

# Supporting Information about The Meditation Group 2023-24

## How to Join the Group

The Meditation Group is for any University of Leeds student who would like to take part! It's free and you are welcome!

## To Sign up just click on the link here and complete the sign up form

<https://studentwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/leap/pathways/preview-pathway.html?pathway=34>

## For More Information

Please email James Taylor at [J.R.E.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:J.R.E.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk)

As you sign up, you are added to the Meditation Group email base and will receive weekly information about what is happening in the group. This message is sent by blind copy so your email address is never shared with anyone else.

## How to Join a Session

Join the group for the year via the link above and then just come to Room 6 on the second floor of LUU whenever you feel like it, sign the register as you arrive and join us! Please arrive a little before noon if you can so we are able to begin as one; but if you need to be late, you are still most welcome!

## To Attend Online via Zoom

Please make sure you have downloaded Zoom onto your device well before your first attendance.

Each week you will receive an email with a link to the meeting page of The Student Counselling and Wellbeing Hub. On this page you can click the 'Join' Button to access the group on Zoom. Just log on a little before we start. I will not be using an online waiting room so you can just join as you please but ideally a little before 2pm each time.

## **When does it takes place?**

**Every week, on Thursdays 12 – 1.30 pm in Room 6, LUU all year round.**

If I am unwell or on leave, I will contact you by email to advise you the group has been cancelled and to let you know when the next group is. Occasionally the group has to work in Room 4 or 5 due to other requirements being made of Room 6 – I will let you know in advance via email of any changes to the room.

## **Challenges while we are practicing**

If there is ever a movement, a kind of breathing or a practice you do not like or feel comfortable to try, feel free to sit out of this part and then join in again when it suits you! Never feel obliged to try anything you are uncomfortable with but always feel welcome to let me know as I will try to find a modification of the practice that will suit you.

## **What if I am going to be late or I want to leave early?**

### **Timekeeping in person**

Please try to arrive a little early or on time as it really helps the group to run smoothly. However, I'm a fan of 'better late than never' so please always feel welcome whenever you arrive! Just come into the room quietly and join in!

I know people have complex timetables so equally, **if you need to leave early**, that's okay. Just quietly leave! As the group is 90 minutes and the university is timetables hour by hour, it's quite usual for some people to leave or arrive at 1pm!

### **Timekeeping on Zoom**

I am not using a 'waiting room' for the Zoom link so you can just join and leave the meeting as you please.

### **Leaving the group email base**

Please email me at [J.R.E.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:J.R.E.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk) if you no longer wish to be included. If you have received invitations to more than one email address (eg People doing Phds who may have both a student and staff email address) please let me know all email addresses you want deleted.

### **Who is it for?**

The group is for anyone interested in meditation. You do not need any prior experience! Meditation is practiced for many reasons but most commonly people come to the group in an attempt to learn new ways to combat stress. However, it is also a very effective for improving your health, awareness, concentration and your capacity to think clearly and creatively. The Meditation Group offers participants experience of a large variety of relaxations, meditations and practices preparatory to meditation so, once you have been to a few sessions, you will have learnt which ones you can make best use of.

### **Who runs it?**

My name is James Taylor. I am a psychotherapist and counsellor working in the University's Student Counselling & Wellbeing Service. I have practiced

meditation since 1996 and have an ongoing interest in practices which enhance health, self-awareness and self-development. I practice Dru Yoga and Meditation and I am a fully qualified Dru Meditation & Yoga teacher. I am also a fully qualified Wing Chun Kung Fu instructor and was formerly a W.T.O. Tae Kwondo instructor.

### **What happens?**

Each group begins with a warm-up or activation, which is followed by an energy block release sequence, stretching and/or breath work and posture (asana) practice. There is then a deep relaxation practice & then a meditation; each section lasting 30 minutes. There is then time for sharing, feedback and discussion of your experience. You are welcome but not obliged to share your experiences! If you wish to discuss something one to one, I will do my best to make an appointment to meet you as soon as possible.

### **What should I wear?**

Most people come wearing what they would do normally. It is helpful for your clothes not to be extremely tight as they can be uncomfortable to sit still in for sustained periods of time. Loose fitting trousers are helpful. If you need to change, there are bathrooms at the other end of the corridor where you can get privacy for this.

### **The Contract between Student Counselling and Wellbeing and Group Participants**

This is an experiential group which means it is an opportunity for us to make use of the *experience* of being together and practicing different meditative techniques. Each person's experience will be different and valuable, so participants are expected to treat each other's experiences with respect. As it can be hard to predict what might emerge in meditation, my role is to support the process and to ensure the group is a safe place for participants to work together.

While we contract to respect one another's experiences, the meditation group is not bound by a contract of confidentiality. Group members are encouraged to meet, practice, support and discuss meditation with one another outside the group's time, as the benefits of meditation grow in proportion to the amount of time taken to practice. However, *it is worth acknowledging that meditation will not suit everyone and anyone having doubts about practice before or during a meditation course should first of all bring them up with me, James Taylor - the group facilitator.* I am willing to discuss any concerns with group members individually and will make an arrangement to meet with you at a mutually agreeable time.

***It will be understood that once you have signed up and received the 'Supporting Information about the Meditation Group' document, your attendance of the group constitutes an agreement to adhere to this contract.***

## **Evaluation**

We wish to learn from your opinions and experience of our services, so, as with our individual counselling services, you are invited to make your opinions of the meditation group known via a voluntary evaluation link. You will be sent a link to this via email which you can then complete online.

## **Why Meditate?**

To practice meditation is to attempt more than mere relaxation, however profound relaxation is one of the consequences of meditative practices. Meditation aims to achieve a clear and alert state of mind and a relaxed bodily state by focusing the mind such that thoughts are 'dropped' and we are at one with the experience of the moment. Meditation seeks to cultivate awareness and is thus different to those relaxed states in which the mind wanders, drifts, thinks, plans, sleeps or fantasises. All of these things may be more or less pleasant but lack the control, agency and alertness implied by focusing.

While meditation can be extremely enjoyable it can sometimes be hard to 'get into'; however the more you do it, the easier it is to get to your meditative states of mind. It richly rewards sustained effort and practice but along the way it is usual to experience distractions and frustrations! The group is a supportive place in which to work through, share and reflect upon such difficulties. This said, an increased sense of relaxation, creativity, insight, concentration, health, well being, peace of mind, mental and physical performance, present consciousness and spiritual awakening are all amongst the benefits people who meditate report emerging from their experience. What I particularly like about meditation is that once simple techniques and practices have been learnt, they can be practiced independently. So, like a therapeutic relationship, meditation practice is internalised and build upon so it is empowering and supportive of our autonomy.

Research performed by Dr. Vincent Giampapa, has revealed that regular deep meditation dramatically affects the production of Cortisol, DHEA, Melatonin and (H-G-H) Human Growth Hormone; hormones which relate to longevity, stress, and well-being. Giampapa suggests that cortisol accelerates aging while negatively effecting memory, learning, health and subjective well-being. Widely recognized as the "stress hormone," cortisol is produced by the adrenal glands when you are stressed. The more of it you produce, the more stressed you feel and the more vulnerable you are to disease as it depresses the functioning of your immune system. Regular meditation reduces stress responses and hence the production of cortisol.

DHEA is also a hormone produced by the adrenal glands. The production of DHEA slows down on average, once we reach our 30s and sometimes even earlier than this. The average 75 year old only has 20% of the DHEA they had when they were 25 years old. When DHEA levels are low, we're more easily affected by aging and disease whereas high DHEA levels increase immune functioning enabling the body to fight disease successfully. At the slower Alpha and Theta brainwave patterns produced by meditation, production of DHEA

increases significantly. Meditators secrete more of the youth-related hormone DHEA as they age than non-meditators. Meditating forty-five-year-old males have an average of 23 percent more DHEA than non-meditators, and meditating females have an average of 47 percent more. This helps decrease stress, heighten memory, preserve sexual function, and control weight.

Melatonin is a hormone that helps to create restful sleep. We make less of it as we age, and since during sleep many important rejuvenating substances are created in the brain, the inability to sleep soundly can dramatically decrease the quality of your life and greatly speed up the aging process. Research has shown 75 percent of insomniacs were able to sleep normally when they meditated. Meditation creates a unique hypo-metabolic state, in which the metabolism is in an even deeper state of rest than during sleep. During sleep, oxygen consumption drops by 8 percent, but during meditation, it drops by 10 to 20 percent.

Research also reveals that Melatonin is a powerful antioxidant. In fact, it is more powerful than Vitamin E. At the slower Alpha and Theta brainwave patterns produced by meditation, production of melatonin increases significantly. One of the other hormones you release during deep meditation is human growth hormone which we make much less of as we age. Deficiencies in H-G-H contribute to the many symptoms and diseases associated with aging so by practicing meditation on a regular basis, you are taking care of your future physical, mental and spiritual health! So it is perhaps unsurprising that long-term meditators experience 80 percent less heart disease and 50 percent less cancer than non-meditators, that 34 percent of people with chronic pain significantly reduced medication when they begin meditating and that meditation is the only activity that reduces blood lactate, a marker of stress and anxiety.

Meditation need not have any religious components but meditative practices are an aspect of many of the world's faiths. The group at The Student Counselling Centre does not have any religious affiliations however if you are interested in them, such groups are available at other times in other places. For example, The Leeds University Buddhist Meditation Society offers meditation classes in the Student's Union building in term time. Sometimes I lead weekend retreats for this group.

### **How does it work?**

Meditation stimulates the brain to induce a process of healing and relaxation which involves the release of hormones. When we meditate, our rational thought processes, housed in our cortex, begin a quiet dialogue with our brain's emotional centres, the hippocampus and amygdala, both of which are in the limbic system. When the cortex and limbic system agree that it is appropriate to relax, they relay the message to the hypothalamus, which connects the brain to the endocrine system. This releases a flood of calming neurotransmitters and hormones, which soothe the entire body. The immune system then secretes its own molecules of information, some of which return to the brain, helping to complete this circuitry of healing. We shift into a relaxed alpha brain wave

pattern, and our nervous system is dominated by the inhibitory parasympathetic branch. When the parasympathetic nervous system is favoured, we send relatively more nerve signals to our organs and glands of immunity, such as the thymus. As this occurs, we reach the ideal condition for healing, what mystics call the sacred space.

### **Meditative Practice**

There are many different varieties of meditative practice which will have different effects on the practitioner – and most likely some will suit a person better than others. Breath and body based meditations tend to foster self-awareness, health, memory, relaxation and bliss. They are good all round practices but can lead to excessive self-analysis. Mantras and affirmations are ideal to promote tranquillity. They are simple and flexible to do, suit people of a devotional temperament but can produce joy at the expense of clarity of mind. Visualisations are positive, creative and individualistic. They can tap the potential of the mind, but may lack depth. These are obviously thumbnail sketches of different practices and their pitfalls so one should not set too much store by them. They rather suggest that diverse experience is both desirable and effective and your experience at The Meditation Group will include all of these different styles of practice. If you attend regularly you will begin to understand experientially how these different practices work and which ones are most useful to you and in which circumstances. .

Meditation can be practiced lying down, while seated, or while walking. In all cases a **posture** needs to be adopted that allows deep and regular breathing and one that will not be so physically discomforting that one cannot concentrate on anything else! (The lotus position will never be for everyone but there are gentle exercises which can allow more or less anyone to achieve it in time.) You will receive guidance with about posture and deep breathing at the group.

It is always the case that the meditator will experience **distractions** from their practice, either from within themselves or from the world around them. These distractions are best viewed as opportunities to deepen practice and so when they occur, they are to be observed and acknowledged as we return our minds to our intended focus. It is important to be realistic about this and to have compassion for our fallibility which first means realising it as it comes up - Otherwise it would be extremely easy to spend all our time criticising ourselves for failing to achieve something rather than trying to achieve it. People using the group find it helpful to reflect on and discuss their experience of distractions which they have a chance to do at the end of each session.

### **Tips for Maintaining your Practice**

#### **1. Get real.**

I find that many people have unrealistic expectations of the length of time they can devote to their daily yoga or meditation. Then, when they don't

manage a 90 minute session daily, they think they've failed. So be realistic. Plan to do a 15 minute practice – warm ups, a swift Energy Block Release and one short meditation, for example, could be a minimum practice.

## **2. Set up a space to practice in**

It can be really helpful to make a small space you regularly meditate in or a corner of your room where you gather one or two things special to you which are evocative of your practice. If you are a person of faith you might like to make a little altar.

## **3. Have a mobile practice**

Not at home? Then take a few minutes of me-time – with your family or friends – and do some stretches or postures. If you're going for a walk, you could practise a walking meditation or chant a mantra quietly. Don't limit yourself to your yoga mat or meditation space and you'll find it easier to adapt it to your environment.

## **4. Involve your family & friends**

Why not share what you have learnt and do a deep relaxation or simple meditation together. You can always use an MP3 file to support the practice. A lot of people will be glad of feeling really relaxed or peaceful – it's a beautiful thing to share.

## **5. Use your senses**

When away from home or class, you might simply forget about your meditation because you're in a different environment. So use your senses to get you back on track. Take your phone or ipod with your meditation music or practices on, and play it! Or take a couple of sticks of your favourite incense or essential oil which you associate with your meditation 'smell'. Our senses are evocative so use them to remind you how great you feel when you practise.

## **6. Use different media**

You can download meditation recordings and instructions from all sorts of sources online. Many of these are free. If you have become a bit tired of the free MP3s I offer, see what else you can find to supplement your practice. You can also get some great apps to support mindfulness and meditation for smartphones. The Headspace app is a very popular one for example and the Mindfulness Bell can be very helpful for structuring the time of your practice.

## **7. Read around the subject**

There is a reading list within this file so check out some of the titles and see if this helps refresh your interest and focus.

## **8. Be kind to yourself**

Lastly, don't give yourself a hard time if your personal practice has a break. Everyone needs a holiday from time to time. So, without judging yourself, make today the time to restart your practice – with fresh determination and an unbeatable attitude!

## **Here are some short meditation practices you might like to try**

### **Keep breathing**

Equal breathing is a powerful way to feel calm fast. Breathe in for a steady count of four, pause for four, breathe out for a count of four and pause for four. Continue for about 3 minutes, keeping the pace comfortable so you don't get breathless.

### **Health Tip!**

*Don't hold your breath for more than a count of one if you have high blood pressure, heart problems, glaucoma or think you might be pregnant. The gold standard for the pace of the numbers is your own heartbeat – to count as you take your pulse to tune in to the rhythm of you count.*

### **Deep Relaxation**

This is often overlooked by those of us who think we're too busy to take time for ourselves, but a 10 minute relaxation is a really efficient way of de-stressing and getting energized quickly. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on the floor. Make sure you're comfortable and cover yourself with a blanket or jumper. Scan through your body, from your feet to your head, asking each part to relax and become heavy. Then breathe gently and calmly for a few minutes, enjoying the deep sense of rest. Finally, deepen your in-breath, feeling energy pouring into your body as you breathe in. Imagine that energy revitalizing every part of your body from the top of your head to your feet. Have a stretch and get up slowly.

### **Try a Mudra!**

Mudras are hand gestures which quickly change the way we feel. Try the gesture of tolerance if you're feeling irritated or upset. Simply connect the tips of the thumbs together, then both the index fingers, middle, ring and little fingers to touch each other. Rest your elbows on your desk or keep them by your sides, so that the tips of the thumbs touch your heart chakra and the other fingers fan outward. Imagine that your breath is coming in from the heart centre, sending calmness and tolerance to the space around you. Continue for three minutes.

### **Nature nurture**

A few minutes in a natural environment is a great way to de-stress. So whether it's a park, garden, mountain or river, get yourself into a green space for at least 10 minutes a day. Look at the beautiful green of the new spring leaves, listen to the sounds of birds around you and feel a sense of calmness entering your body and mind.



### **Rise and shine**

When you wake up in the morning, completely relax your body for one minute, while you're still lying in bed. Think of 5 things you're really grateful for. Then gently sit up and wrap your duvet around you. Bring your attention to your breathing and let it get deeper without forcing it at all. Focus on your heart and feel warmth spreading through your body as you breathe. Continue for five minutes, then stretch and start your day.

### **Relax body and mind**

Do some stretches then lie down on the floor on a firm yet comfortable surface (a soft carpet or blanket is fine). Cover yourself with a blanket so you don't get chilly. Make sure that your body is aligned in a straight line.

Starting from your feet, tense and relax each part of your body. Contract the muscles first in your feet, and then feel each of the toes relaxing as you soften the feet against the floor. Work up the body, through the legs, hips, abdomen, chest, back, neck and head. Then focus on your breathing, and each time you breathe out, let your body release tension. As you breathe in, take peace and calmness into the body. Repeat for 5 minutes.

To finish, gradually bring your awareness back to your body and feel how your body is positioned on the floor. Move your toes and fingers gently, then stretch and sit up without disturbing that wonderful feeling of relaxation!

### **Stress busting technique**

1. Relax for a few moments and focus on your breathing, watching the natural rhythm of each inhalation and exhalation.
2. Imagine a situation in your life that needs healing.
3. Create an image of that situation 9in front of you, as if it were on a video screen. As you breathe in, draw some of the stress of the situation into your heart and immediately send it upwards and out of the top of your head as you breathe out.
4. Feel that above your head is a region of golden light in which you have full access to your healing potential. Imagine the stress entering this region and visualise the situation being completely healed.
5. On an in-breath, draw this new situation into your heart and breathe it out into the scene in front of you, bringing peace and a good solution to that situation. See smiles of relief on the faces of everyone concerned.

Repeat steps 2-5 until you feel relaxed, calm and full of joy.

### **Sunshine bliss**

This is great for the winter blues!

On a sunny day, wrap up warmly and sit comfortably outside, whether on a chair or cross legged on the ground, facing the sun. Make sure your back is tall and upright and relax your shoulders and face.

Close your eyes and let the sunlight radiate onto your face. Imagine that each cell is absorbing the sunlight and that you are being filled with energy and

positivity. You can do this meditation when it's not sunny by visualising the sun and imagining its rays shining on your face. It's a simple technique but very powerful.

*Thanks for permission to share these practices go to my friend Jane Saraswati Clapham of Dru UK who shared them originally in personal communications.*

## **Meditation Resources**

If you go to this resources link: [For Students | University of Leeds](#)

You will be able to access a collection of free MP3 and web based resources to support your practice; have a look! I would particularly like to draw your attention to the '8 Minutes to Calm', 'Deep Relaxation' and 'De-stress Meditation' MP3 downloads as well as free downloads from the Wildmind web site which can assist you in your practice in between the meditation sessions at the centre.

<http://www.wildmind.org/mindfulness/>

<http://www.wildmind.org/metta/>

You can download the MP3 files onto computers, phones and MP3 players and using playlists, can create practice sessions for yourself. If you need any support with this, just contact me at [J.R.E.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:J.R.E.Taylor@leeds.ac.uk) or speak to me at a group.

## **Helpful Online Resources**

On practical mindfulness	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkxSyy5R1sq">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkxSyy5R1sq</a>
On compassion	<a href="https://mbsr.website/news/near-and-far-enemies-fierce-compassion">https://mbsr.website/news/near-and-far-enemies-fierce-compassion</a>
	<a href="https://youtu.be/lvtZBUSplr4">https://youtu.be/lvtZBUSplr4</a>
On forgiveness	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiRP-Q4mMtk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiRP-Q4mMtk</a>
On vulnerability	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o</a>
On shame	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psN1DORYYV0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psN1DORYYV0</a>
On benefits of meditation	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4ghJSN7nXQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4ghJSN7nXQ</a>
Yoga for anger	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMOCnilrt4k">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMOCnilrt4k</a>
Yoga for Stress	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4FSaMh3Eio">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4FSaMh3Eio</a>

## **Helpful Reading**

Bodhipaksa (2003)	Wildmind: A Step by Step Guide to Meditation Windhorse Publications
Bodian, S & (2006)	Meditation for Dummies
Cope, S (2000)	Yoga and the Quest for True Self Bantam
Ornish, D	Hobdean, Wiley.

- Dalai Lama (1988) The Art of Happiness London, Coronet.  
 Dalai Lama (2004) The Wisdom of Forgiveness. Riverhead.  
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 Farias, M The Buddha Pill – Can Meditatio Change You?  
 & Wikholm, C (2015) London, Watkins  
 Frankel, V (2004) Man’s Search for Meaning. London, Rider.  
 Germer, C (2009) The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing  
 Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions  
 Guildford Press  
 Harrison, E (2004) Teach yourself to Meditate Piatkus Books  
 Harvey, J (1988), The Quiet Mind, Honesdale, PA: Himalayan  
 International Institute.  
 Hendricks, G (1995) Conscious breathing, New York: Bantam.  
 Hirschi, G (2000) Mudras: Yoga in your hands Boston Weiser  
 Books  
 Johari, H (2000) Chakras: Energy Centres of Transformation  
 Rochester, Vermont Destiny Books  
 Kabbat-Zin, J(2005) Coming to our senses, London: Piatkus.  
 Nestor, J (2020) Breath – The New Science of a Lost Art Penguin  
 Patel, M et al (2014) The dance between joy and pain - Revised 2014  
 Rothschild, B (2000) The body remembers, New York: Norton.  
 Sri Swami Satchidananda Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: New Edition 2012  
 Swami Rama et.al (1998) Science of breath, Honesdale, PA, Himalayan  
 Institute Press.

### **At the movies!**

All the movies below are vehicles for the transmission of many ideas emerging from the study and practice of meditation. They all consider the impact of desire and attachment, some with great grace and others with great humour! Enjoy!

Spring Summer Autumn Winter Spring  
 Travellers and Magicians  
 Three Idiots  
 Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon  
 In Pursuit of Silence

**James Taylor**  
**August 2023**