

MEDITATING TO THE BEAT



THE BEAT IS YOUR FRIEND

THINKING IS THE ENEMY

If you've been alive you've experienced distraction. Being at a rave, show or party and getting stuck in your head. Thinking about what he said, what you're gonna eat after this, how that one person is definitely judging your dress, fights we win in our heads that keep us living in a world beyond the beat. This ruminating fucking sucks. Yet we don't have to sit at the rave and stew, we can get out of our heads and into the groove, we can meditate to the beat.

The Basics of Mindfulness

Meditating to the beat means being fully present with the party, being mindful of what you're there for. When we're meditating to the beat we want our minds to take on a few qualities:

Non-judgmental: we don't sit there judging every moment as good or bad. This doesn't mean ignoring if something isn't good, but it means letting go of focusing on our judgements. If I notice the track sucks I don't have to fixate on it for the entire duration, I can notice it and let it go. What else is happening? Is there something here I do like?

Effective: we do what works in the moment with our bodies and attention. Sometimes we can't put every ounce of focus on the kickdrum, but have to be aware of other dancers or a drink in our hands. Do what works for the situation, don't get stuck in thinking you have to be or act one way, adapt to what works.

One-Mindfully: as much as possible we try to keep our attention one pointed, doing our best to stay with our object of meditation. When we get pulled off, we gently bring ourselves back. We don't have to berate ourselves for losing focus, staying focused on anything for even a few moments can be a huge task. Do your best.

These qualities are how we approach the beat, but what do we do?

Participate: use your body to connect to the beat! We're very evolved to be able to connect to a predictable pattern and stay with it. Listen for the kick drum and move your body on each hit. Move your body, dance.

Observe: notice the beat, listen to it, have a bare awareness of what's going on, focus on individual parts of the track like the bass, lead or drums, notice how your body reacts to the speakers.

Describe: describe what's happening in the music, either in your head or to a friend. What's the kick doing? Is there a melody? How would you describe the sound for a magazine review?

Getting on Beat – Taming the Mind

With our what (participation, observation and description) and our how (non-judgementally, effectively and one-mindfully) we can get on the beat! Here's my formula for staying with the beat:

1. Start big and obvious. Ruminating can be hard to stop. So don't sit on the sidelines or doomscroll, get into the crowd! Do the most obvious and energetic things first: moving back and forth, tapping your foot, nodding your head, counting the kick drum.

Most dance music is in 4/4, meaning every "bar" has four beats in it. Listen for the kick, the big boom, the doof doof, and count to four. Counting in your head while you tap your foot, nod your head or sway your body will help you connect to and follow the beat. The more you're focused on counting and grooving, the less space your mind has for the trash. Don't worry about distracting thoughts coming up, notice it's happening and just return to counting and grooving, thoughts will leave on their own.

2. Get more refined. You'll soon notice that once you've stopped thinking about your ex that counting to four forever isn't all that exciting, even if it's grounding. Once we hit this stage, try letting go of the count and just move your body. Step left and right, move your arms in time, nod and move your shoulders. If the rumination comes back simply return to counting the beat. There's no issue jumping back and forth between counting and thought-free dancing the entire night!

You might notice pleasant sensations in your body, a tingle in your spine, a warmth in your chest, maybe you're just grinning. Keep that feeling around, let it grow, give it some attention. Put it into your dancing or your listening. Happiness helps us stay mindful.

3. Focus in. There's a point where you might be enjoying the song so much that even dancing is getting in the way of your enjoyment! Try throwing on a pair of over ear hearing protection and sitting against the subwoofers. Close your eyes and let yourself be immersed in the music, let your body go, let judgements and interpretations and worries go, lose yourself to the beat.

If you can't keep that level of focus, jump back into the dance floor. It takes practiced skill to stay with any object of meditation for even a moment. It's normal to jump between these levels.

This progression from obvious, big and involved to subtle and refined is a classic trajectory with many schools of meditation. Don't take my specific steps as gospel, experiment and try new things to see what helps you stay with the beat. Everyone is different and part of being a skilled meditator is knowing what works for your mind. Remember that focus, concentration and attention is a skill you build with effort. Staying with the beat can be easier or harder depending on who we are (or what we're on) and how much practice we have put in. You can't expect to pickup a guitar and shred if you've never practiced, the same is true of concentrating our mind.

If you're interested in a more traditional guide to seated meditation, consider Ajahn Brahm's book "Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond" (there's a free pdf on the first page of Duck Duck Go) or taking a visit to Dhamma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, a local Theravada Sri Lankan monastery with twice weekly meditation groups.

"I think therefore I am not"
- *Thich Nhat Hanh*

This zine inspired by reading about the Komuso, said to have practiced suizen (blowing zen), a form of mindfulness meditation focused around playing the shakuhachi, a type of Japanese flute. While there is no documentation of how this was done, anyone who's meditated and played and instrument knows both demand focus, attention and an ability to over and over discard what is not useful to the moment. The specific formulation of mindfulness is taken from Dialectical Behavioral Therapy and the meditation instruction from my own testing and love for groove.

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