

CONQUER YOUR MIND

Through meditation practice, you can bring about transformational changes in your life

THE ARTICLE COVERS Q/A OF -

- Why wandering mind is unhappy and focused mind is happy mind?
- What's default mode network (DMN) in brain and how it relates to our ego and mind's health
- Why meditation is becoming more popular in USA compare to India?
- How can we meditate without learning from expert/teacher?
- How meditation affect our physical and mental health and wellbeing?
- How can we become a better human being through meditation?
- What are the myths and misconceptions about meditation in India?

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& Explore Your Life Journey



Through meditation practice, you can bring about transformational changes in your life

When we closely observe our mind, with closed eyes, for a few moments, what we see is a nonstop stream of thoughts. We have no idea how thoughts arise. From one set of thoughts to another, the mind is always engaged in generating thoughts. Most of the time, the mind is restless. Like a monkey, it jumps and swings from one branch of thoughts to another, alternately nibbling on and throwing out "half eaten" fruits/thoughts. Buddhists call it the "monkey mind" to describe its unsettled and restless nature. Unless we calm our monkey mind, it never rests, and keeps jumping in all possible directions.

We all must have noticed that despite trying hard to stay in present, our mind keeps wandering. Mind's wandering increases when we perform uninteresting tasks. When we attend any lecture or meeting and the topic is either not relevant or not to our interest, our wayward mind will not be attentive to the subject. We invariably get lost in our own thought process. We are either planning or anticipating the future, worrying about something, or reliving the past. There is no shortage of upcoming tasks and duties to think about. Even if we don't have anything pressing to consider, we will slip into daydreams. We are lost in fantasies.

Mind's wandering is a natural phenomenon. It's the very nature of our mind. In a way, it's our default mode of mind. Researchers have recorded people's brain activity and their mind-wandering. It was found that when their mind was wandering, their brains showed activity in several parts (cortical regions) that are the same ones that are active when our brains are "at rest." These areas are always operating in the background. So, mind-wandering is a natural feature of how our brains work.



**Normally,
50%**

of the time our mind is not focused or attentive; in fact, it's on wandering mode.

When we are bored or doing routine or any uninteresting work, mind's wandering is as high as 70%. On the other hand, when we are engaged in mind-absorbing or concentration-demanding tasks, this percentage is low, as low as 10%.



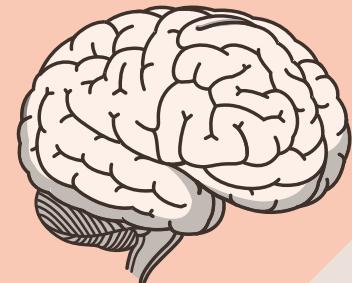
When our mind is wandering, it means it's an 'autopilot mode' or in default mode. During this time, many interconnected areas of brain are active and they form a network, which is known as default mode network (DMN). When there is a high activity in DMN, it means we are not focused on the present moments and thinking about all other things (except about the task at hand). In a way, DMN is a home of our 'ego'. It's also referred as the "me" network of our brain. It lights up when we think about ourselves, daydream, introspect, worry or busy with 'I' thoughts.

It's a known fact that when we are disturbed or distressed or worrying about something, then it's very difficult to focus on present. Mind's wandering increases on those moments. We are not able to concentrate on any anything other than the issue which is troubling us. It's well established that wandering mind is unhappy while focused mind is a happy one. Among the life's most challenging tasks is to control our mind. To manage thoughts under distressing moments is not an easy way. More we try to suppress our negative or troubling thoughts, more forcefully they resurface. Even if we divert our attention to entirely different thing, we are not able to focus on present. This condition leads to 'overthinking'. Same set of disturbing thoughts come in the mind despite our best efforts.

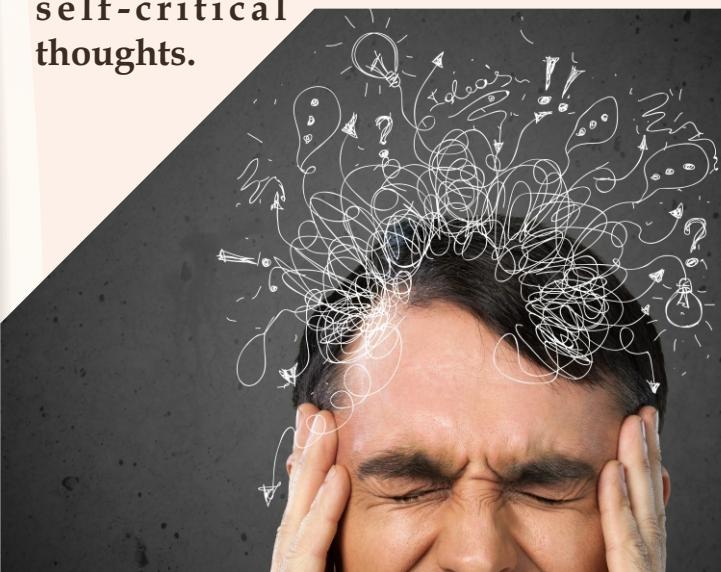
So, whenever we are not focused on any task or present at the moment then our DMN is activated.

We are on 'thinking mode'.

Our thinking mind is at work.



When we keep on overthinking all the time, it may even lead to a mental condition like depression or anxiety. This situation, in turn, reinforces the overthinking. Under both conditions, we are deeply mired in distressing thoughts. Studies have shown that overthinking leads to serious emotional distress. Whether we worry and fret about something or are fearful and anxious, those repetitive and negative thoughts are reluctant to leave our head. Too often, our inner voice will keep on repeating self-critical thoughts.



When we experience continuous bombardment of negative thoughts, unless we control them, they can potentially lead to mental illnesses. Mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, or attention deficit disorder invariably start with our inability to manage toxic and distressing thoughts. Then a time comes when those thoughts become uncontrollable. Therefore, each one of us must learn how we can manage thoughts when we face challenging situations. Negative thoughts are among the biggest obstacles we face on our life's journey.



Negative thoughts are, by nature, very sticky. They stick inside the mind. It's very difficult to get rid of them. Through meditation, we can remove 'stickiness' of those distressing thoughts. To understand it better, read this small story. Once a thief goes in a house to steal valuable things. There were no occupants in the house. When thief reaches the house, he finds nothing worth stealing. The thief after spending some time, left quietly. He had nothing to steal. Likewise, when mind is intruded by negative and disturbing thoughts, if we don't pay attention, the intensity of 'negativity' of those thoughts will decrease. Like the thief, those thoughts had no incentive to stay in the mind when we pay no attention to them. So, we must not entertain those kinds of thoughts.



Researchers have established that whenever we suffer from disturbing thoughts, it's the DMN, which becomes overactive. These disturbing thoughts are directly or indirectly related to our ego or self. Mind wandering increases, there is difficulty in focusing on present moments, when DMN becomes overactive. No doubt the DMN is useful because it gives us the 'sense of self-identity'. All of our autobiographic memories, perceptions, beliefs about Self etc are stored here. However, the problem arises when it becomes overactive. Research establishes that even when we suffer from mental diseases like depression, anxiety and schizophrenia, activities increase sharply in this network.



Several studies have shown that therapies like meditation could influence the default network. Our thinking mind or the DMN can be calmed by way of meditation. After practicing meditation, we can effectively control DMN of our brain. That's the reason with meditation, we start managing our thoughts especially distressing thoughts. These types of thoughts can't disturb our mind for a longer time. This is how through the practice of meditation; we can successfully control the inflow of thoughts. Negative feelings like sadness, depressive mood, hatred, loneliness, fear and anger can be managed very well through the ancient practice of meditation.

Meditation is currently one of the most powerful wellness trends in the world. It's growing exponentially across many nations, including the USA and India. Since the benefits of meditation have been validated by scientific studies across the globe, very large numbers of people are turning to it.

Meditation along with yoga, two ancient practices, is now officially the most popular alternative health practice in the United States. According to the survey conducted in 2017, nearly 14.2% people practiced meditation as contrast to just 4% in 2012. Meditation is thriving, and has become a billion-dollar industry in US.

Recent trends show that meditation has become a widespread movement in the USA. Though the corresponding figures are not available for India, it's certain that a far smaller percentage of Indians are engaged regularly in meditation. Isn't that surprising? Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, way back in 1975, introduced Transcendental Meditation™ in the USA, making it popular among a large population. India is a land of origin of meditation practice. The oldest documented evidence of meditation practice is found on the Indian subcontinent, from approximately 5,000 to 3,500 BCE, where wall art shows people seated in meditative postures. Many kinds of meditation practices began and developed in India. Unfortunately, the number of meditation practitioners in India has not grown to the extent that many countries are now witnessing.

People are now realizing that meditation is the best tool to train their minds. Meditation studios, brands, and apps are popping up worldwide. Along with a healthy diet and exercise, meditation is being recognised as one of the three pillars of well-being. As the way the meditation grows ever more popular, a solid backing of research studies conducted worldwide keeps pace. Otherwise, this practice would not have spread so rapidly. Today there are more than 4,000 research studies, according to US National Library of Medicine, pubmed.com, on the subject. About 25 papers were published each year in the 1990s, whereas over 400 were published in 2016. In fact, many studies of meta-analysis are coming up corroborating the results of various research projects.



A listing of meditation's benefits on both physical and mental health, validated by research studies, would become voluminous. Therefore, only certain critical areas are being touched upon here. When we meditate, we practice moment-to-moment awareness while observing whatever happens around us. It's like any other physical exercise. The result is that our mind gradually becomes more focused and attentive.



As we become more aware, our meta-awareness (awareness of awareness) increases. We become nonreactive, responding appropriately to situations as the need arises. We then start observing ourselves from a distance. It's a big positive change that happens when we meditate. We begin to make more conscious choices and decisions because of increased self-awareness and attention to the present moment.

When we practice meditation, our DMN becomes quieter and less active. In other words, our thinking mind is under check. We gradually inculcate the habit of becoming more and more nonreactive and nonjudgmental. This can truly be called "becoming awakened" or, in the words of philosopher Gurdjieff, "waking up." We can experience inner peace and serenity in a stressful world.

According to one estimate, a person of 30 years of age who does regular meditation for the next five years can expect a biological age of 23 at the age of 35; his non-meditating counterpart will show, on average, a biological age of 36 years. Such difference in biological age can be observed in real life situations. So, for a longer and much healthier life, meditation can be the best and easiest option available. The reason behind slow aging is primarily taking care of mental stress, which most of us experience.

Once we begin to live mindfully and are attentive to whatever is happening around us, many pleasant changes in our mind and body start manifesting.

Whatever may be our core purpose in life, we all want to live a healthy and happy one for the longest possible time. No one wants to die prematurely. What is happening now is that more people are dying from lifestyle diseases. Research has shown that through regular practice of meditation, we can slow down our aging process.

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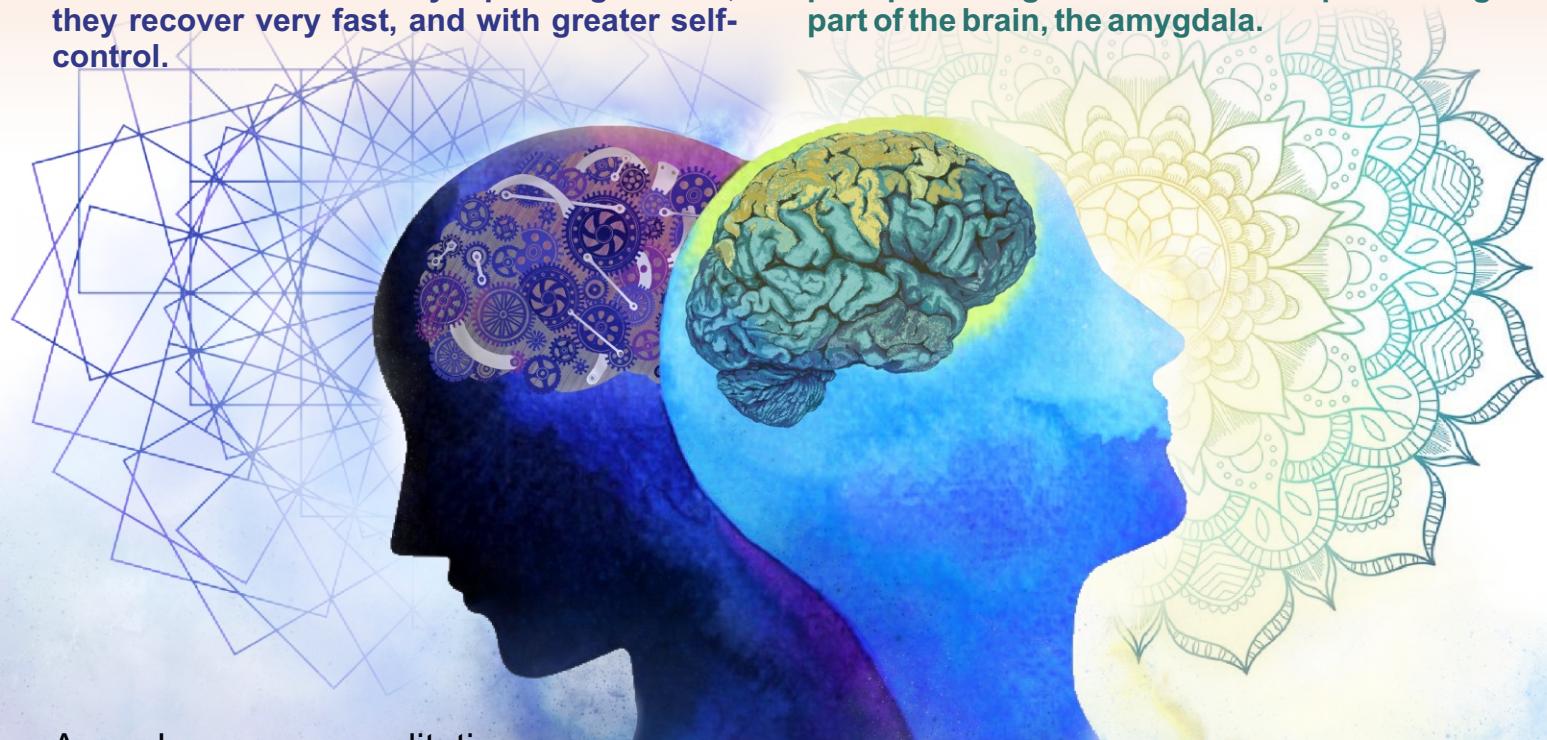


The relationship between the slowing down of aging and reduction in psychological stress has been established by researchers. Stress leads to the shortening of telomeres (the protective caps at the tip of chromosomes), which is considered the main marker for aging. In a trailblazing study conducted by scientists Elissa Epel and Elizabeth Blackburn of the University of California, it was found that stressed mothers of seriously ill children had shorter telomeres. Both scientists later got a Nobel Prize for this study. In this way, a direct connection between chronic stress and aging was established. The relationship between meditation and mental stress and anxiety has also been confirmed through numerous studies.

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Through this practice, depressing, distressing, and other negative thoughts are under check. The resulting sense of peace and well-being pervades in every area of life.
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Under stressful and unpleasant conditions, regular practitioners can lead a peaceful life. Even when disturbed by upsetting events, they recover very fast, and with greater self-control.

With meditation, we gradually develop a far greater control over our emotions. Meditation prompts changes in the emotion-processing part of the brain, the amygdala.



As we have seen, meditation can transform one's life with far more self-awareness, focused attention and clarity. Through these attributes, we can live mindfully. With better control over our inner life, we certainly can live life on our own terms. Clarity and control are also the conditions in which a strong sense of compassion and empathy take root, which can give meaning to our life. Studies have established that through meditation, we can become more compassionate and empathetic toward others. We understand their feelings and point of view with greater clarity and understanding.

Living mindfully, with warm feelings of love and compassion, also improves our immune system. Overall mental and physical health improves significantly with regular practice of meditation. Numerous studies have shown remarkable structural and functional changes in the brain of practitioners. The only requirement for beginning meditation is to break the mental inertia and come out from the comfort zone.

Learn to meditate – simply start observing the present moments

Meditating is an extremely simple mental exercise, but in practice people find it very difficult to continue. What is generally seen is people enthusiastically starting it but quitting after a few sessions or a few days, due to a variety of reasons. Most common is lack of patience and perseverance. During initial sessions, they find it difficult to observe breathing for an extended time. Though gradually, this “observation” becomes more and more easy, students tend to lose patience. Those who succeed in the first few days sit quietly for an uninterrupted 10 to 15 minutes, then they generally start practicing meditation regularly. Moreover, they, in between, start seeing its impact on their mind and body.

YOU CAN PRACTICE MEDITATION AT HOME, NO TEACHER REQUIRED

- One can meditate even while walking, sitting, or lying on the ground, but the recommended posture is sitting quietly, with closed eyes, in peaceful surroundings.
- Sit on a cushion on the floor, or on a chair, with a straight and unsupported back.
- Pay close attention to the movement of the breath.
- Breathing in, be aware that you are breathing in, and how it feels.
- Breathing out, be aware that you are breathing out.
- Feel the coolness of air going in, and the warmth of the air coming out from the nostrils.
- Continue this simple process for the length of your meditation practice, constantly redirecting the attention back to the breath.
- While we meditate, we are, as to be expected, distracted by surrounding sounds, physical sensations, and the irrepressible arising of thoughts.
- Whenever this happens, gently recognise that you have been distracted, and bring the attention back to the breathing.
- Just observe whatever is happening in a non-judgmental manner while observing and watching the breathing.



This is the essence of breathing-based mindfulness meditation

In **TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION**, TM instead of breathing, we pay attention to a mantra. TM is one of the most important and worldwide popular meditation techniques. Introduced way back in 1955 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008), the technique is again very simple. One has only to inwardly repeat, silently, in the mind, a continuous mantra or word that is pleasing to the mind in order to achieve a restful state. TM gives our mind an inward direction. It helps us to turn the attention within, and once that is accomplished, the mind starts to settle down.



As we have seen, in meditation we are, while sitting quietly and comfortably, present to observe our breath or bodily sensations, or to repeat mantra with closed eyes. The idea is not to do anything intentionally, just experience the present moments. We are not required to react or respond to thoughts arising in our mind, but simply to observe and let them go.

Whether we attend to the breath (mindfulness meditation) or mantra (TM) or bodily sensations and thoughts (Vipassana meditation), attention is distracted and our mind automatically goes in a different direction. Better yet, it simply rests. It is very difficult to hold our attention on breath, mantra, or the coming and going of physical sensations and thoughts, continuously for even 20 seconds. Random thoughts are certain to arise. Regardless of the nature of the distraction, we may then gently bring our attention back to the breath or mantra. We keep on repeating this process while meditating.



Another very popular meditation in India is **VIPASSANA MEDITATION**, which is taught in various centres set up throughout India and abroad by the late S.N. Goenka. For Vipassana meditation, meditators are asked to practice, for the first few days, breathing-based meditation, as explained earlier. After that, they need to observe their thoughts and bodily sensations in a non-judgmental way. **This meditation is considered far tougher than TM and mindfulness meditation, but is very effective.**

Focus, un-focus, and then focus again goes on without resistance. When we do this, the mental faculty gets trained and we become more and more focused.

As we become more focused, mind's wandering lessens, and we become happier . . . or less unhappy. This is the simple science behind meditation.



In the same way that we practice mindfulness meditation, we can practice mindfulness in our daily activities – for instance, while eating, walking, and talking. In mindfulness meditation, the idea is to pay attention to whatever is going on in the present moment, simply to be aware of what is happening. If we are speaking, we must pay attention to the words we speak, and attentively listen to what the other person is saying. If we are walking, we should be aware of surrounding sights and sounds, our body movements, such as feet touching the ground, and the flow of the breath.

The reasons why meditation practice is not becoming a widespread movement in India as it is in many other parts of the world are the beliefs and myths that are attached to it. First, people are not convinced in their heart that just sitting silently can stop the movement of thoughts in their mind. Failed meditators the world over conclude after a few minutes (or even days) of effort that it's not possible to disregard their thoughts. They don't realize that to manage one's thoughts requires time and effort. Sitting for just a few minutes will not reduce the flow of thoughts into their mind.

MINDFULNESS



Very often, people start learning or practicing meditation when they are mentally stressed or disturbed. At trying times, it's undoubtedly more difficult to practice meditation.

Another related belief that people often harbour is that it takes years to get benefits or desired results from meditation. To the contrary, studies have confirmed that within a few days, people start getting results. Mind starts feeling relaxed. We feel more focused and attentive after even two weeks of practice. When people think it would take months and even years to get desired results, they obviously are hesitant to go for meditation. Time constraint is another excuse people often use to rationalize their reluctance.

Agitated, our "monkey mind" is far more restless; it requires rigorous efforts to calm it. Many people in sheer frustration discontinue practicing meditation.



No doubt we are busy people, even if we actually have plenty of time available for meditation. People don't know how to manage their time effectively. Meditation even improves the skill of time management. Since with meditation, one becomes more focused in all matters, more spare time is freed up for productive use.

More importantly, some people perceive meditation as a practice meant for spiritual people, who have little to no interest in worldly affairs. Especially among older people, this belief is very prevalent. They feel once we start meditating, we will lose interest in our family, relationships, and society at large. They often believe that meditation is meant for people like monks, living at high altitudes, having no interest in the outside world. They are oblivious to the fact that mindfulness-based meditation can be practiced whenever we have time, even while travelling, walking, and simply relaxing. It's not necessary to practice it during the early hours of the day. That notion of practicing meditation at dawn is no longer valid.

Lastly, in India, a variety of meditation practices are currently in vogue. Many spiritual leaders are promoting their own "designer" meditation. Some of them are not mindfulness-based practices. For instance, practitioners may be required to "concentrate" on some object, or even on a point between their eyes (the tisra til, or third eye).

Unfortunately, there are no studies or research to corroborate the benefits of practicing these newer approaches to meditation. Despite that, hundreds of thousands of followers are regularly meditating along "new & improved" lines. That's why when followers don't observe quick and easy results, they discontinue the practice. In this way, meditation as a whole is discredited. Those who believe they have failed will obviously have second thoughts before they restart meditation.

