# You Don’t Have to Clear Your Mind to Meditate. Here’s the Truth, Backed by Science

**7 MIN READ**

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# Forget the myth that meditation means stopping your thoughts. Learn how awareness, not emptiness, rewires your brain for focus, calm, and resilience.

In my meditation teacher training recently, a student raised a great question: *"What do you say to people who ask, 'Am I supposed to stop thinking during meditation?'"*

My teacher smiled and said, "*I tell them: You're not erasing thought. You're developing awareness so you can be aware of thinking*."

That shift in framing matters.

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Because meditation isn't about *not thinking*.
It's about practicing *not getting lost in your thoughts*.
It's about noticing that you're thinking, planning, worrying, and still being present rather than swept away.

# You Can't "Clear Your Mind." That's a

# Meditation Myth

“Clearing your mind” isn’t about *erasing* thoughts.

When you “clear the table” after dinner, you don’t throw everything away. You put things back in their place: The dishes get washed and put in the cabinet. Yes, the garbage gets thrown out, or some of it gets composted. The leftovers get put away in the fridge. “Clearing your mind” isn’t about having a mind filled with nothing. It’s about putting thoughts in their place and creating space around them so they don’t hijack your entire awareness.

## You Are What You Practice

In meditation, we get to experience our own awareness. We practice how to be in relationship with whatever is arising, whether it be thoughts, sensations, emotions, without becoming overwhelmed or reactive. And when we do that, we open ourselves up to experiencing more of the world. How wonderful!

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My meditation teacher says, *we’re always practicing something*. And what you practice becomes how you live. Are you practicing stress? Practicing distraction? Or are you practicing calm? Practicing contentment? Practicing open-hearted curiosity?

You are what you practice.

When stress or uncertainty hits or a trigger surfaces and your body shifts into reaction mode (fight, flight, fawn, or freeze), if you’ve been practicing presence, your nervous system has another path it knows how to find. You become more able to *respond* to

the moment rather than *react* out of habit. In this way, practicing meditation give you choice.

That’s agency. That’s resilience. That’s freedom.

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# What Meditation Really Trains You to Do

Here’s how mindfulness meditation works: You sit. You breathe. You rest your attention on an anchor: your breath, a sound, a sensation, a candle flame. Inevitably, your mind drifts away from that anchor. You start planning dinner, or replaying an argument, or solving a work dilemma. That’s normal. That’s how our brains work. This is also the moment where most people think they’re failing at meditation. But, if you’ve *noticed* your mind has wandered, then you’re actually meditating! Because you’re aware. Congratulations! That’s one rep. Now, do it again. Find your anchor. Breathe. Keep your attention on your anchor. When you notice your mind has wandered, congratulate yourself for noticing and return to your anchor.

That’s the practice. You don’t shame yourself for drifting off or decide it makes you a “bad meditator.” That single moment of recognition (“*oh, my mind wandered!*”) is the beginning of neural rep that can strengthen focus, steadiness, and emotional flexibility. Meditation is the practice of returning, and the returning becomes resilience, and the resilience becomes presence. You return to the breath. And begin

again.

## Meditation is the practice of returning, and the returning becomes resilience, and the resilience becomes presence.”

We spend a lot of our time and energy pushing away things we think we’re doing wrong. Meditation asks us to welcome it all. Notice. Set it aside. Return to an anchor. And begin again. Some people find it helpful to label whatever kinds of thoughts or sensations have swept them away once they notice them. You can simply say, this is planning or this is remembering or this is worrying. And then, gently, you bring your attention back to the breath or whatever anchor you’ve chosen. It’s not about *whether* you’re planning or thinking. It’s about whether you’re lost in planning or *aware* in planning.

Discomfort in your body? A sound outside the room? A wave of self-doubt?

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Notice. Be with it. Allow it. Then come back.

That’s the rep.
That’s the practice.
That’s training your attention.

And it matters now more than ever.

# A Three-Minute Guided Breath Meditation

Listen:

Wherever you are, take this moment to pause. You can set a timer for three minutes if you'd like.

- Find a comfortable, supported position. You can close your eyes if you'd like, but you don't have to.
- Take a few deep, cleansing breaths, inhaling through your nose and extending your exhale through your mouth
- Release any tension you feel. Soften your belly, your shoulders, your tongue.
- And relax into your natural breath.
- Notice that your breathing happens without you having to do anything.
- Notice where you feel your breath most. Is it in the rise and fall of your belly? In your nostrils? You chest? Just notice.
- Notice the inbreath, and the outbreath.
- Notice that there's a pause in between.
- You can say "in" and "out" along with your breath if that helps you.
- Sit in this way, breathing naturally, strong and supported, with your attention on your breath.
- When you notice that your mind has wandered, as it naturally does, bring your attention kindly back to your breath.

- You can do this for just one breath. And then try for another.
- Sit in this way, supported, naturally breathing, returning to the breath when your mind wanders.
- When you're done, wiggle your toes, open your eyes if they are closed, stretch your arms above your head. Breathe deeply.
- If you'd like, you can place your hand on your heart and offer a moment of thanks for your practice.

That's it. That's the practice. You can do that as often as you like. The more you practice, the more you're rewiring your brain for resilience. May your practice be for the benefit of all beings.

## Meditation Matters in the Attention Economy

We live in a world determined to own a share (if not all) of your attention. Marketers call it mindshare. Social platforms call it engagement. Economists and technologists call it the attention economy.

But when you lose control of your attention, you lose the thread of your own life. You get swept into eddies of distraction that can lead to disconnection from your body, your relationships, your purpose. You start living in the surface currents of your mind; spinning, scrolling, reacting, while your deeper self goes uninhabited.

Right here, in this moment, is where your breath is breathing.
Where your heart is beating.
Where your hands are doing their work.
Where your life is happening.

Meditation is how we practice returning to this present moment. It's not about perfection. It's about pliability. How stretchable is your attention? How wide can you open the window of your attention without getting blown away by the winds of

distraction? When your attention wanders, does it take a search party to bring it back? Or can it return easily, like a well-used muscle?

That's why we train. That's why we sit. When we build awareness of our thoughts, emotions, and impulses, we build our capacity, our power. Not power over others, but power to choose how we show up. To pause before reacting. To stay grounded when emotions rise. To be fully here.

You don't have to stop thinking to meditate. You just have to notice.

You don't have to be peaceful to practice. You just have to sit with what's here.

## How Mindfulness Meditation Rewires the Brain (The Science of Meditation)

The science of meditation has moved far beyond the realm of "feel-good" advice. Neuroscientists now have decades of imaging studies showing that regular mindfulness practice physically changes the brain's structure and function. And when we talk to experts and visionaries at the top of their game, they all agree, **meditation is a non-negotiable.** Here's some of the science of meditation:

A 2024 **review in *Biomedicines*** found that mindfulness meditation increases cortical thickness in areas tied to attention, decision-making, and emotional regulation, specifically the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex. These changes are associated with better focus, clearer thinking, and a greater ability to manage stress.

At the same time, meditation reduces the size and reactivity of the amygdala, the

brain’s alarm system for fear and stress. The smaller and less reactive the amygdala, the less likely you are to be hijacked by anxious thoughts or emotional reactivity.

In short: the brain you have right now is not fixed. With consistent mindfulness practice, you can literally rewire it for calm, focus, and emotional balance, the kind of changes that last far beyond the cushion./

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