



Disconnect to Reconnect

In 2012, Sara Kushwara, a 36-year-old teacher from Connecticut, moved to Istanbul, Turkey, to teach English. She found herself living in a hectic city where she heard the call to prayer five times a day mixed with the sound of cars, boats, protestors, and pedestrians pushing carts down ancient cobblestone streets. She realized she needed to find composure in the chaos around her. It was this realization that led her to meditation.

Kushwara hadn't lived in Istanbul long before some new friends invited her to join a meditation group. This was a life-changing experience for her and the answer to quieting the chaos. After most meditation sessions she felt calm, cleansed, and grounded. Sitting in a chair with her eyes closed for 45 minutes a day while concentrating on her posture and breathing allowed her to become more focused. It made it easier to deal with the excitement and obligations that were now part of her daily routine.

Kushwara moved back to the U.S. a couple years ago and continues to meditate every day. While the frenzy of living in a foreign city may not exist for her anymore, she is now married with a one-year-old son. And despite never having enough hours in the day, she still makes meditation a priority. She sometimes uses an app on her phone to connect with fellow meditators. For as long as it works for her as a tool to escape the stresses life creates, she will continue to meditate.

Medical and Mental Benefits



For many, the thought of meditation conjures up ideas of spirituality. And, in fact, many who meditate believe they are enriching their souls. But what about the medical benefits a person can gain from meditation?

Ram Ramabhadran, a retired molecular biologist living in Raleigh, North Carolina, joined a meditation group hoping it would help with his feelings of irritation and anxiety. Since he began his journey into meditation, he has been able to find patience through mindfulness meditation. He now sleeps better and lives a more peaceful life.

As a man of science, he feels the cause and effect of daily, guided meditation sessions. He suggests that, to experience all meditation has to offer, one needs to make it part of a daily routine.

Medical professionals continue to study how the brain benefits by simply giving it a rest. According to Dr. Gayatri Devi, neurologist and author of *A Calm Brain*, while it doesn't work for everyone, meditation can be a bottom-up alternative to prescription drugs for treating a number of illnesses. In fact, she believes drugs have not solved the problem of depression, and more people than ever are complaining of insomnia and anxiety.

Studies at the University of Wisconsin show that experienced meditators have much higher levels of activity in the section of the brain that processes positive emotions and less activity in the areas associated with anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions.

In addition to helping people with anxiety, depression, and insomnia, a study published in the journal *Perceptual Motor Skills* found meditators exhibited a higher IQ and improved academic performance, more accurate perception, improved creativity and problem solving, improved focus and memory, improved job satisfaction and job performance, and improved athletic performance due to faster reaction time, increased energy, and endurance.

Those who meditate daily usually have a sacred spot in their home they turn to for respite. It is often a quiet spot where there is little likelihood of being interrupted. Avoiding work spaces that can draw focus to unfinished tasks or items requiring attention is also a way to distance oneself from possible disruptions.

But, as beneficial as daily meditation can be, sometimes people feel the need for more of an immersion. In today's world, there are endless distractions vying for our attention and, at times, they can seem impossible to tune out. Whether it is the constant buzz of electronics, politics, work, or family, meditation retreats are becoming a popular way for people to learn to live in the moment and assist in blocking out the noise.

Getting Away from It All

Determining how you want to learn—or continue your progress in the art of meditation if you are already an experienced meditator—is the first step in the journey to self-discovery. There are so



many options when it comes to selecting the right retreat, it is beneficial to break the options down.

Those who are looking for a complete escape with a touch of adventure might attend retreats that offer outdoor activities in addition to guided group meditation sessions. Exploring nature through physical exercise combined with meditation can be just what some people need to release tension and experience a deeper calm.

One such retreat is The Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. This quintessential meditation retreat, complete with 120 acres of land, sits between mountain and ocean, with a cascading canyon stream and hot mineral springs. It is an environment seemingly made for a spiritual awakening. The Esalen runs as a nonprofit organization, offering meditation workshops for beginners as well as experienced meditators. While not meditating, guests can take nature hikes, surf or kayak in the ocean, or enjoy breathtaking views while running along the Pacific Coast Highway.

Packages range from a weekend stay in a communal lodge for \$420 to seven days in a premium single room for \$3,555.

Where Silence Is Golden

Seekers of a deeper self-awareness and more intimate meditation sessions might want to look for a retreat that offers what is called noble silence. Places with a silence policy believe that, by avoiding the chatter, you increase awareness and simplify life. At most retreats of this kind, guided sessions where talking is encouraged are conducted, so it is not as though participants must remain quiet their entire visit. These retreats put a strong emphasis on personal transformation.

Rolling Meadows in Brooks, Maine, is located off a dirt road in a restored 1840s New England farmhouse. Quaint as it may be, it sits on a vast property of 100 acres, 15 miles from the coastal town of Belfast. The eponymous rolling meadows create the perfect environment to help one discover balance.

This retreat not only prescribes to noble silence, it also prohibits technology, which Surya-Chandra Das—one of Rolling Meadows' teachers—believes has become an addiction. Its goal in having no-speaking and no-technology policies is to remove external stimulation and distractions to help participants slow down while nurturing them through a contemplative healing process that rejuvenates their minds, bodies, and spirits. After all, the quieter you become, the more you can hear.

Packages range from two to six nights and start at \$495 per person and go up to \$1,250.

Pampering Your Mind and Body

Meditators wanting to feel rejuvenated with a certain level of pampering may want to explore a spa-meditation experience at a retreat that includes such amenities as massages, yoga, and facials.

The Mii amo in Sedona, Arizona, is a destination spa whose red rock backdrop will inspire all who



attend. Mii amo curates its retreats to help guests find balance and inner harmony. The resort offers services ranging from massages, body wraps, and skincare to fitness, yoga, and meditation classes. The retreat's unique location and services are sure to suit anyone seeking ways to renew body and mind.

All-inclusive packages for three, four, and seven nights start at \$2,454 and go up to \$10,620. Spa treatments are included in each option.

While retreats vary, most use the beauty and peace of their natural landscape as a means of establishing the beauty and peace within. They also place an emphasis on healthy nutrition; many include farm-to-table, vegetarian, vegan, and organic meal options in their packages.

Regardless of how you practice meditation—at home in a quiet spot or at a posh resort—the medical and spiritual benefits can be powerful. Remember what Buddha said: “A disciplined mind brings happiness.”