

# Can you even meditate without new-age music, man?

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Finding zen with all that new age music and ambient sound.

IMAGE: CHRIS COLLINS / GETTY IMAGES

BY [BRITTANY LEVINE BECKMAN](#)  
13 HOURS AGO

[March Mindfulness](#) is Mashable's series that examines the intersection of meditation practice and technology. Because even in the time of coronavirus, March doesn't have to be madness.

Swirling synth drones, plucky zither, vibrating gongs, whirring bowls, chirping birds, crashing waves. These sounds have become common backing tracks as a disembodied voice projects from our phones, guiding us to get comfortable and notice our breath.

The rise of meditation apps has kicked off a resurgence of at-home practices heavy on the new-age music and ambient sound. But do you really need music to meditate? And if so, are these nature-inspired tunes with faux-Eastern twists always the best choice when you want to relax?

No, and no.

But, meditation experts say, you do you.

Just like there are many types of sports, there are multiple meditation practices, says Diana Winston, director of mindfulness education at University of California, Los Angeles' [Mindful Awareness Research Center](#), and the author of [The Little Book of Being](#). Some involve music and some don't. Often, those that use music do so to take you on a musical journey or foster relaxation.

Winston skips the music, however, when she teaches [mindfulness meditation](#) both at the center and on its [free app](#).

"What we're trying to cultivate with mindfulness is a quality of attention, where you're present with each moment," says Winston. "What can happen with music is it can be ruminative. It can bring on imagery and memories and associations, and in mindfulness, we're actually trying to stay in the present moment and avoid going down those roads."

Dr. Rekha Chaudhary knows exactly what she means. The University of Cincinnati associate professor of medicine, who also teaches a meditation class for medical students, recalls being in a yoga studio playing Hindu chants. But the chanter had an American accent.

"I couldn't even focus. I couldn't get focused because this feels like temple to me. That really bothered me," says the oncologist. "I was like 'Why are they playing this religious music and they can't even pronounce the words!'"

## □ "There is not one meditation style or voice or practice type that suits everyone."

When it comes to scientific studies on music's impact on meditation, the results are limited and vary. One [2013 study](#) by University of Zurich researchers concluded it didn't matter mentally or emotionally whether participants listened to relaxing music ([a Latin hymn](#)), rippling water, or silence before taking a stress test that involved a fake job interview and a difficult math problem. A [2019 pilot study](#) from the U.S. Army Research Lab found experienced meditators preferred silence while novices liked music without a distinct melody. A [2017 study](#) at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center discovered the part of the brain associated with internally focused thought lit up most often on MRI scans when someone heard a song they liked (the type of music was less important).

"What works for one person doesn't work for another person. So music for some people can be completely distracting, for other people it can help them feel more peaceful and relaxed," Winston says. Chaudhary falls into the distracting camp, preferring to meditate for 10 minutes in silence in the morning before her kids wake up.

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Insight Timer, one of the most popular meditation apps, acts as a platform for meditation instructors to upload classes to 13 million users. Of the guided meditations offered, about 47 percent have background music, while 53 percent don't. More than 80 percent of the music meditations use ambient music.

There's no scientific reason as to why Insight Timer wanted to offer both, says Maddy Gerrard, head of partnerships and original content. Instead, Insight Timer was motivated by a desire to develop diversity among the 35,000 music and guided meditation tracks on the app.

"There is not one meditation style or voice or practice type that suits everyone. We want someone to come to the app and be able to find what helps them in that moment and to also filter out things that don't work for them," Gerrard says.

### What's meditative music anyway?

While new age music has become a cliché in the wellness world, there isn't a singular definition of meditative music.

When Richard Wolf asks University of Southern California students in his music and mindfulness course to compose a non-verbal guided meditation, the submissions vary widely. While Bon Iver copycats abound, he's also heard new-agey piano, synth drones, a bass clarinet playing long notes, a portable air

conditioner with electric guitar chords, a raucous hip hop instrumental, and harp music. He was surprised, however, when one student came back with an electronic house track with aggressive drumming.

Most of the class considered the piece meditative, even if for Wolf, it was anything but.

"It depends on your frame of reference, and the kind of music that you listen to, as to what you will consider to be meditative. What is going to hold your intention and lead you into a frame of mind that's calm and steady," says the Emmy-award winning composer, who's been practicing meditation regularly since having a panic attack 15 years ago.

**SEE ALSO:** [How to start meditating right f\\*cking now](#)

As to why so many meditation classes rely on new age music, Wolf notes that it's non-threatening and typically has a slow tempo and languid changes. Which, if you're into that kind of thing, can be very relaxing. On the flip side, if you find it cheesy, it can be very irritating.

Wolf meditates 20 minutes in the morning and 10 to 20 minutes in the evening. He prefers silence, but when he's having trouble focusing at night after a buzzy day, he'll gravitate to minimalist compositions. He's particularly fond of Ex-Easter Island Head, a group known for hitting electric guitar strings with mallets.

#### Ex-Easter Island Head - Mallet Guitars Three Third Movement



The music isn't what guides the meditation, but it can be used to cross over into a focused state, says Wolf, who penned the aptly named book [In Tune: Music as the Bridge To Mindfulness](#).

Even if you meditate with music, you should be able to get to a place where you can "listen to your own inner sound and your own inner silence." He waxes philosophical when taking this metaphor further.

"You need the silence. The silence is where it's at, getting into the stillness and the silence. And then you can go beyond sound and silence, beyond existence and non-existence, beyond perception and non-perception. That's a place where it's nice to be."

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