

A Guide to Discursive Meditation

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Learning the Process

Once you get the hang of it, the process of discursive meditation is simple and straightforward, and it can quickly become a valued part of your daily routine.

Once you have selected an appropriate time and place for your practice, discursive meditation has seven components or stages:

1. The Opening Act
2. Posture
3. The Relaxation Stage
4. The Fourfold Breath
5. The Discursive Stage
6. Journalling
7. The Closing Act

As you begin, for the first week or two, just work with steps 1–3 and 7 each day. Once you are making progress with those steps, add step 4, and practice just 1-4 and 7 for another week or two. Once you more-or-less have the hang of these, then add steps 5 and 6 to complete the process. Above all, remember that there's no prize for getting to the end first. Take as much time as you need with the initial steps.

Time & Place

To meditate effectively, find a place where you are confident you will not be disturbed for the duration of the meditation session. A quiet room with a door you can close, free of loud noises, with a comfortable temperature, etc., is ideal. If necessary, let family members or others know that you would like to be left alone for that time. Your cell phone, and any other device which might create an interruption, should be silenced, turned off, or left in another room.

Other than a simple chair (as described in step 2 below), and a way of keeping time (described in step 3), and an ordinary notebook and pen or pencil, no other special items or circumstances are required.

Most people find it best if they meditate in the same location every day, and at around the same time (perhaps right after you get up in the morning). Having a routine time and place will help you to more easily settle into “meditation mode” each day.

It's best to wait at least an hour after eating before you meditate. After a meal, your blood-flow and energy are naturally directed toward the gut to focus on digestion, but to meditate, you will want that same blood-flow and energy going to the mind and head.

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Step 1: The Opening Act

Traditionally, discursive meditation begins with some act of invocation and/or protection: a small ritual, if you will, which is intended to help you get into a suitable frame of mind (leaving aside the worries of the day, and focusing on the meditation) and to ensure that the meditative act goes safely and successfully.

At a minimum, this functions at a psychological level, where over time, repetition of this ritual acts as a trigger that tells your mind “it’s time for meditation,” and helps you to slip into the appropriate frame of mind quickly and easily.

Beyond that, there’s something powerful and helpful about situating ourselves within a larger cosmos, in relationship to powers and forces (whether personal or impersonal) that are greater than ourselves.

I suggest here a variety of options that you might choose. You should certainly feel free to experiment, to see what feels right and works well for you personally, but once you have a sense of what works, I strongly recommend that you begin with the same small ritual every time you meditate. Over time, the habits formed by that repetition will become more and more powerful for helping you overcome distraction, tiredness, and other obstacles to your practice.

This opening act was taught to me as a key component when I learned this practice, and to my knowledge, something like it has always been a traditional part of the activity. In my personal experience, I have found it to be valuable and essential. For these reasons, I strongly recommend using some such opening frame whenever you practice discursive meditation, though of course, the exact form that takes is up to you and your own needs and circumstances.

This list of options is meant to be suggestive, and not exhaustive. You might consider:

- Some sort of prayer or invocation. Those inspired by Stoic philosophy might use these lines from Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus*, quoted as the last words of Epictetus’ *Handbook*:

Guide me, O Zeus, and thou, O Destiny,
To wheresoever you have assigned me;
I’ll follow unwavering, or if my will fails,
Base though I be, I’ll follow nonetheless. (translated by Robin Hard)

- Those who have some religious tradition will have a wealth of options to choose from: for Buddhists, taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; for Christians, the Lord’s Prayer; for those who honor the Hellenic Gods, one of the Orphic Hymns; etc.
- People of any faith tradition (or none) who have some reverence for nature may find the [Universal Druid Prayer](#) appropriate. The first and last lines of this prayer can be modified to suit your own theology (or lack thereof): you might call on a particular deity by name, or use an address like “O Mother Earth,” “O powers of Nature,” etc.
- Instead of a prayer, you can also use some other ritual act to define the meditative space. This might be as simple as washing your hands, head, and face with a bowl of cold water. Or you might extend your arm with two fingers pointed outward, and spin around clockwise to draw a circle around yourself and the chair where you’ll sit. Either way, hold in your mind the intention that you are protected from distraction, and able to focus on a productive meditation.

Step 2: Posture

Here, you have two distinct options, both quite traditional: either sitting on an ordinary chair or bench, or laying on your back. Choose whichever works best for you, given your health, physical mobility, material circumstances, and propensity for falling asleep.

The Seated Position

Sit upright, on a firm surface. A simple wooden chair or bench, which does not have arms or a soft cushion, is ideal. It's somewhat traditional to face the east, but you can experiment with what works best for you and for the space you are in.

Sit forward, near the front of the chair, so that you are not leaning against the chair's back. Your feet should be flat on the floor, with the bottoms of your thighs parallel to the ground (or ever so slightly pointed downward: a tiny bit lower toward the knees and higher toward the hips). If, like me, you have large thighs, it is the bottom (not the top) of your thigh that is relevant here: the bottom of your thigh should be level, while the top points noticeably downward toward the knee. This posture, together with relatively loose clothing (unbuckle your belt if necessary) will enable you to breathe freely and deeply later on. If your knees are too high relative to your hips, you will have a hard time taking a full, deep breath that fills your entire diaphragm.

If you have long legs, it may be a challenge to find a chair that is tall enough to support the correct posture. In that case, consider placing a wooden board, a book, or some other firm, flat object on the seat of your chair, in order to raise your hips to the appropriate position.

Don't underestimate the importance of this posture. When I first began practicing discursive meditation, I figured that one of my ordinary kitchen chairs would be "good enough." After more than a year of daily practice, I stayed overnight at a friend's home, where I happened to use a slightly taller chair for my morning meditation. I was amazed by what a difference that extra inch of height made!

Sit upright, with your spine vertical, poised but not tense. The flat spot on the top of your head should either be level, or pointed slightly downward to the front.

Place your hands comfortably on your thighs, palms down on your thighs, with your upper arms and elbows held loosely at your sides. Your hands can be as far forward (toward your knees) or back (closer to your hips) as you find comfortable. Try to make sure that whatever position you find, your shoulders are relaxed and lowered, releasing any tension in your neck. The exact location will vary from person to person, depending on the relative proportions of your body.

If you find that your shoulders are still high and tense, place your arms by your sides, fingers pointed downward to the floor, with the weight of your limp arms allowing your shoulders to rest. Gently shake your arms by your sides for a moment, letting go of any tension in the arms, shoulders, or neck. Then pivot your elbows to move your hands to your thighs (as described above), without changing the position of your elbows or shoulders. This should help you to keep your shoulders relaxed.

Laying on the Back

Alternatively, you might choose to lay flat on your back. The surface beneath you should be firm and unyielding: it's important that your spine remain straight, so a soft mattress or squishy sofa will not do. You might simply lay on the floor (with a blanket under you to moderate the temperature, if necessary). Your head should rest on the same surface as the rest of your body. Do not use a pillow.

Clasp your hands over your chest, either interweaving your fingers, or placing your dominant hand over top of the other. The tips of your thumbs should be above your heart, while your pinky fingers are above your solar plexus. Allow your elbows to rest comfortably on the ground, close by your sides.

Your legs should be straight, with your feet either touching each other side-by-side, or with one ankle atop the other.

It is customary to orient your body with your head to the north and feet to the south, but other directions can also work. If you do try different angles, simply pay attention to see what works best for you over time.

Just as with the seated posture, this position, together with loose-fitting clothing, will allow you to breathe fully and deeply. Once again, unbuckle or remote a tight belt, if necessary. If you find yourself regularly dozing off during meditation, then you should probably switch to using the seated position. (You might also try adjusting your evening schedule, to get more sleep at the typical time!)

Step 3: The Relaxation Stage

Once you're positioned comfortably in one of the two postures described above, you will spend five minutes relaxing, focusing on each part of your body, and releasing any tension which may be stored up there. There are a variety of methods which can help you mark this five minutes:

- Set a timer or alarm. If you do this, try to choose a device which will make a short sound and then stop on its own. Do not use something where you will need to press a button, get up, or otherwise move when the time is up.
- Place a watch, clock, or timer in front of you, in your field of vision, where you will not need to turn, lift, or lower your head to see it. I sometimes use a digital timer which counts up, which I place on a small table directly in front of my chair.

I recommend leaving your phone far away, even in a different room, and timing your meditation in any other way. For so many people today, the mere presence of the phone is a reminder of all the cares, worries, and responsibilities of the day. Literally laying that aside, even for only a few minutes every day, can be surprisingly powerful. If you must use your phone as a timepiece, make sure that it's turned off in as many ways as possible, so that calls, messages, and notifications will not disturb you.

Beginning from your feet and working your way up to your head, simply attend to each part of your body, noticing whatever tension is present there, and letting go of it (excepting, of course, that minimal amount of muscular control that's keeping you from falling out of your chair).

“Breathe in” to particular parts of your body with each inhalation, then “breathe out” the tension from that area along with each outbreath, focusing on the place(s) in your body where that tension is most acute. On each inbreath, clench the muscles in one part of your body, without actually moving your limbs; then on the outbreath, unclench that same muscle group as completely as possible.

For the first few weeks or months of practice, you will likely need the full five minutes to relax your body as much as possible. But once you become accustomed to the practice, you may find that your body is holding less tension in general, and you can quickly settle into the relaxed state in only a minute or two. Early on, though, plan on spending the full five minutes on this step every day, whether you think you need it or not. Unless they have some other established relaxation practice (through massage, martial arts training, etc.), most new meditators are surprised by the astonishing amount of tension they are holding in some part(s) of their body!

Step 4: The Fourfold Breath

Once you have done that, for the next five minutes, you will sit still and breathe rhythmically through your nose. A special mode of breathing, called the “fourfold breath,” is especially helpful here.

The fourfold breath has four stages: the inbreath, a pause, the outbreath, and another pause. Counting silently to yourself to keep time, make each of the four stages last for an equal amount of time (traditionally a count of four each). So, breathe in while silently counting “1, 2, 3, 4,” then pause while counting “1, 2, 3, 4,” exhale while counting “1, 2, 3, 4,” then pause again for a count of “1, 2, 3, 4.” Maintain the same steady pace of counting throughout the entire process, so that each of the four stages lasts an equal amount of time. Repeat the cycle until the five minutes are up.

With each inbreath, start by filling the lower diaphragm (what we think of as “the belly”) with air. Your belly should visibly expand outwards. Then work your way up, filling the upper portion of the diaphragm with air as well. Your chest will likewise expand outwards. During the pause, keep both belly and chest in this expanded position. As you breathe out, they will contract inwards, and hold that contracted position during the next pause.

If you are unsure of what you’re going for when it comes to breathing with the entire diaphragm, find some opportunity to watch a newborn infant breathing (whether the baby is awake or asleep). As infants, we all breathe in this deep, full way that expands and contracts the entire diaphragm; it’s only as we grow older that most of us learn to breathe in a more shallow way that neglects the lower diaphragm. (Some adults manage to return to this deeper mode of breathing when they’re asleep, though this is by no means universal.)

It’s important that you not clench your throat, nor otherwise try to hold your breath. Let the pause come from the motion of your chest, and not from your throat. Your throat should stay open and relaxed throughout the entire process. If you find yourself clenching, try placing the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth, right about where the bony ridge near the front of the mouth ends and the soft palate begins. Most people (myself included) find it impossible to clench the throat while the tongue is in this position.

Take approximately five minutes on this stage every time you practice discursive meditation.

Step 5: The Discursive Stage

You are now done with the preliminaries, and ready for the step which specifically characterizes discursive meditation. For the first few months of your practice, spend five minutes on this stage as well. After a few months, when you are ready, you can gradually increase the time. But it is better to start simple, with something that you can manage day in and day out, rather than biting off so much that you cannot sustain the daily practice. You can time these five minutes just as you did for the earlier stages.

During this stage, there is no special way that you need to breathe. Simply allow yourself to breathe smoothly and freely, in whatever way comes most naturally to you.

Choosing a Theme

In this stage, you will begin by calling to mind the theme of the meditation, which you have already chosen prior to beginning the session. The theme can be a short passage of text (no more than a phrase or sentence), an image, a symbol, or even any pair of these whose connections or relations you would like to explore. Really, anything meaningful can be turned into a theme for meditation. Some good sources for themes include:

- Selections from a philosophical, literary, poetic, religious, or spiritual text. As you read (not during meditation, but at other times of the week), copy down into a small notebook any lines or phrases which jump out at you or grab your interest, and use each of these as the theme for one or more sessions of meditation.
- An image, especially if it is something produced thoughtfully, with deliberate symbolism. If you choose this option, it's totally fine (and often quite helpful) if you have the image literally, physically in front of you when you meditate on it.
- The characters, settings, objects, or events of traditional myths, particularly if those myths are important to your self-understanding, or to your sense of your place in the world (as an individual, a member of a community, etc.).
- Sets of symbols. The first ten numbers, the four elements, the different phases of matter, and the basic geometric shapes are all classic options, but there are many, many more.

Whatever you choose, make sure that your theme is “bite size,” something that you can hold in your awareness all at once. It can still be complex and have multiple parts, but should not be so big that you are prevented from calling to mind the entire thing as a single unit. For example, you can certainly go bigger than a single word, and take a phrase, a sentence, or a line or couplet of poetry as a theme, but something as large as a long paragraph or an entire sonnet should probably be broken up into several smaller themes. The same principle applies for themes which are not verbal. When in doubt, lean toward themes which are smaller and more compact.

One important caveat: while the sky is the limit when it comes to choosing themes, it can be helpful to remember the old saying that “what you contemplate, you imitate.” Most of the time, focus on themes that are positive or evaluatively neutral (for example, but not only: what you admire, what inspires you, what you'd like to become; or things written, produced, or handed down by people whom you admire or would like to emulate). An occasional session of medita-

tion that focuses on a problem, a difficult circumstance, an injustice, or similar such things can be fine, but I do not recommend that you do this too often—no more than one or two days in a month of daily practice—lest you internalize the problem, and start to take on the image of negative or harmful persons or things in your own life and behavior. Above all, it would be a serious mistake to meditate on the very same problem or injustice day after day.

Finding Themes from a Book

Discursive meditation can be a powerful tool for delving into the depths of a written work of philosophy (or into other similarly dense works of mythology, spiritual teachings, etc.). Here's one traditional method:

Once a week, read a single chapter from the book, two times through. On the first reading, go as quickly as you can. Your goal is not to capture all the nuance; you are simply trying to get a feel for the overall narrative structure. On the second pass, read more slowly, and make a note in your meditation notebook of seven ideas or concepts that seem especially salient, important, central, or confusing. You yet don't need to have any idea *why* they are important, or how they connect to the other parts of the chapter. Just trust your intuition, and write them down.

For the next week, take each of these seven items as the theme for one day's meditation. Now is the time to explore how each theme connects to the larger chapter, as well as to other ideas and arguments that are not mentioned in the text.

At the end of the week, read the chapter one more time. You will likely find yourself understanding much, much more than you did a week ago. Then repeat the process with the next chapter, reading the new chapter twice, to find seven themes there for the following week's meditations.

The Process Itself

Once you have finished the fourfold breath, begin to breathe normally, in whatever way comes most naturally and unconsciously to you. Bring the day's theme to your awareness, and explore it: its implications, its assumptions, connections, meanings. If it helps, you can think of this as a silent conversation with yourself—that's where the name "discursive" comes from. As long as you continue to have a path or a thread back to the theme, then there are no right or wrong ways to go.

When (not if) you inevitably find your mind wandering to something that is not connected to the theme, try to backtrack, if you can: What was I was thinking of just before this? What thought led me to that one? And so on, and so on, until you are back at the theme. This practice of backtracking is itself an important part of the process, a way of strengthening both your focus and your power of recall. So there's nothing at all wrong with it; it's a normal and valuable part of the activity.

Similarly, when you find that a train of thought has petered out or exhausted itself, backtrack your way toward the theme, until you find a fork that you can take in another direction. Then pursue that.

How might you pursue the implications of a theme? Here are a few possible approaches:

- Analyze the text word by word (or the image, element by element, etc.), seeing what significance each component might have on its own, or in company with the larger context. An extended example of this is given below.
- Use a set of standard questions. In grade school, many of us learned the “W-questions”: Who (or whose)? What? When? Where? Why? How? These, or another similar framework, could be a very useful starting point. As you use them regularly, you might want to take note: Do certain of these questions frequently get more mileage than the others? Is anything missing from this list of questions, and if so, what is it?
- Explore applications and examples. If the theme states or implies some general principle, you might spend an entire meditation session considering all the ways in which one particular example fits, or fails to fit, that principle. Or you might seek out counterexamples which, at least on the face of it, seem to run counter to the general principle: explain why they seem like counterexamples, and then explore ways in which they might, nonetheless, be included under the general statement.
- Explore general principles and categories. This is the reverse of the previous option. Consider whether there are any more general concepts or principles, of which your theme is just one specific case.

As you carry out this process, simply sit still, in the posture described in step 2, breathing naturally and comfortably.

An Example

As one example of selecting a theme and beginning the discursive stage of the meditation, we might consider the quotation from Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus*, given above. We can get at least five separate themes for meditation from this passage, and each of these themes can give rise to a wealth of ideas to explore.

The single phrase “Guide me, O Zeus” has more than enough built into it, to serve as a theme all on its own. While meditating on this theme, you might be inclined to consider:

- What does it mean to be guided, or to be someone’s guide?
- How is the Stoic Zeus a guide? What kind of guidance might he give?
- Can I see his guidance in specific incidents from my own life? If so, what was that like, and how can that experience give me a deeper understanding of Zeus, of cosmic order, or of what good guidance is like?
- Can that, in turn, show me some specific ways that I might be a more Zeus-like, guide for other people?
- Where am I being guided right now, at this point in my life? This could be on the scale of “major life goals,” or in terms of some smaller, specific project, experience, relationship, or opportunity.
- In what specific ways I see the guidance of Zeus being expressed through other specific people, things, or events in my life? After all, in traditional Stoic thought, Zeus per-

vades the entire cosmos! If I can think of several different examples, what do they have in common? What unifies them as a group or category?

- If that category turns out to be very large and all-encompassing, is there any kind of guidance left, that would *not* count as being guided by Zeus?

And so on, and so on. Some of these bullet points follow on from the ones before them, while others represent a return back to the theme and starting again. With this many avenues to explore, you might even spend multiple sessions of meditation, just on this one theme—and this was by no means an exhaustive list of the possibilities!

Once that theme has run its course, you might choose the next phrase as another theme for the following day: “And thou, O Destiny.” Here again, there’s quite a lot to explore:

- What is “Destiny”?
- What does it mean to think of Destiny in personal terms, as the author does here? Or is he addressing an impersonal force after all?
- How is Destiny different from Zeus (which is suggested by the author using the word “and” to connect the two)? How are they the same? Might their relationship be even more subtle than mere sameness or difference? What is it?
- Is it different to be *guided* by destiny, as distinct from being pulled, dragged along, encouraged, invited, etc.?

In this example, each one of the bullet points can be seen as unpacking a single word of the quotation: the first point addresses “Destiny,” the second starts from the word “thou,” and the third shows us that even the word “and” can give rise to worthwhile reflections!

Once that theme has run its course, you might take at least three more themes from the quotation, and spend a day or more meditating on each of them, as above. Note that you do not need the list of bulleted questions prior to meditation; you only need the short phrase that constitutes the theme itself.

Step 6: Journalling

Once you’ve completed the discursive stage of your meditation, it can be helpful to jot down in a journal or notebook any thoughts, connections, or insights which occurred to you during the discursive phase. It’s best to wait until after the meditation is done to do this; I do not recommend writing during the discursive stage (step 5) itself. Journalling should be a separate and distinct phase in the process.

Some people find that when they start jotting down these notes, they come up with new insights or connections, which had not come into their awareness during step 5 itself. If that happens, it’s totally normal and fine; feel free to write them down, too. And if it doesn’t happen, that’s also totally normal and fine.

This act of writing down will help you to fix in your memory the discoveries or connections you made, and sometimes it may also provide you with additional themes, from which you can begin future meditations.

Some meditators—especially those who do not regularly get new insights during journaling—prefer to go directly to the closing act (step 7) after the discursive stage, and then briefly write in their journals after that closing ritual or prayer. Either way is fine.

Step 7: The Closing Act

This is the bookend, which matches or complements the opening act in step 1. If you began with prayer, then you might choose to offer a prayer of thanks to the same God(s), spirit(s), or other power(s) that you invoked at the beginning. Alternatively, a prayer for peace, or the famous Serenity Prayer, could be appropriate here. Or depending on what opening prayer you've chosen, you might repeat the very same prayer here at the end.

If you performed some other ritual, then this is the time to reverse or undo it (for example, mindfully emptying the bowl of cold water, or retracing the same circle counterclockwise), letting go of the special space you were in for your meditation, and returning to ordinary life. In any case, do something to formally mark the end of the meditation. Then go on about your day.