



think about it

Meditation can help your brain work more efficiently.

Sitting in meditation can be challenging. You might feel anxious to get back to your busy day. Your mind wanders.

Your foot falls asleep. But consider this: A regular meditation practice can make your brain work better.

Over the past few years, scientists have discovered that meditation helps the brain to process information more efficiently. One study, conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, found that people who meditate capture information that others miss when presented with a series of visual cues in quick succession. The difference was most marked in longtime practitioners of *vipassana* meditation, but even novices who practiced just 20 minutes per day scored better than people who didn't meditate.

Just as repeated practice of Sun Salutations builds strength and stamina, so regular meditation enhances the brain's capacity for perception, awareness, and efficiency in processing, says Sat Bir Singh Khalsa, assistant professor of medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School. "Meditation has both short- and long-term benefits to brain structure and function," he says.

Another study, conducted through Massachusetts General Hospital, found that longtime meditators have a thicker insula, the part of the brain that links the emotional center with the thinking center. Some researchers say that this finding may explain a seeming paradox: In meditators, the amygdala, the part of the brain tied to the fight-or-flight impulse, is more active than in nonmeditators. But meditators also seem to be better able to calm that response than others.

"No one has proven why yet, but the theory is that meditators are more aware of what's happening in their environment and better able to control their internal psychological and physiological responses to it," says Khalsa. HEATHER BOERNER

simple meditation

Mark Coleman, a meditation teacher and the author of *Awake in the Wild*, offers this simple meditation as an introduction to mindfulness, or the state of nonreactive, receptive awareness that forms the heart of *vipassana* meditation.

Sit comfortably in an upright but relaxed position. Close your eyes and bring your attention to your nostrils. As you breathe notice the subtle sensation of cool air passing into, and warm air passing out of, your nose. Without manipulating the breath, simply notice the sensation.

Maintain your attention to every breath. Staying relaxed and mentally alert, become curious about each passing one as if it were your first.

If your attention wanders, simply notice the distraction and patiently return to the sensation of the breath. Your ability to stay present deepens by consistently returning to the current moment.

Do this exercise 10 minutes once or twice a day, gradually extending your sessions to 20 or 30 minutes each.