



# *Anxiety to Zen*



An Introductory Guide for Using  
Meditation to Help with Anxiety

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Anxiety versus You



Seven Myths about Meditation



Starting with Mindfulness



Discovering for Yourself



Beyond Mindfulness



What to Expect



Next Steps

## Table Of Contents

**About the Author:** Douglas Cheolsoeng Gentile, Ph.D., is an award-winning research psychologist, author, professor, and fully-ordained Zen monk. Named one of America's best 300 professors by the Princeton Review, he is also a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science. He is also a meditation teacher and Dharma holder in the Five Mountain Zen Order. With decades of scientific research and training in several styles of Buddhism, he has a dual expertise in Western psychological science and Eastern philosophy. For more information and guided meditations, go to [www.ZenBreakthroughs.org](http://www.ZenBreakthroughs.org)



## We live in an age of anxiety.

Unfortunately, many of the things we are encouraged to do make it worse, rather than better. As a simplistic example, the news on television shows us how much there is to be anxious about, but it tells us the solution is to keep watching. So we watch to feel more in control, because knowledge is power, right? But the more we watch, the less in control we feel. This becomes a type of addiction spiral, with us becoming ever more anxious.



## You might feel like you're drowning, but there *IS* a lot you can do to help yourself.

Some strategies are helpful in the short-term, and some are helpful in the long-term.

When we're gripped by anxiety, however, we tend to reach for the short-term fix. There is nothing wrong with this, but we may be missing an opportunity to see the bigger picture.

### What do you ultimately want?

### What is your long-term goal?

Everyone will have a different answer, but I believe most people's answers would include at least two similar aspects:

1. We want to be stable and strong enough that we are no longer overwhelmed by our anxiety or other strong emotions, and
2. We want to be able to get through difficult times with a sense of ease.



If you share either or both of these goals, then keep reading.



## CHAPTER 1: ANXIETY VERSUS YOU

My professional training is as a research psychologist and also as a Zen Buddhist monk. Both of these disciplines have a lot to say about emotions and how to work with them. The good news is that there are lots of things you can do. The bad news is that there are lots of things you can do. The trick isn't finding solutions – the trick is finding what solutions work for you.

Over the past few decades, if you were to look at the top ten prescribed medications in the United States, anti-anxiety and antidepressant medications are always on the list. This is not an accident, nor is it a fluke.

Anxiety disorders have been on a tremendous rise, especially among young people. We live in a very stressful world. Nonetheless, the world has always been stressful. What has changed? There are many things, but allow me to list a couple of important ones.

First, pharmaceutical companies have created many excellent medications that can be beneficial. Yet, they don't make any money on them unless people feel a need to use them. There is therefore an incentive to make people feel like they are helpless and need external help from a pill.

Second, medical professionals have gotten better at diagnosing anxiety and mood disorders. They also are visited by pharmaceutical representatives who encourage them to prescribe medications.

Third, the advent of the smart phone and social media, which lead us to feel like we need to be constantly in contact with everyone, to be multi-tasking, and keep up with what everyone else is doing seems to be one of the causal factors behind the recent increase in anxiety.<sup>[1]</sup>

Fourth, we have become more sensitive as a society toward optimizing our health and wellness, so we are more attuned to noticing when we're having difficulty.

Notice that none of these are inherently bad. Noticing when we're in distress is a good thing, as it is a type of inner wisdom. Some people need medication, and when prescribed appropriately it can be very effective. Nonetheless, many people want something in addition to medication to make it more effective. Others want to learn to manage their anxiety without medication. Sadly, our culture expects quick fixes (e.g., take a pill and feel better immediately!), and there are economic pressures to make people feel like they can't fix themselves so that they are more willing to spend money.

My experience is that many, maybe most, people can learn to work with their own minds in a way that provides lasting and long-term benefits. It helps to have a guide, but even that isn't absolutely necessary. The point is that you have far more ability to manage your emotions than you realize. You do not need to keep feeling like the victim of your own emotions.

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**[1]** Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Decreases in psychological well-being among American adolescents after 2012 and links to screen time during the rise of smartphone technology. *Emotion*, 18(6), 765–780. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000403>



## CHAPTER 2:

### MYTHS ABOUT MEDITATION

This book focuses on beginning to use meditation to work with anxiety and other difficult emotions. Let's be realistic, though. You are probably reading this because (1) you've heard that meditation can help but haven't had any good instruction in it, or (2) because you tried meditation before and it didn't work the way you thought it would and so you stopped. The actual practice of meditation tends to be very different from what people expect because there are a lot of myths about it.



#### Myth 1: The goal is to stop thinking

This is a damaging myth. The mind thinks. That's what it does. You can't really stop it, and if you try to force it to stop that's a form of self-harm.

There are hundreds of types of meditation and they all have different goals. Yes, there are a couple of them where one tries to stop thinking, but they're rare, and honestly, not necessary if the goal is to learn to suffer less. The goal, therefore, is not to stop thinking, but to not be captured by our thoughts.

#### Myth 2: Meditation is a religious practice

It can be, but it certainly isn't necessary or inherent in it. Every human wisdom tradition, whether it's religious or philosophical, has a meditative component. Some traditions call it prayer, centering, mindfulness, or transcendental. The point is that people from all cultures throughout time have recognized that meditation (broadly defined) can have real benefits.

Essentially, it is just a practice. As your grandmother probably told you, whatever you practice you will get better at. This is basic human learning psychology. So meditation is a practice where we use the power of our minds to help us understand and work with our minds, so that they don't carry us away to unproductive places.



### **Myth 3: You need special clothes, posture, incense, cushions, etc.**

Nope. These can help some people stay focused, or learn to enter a meditation more comfortably or seriously, but none of it is necessary.

My teacher says “Correct meditation is maintaining your mind, moment after moment.” That’s not about being on a cushion, wearing robes, having beads, or anything extra. Instead, it’s about disciplining ourselves not to run away from our experience.



### **Myth 4: It takes years to get any real benefit**

As with most complex human abilities, there are both short-term and long-term effects. If you do a calming meditation, it will most likely have an immediate effect on bringing your heart rate and blood pressure down. By itself, however, it won’t keep your blood pressure down for very long afterwards...maybe an hour or two. So if you’re trying to reduce your anxiety, you can probably do that in one meditation session (but there are caveats – sometimes it won’t work in the short-term!).

But if you practice day after day after day, then the effects can begin to be habitual and permanent. This is why many people start a practice and quit. They expect the effects to be immediate, and although there are some, they are short-lived until you have practiced them repeatedly.



## **Myth 5: Meditation is self-indulgent and is just an escape from reality**

My experience is the opposite. The more I meditate, the more in touch with reality I become. Yes, it has a quality of doing something for myself, which could appear self-indulgent. Yet, when I do it, I become more available to other people - kinder, and better able to work with others. So by doing this thing “for myself,” I am actually able to do more for others.

## **Myth 6: Meditation is anti-Christian (or other religion)**

Meditation at its core is about learning to pay attention. Paying attention isn't anti-anything. It's not about believing anything or following any particular teacher or teaching. It's a set of practices to help make us more fully awake and human. If anything, that's what all religions are hoping for. Doing these practices can be integrated into your current path, with no need to change anything about your path. I know lots of Christian meditators, Jewish meditators, atheist meditators... Some of them even go so far as to call themselves Christian Buddhists, because the Buddhist practices do not conflict with Christian (or other religious) beliefs.





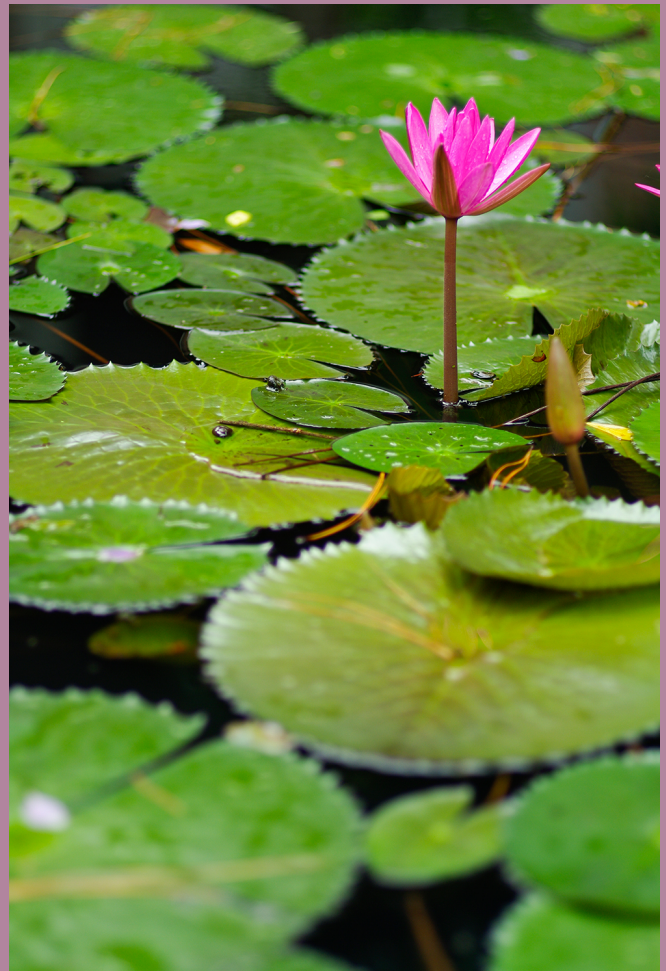
## Myth 7: Meditation is about feeling good, or at least, feeling less

Again, in my experience, the opposite is true.

Meditation is about not pushing any of our experience away. This may be difficult to hear, but we actually feel more as we get better at these practices.

This is why many people who have tried meditation to deal with difficult emotions stopped. They thought they would stop feeling them, but that's not the way it works. Instead, the practice helps us to **not be stuck** in the difficult feelings, to not be traumatized by them, and to work with them skillfully.

All emotions have wisdom in them, but it takes practice to be able to separate the wisdom from the confusion. Meditation is fantastic at helping to gain the discernment needed to do this. Once we can separate the wisdom from the confusion, then even our difficult emotions can become valuable and beneficial. We no longer feel abused and controlled by them. We can use their energy in positive ways.







## CHAPTER 3: STARTING WITH MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the new American antibiotic. People claim (and studies generally confirm) it can reduce stress, anxiety, depression, emotional reactivity, and can also improve attention, cognitive focus, and relationship satisfaction. We approach mindfulness as if it was a performance-enhancing drug – caffeine on steroids – and thereby miss the real benefits.

Mindfulness is a practice of nonjudgmental attention to whatever is occurring at this moment, without trying to force it to stay or change. Although this practice can have many benefits, it is just a first step in the right direction. It opens the door to self-understanding and wisdom, which leads to a path of ease. But to travel the path, it helps to have a map and a tourist guide book so that you don't miss any of the important sights or experiences on your trip.

There is more than one way to learn to comprehend what we see on a new path. One approach is to immerse yourself in the culture for a period of years. This could be done, for example, by entering a Buddhist monastery in Tibet or Japan. This isn't a practical approach for most people.

Luckily, the meditative path has been tested and examined for over 2500 years, and you don't have to do it alone.





To comprehend the larger picture and path without entering a monastery and learning Tibetan, we need to recognize how many people (especially Westerners) think. There is no single way, of course, but I believe that many educated people share several assumptions about the world, including:

- Opinions are distinguishable from facts
- Science is one way of testing and verifying facts
- We desire happiness and connection in our lives
- We understand that humans are flawed
- We prefer to deal with things that we understand rather than those we don't, even if our understanding is wrong
- We recognize that we tend to be fairly habitual in our preferences, behaviors, and emotions
- We value freedom of action and expression, but still feel trapped
- We want to have more authentic interactions
- We believe that people can change
- We want to be less stressed and anxious, or at least want to stop feeling out of control of those feelings
- We believe that we not only can have it all, but feel pressure that we should, although we recognize that trying to causes more stress
- We believe in self-help, but we're pretty lazy, so we'd prefer a savior
- We would rather someone tell us the answer than figure it out for ourselves, but then we devalue the answer because it came at such a low cost
- We like bulleted lists
- We don't want to be victims, but we're kind of addicted to the feeling of power we get when we play the victim
- We often feel that the worst crime is to be bored, but we do very little to stay out of its prison
- We always think the next thing (girlfriend, husband, diet, car, iPhone) will make us feel happier, yet somehow we aren't surprised when it doesn't, so we keep on looking to the next thing
- Underlying this search for the next thing is a deep assumption that happiness is achievable



Regardless of whether you agree with all of the individual items above, the list has one remarkable aspect. In it we can see what are called the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism: that (1) we seek happiness but find ourselves discontented a lot, so (2) we grasp for quick solutions, which continues the cycle of discontent. Yet, (3) we know that we could be more content, and (4) we know that we can change and that there are practices we could do to help ourselves. So we seek things to help ourselves become more happy and content, but because we want quick fixes, we behave in ways that only feed the cycle. How do we break the cycle? The trick is to not be tricked.

The deck is stacked against us, however, making it easy to be tricked. We trick ourselves and there are many outside forces working to trick us. For example, all advertising is based on these Noble Truths, which is why it works so well. Ads work to make you feel discontented. They show you people who are more attractive, with allegedly perfect happy lives, having better sex than you. They thereby show you that something better is possible, and that there is an easy solution – purchase the improved WonderCore 3000! That is, the “solution” is to continue grasping after the next thing, which just makes you more unhappy, and the whole process is a downward spiral that is good for the economy itself but for no one that lives in the economy.

Complicating matters, the mindfulness movement has also begun to use the advertiser’s approach. The “mindful revolution” made the cover of Time magazine in 2014. Almost every article in Mindful magazine focuses on mindfulness practices or promises benefits. Scientific researchers (including myself) began studying the effects so that we can either verify or negate some of the claims that are being suggested by headlines such as “The planet’s happiest human – and his app”<sup>[1]</sup> or “Mindfulness is not a cure; it’s better.”<sup>[2]</sup> Forbes magazine has articles on mindfulness in the workplace, and there are several books and seminars about how businesses can benefit from mindfulness.

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[1] Addley E. The planet's happiest human - and his app. The Guardian, 2015, May 29.

[2] Goldstein E. Mindfulness is not a cure; it's better. Huffington Post, 2012, August 8.





Although it is certainly true that mindfulness can help in many ways, it will be of limited value – just another fad diet – unless we take the steps beyond basic mindfulness to get to wisdom and ease. That is, if a diet says we should stop eating candy, this alone does not get us to health. True health comes from doing the other things necessary beyond the diet, such as getting sufficient sleep, exercise, etc. If we focus only on one aspect, it can't have the full effect we desire.

There are lots of good resources for ways to do mindfulness meditation, so I won't go into detail here, but the basic instructions are:

1. Take a comfortable seat
2. Set a timer (5-24 minutes is most typical – I recommend short times for beginners)
3. Take three deep breaths feeling the breath all the way in and out, noticing where you feel it most keenly, and then
4. Place your attention wherever that is. Some people will feel the breath most at the nostrils, throat, chest, or belly...it doesn't matter. Find a place, and focus your attention on the feeling of breath going in and out.
5. When you get distracted (and you will - that's the way it works), notice that you've been distracted, and replace your attention on the breath.

Although this seems simple, it's surprisingly hard to maintain for more than a couple of minutes.

The more interesting question, perhaps, is "now what?"





## CHAPTER 4: DISCOVERING FOR YOURSELF

I am, first and foremost, a scientist. I do not believe something without some data or evidence. I am biased toward practical solutions rather than theoretical or inspirational approaches. What attracted me to mindfulness and meditation is that they are practical – that is, they are practices. Furthermore, they are empirically testable. You can try them yourself and test whether they work as advertised.

Meditative techniques also interest me because they have been used by many different types of people for thousands of years. Every wisdom tradition has a history of including a meditative component. Several Christian mystical traditions include meditating. Some use an apophatic approach – focusing on what God is not, stripping away our thoughts of what God is like because concepts limit. Meditation in this style seeks to rest in the felt presence of God without concepts and ideas. Others use a kataphatic approach – using images, concepts, and visualizations such as the image of a mystical marriage with Christ. These meditation techniques are not unique to Christianity. Most religions use visualization, such as seeing God as a creator or “heavenly father.” Prayer can be a form of meditation. Some religious traditions have deep meditative practices. For example, Sufi meditation focuses on self-discovery that helps one to understand Allah, including single-pointed focus: “Sufi meditation is directed towards the heart since the heart is the center and the seat of love and divine inspiration, and the heart does not falsify that which it sees.”<sup>[1]</sup> Modern psychotherapy uses mindfulness approaches. Artists use meditation to unlock creativity (see, for example, director David Lynch’s book *Catching the Big Fish*). To paraphrase an old Elvis Presley album title, 100 million meditators can’t be wrong. There must be something to it for it to have been passed down through so many wisdom traditions for millennia.

With this approach to testing for ourselves, we can begin to examine the practices and claims about meditation. Meditation is said to have many benefits – this is something you can test for yourself. There are many different types and styles of meditation, and they are designed to have different outcomes. Each of these outcomes, however, should be tested against the metric of whether they increase or decrease our suffering.

Broadly speaking, there are two styles of Buddhist-inspired meditation practice: **Familiarizing** ourselves with how our minds and emotions work, and **Cultivating** new and healthier patterns. Mindfulness meditation focuses primarily on familiarizing.

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[1] Angha N. Meditation. Principles of Sufism.8(2).



If you want to reduce your anxiety and live with more ease, it is valuable to start by familiarizing yourself with your mind and emotions. How can you change or improve something until you understand how it works? If my car isn't running smoothly, just wishing for it to work won't help. Repainting the car or putting an inspirational CD in the CD player won't make it run more smoothly. By knowing how the car works, we can focus our efforts on the places that can actually make a difference. Similarly, we need clarity about our circumstances and ourselves to be able to make a difference, but often when things aren't going the way we want, we get caught up in blaming and feeling that it "shouldn't be this way," and then we make a bigger mess.

Mindfulness meditation starts us on the path to understanding how our minds work. As we gain familiarity with our minds, the ability to be mindful begins to cultivate three properties: **Tranquility**, **Stability**, and **Clarity**. Each of these helps prepare us to be able to work with our minds more easily.

Tranquility is often a goal people explicitly have when they begin meditating - they want to slow the mind down and have some sense of peacefulness or stress reduction. It is worth noting that people often also have the belief that the goal of meditation is to stop thinking. This is not correct. The mind will always think - that's what it does. The goal is to learn to be less hooked by the thoughts.

As we slow the thoughts down, we begin to be better at focusing our attention intentionally rather than being so easily distracted by the next thought. This increased stability is sometimes called one-pointed focus.

As we gain stability and tranquility, we also begin to gain some clarity by seeing deeper into our true natures.

A classic analogy asks you to imagine scooping a glass of water out of a muddy river - it is undrinkable at first. There is too much sediment floating around in it, and no amount of effort will change that. You can't get the mud to settle out by shaking it hard or trying to force it to the bottom. Instead, if you let it sit quietly, the impurities will slowly settle to the bottom of the glass, leaving the water tranquil and clear.

Once we have achieved some stability and clarity, the mind becomes easier to work with. We can see more clearly how our thoughts, beliefs, and actions have effects - whether our states of mind tend to be helpful or harmful. We can begin to practice meditation techniques that cultivate beneficial states of mind.

That is, there are many more practices beyond mindfulness meditation, so mindfulness is really just a first step.





## Perils of Mindfulness for People with Anxiety

Straight-up mindfulness meditations have a spotty record for helping with anxiety. There is little doubt that they can help many people, but for some, they may make things feel worse.

In particular, some people with a history of trauma have coped by divorcing their awareness from their bodies. When asked to focus carefully on the feeling of the breath in the body, this might actually trigger more anxiety (at least for a while).

In contrast, some people with a history of anxiety or panic attacks may be hypersensitive to feelings that may suggest they are about to have an attack. When asked to pay closer attention, it again may trigger a sense of increased anxiety.



The point is that mindfulness meditation is not a cure-all. Some people may need to do other styles of meditation to get the benefits, at least at first.

If it doesn't seem to be working at first, that's normal.

Mindfulness meditation can make us feel more relaxed, calm, and resilient right away, but in my experience, that doesn't happen for most people.

Instead, we gain ease and resilience over time, reducing the intensity or length of anxiety, giving us new ways to work with it.





## CHAPTER 5: BEYOND MINDFULNESS

Many people enter meditation because they are suffering and they hope that these practices can help them. They know that they are a mess, and they want meditation to “fix” it. Yet, as they sit on the cushion, they are confronted very directly with all the ways in which they are a mess.

This can be disheartening.

They wanted to get better, but it seems like it’s getting worse. If they don’t quit, and many do at this point, then they may confront the next problem.

There’s a seeming contradiction in the practice: I want to be one of those joyful people who handle things with ease, but I’m an anxious, controlling, neurotic mess. How can I become what I’m not?

The answer to this contradiction is that it’s a false problem. You aren’t only a mess – you have all of the other aspects of ease, trust, and compassion already in you – you just haven’t practiced them as much as you’ve practiced anxiety.

So we practice in a simple but effective way in meditation, using the time on the cushion as a safe place to focus on these skills of setting intentions, focusing and sustaining mindful attention, broadening our awareness, and letting go so that we can be less reactive. Every time we go through this cycle, each of these aspects gets stronger. If you practice a loving-kindness (*metta*) meditation, you will likely become less angry and more kind, because you already have those aspects in your personality.

Ultimately, your grandmother was a great neuroscientist. She told you “practice makes perfect.” She was right. So what do we want to practice? How do we learn the practices to help our anxiety? There are so many answers to these questions that it can be overwhelming. Let’s break it down a little.

First, what external help might be beneficial? Would it help to see a therapist? Should you get on or change medications? Do you need to talk to someone to help you let go of some old baggage? You can make a list of things that require someone else to give you something and then decide which you are able to attempt. But even if you don’t have the ability to get help from others, there is still a great deal you can do yourself, which brings up the second aspect.

What can you do for yourself? You might think about things you can change, such as jobs, relationships, how much you are on social media, etc. There may indeed be things that need changing, but if the focus is on what you want to change in your environment, you will be limited in how much you can do. If you focus on your interior environment, your habits of mind, your habits of emotion, your ways you like to cope, then you can make changes that follow you everywhere and don’t depend on external circumstances to be effective.





As noted in the last chapter, meditation techniques can be grouped into two main functions - familiarizing and cultivating techniques.

Familiarizing meditations are designed to help us see our mental and emotional habits clearly, so that we can begin to see what types of thoughts help us and which actually hurt us. For example, often we think that reacting in anger will make us feel better, but then we later feel guilty or realize that we made things harder for ourselves by the way we reacted. We can't change our approaches until we see them clearly.

There are lots of types of familiarizing meditations. These include:

- Mindfulness of thoughts
- Mindfulness of feelings
- Counting positive, negative, neutral thoughts
- Mindfulness of breath, noticing what types of things distract you
- Discerning how thoughts and feelings chase each other

Once we start seeing how our thoughts and feelings are conditioned and habitual, we can begin to create new habits. This can be done through cultivating meditations, including:

- Loving-kindness (*metta*) meditations
- Compassion (*karuna*) meditations
- Equanimity (*upekkha*) meditation
- Contemplative meditations on karma, on cause and effect
- Contemplative meditations on interdependence

There are more than these, of course, but hopefully this short list makes it clear that there is a lot you can do for yourself to begin to improve your situation even if nothing in the external world changes to support you. In fact, in Buddhist thought, you are really the only who can help you. Your liberation does not depend on external situations - if it did, then basically only a few lucky people would ever be ok. But Buddhist philosophy is clear that calm and ease are available to everyone. It might just take a little work.





## CHAPTER 6: WHAT TO EXPECT

It's too easy for people who struggle with anxiety, depression, trauma, and other difficult emotions to believe they're supposed to just paper over their feelings with a smile and pretend. I suppose there may be times when this is needed, but in the long run, it isn't going to be helpful.

Zen approaches are about learning not to pretend. That means it won't always feel comfortable as you progress.

One of the real problems with the current mindfulness movement is that people talk about meditation as if it is a smooth and generally easy path, filled with sunshine and flowers and all the comic books and wax lips you could want. Then when you come upon a bumpy patch, you feel like you're doing something wrong, or worse, that you "can't meditate." I have had lots of people tell me this, and it's baffling. Any time you concentrate on something by putting some effort into paying attention, that's basically meditating. Everyone can do it. They just don't do it in a way that helps them to understand their own minds. You can do it. But that doesn't mean it will always feel good. Here is what you can expect as you travel down the path.

Some people have a couple of really "good" meditations when they begin. They feel relaxed and calm, maybe even slightly euphoric. Other people feel it as a struggle with no real sense of calm, just relief when they stop. Others spend the whole time wondering if they're doing it right, or just go off on a daydream the whole time. None of these is really any better than any other.

It's very typical to focus on the breath (or whatever the object of meditation is) and



then after only a minute, the train of thought comes by and you catch a ride on it. Maybe you don't even notice you've been riding the train of thought until the final bell rings. Maybe you notice after a couple of minutes, then come back to the breath for 3 breaths until the next train takes you on another ride.

Over time, you start getting better at catching yourself and returning to the breath. Ironically, this makes many people feel like they're getting worse at meditation. They feel like their minds are getting even more uncontrollable, because they notice that now they get lost in thought lots of times during a meditation session. This feels like a failure, and leads many people to think that they can't meditate, or that they "tried it and couldn't stop thinking." And so they quit just when it was really starting to work!

This is ironic and disappointing. When they started, they only got off the distraction train once every 10 minutes. Now they notice they're distracted within about 30 seconds, and so they catch themselves lots of times. This shows that they're getting really good at meditation, but they take it as evidence that they're getting worse, and give up just as they could begin to move into more advanced techniques.



The point isn't to stop thinking. You can't. The point is to notice when you're thinking. There are pauses between the thoughts. See if you can stretch them out to be a little longer. You will never stop thinking, and you shouldn't. So continuing to be distracted by thoughts in meditation is not evidence you can't do it.

These incorrect ideas are barriers you erect for yourself. Once you get past them, however, new opportunities open up. Most people start to see themselves a little more clearly. With this new clarity, they gain the ability to make some different choices. Perhaps a situation at home would normally make you angry and you would yell. Now the situation begins to push your buttons and you see how your habitual thought processes are manipulating you to do the same thing you always do. You know how that will end. But now you see that maybe you can insert some pauses into the habitual thoughts, or pay attention to something you hadn't noticed before, and this gives you space to try something different. No matter how it turns out, you now have new data to start seeing what else you could do differently. This relaxes the sense of claustrophobia that many people feel when a strong emotion arises – it gives a sense of freedom, that there are more ways through and out than you used to be able to see.

At some point, most people have a regression. They get to a point where the anxiety gets worse again, or where they seem to lose whatever progress they felt they had made. This is the way it works. We spent our lifetimes building habits, and the habits feel comfortable even when they make us miserable. They have a type of gravity, constantly trying to pull us back into our old emotional patterns.

Because the habits feel comfortable, anything you do to challenge them will almost necessarily feel uncomfortable.



We spend too much of our lives hiding from our own experience. A classic study asked people to try lots of experiences, some pleasant (e.g., eating chocolate) and some unpleasant (e.g., a painful electric shock). They were asked how much they would pay to either repeat or never repeat the experience. The researchers took the people who hated the electric shock so much they said they would pay to never have it again, and connected them back to the shock machine. They were told that they had to wait 15 minutes for the next part of the study, and if they pushed the button they would get another painful shock. Remember that these were the people who hated the shock. 67% of the men and 25% of the women gave themselves shocks rather than just sit there. That is, they preferred actual pain to the existential pain of simply waiting!<sup>[1]</sup>

So you should expect that at some point (or many points), you will feel like you would prefer to return to the old habitual troubles rather than suffer through the pain of learning new patterns.

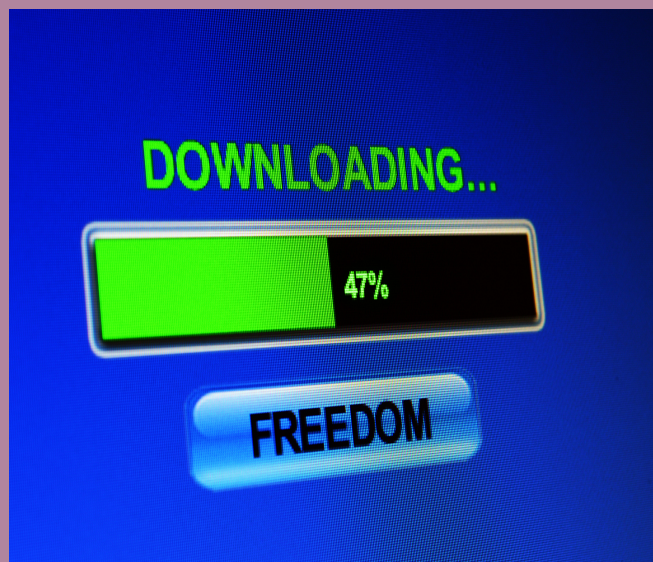
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<sup>[1]</sup> Wilson, Reinhard, et al., (2014). Just think: The challenges of the disengaged mind. *Science*, 345(6192), 75-77.



If you keep practicing, however, you will likely find that you get sucked back less into the old habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, or you'll return to old habits for shorter periods of time. **This is a huge breakthrough** (although you might not even recognize it). You aren't stuck. And it does get easier, even if it isn't always a linear progression.

Over time and with enough practice, you will find that you can handle anything. In fact, this isn't new. You always could - you just didn't trust yourself enough yet.



## CHAPTER 7: NEXT STEPS

I assume that you have read this far because you are ready to see if meditation can be of use to you. Maybe you tried in the past, but didn't get the results you expected. What can you do now to begin working on achieving the freedom from negative patterns?

Obviously, you will be the best judge for yourself, but here are some things to consider.

### Do you need a teacher or guide?

No. But having one can help.

We are highly adept at fooling ourselves. Just look at how you already try to manage your anxiety. If what you were doing was really beneficial, you wouldn't still be stuck. Yet, you keep doing the same things with the mistaken belief that they are helpful.

A teacher can show us where we're stuck and where we're fooling ourselves.

In addition, some types of practices are hard to learn without a guide of some sort. This is why I think going to a meditation group or doing guided meditations can be so beneficial - we aren't left to figure them out for ourselves.

### What if you don't live near a teacher or group?

There are lots of online resources now that didn't even exist five years ago. You can connect with real teachers in many lineages and find one that fits you. That's really the key - just because one practice or teacher doesn't help you does NOT mean that you are helpless. You just haven't found the right practices or teacher.

### How do you get started?

There are many excellent introductory books on mediation.

You can search your area for a local meditation group, and most will let you come for free or a small fee. If it's a big fee, you should be skeptical.

You can often get basic meditation instruction from a therapist. This is usually very basic. It would be a good start, but most therapists are not trained in what to do next with meditation.

There are several apps that provide guided meditations. I personally like Insight Timer, and have a couple of talks on it.

My website [ZenBreakthroughs.org](http://ZenBreakthroughs.org) has a wide range of guided meditations, talks, videos, and other resources that specifically target working with anxiety and other difficult emotions.

### What if you need help right now?

Reach out to friends, loved ones, or a therapist. You don't have to face everything alone. If you don't have anyone you can talk to, call the National helpline for mental health at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). This is a confidential and free service that can help you to access local resources.



# Thank You for your Practice!

This has only been a start, but that's all we can do - Keep starting, keep practicing, and at some point we will be surprised to see how far we have come.

For more practices and support, please visit

[www.ZenBreakthroughs.org](http://www.ZenBreakthroughs.org)



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