

# Why Should You Contemplate More?

The importance of experiencing your own existence.

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From the Greek philosopher Plato to the Buddha to modern psychology forefathers William James and Wilhelm Wundt, the value of contemplation as a means of fostering well-being and [wisdom](#) has been known for a long time. Contemplative practices exist within a range of life contexts, including in religion, [spirituality](#), performing arts,

literary arts, martial arts, visual arts, [education](#) (e.g., contemplative pedagogy), professional development (e.g., reflective practice), and personal development (e.g., life-reflection).

Some of the most common forms of contemplation include [meditation](#), [mindfulness](#), yoga, qigong, tai chi, and contemplative prayer. However, contemplative features can also be identified as part of the psychological processes needed for humans to function effectively, such as [self-regulation](#) (i.e., how we manage our emotions and impulses), self-awareness, self-consciousness, introspection, reflection, and meta-[cognition](#) (i.e., higher-order thinking skills).

Contemplation should be distinguished from routine forms of thinking, thought rumination, reminiscing, remembering, problem-solving, or being absorbed in a task. Dictionary definitions of the word contemplation, such as that provided by the [Online Etymology Dictionary](#), typically describe it using terms such as "to gaze attentively, observe; consider," "to mark out a space for observation," and "act of holding an idea continuously before the mind."

A common feature across most approaches to contemplation is an appreciation of the value of focused observation, whereby through observing a given concept, situation or object in a focused manner, meaningful insights can arise. Some experts in contemplation have explained this process using the analogy of sunlight that only needs to shine on a flowering plant in order for it to bloom (i.e., where blooming corresponds to deriving wisdom, well-being, or understanding).

For contemplation to be most effective, it appears that maintaining a degree of awareness over the process of focused observation is also required. This means, for example, if a person was contemplating by focusing [attention](#) on their breathing or the concept of time, they should also remain aware of the fact they are engaged in contemplation and directing their attention in a particular manner. This two-tier awareness process appears to help prevent getting lost in the contemplation or succumbing to thought rumination, daydreaming, or being overly conceptually absorbed.

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Regardless of whether a person engages in contemplation while sitting in contemplative prayer or meditation, moving gently as part of a mind-body practice such as yoga or tai chi, or using introspection or reflective techniques as part of their work, evidence from literally thousands of studies conducted over the past six decades demonstrates that contemplation can result in various benefits to health and well-being. Examples range from improvements in pain, balance and physical strength as a result of practicing yoga to improvements in [emotional intelligence](#), mood disturbance, and psychological well-being by practicing one of the many forms of meditation. Further examples are increases in learning ability following reflection as part of professional practice, as well as better educational achievement and health outcomes due to effective self-regulation strategies.

Irrespective of whether a person wishes to approach it from a psychological, religious, spiritual, philosophical, personal development, or professional

practice perspective, contemplation appears to be integral to how individuals construct meaningful lives and relate to the world they live in. Although contemplation can take on many forms, I personally like to think of it as a means by which we can break from habitual ways of thinking and behaving in order to actually experience our existence. All too often, people get so absorbed in tackling life's problems, trying to make enough money, and living the rat race more generally, that they forget to take stock of their existence and reflect on what's truly important in life. And this is a [shame](#); without developing contemplative awareness in whatever form it might take, we not only ignore a wealth of research findings but also the advice of various ancient and modern traditions concerned with healthy living.

The 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes asserted that "I think, therefore I am." However, it follows logically that "If I am not aware I think, I am not aware I am." In other words, unless we regularly take time to step back in order to observe and fully experience ourselves living, thinking and being, then it's difficult to come to a meaningful understanding of who we really are and how we want to grow as a human being. Not regularly allowing the heart and mind to be nourished by contemplation also means that rather than live life, we run the risk of being lived by life, which may lead to feelings of regret during later life stages.