

Mantram Meditation

What is mantram meditation?

Mantram meditation is one of many types of meditation. A *mantram* is a specific word or phrase. This word or phrase is the object of focus during meditation. You may also have heard of the word *mantra* before. The word *mantram/mantra* originally comes from the ancient language of Sanskrit, the language used in ancient religious texts from India. The reason there are two English spellings has to do with how the word is adapted into English. Both words have the same meaning, and this handout will use *mantram*.

Meditation practitioners in Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism use *mantrams*. Hymns and chants in other traditions such as Christianity are often used in a similar way. One example is reciting the rosary. Modern teachers of meditation may include non-religious *mantrams*, using any word or phrase their student chooses. So, a *mantram* may have religious or spiritual meaning, but not always.

Dr. Herbert Benson, from Harvard Medical School, has studied what happens during meditation. He discovered that when people meditate, their heart rate slows, their blood pressure lowers, and their breathing rate also slows. He called this effect “the relaxation response.” The relaxation response is the opposite of the “stress response,” which is what the body does when it’s under stress. The stress response is often referred to as the “fight or flight” response.¹

Dr. Benson found that there are many ways to produce the relaxation response. Over the past 40 years, research has taught us more about how being in a state of relaxation improves health.² **Dr. Benson found that there are 4 basic parts to practicing the relaxation response:**

1. **A comfortable posture**—for example, in a chair or on a cushion on the floor
2. **A quiet environment**—someplace where no one will bother you
3. **Object of focus**—this can be a word, sound, or phrase you say out loud or to yourself, the breath, or gazing steadily at something
4. **Returning to the practice** – when distracting thoughts enter the mind, you bring the mind gently back to the object of focus

Dr. Benson emphasized that it does not matter so much *what* the object of focus is. The important thing is *how* you use this object. All you need to do is bring the mind back to this object each time the mind “wanders off” in thought.

In mantram meditation, the object of focus is a word or phrase. A *mantram* may serve two roles. The first is as something you focus on. The second may be as a “spiritual anchor” if the word or phrase also has a personal, spiritual meaning. Refer to the handout, “[Spiritual Anchors](#),” for more general information. Reference below for examples of *mantrams*.

How can mantram meditation help me?

There are more and more studies being done on the benefits of meditation (refer to the handouts related to [Mindful Awareness](#) and other handouts in the [Mind & Emotions](#) section of the Circle of Health Self-Care strategies to learn more). Research shows that meditation can help you deal with mental stress and improve well-being.³

One research group has studied the effects of slowing down the breath to about 6 cycles per minute. That's about 10 seconds each time you breathe all the way in and out. They found that when the breath becomes slow and regular, the natural rhythms of the body start to work together better. The heart and nervous system come into harmony. This gives you a feeling of calm and well-being.⁴ They found that repeating a *mantram* or praying the rosary are two methods that slow the breath to 6 cycles per minute.⁵

A *mantram* may be used in meditation practice for 10-20 minutes a day, for example. A *mantram* also can be helpful in daily life. For example, before doing something that may be stressful, you can repeat your *mantram* silently to yourself a few times. This does the following things:

1. It is like hitting the “pause button” for your mind.
2. It brings you into the present moment.
3. It reminds your brain and body of the feeling of calm—the relaxation response—created by your regular meditation practice.
4. It helps you focus.

Our minds tend to get lost in thought and often are not in the present moment. A *mantram* serves as a “touchpoint”—something that reminds you to *be here now*.

Which mantram should I use?

Some meditation traditions may use a specific *mantram*. If you practice meditation with a specific method, such as yoga, you may use a *mantram* from that tradition. However, you do not need to take a class to learn mantram meditation. As Dr. Benson teaches, you can choose any word or phrase as the object of focus. For example, in an oral communication, Dr. Benson (October 2008) suggested that students can simply use the word “one.”

Below are a few examples of *mantrams* from different spiritual or religious traditions:

Mantram	Meaning	Tradition
<i>Om Shanti</i>	<i>Om</i> is sometimes translated as “the cosmic sound”—the core vibration of the universe. <i>Shanti</i> means peace.	Hinduism; Yoga
<i>Ave Maria</i>	Latin for “Hail Mary”	Christianity

Mantram	Meaning	Tradition
<i>Sat Nam</i>	“True name,” or “whose name is truth”	Sikhism
<i>YHVH</i>	The tetragrammaton; one of the names for God in the Hebrew Bible (pronounced <i>Yahweh</i>)	Judaism
<i>So Ham</i>	“I am”	Hinduism
<i>Om Mani Padme Hum</i>	Sometimes translated as “jewel in the lotus”	Buddhism

While the *mantrams* above may be in languages such as Sanskrit, Hebrew, or Latin, there are many possibilities in English. For example, you can simply use words such as “peace,” or “love.” One meditation offered by the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh is to say “I am” as you breath in, and “at peace” as you breath out. Even simpler is to say, “in” when breathing in, and “out” when breathing out. You can choose a similar word or phrase in your native language if it is not English.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests repeating the following poem during meditation.⁶ This is one example of a *mantram* in English. It can be repeated with each word or phrase together with each breath:

In, out
Deep, slow
Calm, ease
Smile, release
Present moment, wonderful moment

How do I practice mantram meditation?

1. Find a quiet place where nothing will bother you. Silence your cell phone.
2. Sit comfortably, on a supportive chair or on a cushion on the floor. Your spine should be straight but not stiff. Rest your hands gently in your lap.
3. Close your eyes, or lower your gaze to soften your focus. “Soft focus” means not focusing your eyes on something.
4. Begin repeating your chosen *mantram*. You may say it out loud at first. You may mouth it without making an actual sound. Or, you can repeat it silently in your mind. Depending on how long your *mantram* is, you can work with the breath in several ways. You might repeat part of the *mantram* when you breathe in and part when you breathe out. Or, you might say the whole thing both breathing in and breathing out. Or, you might say it only when you breathe out. Do whatever feels right to you.

- The mind normally tends to wander. When it does, simply notice. Then, without judging or getting upset, gently bring it back. Continue repeating your *mantram*. The mind will wander over and over again. This is normal and is part of the practice.

How long do I need to practice every day?

The most important thing is not how long you practice. The key is to practice regularly. A little bit every day is more effective than doing it for a long time every so often. Choose a period of time that is realistic for you. Starting with as little as 5 minutes once or twice a day can be helpful. Try using a timer or a meditation application on the Internet or on your smartphone to help set aside the time.

For you to consider:

- Did anything surprise you as you read this handout? If so, what did?
- Would you like to try mantram meditation? If so, what mantram will you choose?
- Would you like to set a goal to practice meditation every day? If so, what length of time will you start with?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health	A variety of Integrative Health handouts on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mind and Emotions • Mindful Awareness 	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
UW Health Mindfulness Program	Courses and instruction on mindfulness meditation.	https://www.uwhealth.org/meditation-stress-reduction/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction/49607
Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine	More information about the relaxation response and associated research	http://www.bensonhenryinstitute.org/about/dr-herbert-benson/8-about/4-the-relaxation-response
Kirtan Kriya/3HO	More detailed information on the background of Kirtan Kriya and instructions	https://www.3ho.org/3ho-lifestyle/health-and-healing/kirtan-kriya-sa-ta-na-ma-meditation
Kirtan Kriya/3HO	YouTube video with instructions	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcAIdGUP-l-c



ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Blue Mountain Center of Meditation	Organization founded by Eknath Easwaran to teach his Eight-Point Program of Passage Meditation, which includes mantram meditation. Includes more instructions and examples of mantras.	https://www.bmcm.org/learn/mantram/

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Jonathan Takahashi MD, MPH, Assistant Professor, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

References

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5. Bernardi L, Sleight P, Bandinelli G, et al. Effect of rosary prayer and yoga mantras on autonomic cardiovascular rhythms: comparative study. *BMJ*. 2001;323(7327):1446-1449.
6. Nhat Hanh T. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching : Transforming Suffering Into Peace, Joy and Liberation*. London, UK: Rider; 1999.

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