

Meditation – An Introduction with Demonstrations

Calm Concentration Meditation

There are two main types of meditation: mindful awareness and concentration meditation. Mindful awareness, or mindfulness, means opening our mind to what is coming in each moment through our senses—usually our senses of hearing, touch, taste and smell. We open our mind to what we sense right here, right now, that we normally don't pay much attention to. Concentration meditation, also called Samatha (SAHM-ata) or Shamata, is closing off our mind to everything except a particular object that we are meditating on. We focus on that one thing. This presentation will be about concentration meditation.

“Concentration meditation” might seem like it's boring and difficult to focus on only one thing. But we don't force our mind to focus, we let our mind relax with just one thing. It's a technique to make our mind very calm, free of distractions and stress. Are there times in your life when you want to feel relaxed and get rid of your worry and stress? We try to relax by watching movies, playing videogames, reading, or doing other favorite activities. But our mind is very busy and not totally relaxed with those activities. Also, what happens to our stress when we finish the activity? The stress likely returns. But after meditation, the calmness stays with us for a while. The more we practice meditation, the longer the calmness remains. So, a better way to describe this meditation is “calmness meditation” or “calm concentration meditation.”

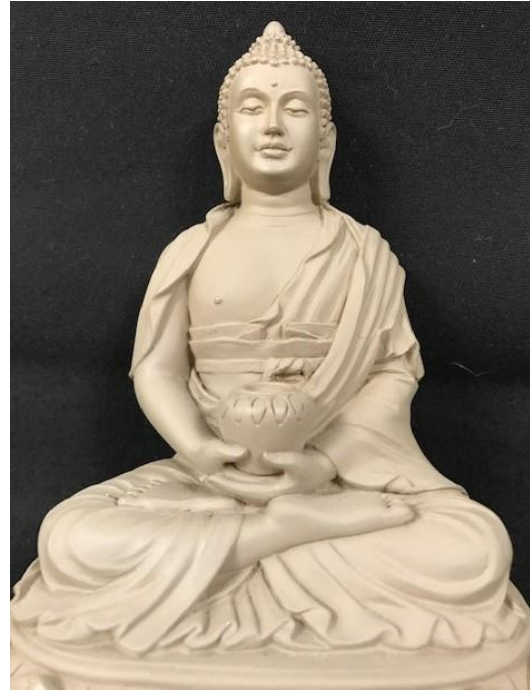
We concentrate on an object in this type of meditation. What kind of object? It must be something simple that doesn't change or move around, so our mind can slow down. It can be something in front of us that we look at, or something else, such as a mantra that we chant silently, or lovingkindness.

A simple and pleasant object to meditate on is a small object from nature, such as a flower, a leaf, a seashell, a feather, a pebble, or a fruit. We sit in a quiet place with the object in front of us, and look at it, concentrating on exactly what it looks like, in detail, memorizing what it looks like as if we are going to draw or paint it. Next, we close our eyes and try to visualize it—to see it in our mind, clearly, in detail. When we do that, we are focusing our mind, not distracted by other thoughts.

Meditation Posture

Before we begin meditation, it's important to sit in a posture that will help keep our body still but that won't make us feel sleepy.

So, we sit cross-legged on the floor. You can sit on a firm cushion or folded blanket. If you like, you can place one foot on the opposite thigh to sit in a half-lotus position, like the photo of the Buddha on the left, or, if your legs are very flexible, you can also place the other foot on the opposite thigh to sit in a full-lotus position, like the Buddha on the right. Or, you can sit on your feet with your knees together on the floor in front of you.



You can place one hand on the other palm, like the Buddhas in the photos.

Or, you can place your hands on your knees or thighs with your thumb-tips touching the tips of your pointer fingers, with your hands either palm up or palm down.

Most important is to keep your back straight. So, sit up tall with the shoulders back but relaxed, not hunched forward, and not stiff.

Your head should be in a position like you are looking at the floor a few feet in front of you.

Gently close your eyes or keep them slightly open like the Buddha statues in the photos.

As you breathe in, remember to sit up tall, and as you breathe out, relax your shoulders, arms and hands.

Meditation on Small Stone

Place a small stone in front of you.

Look at it carefully, noticing exactly what it looks like without touching or moving it.

Look at its size and shape—its outline—as if you were going to draw a picture of the stone.

Notice the main color of the stone.

Notice any other colors in the stone and where those other colors are.

Notice the details of the stone's surfaces—whether it looks smooth or rough, shiny or dull; any cracks, folds, layers, holes, dips, bumps, points or other features of the stone.

Notice the shading of the stone, that makes it appear three-dimensional.

Notice shading under the stone.

Now, close your eyes and try to visualize it—see the stone in your mind.

See the main color of the stone, and any other colors in the stone and where those other colors are.

See the stone's surfaces—smooth or rough, shiny or dull; any cracks, folds, layers, holes, dips, bumps, points or other features.

See the shading of the stone, that makes it appear three-dimensional.

See the shading under the stone.

If you can't remember exactly what the stone looks like, then open your eyes for a moment, look at the stone, and try to see it in your mind again.

Meditation on Candle Flame (only with adult supervision)

Place a candle in front of you and light it carefully.

Look at the flame and try to notice every detail about it.



Notice the shape of the flame, as if you were going to draw the shape on paper.

Notice any slight movement of the flame.

Notice the color of the top of the flame.

Notice the colors at the bottom of the flame.

Notice any colors between the top and bottom of the flame.

Notice the color and shape of the wick on which the flame is burning.

Notice the slight glow around the flame—what part of the flame the glow surrounds, and how far the glow extends outward.

Now, close your eyes and try to visualize it—see the flame in your mind.

See the shape of the flame.

See the slight movement of the flame.

See the color of the top of the flame.

See the colors at the bottom of the flame.

See any colors between the top and bottom of the flame.

See the color and shape of the wick on which the flame is burning.

See the slight glow around the flame—the part of the flame that the glow surrounds, and how far the glow extends outward.

You can open your eyes for a moment to remember what the flame looks like, and then close your eyes again to see the flame more clearly in your mind.

Demonstration With Dried Beans:

(On a table or the floor, place an illustration of a person's head in profile, and next to it, a pile each of lima beans, red beans, spotted and/or pinto beans, black beans, and lentils)

Let's make a picture, an artistic representation, of what our mind looks like typically in our daily life, and what it looks like when we are meditating.

We'll use these dried beans to represent different types of thoughts on this drawing of a person's head.

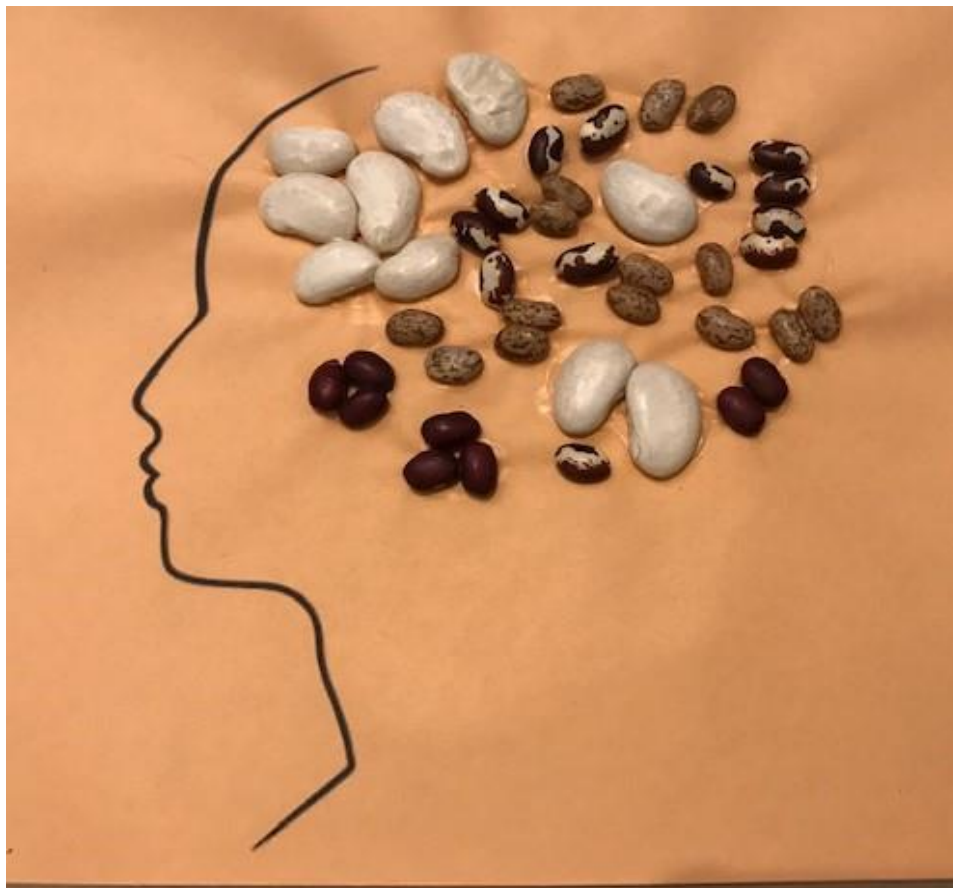
Let's imagine that these big lima beans are our strong, unpleasant emotions, or "big feelings," like anger, hatred, jealousy, revenge, fear, and worry. These strong emotions take up a lot of space in our mind, because we tend to think a lot about things that upset us. So, we sprinkle some lima beans on the picture to represent our strong emotional thoughts.

Let's imagine that these red beans represent our happy, excited feelings, for example the joy we feel when we're going somewhere special with a friend, going to a party, looking forward to our favorite activity, winning a sports competition, or receiving a wonderful gift. Sometimes we have happy thoughts, so we sprinkle some red beans on the picture.

Let's imagine that these spotted beans and pinto beans represent ordinary thoughts of the future, such as what we have to do tomorrow, our plans and expectations, and thoughts of the past, like what we did yesterday, and what we learned earlier.

We have many thoughts of the past and future, so we sprinkle many pinto and/or spotted beans on the picture.

So now we see many different types of thoughts filling our mind, represented on this picture. This is our ordinary mind.



Next, let's clear away all these beans and with just the blank outline of the person's head, let's make a picture representing what a mind looks like when we practice meditation.

Let's imagine that each black bean is one moment of focusing on the object of our meditation,

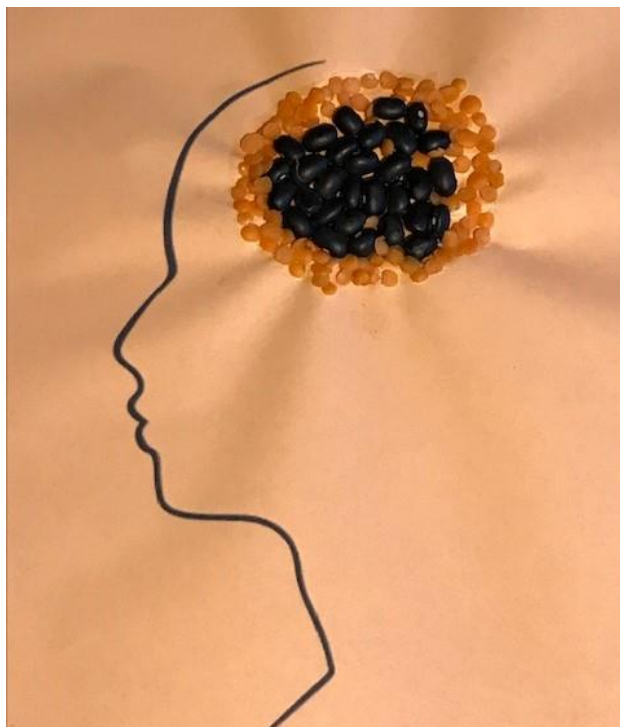
for example, one moment of observing the shape of the object, then one moment of observing the main color of the object, then one moment of observing other colors of the object, and so on. So, we put many black beans all focused together in this picture.

When our mind is so focused on the many details of the object of our meditation—represented by all the black beans—there are no other thoughts or distractions, so there are no other beans.

But after a few moments of concentration, other thoughts—distractions—may arise. Whenever we notice we're not focused on the object of meditation, then we just bring our mind back to the object, without judging ourselves or feeling that we can't concentrate well enough. So, another kind of bean comes into the picture, and then goes away.

When we're very focused on a simple object of meditation, especially after we have been practicing meditation regularly, then a pleasant, peaceful feeling may arise.

It's similar to the feeling of gazing at countless bright stars in a clear night sky in a remote area, seeing a beautiful bird perch near us, or watching dolphins play in the ocean waves, except that we don't ever get bored with it.



The peaceful feeling is represented by these lentils. We sprinkle the lentils around the black beans, to represent the peaceful feeling when meditating.

This picture represents our mind when we're practicing meditation.

What's the difference between this picture and the previous one?

Our ordinary mind looks chaotic, busy, a jumble of all types of beans.

Our meditating mind looks organized and neat.

Benefits of Meditation

Why should we practice meditation? How is it useful to us?

We concentrate on many things in our daily life—we concentrate when we study, read, work, play sports, or play videogames—so why practice concentration meditation?

When we're not meditating but just concentrating in our ordinary activities, our mind is very busy taking in new information and focusing on different things each moment.

But when we concentrate in meditation, our busy mind becomes calm. And our concentration becomes sharp, precise, like a laser focused on one point.

Does concentration meditation have the same benefits as mindfulness?

Yes, it has many of the same benefits. Both meditation and mindfulness help us to calm down and feel more positive, confident, and able to focus.

They both can change our busy, agitated, overstimulated or tired mind to a relaxed but fully alert, clear and refreshed mind.

They both can help us when we're stressed or upset. They reduce anxiety by taking our mind away from unpleasant thoughts. They calm our body, slowing our breathing and heart rate, reducing tension in our muscles, and relaxing an overstimulated brain and nerves.

But in addition, concentration meditation trains us to be less distracted, to have a less scattered mind. In our daily lives, we often multitask and have to remember so many things, so our mind gets used to being very busy, aware of so many things. Concentration meditation helps us reverse that habit so we can focus on one thing at a time when we need to.

Also, concentration meditation helps improve our mindfulness, and mindfulness helps improve our concentration. The two types of meditation support each other.

For example, when we practice mindfulness of breathing, we need to concentrate our awareness on breathing and avoid being distracted by other thoughts. When we practice mindful walking, we need to concentrate our awareness on all the sensations of walking and not think about what we're going to eat for lunch.

When should we meditate?

We can meditate in the morning, even for just a few moments. It helps us begin the day with a good mood and positive, confident attitude.

If we meditate just before we go to bed, we can relax and sleep better, and avoid bad dreams.

The more we practice meditation the more benefits we feel, just like practicing a sport improves our performance, and exercising makes us stronger.

If we make a habit of practicing meditation for just a few moments at a time while we're young, then when we're older it will be easier to meditate deeply, which will help us immensely to cope with all the stresses, difficulties and responsibilities in life.

Also, meditation gives us strong powers of concentration so we can be successful in whatever we do. And, we can enjoy the peaceful feeling we get from meditation!