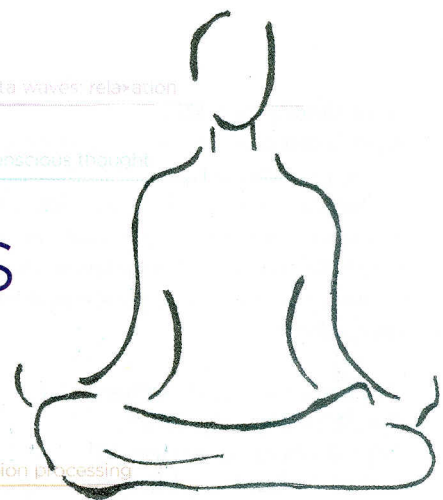


Theta waves: relaxation

Alpha waves: conscious thought



Beta waves: information processing

Meditation for Beginners

An increasing number of Americans have turned to this ancient Asian practice as a way to calm down and improve health

BY DAVID KING

For many people, the word meditation may conjure up images of monks in pastel-colored robes sitting crossed-legged on the ground for an extended period of time. While there's truth to the sitting part, you may be surprised to learn that an increasing number of Americans from across the religious spectrum have turned to the ancient Asian practice as a way to calm down and improve their health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a 2007 national survey found that more than 20 million Americans reported having meditated in the past year. While meditation customs vary—practicing individually versus as part of a group; in silence or while listening to instructions; in a religious context or secularly—a number of studies have shown that regular meditation can have both mental and physical benefits.

The biology behind this is that when you meditate, the brain experiences a decrease in the number of alpha waves, which are responsible for conscious thought, and an increase in the number of theta waves, which are tied to relaxation. Beta waves, an indication that the brain is processing information, also decrease in number.

“Our model of brain activity during meditation indicates that there may be very demonstrable reasons why people who frequently practice meditation experience lower blood pressure, lower heart rates, decreased anxiety, and decreased depression,” says Andrew Newberg, MD, of the University of Pennsylvania.

So, where to start? The Chicago area has a number of resources for people trying out the practice for the first time. The following places all offer weekly group sessions and all welcome participants of any religious background. Some are free, while some ask for a nominal fee or contribution. You need not bring anything with you when you go, but you should wear loose, comfortable clothing.

Chicago Weekly Sitting Meditation Group at The Yoga Boutique 655 W. Irving Park Rd. (enter on Pine Grove Ave.)

Mondays, 7:45pm. Two back-to-back sitting meditation sessions of 15 minutes each. Cost is \$2.50 per session, with a minimum of \$10 to start. (Those unable to pay should contact the organizer).

This popular non-denominational group in Lakeview tends to attract young adults, many of whom have never meditated before. The friendly organizer, Robert Pope, offers helpful instructions, and participants socialize at the beginning and end of the session. meetup.com/Chicago-Meditation

Diamond Way Buddhist Center 830 N. Hermitage Ave., 1st floor
Mondays and Fridays, 8pm. A 10-minute talk on Buddhism, followed by

30 minutes of guided meditation, tea and socializing. Donation requested but not required.

At Diamond Way, you'll feel like you're in someone's living room—literally—sessions take place in a three-flat building in the East Village neighborhood. This youngish group sees some 15 to 30 people per session, and all are invited to hang out in the cozy basement, which has tea and reading materials for before and after. diamondway.org/chicago

Inner Metamorphosis University 1418 W. Howard St.

Thursdays, 6:15pm. One hour of instruction and sitting meditation. Free.

Inner Metamorphosis University may well be the best hidden of all these places. The nascent group meets in a small but pleasant space on Howard St. off of Sheridan Rd. The small group size allows for personal guidance from an instructor who's happy to teach newcomers. lifesurfing.org

Shambhala Meditation Center 7331 N. Sheridan Rd.

Sundays, 9 am. Three hours of silent and guided meditation, as well as Buddhist chanting; Tuesdays, 7pm. One hour of sitting and walking meditation, followed by a break for refreshments, and then reading of a Buddhist text and group discussion. Free.

At Shambhala, you'll get well-rounded training in meditation, either in group sessions or from a personal instructor (both are free). Learn about sitting posture, walking meditation, and “mindfulness” (paying attention to your thoughts) in a place that welcomes visitors of all ages, from teens to 80+. chicago.shambhala.org

Tsogyaling Meditation Center of Evanston

1599 Maple Ave., Evanston, Ill.

Fridays, 6pm. One hour of instruction and sitting meditation, followed by an optional half hour of discussion. \$10 requested, but any amount accepted.

Cheery co-organizer Nancy Floy and her husband, Asang Betsang, native Tibetan, welcome first-timers to this modern space in downtown Evanston. As many as 20 participants of diverse backgrounds come out for a session. Those who have trouble sitting still for long periods of time may like Tsogyaling for its sequence of five- and ten-minute sittings punctuated by short breaks. evanstonmeditation.org

David King is a Chicago-based freelance writer.