

Meditation for Beginners

Meditation is a good first step along almost any spiritual path, certainly including Witchcraft and the other shamanic and nature-worship traditions. It isn't terribly hard, and it isn't very exotic. It's a fancy name for a group of fairly simple activities that are pleasurable as you do them and carry payoffs regardless of what your eventual religious choices may be.

Let's first take a look at some of the ways regular meditation can benefit anybody, whether they are religious or not:

1. **Stress reduction:** Any excitement, good or bad, sets off a state of physiological arousal called stress. It's a good thing in itself, allowing us to respond quickly and effectively when we need to. But modern life is a constant series of small excitements, like being startled when the phone rings, and our arousal level never goes back down to its "resting state" all day. Mainstream doctors estimate that 50-80% of the diseases they treat are in some way related to elevated stress levels. Problems as serious as strokes, ulcers, heart attacks are directly stress related. Laboratory experiments have shown that regular meditators go into the arousal state just like anybody, but when the stimulus is gone, they return to the resting state much more quickly and completely.
2. **Concentration:** Meditation is exercise for the mind, just as push-ups and sit-ups are for the body. One of the purposes is to strengthen the meditator's ability to focus and concentrate on whatever is being done at a given moment. Eastern meditators excel at martial arts and handcrafts because of this ability, while Western ones make surprisingly good administrators. This can't help but be useful, wherever your spiritual or professional interests may take you.
3. **Fresh perception:** We don't always pay attention to what comes in through our senses. We look at the sunset and think about how we handled that problem at work earlier or who we expect to see at the party later. Or we don't pay attention to all of what comes in through our senses. We need to focus. We watch the traffic and ignore the sunset. But the same mental control that lets us focus in can, with a little more practice, let us open up. When it's appropriate, we can just let all the beauty of the sensory world in and revel in it.

A note of caution here: some meditative systems do advocate and train for withdrawal from the world of the senses, which is seen as a veil of illusion separating us from absolute bliss. Some physical exercises are better for tennis and others for swimming, and you choose your training on the basis of your goal. As worshippers of the manifest Mother Earth, we know that absolute bliss can be found in the dewdrop on a spider's web.

4. **The Peak Experience:** A sense of union with All That Is, accompanied by feelings of great joy and peace. A major reward for following any spiritual path, this experience is actually not dependent on being in any particular religion. It isn't even dependent on being religious at all. Regular meditation seems to increase the probability that you'll enjoy this, but non-meditators sometimes also have peak experiences. Like orgasm, impossible to describe before or to miss

afterwards, and very, very good. Try it, you'll like it.

As you can see, all of these benefits are irrelevant to whether you decide to pursue the Craft. So even if you should decide that you really wanted a convent rather than a coven, you will not have wasted your time. But if you do get into the Craft, you'll soon find yourself doing things like pathworking (guided fantasy), tranceworking, divination, healing. All of these are easier and come more naturally to a mind trained by meditation.

At this point, it's time to stop talking about it and start doing it. Here are a couple of starting points;

1. **Body Work** There are many well-developed methods, and you can probably find good teachers for things like Tai Chi or Hatha Yoga near your home. Right now, here's something much more basic. Start with your right arm and tense it up. Make a fist, pull it as tight as you can. Hold it for a few seconds. Then, very suddenly, release it. Let it drop like the arm of a rag doll into your lap. Feel the increased relaxation and the increased energy flow in your arm.

Next time, instead of sitting in a chair with a book, try the same thing while lying flat on the floor. You'll be able to repeat the process not only in all four limbs, but in most parts of your body. It's a good warmup for the more mental types of meditation, or you can use it if you have trouble falling asleep. On a high stress job, you can do this with just your shoulders while sitting at your desk. Nobody will notice, and you'll break the stress cycle.

2. **Breath Counting:** Classically, you sit comfortably for ten or more minutes, breathe slowly and deeply, and count from one to four, one number for each breath, again and again. If your attention wanders, just bring it gently back to your slow counting. This calms you and gives you practice in concentration.

A Pagan adaptation of this practice would be to think "air, fire, water, earth," instead of "one, two, three, four." You can then practice visualizing the elemental colors, or a picture for each element (e.g. hang gliders, a campfire, breaking waves, a rock face). You will be reinforcing your attunement to the elements each time.

3. **Mindfulness:** The most basic one. Just observe the flow of your thoughts passively. Do not follow your thoughts nor associate to them, just let them go. The classical visualizations for this are a stream with logs drifting down it or a pond with bubbles rising slowly to the surface. Again, this will strengthen your power of concentration. It will also increase your self-awareness.

4. **Contemplation:** Choose an object and spend ten minutes a day simply looking at it. Don't describe it verbally, don't associate to it, just look at it. You'll be using the same object for several weeks at a time, so choose something that will last, like a rock rather than a flower. This trains your sensory awareness.

One Pagan adaptation would be to use one of your working tools, which would help you attune to that tool much better. Or, if you want to work on your visualization, try doing two ten minute periods per day, one with your chosen object and one without.

5. **Mantra Meditation:** This is the form everybody has heard about. You choose a short phrase and repeat it to yourself for ten minutes a day. It trains us to shut up the "inner dialogue" that most of us have going on at all times, so that we can really listen to each other or look at the sunset. Opinion seems to be divided about whether to use a nonsense phrase or one of special personal significance.

If you are curious about why and how meditation seems to work, I'm providing a short reading list. Just remember that the theory is pretty useless without the practice. In other words, don't just read, meditate.

Brief Reading List on Meditation

Johnson, Willard. *Riding the Ox Home*. Boston, Beacon, 1987

More of the background, history and philosophy, less practical advice for beginning meditators. I particularly love this book for its presentation of the "ox herding" pictures, a traditional series of illustrations of the meditative process.

LeShan, Lawrence. *How to Meditate*. Boston: Little Brown, 1974.

The most important source for this article. Dr. LeShan is a practicing psychotherapist, a student of parapsychology, and a teacher of meditation and psychic healing. Very down to earth and practical approach.

Mariechild, Diane. *Mother Wit: A Feminist Guide to Psychic Development*. Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1981.

Much of the best Pagan materials have been coming out labelled "for women." Men are either going to have to adapt this stuff for themselves, as women have done for years, or deprive themselves of excellent sources like this book. A cookbook - many, many exercises - and a fine one.

Rush, Anne Kent. *Getting Clear: Body Work for Women* New York: Random House, 1973.

As above not really just for women. An excellent summary of body approaches, exercise, breathing, massage, nutrition and more. Gentle feelings.

Watts, Alan. *Meditation*. New York: Pyramid, 1974.

More poetic than informative, but too beautiful to leave off the list. This one is for the flavor.

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