must be doing something wrong.

At the beginning, my meditations were what seemed like a scary trip deep into the jungle on a stormy day, when all the animals were just trying to get to know each other. From where I was in my practice—and what happened during my meditations—I figured I was doing something massively wrong. And I must need to work harder at it, like years or decades. It turns out that I was wrong about this one, too.

Truth: One of the important principles of meditation is to be non-judgmental of your thoughts and experiences. So really, there is no right or wrong way to meditate and there is no meditation that can be labeled good and none that can be labeled bad. As a beginner, you may need to call your mind back to the present moment more often, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Just like many other things in life, mindfulness is a skill that takes some practice. Meditation is the practice, and the more hours of experience meditating you rack up, the more mindful you will become over time. With a consistent practice, the benefits will build and the practice will come easier, meaning you'll be able to get into the meditative state faster and you'll be less affected by distractions.

While giant life changes generally don't take place after a five-minute meditation, I noticed many subtle, positive changes in the first week or two of my meditation practice ... like my patience, perspective, tolerance, and creativity. And [research studies at Harvard](#) have shown that it only takes eight weeks of meditating daily to create measurable changes in the brain relating to stress and awareness levels.

Myth #6: Meditation Is a Religious Thing.

When many people first think of meditation, they think of Buddhist monks and “Ommm-ing” yogis sitting cross-legged on the floor, chanting and meditating.

Truth: It's true that the practice of meditation has roots from several religions and spiritual practices, but the practice of meditation itself does not need to have a religious affiliation, and there's no need to hold any beliefs or values in order to meditate.

Maria Konnikova, author and PhD in psychology from Columbia, wrote in a [New York Times article](#), “Though the concept originates in ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Chinese traditions, when it comes to experimental psychology, mindfulness is less about spirituality and more about concentration: the ability to quiet your mind, focus your attention on the present, and dismiss any distractions that come your way.”

If you want to Om, chant in Sanskrit, and pray to any God of your choice, you can do that during meditation. But that’s certainly not a requirement.

Myth #7: People Who Meditate Are Always Peaceful and Mindful.

This one makes me laugh. I definitely had a few surprising moments when I first became curious about meditation and witnessed unmindful acts from people who I thought were hard-core meditators ... even teachers of meditation!

When I started teaching, one of the first questions a student asked me was if there were ever times where my mindfulness escaped me. My answer? An enthusiastic “Of course! Every day ... I’m human. Meditating will help you live more mindfully, but it won’t take away your role as a human.”

Truth: I’ve been meditating for years, have a daily practice, and teach meditation—and I’d like to bust this myth first-hand. I have plenty of mindless and unmindful moments that I’m not proud of, and my friends who meditate and teach the practice share the same sentiment.

But I will say that since I’ve started meditating, the amount of mindlessness in my life has significantly decreased, and when I do something that I consider to be unmindful, I recognize it quicker, observe it, and try to be non-judgmental and forgiving with myself. The more I meditated, the less mindless I became in other parts of my life, too.

But yes, meditators are still human, still perfectly capable of making mistakes, doing stupid things, and experiencing unpeaceful thoughts and moments.

Myth #8: You Must Be into Yoga (or at Least Be a Hippie or Vegan).

Crystals, chanting, levitating, gurus, mythical gods and goddesses, and nag champa incense ... these are the things that came to my mind when I first heard about meditation. And I can’t say that made me more interested in trying it out.

I’ve had students ask me all sorts of questions, like “do I need to stand on my head to meditate?” and “What kind of yoga clothes do I need to buy in order to start meditating?” and “Do I need to change my entire diet? I’m not a vegan, can I still meditate?” One woman told me that she liked washing her hair too much to start meditating.

Truth: People from all walks of life and cultures meditate. It’s only becoming more widespread as the science-backed benefits of meditation become more known to the mainstream public. Meditation is for yogis, vegans and hippies, but it’s also for doctors, CEOs, bartenders, elementary school teachers, lawyers, nurses, and pretty much anyone looking to release stress, calm the mind, boost creativity, and increase their self-awareness, patience, productivity and compassion..

Myth #9: Meditation Is Easy.

“Meditating is just doing nothing, so what’s the point?” This was one reoccurring thought I had years ago. Over the years, I kept hearing about the benefits and what meditation could do for me. And when I first started meditating—an activity I thought would be easy—it was actually super challenging. I was surprised and felt like a failure, so I gave up. As an overachiever, I liked being good at things,

especially easy things. I'd restart my practice and quit many times over my first couple of years meditating. I wanted to stick with it, but I thought I wasn't good at it. I mean ... I was just sitting there, so it should be easy! But it was far from easy for me at the beginning.

Truth: Starting a meditation practice was one of the hardest things I've done. But it's also been one of the most valuable. I wish someone had told me at the beginning to expect a challenge—I would have been more patient and understanding with myself.

It's important to set the expectation up-front that being in the now—at times—can be the hardest place to be. If you know in the beginning that a meditation practice is meant to be rewarding and valuable in your life—but not always easy—you'll also learn to be patient with yourself.

Don't get me wrong, meditation can certainly be easy and effortless. Some people find that meditating comes natural to them right away, and it is in fact easy. But for others, like me, the ease of meditation takes time. It's important to know that is normal at the beginning *and it does get easier*.

Myth #10: Type-A's Can't Meditate.

This was a resolute belief I had for many years. I thought that just like some bodies are built for marathon running and others are built for acrobatics, some personality types would be suitable for meditation and others not at all.

I've always had a driven, go-go-go, type-A personality. Slowing down was hard for me growing up, and back-to-back activities were common for me even as a kid. I skipped lunch every semester in high school, just so I could take an extra class, so I'd eat lunch during those five-minute breaks between classes near my locker. After school, I would go straight to dance class, play practice or choir, and I often went to work after that. The college and corporate chapters of my life looked even more ambitious.

When meditation was recommended to me to help with anxiety and stress, I didn't think it was possible. And when I tried it more than 10 years ago for the first time, I thought I had proven myself right. I couldn't meditate, and I thought it was because I was type-A.

Truth: Anyone can meditate. And type-As probably have a lot more to gain than anyone since they often move too fast through life and typically take on more responsibilities and put more pressure on themselves to succeed. It may be a little more difficult for type-As to start out, but if they have the right expectations and guidelines, believe it's possible, and find some patience with themselves at the beginning, the rewards can be incredibly valuable.



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This post was adapted from the book, [The Type A's Guide to Mindfulness: Meditation for Busy Minds and Busy People](#)

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