

How to Meditate

You might have heard about meditation and its benefits. Most people who meditate say they sleep better, and worry less. Others say that their thinking isn't such a problem anymore and that they're not as depressed. Some people experience a radical shift in how they see themselves, and the world, where everyday events around them are much the same as ever, but they themselves have learned to let go a little (or a lot).

With all these good things that can come from meditating, many people mean to take up meditation, but it can be hard to get started, especially on your own. This is why we put this piece together, and why we offer to write to people in prison about their meditation.

"For me meditation means just quietening down, just stopping that chattering monkey, all that garbage that's going on in your head. A thought'll pop up, but you don't have to go with it. And it's not just a thought that pops up – something happens, you don't have to react to it, deal with it. Someone swears at you or pushes in front of you in the queue, you don't have to react to it. It's a case of not letting other people dictate your actions. Not letting an impulse dictate what you do. Trying to be the person you want to be."

~ J, HMP Standford Hill

Arranging Your Body

If you can find the right sitting position – comfortable, stable and upright – you are well on the way to getting the hang of meditation. Take ten minutes or so to experiment with the positions in the pictures. Once you've found a position, make sure your back is upright and truly relaxed. Sit on at least four inches of support; if you try to sit directly on the floor with nothing under you, some of your back muscles will start to ache as they work unnecessarily to keep you from falling backwards or slumping. So sit on a couple of thick books, a folded pillow or anything you can find. That way, the backbones can stack up correctly, allowing the back muscles to be relaxed.

- Keep your neck long, with the chin not pointing up or down.
- Keep your eyes open, gazing down past your nose, to a spot on the floor in front of you.



Half Lotus

Easier than full lotus. Pull your right foot in close to your body and then place your left foot on your right thigh. Switch sides each time you sit.



Burmese

A way of sitting with both legs bent and parallel in front of you, both ankles on the floor.

Full Lotus

Might be difficult at first, but it's a good, stable position. Put your right foot on your left thigh, then your left foot on your right thigh. Switch sides each time you sit.



How to Meditate (cont)

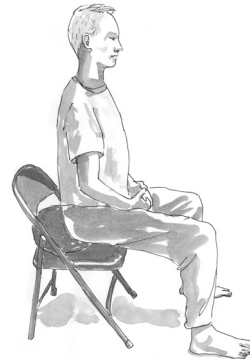


Seiza

Kneel with two cushions or a thick rolled up blanket between your bum and your feet.

Chair

It's also absolutely fine to sit on a chair, or on the edge of your bed. Sit up straight towards the front of the seat; don't lean on the back. Have your feet firmly planted on the floor (prop them up if they don't reach the floor).



Attention with the Breath

Take three deep long breaths then start to breathe normally in and out through the nose. Count the breaths silently to yourself: in 1, out 2, in 3, out 4 and so on, up to 10, and then start from 1 again. If you lose count, it doesn't matter. Just come back to 1 and keep going.

Keep going like this for five minutes to begin with. That's all there is to the practice. It is as simple as that! As you are counting your breaths, some thinking may be going on in your mind, and it is tempting to follow your thoughts. This happens to us all. It is what minds do. They wander and think and worry and plan. That's fine. It is also possible for the mind to be still and focussed. This is also what minds do. And actually, you'll find that your mind really enjoys being stiller. So when your attention wanders off from the breath, don't worry. Just let it return very gently without any thought, back to the breath. You might have to do a lot of this returning. That too is normal. Keep with it, without judging yourself.

How Much and When?

Meditation works when it's practised every day. Some prisoners tell us that they meditate for several hours each day. Others might do five minutes in the morning when they wake up, and five before they go to sleep. If you can manage to work up to 25 minutes, that's good.

Final tip: See if you can let go of trying to get anywhere with meditation. Don't try to do anything. Keep returning your attention to your breath when it wanders, and know that the time and energy you put in will lead somewhere, but don't try to be anything other than exactly how you are. We'd love to know how you're doing.

An Invitation to Sit with Us

Staff at the Prison Phoenix Trust sit in meditation each morning from 8.30 to 8.55. You are welcome to join us then if you can, wherever you are. We may not be together, but in fact we are never be separate. (Regular sitting makes that clearer J!) And if 8.30 isn't a good time for you, it doesn't matter: any time you do it is time well spent.

For help with your yoga and meditation, write to The PPT, PO Box 328, Oxford OX2 7HF

