



## Open Monitoring Meditation

 Mindfulness

 Meditation

 5-60 min

 Client

 Yes

In focused attention (FA) meditation, attention is directed and sustained on a selected object (e.g., the breath). Once the meditator notices that attention is not focused on the object anymore, he/she focuses attention back to the object. In open monitoring (OM) meditation, also referred to as “open awareness” meditation and “choiceless awareness,” the meditator does not focus his attention on one stimulus (like the breath or a sound) but remains open and attentive to whatever arises in experience from moment to moment. The meditator, instead, pays mindful attention to the entire field of sensory experience. Conscious attention moves instantly and naturally between the changing elements of experience. OM meditation aims to cultivate the watchful awareness that notices thoughts and feelings as they arise from moment to moment.

Preliminary research findings suggest that OM meditation does not rely on brain regions involved in engaging or sustaining attention on one area but on brain regions implicated in monitoring, vigilance, and disengaging attention from stimuli that distract attention from the ongoing stream of experience (Hölzel et al., 2007; Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, (2007); Tang, Yi-Yuan, et al., 2007; Valentine & Sweet, 1999). In another study, a group randomly assigned to five days of meditation training, mostly based on OM meditation, showed greater improvement in conflict monitoring compared to a control group that received relaxation training (Tang et al., 2007).



### Goal

OM practice can strengthen the ability to observe thoughts, feelings, and emotions. A central aim of OM practice is to gain a clear reflexive awareness of the usually implicit features of one’s mental life, such as thoughts about the past or habitual ways of responding. It is said that awareness of such features enables an individual to transform cognitive and emotional habits (e.g., worrying when things turn out differently than expected or shouting when experiencing anger) more readily.



## Advice

- For many clients, OM meditation is not so easy; therefore, it may be wise to do it for relatively short periods to avoid frustration. One may, for instance, start with five minutes and move on from there.
- When clients reflect on their OM meditation experience, they may talk about very different experiences, such as feeling chaotic as the attention skips around or feeling very calm. Whatever experience is present, clients should be aware that it is important to welcome each experience and bring curiosity to the experience.
- The choiceless awareness that is cultivated in OM meditation may imply that one does not do anything. Although OM meditation is a being state rather than a doing state, it is important to realize that even choiceless awareness includes intention; in this case, the intention not to choose but to stay aware of where attention resides.
- When this meditation causes the client's mind to feel unsettled, the client may return to the breath as an anchor.
- OM meditation can be preceded by FA meditation. Participants may start by focusing their attention on their breath, and then, when the mind becomes particularly calm, they can try to let go of the breath entirely as an anchor.
- It is advisable to incorporate moment-to-moment events in the environment into the flow of meditation guidance. For example, sirens or jackhammers, hallway happenings, or the sound of heating and air conditioning can be noted and offered to the group. Questions like "What kinds of sounds are present in this moment?" and "What's happening within you as you notice the sound of the ambulance?" can strengthen the observing mode of participants.
- In this meditation, the practitioner allows the mind to observe whatever surfaces during the meditation. This may cause issues that have been deeply repressed to begin to rise to the surface and provide participants with the opportunity to address them consciously. Moreover, the practitioner may wish to address these issues in the reflection after the meditation. The following questions can be asked:
- Sometimes, during OM meditation, issues that have been deeply repressed begin to rise to the surface. Did you notice things that you might have repressed in the past?
  - If so, what kind of experiences did you notice?
  - What was it like to notice them?
  - How did you deal with them?



## References

- Hölzel, B. K., Ott, U., Hempel, H., Hackl, A., Wolf, K., Stark, R., & Vaitl, D. (2007). Differential engagement of anterior cingulate and adjacent medial frontal cortex in adept meditators and non-meditators. *Neuroscience letters*, 421, 16-21.
- Jha, A. P., Krompinger, J., & Baime, M. J. (2007). Mindfulness training modifies subsystems of attention. *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, 7, 109-119.
- Lutz, A., Slagter, H. A., Dunne, J. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2008). Attention regulation and monitoring in meditation. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 12, 163-169.
- Tang, Yi-Yuan, et al. (2007). Short-term meditation training improves attention and self-regulation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104.43, 17152-17156.
- Travis, F., & Shear, J. (2010). Focused attention, open monitoring and automatic self-transcending: Categories to organize meditations from Vedic, Buddhist and Chinese traditions. *Consciousness and cognition*, 19, 1110-1118.
- Valentine, E. R., & Sweet, P. L. (1999). Meditation and attention: A comparison of the effects of concentrative and mindfulness meditation on sustained attention. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 2(1), 59-70.



# Open Monitoring Meditation

## Introduction

In this meditation, you will allow your attention to go to objects that are at the forefront of your awareness—whether they are sounds, sensations of contact as you sit, emotions as they manifest in the body, or other experiences. Just be aware of them in an expansive, receptive, and welcoming way. Welcome any experience. Notice whatever comes up in your awareness (bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions, sounds, urges) and let it go again. Try to let go of any specific focus of alertness - just sit with awareness. You may choose to return to the breath as an anchor if your mind feels too unsettled.

## Instructions

Settle into a sitting posture that reflects dignity and presence, taking your time to feel where the body touches the chair or cushion, anchoring yourself in this space, this moment.

Now, first, turn your attention to the breath for a few moments. Simply breathe in and breathe out. Every breath is a new opportunity to be fully present in this moment.

Then, when you are ready for it, let go of the focus on the breath. Allow your attention to just float from moment to moment.

Your attention may go to thoughts, sounds, physical sensations, emotions. It does not matter where your attention goes. Maybe your foot hurts a bit. Maybe your breath is calling your attention. Perhaps a feeling of fear in your chest asks for your attention. Maybe you notice the sound of a passing car. Just shift from sense to sense, allowing your senses to lead you.

Try to see your sensation not as a distraction but rather as an opportunity for exploration. Be curious. Keep your attention on whatever seems most pressing until another sense guides you in a new direction. At some point, the current sensation may loosen its hold on you.

There might be something else going on in your body or in your surroundings that is more compelling now. Go there and repeat the process. Just hang out with whatever is going on. Ride your current of awareness as it naturally shifts.

As with all mindfulness meditations, whenever your mind wanders, bring it back to the “object of attention,” in this case, whichever sense captures your attention the most.

Both positive and negative experiences may arise at times. Hang out with them without judgment. Just notice them. Observe them. When you feel overwhelmed by the experiences, you can always go back to the breath to re-anchor yourself in the present moment.

We continue with this free-floating awareness for about 10 minutes in silence.