

Meditation and Epicurean Philosophy (?)

Post by “Matt” of January 9, 2022 at 8:01 PM

Admin Note: This thread is currently closed.

There is no evidence that Epicurus or Epicureans practiced meditation. There are many forum members who have studied Buddhism in the past, and this thread remains here as a reminder to focus on Epicurean goals for how choices of what to do are based on the pleasure that they bring, or the relief from stress that they bring (and not as a kind of virtue/religious discipline to develop as it often becomes for Buddhists). -- October 17, 2024

I’m definitely not one to promote any sort of esoteric things within Epicurean Philosophy, but the brief discussion in the music thread got me wondering if anyone here practices mediation as a therapeutic discipline? Not to attain any metaphysical goal, but rather as a form of relaxation and centering?

As I said in the music thread, I listen to ambient music to detoxify my brain (to get music ear-worms out, to muffle the sound of news chatter etc.) and to relax. In the past I tried various forms of meditation, especially during my George Harrison-like Eastern philosophy journey. Usually those forms of meditation have some metaphysical goal attached to them as in Buddhism and Vedanta which now are very unappealing to me. One form from Chinese philosophy made the most sense for me. The “quiet sitting” technique that is used by Taoists and also historically by Confucians, was the most beneficial. As opposed to visualizing anything, the idea is to let go of all visualization and mental phenomena and attempt to trance out. Kind of like putting your brain into a hibernation mode to clear away noisy thoughts. This particular mediation works well for me as long as the environment is without distraction. But again, I also can do something similar with headphones listening to ambient drone.

So does anyone else do any practices?

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 9, 2022 at 9:03 PM

This is a very good topic, in my opinion. There are so many forms of meditation out there, and everyone has individual preferences for what feels pleasurable. Now that I am personally identifying as "Epicurean" I am very much enjoying the idea of "doing what is pleasureable"

rather than doing meditation for "stoic-discipline" reasons.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has a very simple approach, and he says: "Enjoy your breath" and so now I periodically remind myself to do that (with a little note posted on my refrigerator). So from my earlier times studying meditation, I have taught myself a certain way of inhaling and exhaling which I find pleasurable. It is very simple and involves the full experience of feeling the body, and it can be a kind of "medicine". Perhaps I will blog on it soon, and then add link to here.

Post by “Don” of January 9, 2022 at 9:41 PM

Epicurus's instructions to commit his epitomes, summaries, and [principal Doctrines](#) to memory suggests to me some kind of repetition in the process of memorization. I've personally used silently repeating the Tetracharmakos in Greek in meditation and it's worked well to focus the mind.

I also (I think) said elsewhere that meditation helps one learn to gain a certain sense of the pleasure of ataraxia. And I maintain it's easier to make sound choices and rejections if one is able to make decisions with a focused, undistracted mind. Meditation can be a *tool* toward the end of living a pleasurable life.

I am not a regular meditator by any means but it is one of the things I seem to return to repeatedly.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 9, 2022 at 11:07 PM

Mindfulness meditation is, to me, pertinent to an Epicurean. In a nutshell, you begin by choosing a specific "object" to focus on such as your breathing or perhaps the sounds in your environment. Just notice it/them and notice what thoughts pop up. Don't get hung up on the thoughts, just let them go. You can do it sitting quietly or anywhere except driving a vehicle.

The relevance of this to EP is that it's a way to become more aware of your sensations, feelings and underlying thoughts. To me this is a great way to practice and develop a habit of working with the Canon.

Something I've been doing lately which I'm enjoying, which isn't pure meditation, is to listen to a 5-10 minute guided meditation on the Fitbit app before getting out of bed in the morning. I tend to get amped up to get myself out of bed, which ends up setting an anxious tone for my whole day. Starting off by relaxing with a short guided meditation is pretty effortless and sets a much more pleasant tone for the day.

I've commented elsewhere that I don't follow a "hedonic regimen" for the reason that I think it ends up becoming a chore rather than maximizing pleasure. If anything, I prefer a "hedonic menu". The same applies for meditation. There is a great variety of meditation techniques: you might call these tools to work on your pleasure engine (credit to [Joshua](#)). Use one as long as it feels valuable to you but feel free to switch to another. Or to none at all. We're trying to maximize pleasure but not to become Zen masters 😎

Post by “Matt” of January 9, 2022 at 11:27 PM

I love all your inputs and responses my friends. Thank you. 😊

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 10, 2022 at 12:23 AM

I'll go ahead and do a description of a simple breath awareness meditation.

You begin as you say to yourself: "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out." This can be your starting thoughts, then you can drop this and move to watching the sensations as they arise in the body...

Focus your awareness on air moving in through the nose (with mouth closed). Notice the feeling of the air as it flows inside the nostrils. Notice the feeling as your chest expands and fills with air. Gently let the air come all the way down into the diaphragm, and notice as it expands. Let the speed of this be at whatever speed feels good. Then watch as you naturally breathe back out at whatever speed feels best. Let your body relax and loosen any tension at you exhale. Repeat this process, and just let it happen at whatever speed feels good. This will vary, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. Check to feel if your sitting posture (on chair or cushion) is both relaxed and supported, so that your spine in a good alignment, head and neck comfortably aligned. Again relax your neck and shoulders as you exhale. As you continue, let your breathing become smooth, let it feel like it is become smooth on it's own accord. No need to force anything. If you feel tightness at any point or place in your body just notice it. Breath into it

with gentleness, and let it relax on its own terms. You can then "play" with aspects of your breathing, including letting your exhale have some audible sound, as well as opening your mouth as you exhale (always breath in through nostrils). Gradually allow your breathing to relax toward going slower and deeper, feeling and enjoying the smoothness. Experiment with eyes open to increase energy (gently focused on a spot about three feet in front of you), or try with eyes closed (to increase relaxation and as a sleep aid, in which case you could do this laying down in bed).

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 11, 2022 at 1:12 PM

The breath awareness meditation I shared in the earlier post can be done in any environment, even as you are moving around, out and about (or if sitting reading/typing on the forum, lol)

So at any time or place, one can simply pause and breathe, to gain an energizing feeling:

Being aware of your breath and saying to yourself:

---Breathing in I enjoy my breath, breathing out I enjoy my breath.---

So this conscious breathing helps oxygenate the body and helps you feel the good energy of the life force in your body.

[Matt](#) and anyone else...would love to hear if you have tried it out, either the focused sitting or the active simple version. 😊

Post by “Matt” of January 11, 2022 at 1:25 PM

I need to try it, I may try it tonight at work if things are quiet. I think some breathing exercises would be good for me since I'm always running between shifts at work, babies and general house related chaos. ☐☐

Post by “Pacatus” of January 12, 2022 at 1:46 AM

[Kalosyni](#)

Thank you so much for that! I recently stumbled on just that phrase (in my own mind) when I was having difficulty: "Enjoy your breath." With some past experience of Centering Prayer and TM, I have sometimes coupled a simple short word/ phrase with the breath, just to remember. But I had forgotten. 😞 As Ram Dass once said: The most difficult thing can be to remember -- to remember ...

And this beautiful meditation connects the body and mind in a unified way. Thank you for reminding me ... 😊 I need to resurrect this simple practice.

Post by “Pacatus” of January 12, 2022 at 2:00 AM

"...as well as opening your mouth as you exhale ..."

I just wanted to add that when my wife had a heart attack a few years ago, we learned that **exhaling** with the lips parted (rather than just through the nose) relieves pressure on the heart. (That's my lay-person's translation.) Thus, it can be a bit more relaxing.

Post by “Godfrey” of January 12, 2022 at 2:04 AM

I've done both the focused sitting and the active version and find both of them relaxing and centering. Most often these days as I'm in the midst of some activity I'll notice tension somewhere in my body, typically my shoulders or lower back, then consciously relax the tension and take a few conscious breaths as I continue to relax the tension.

Ahhhhh... With a bit of practice it's very effective.

Post by “Scott” of January 12, 2022 at 10:18 AM

I'll just echo most of the above thoughts. I use a breathe and focus technique **many** times a day. It relaxes tension, breaks me out of automatic mode and reminds me how pretty much every single moment is an opportunity to enjoy being here. What could be more wonderful than being here? Without "being here", life would be rather less interesting!



Post by “Kalosyni” of January 12, 2022 at 1:40 PM

Some thoughts today...in regard to meditation, just thinking to point out that it doesn't lead to the understanding of the nature of things, or the best way to live.

So it is important to see it as form of enjoyment, or a kind of pleasure, but it cannot be relied upon as a complete cure (which is one reason why I left Buddhism). And I think it was said somewhere on the forum that there is no evidence that Epicureans did meditation. As a form of pleasure, meditation could be a tool for pleasure, and it would depend on a given person's inclinations. It is possible that going for a short walk gives equivalent health benefits, and possibly more pleasure.

The best way to live has many components...and I am still working out what the Epicurean philosophy brings to life-long well-being...to see a big-picture view of Epicurean philosophy.

Post by “Pacatus” of November 17, 2023 at 5:52 PM

There are many kinds of meditation/contemplation – and they need not be mutually exclusive. I especially liked [Kalosyni](#) 's “enjoying the breath,” for example: it helped me move from an effortful “focus on the breath” to feeling the pleasure of just breathing.

With that said, [Eoghan Gardiner](#) has recently mentioned doing “lectio divina” using Epicurean texts. That might be similar to [Don](#) using the tetrapharmicon (in Greek).

Another is the Eastern Orthodox use of icons for visual meditation/contemplation. I think people have used images and busts of Epicurus for a long time. But, for me, Genevra Catalano's artwork provides a new dimension in that regard. For example, I am using a copy of her “Elder Epicurus” on my computer screen (I hope that's okay @Nate). But the one I'm really looking

forward to is the larger version of her “A Day in the Garden” – a framed version of which (when it arrives) will hang on the wall in my “office,” facing where I sit every day. [RE: "A Day In The Garden: Epicurus, Hermarchus, Leonteus, Themista, Hippoclidus, Polystratus, and Alexandria" by Genevra Catalano \(2023\)](#)

I have a copy on my computer as well, and I find that contemplating it brings me a feeling of peace/serenity. It will be the first thing that I see every day (after the coffee pot). And it will be available to me throughout the day – for nonverbal meditation/contemplation.

Post by “burninglights” of November 17, 2023 at 7:46 PM

A mindfulness meditation exercise I've really come to enjoy is to take in a slow, deep breath from as low in my abdomen as I can, let my stomach fill up 360 degrees, and then release and let my stomach deflate effortlessly (as opposed to a controlled release).

Sometimes I just focus on my breath, or sometimes I couple this with a visualization, such as a small stream that ran near my house when I was a kid.

I find the stream to be a good visualization of the mental 'thought stream' and I find that image particularly helpful for placing the thought into its proper context as part of an endless stream, which I can let go of and watch drift away.

Post by “Bryan” of November 17, 2023 at 10:39 PM

An easy, relaxing and beneficial meditation (focusing the mind, ἡ ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας) is to listen to Lucretius on an audiobook with reduced speed and picture everything as though it is a movie.

I am unable to engage in any secondary activity while doing this. If my mind wanders away from producing the movie at any point I just rewind the audiobook a minute and pick the movie back up.

Post by “Cassius” of November 18, 2023 at 1:39 PM

Now that this thread has come to life again I reviewed it from the beginning and decided to change the title to "Meditation and Epicurean Philosophy (?)."

To my recollection we have never held a close discussion of what "meditation" really means. By raising the point I realize that bringing it up will seem to be an invitation to go there, and I am not even sure that is desirable consistent with our forum goals. One of the main reasons for the existence of this forum is to resist any effort at amalgamation of teachings from schools which have highly different views of the universe and of the goal of life, and a thread which becomes an advertisement for "the benefits of Buddhist meditation" or "the benefits of Stoic mindfulness" is going to skirt close to something that needs to be conducted elsewhere. On the other hand, "the hazards of Buddhist meditation" or "the hazards of Stoic mindfulness" would be more obviously consistent with the purposes of the forum.

[As per the Wikipedia page on meditation:](#)

Difficulties in defining meditation

No universally accepted definition

Meditation has proven difficult to define as it covers a wide range of dissimilar practices in different traditions. In popular usage, the word "meditation" and the phrase "meditative practice" are often used imprecisely to designate practices found across many [cultures](#).^{[19][20]} These can include almost anything that is claimed to train the attention of mind or to teach calmness or compassion.^[21] There remains no definition of necessary and sufficient criteria for meditation that has achieved universal or widespread acceptance within the modern scientific [community](#). In 1971, [Claudio Naranjo](#) noted that "The word 'meditation' has been used to designate a variety of practices that differ enough from one another so that we may find trouble defining what meditation is."^[22]: 6 A 2009 study noted a "persistent lack of consensus in the [literature](#)" and a "seeming intractability of defining meditation".^[23]

Separation of technique from tradition^[edit]

Some of the difficulty in precisely defining meditation has been in recognizing the particularities of the many various [traditions](#);^[24] and theories and practice can differ within a [tradition](#).^[25] Taylor noted that even within a [faith](#) such as "Hindu" or "Buddhist", schools and individual teachers may teach distinct types of meditation.^[26]: 2 Ornstein noted that "Most techniques of meditation do not exist as solitary practices but are only artificially separable from an entire system of practice and belief."^[27]: 143 For instance, while monks meditate as part of their everyday lives, they also engage in the codified rules and live together in monasteries in specific cultural settings that go along with their meditative practices.

I think for the moment I am going to close this thread and refer the issue to a moderator discussion before we proceed further. I feel confident from past experience that some of our core people find mediation of a type helpful (Matt, who started the thread, being a good

example.) But one of the purposes of this forum is to provide direction for people who are new to Epicurus, and we need to first identify to what extent certain variations on "meditation" can be harmful from an Epicurean perspective.

I'll set something up on that and eventually this thread will likely be re-opened, but we at least need a reference somewhere that covers basics on:

1. The hazards of certain types of mediation,
2. What types of meditation might be consistent with Epicurean philosophy, and
3. What references if any in the Epicurean texts indicate endorsement of any type of meditation.

Post by "Cassius" of November 18, 2023 at 1:48 PM

For example, right after I closed the thread, Eoghan sent me this:

"My only real hesitancy with mindfulness et al is that it seems it falls into the same trap as modern Stoicism does, which is to say it takes one small part of a larger system. (mindfulness for Buddhism - Ethical living/virtue as the sole good for Stoicism). A lot of Buddhists I know would say that the point of meditation ultimately is to obtain the right view which is to understand the 4 part cure, 8 fold path, Samsara etc... But if it is having discernible benefit for you (helping you live pleurably) then I think it's good but be very careful as these techniques are hard to separate from their tradition."

I suspect a lot of us have thoughts like that, while others who are more into mediation will feel a lot stronger in support of it. Before we open up that public discussion let me talk to the moderators about it.

Edit:

I also want to comment on this that Eoghan said: "*But if it is having discernible benefit for you (helping you live pleurably) then I think it's good but be very careful as these techniques are hard to separate from their tradition.*" That's stated well, but it's worth making clear that it would not be sufficient just to consider "meditation" to be a pleasure, because as we all know it is Epicureanism 101 that not all pleasures are to be chosen, and some are to be avoided when they bring more pain than pleasure. Prudence tells us to look into what to expect "all" the ramifications to be, and that's what needs discussion before a section on "meditation" becomes a significant part of this forum.