

The Essential Guide to **How to Meditate**



LION'S ROAR



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WHEN IT COMES TO MEDITATION, I feel like a perpetual beginner.

The late Shunryu Suzuki Roshi enjoined us to keep a “beginner’s mind” for, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.” Such a mind will of course serve you well, but that’s not quite what I’m talking about. I’m talking more about feeling like a “failure” when it comes to meditation practice. Now, that’s something I’m an expert in!

There’s a little secret in meditation, one that is revealed over the years (to folks like me at least): even if you really believe in meditation, and even if you really enjoy it sometimes, there will come a time when you let your practice lapse. And then you’ll have to begin again. And this cycle, like samsara itself, may well keep rolling on indefinitely. Welcome to the Realm of the Perpetual Beginner. There are a lot of us here!

But there are ways to get back to our regular practice. The support and comradeship of like-minded friends (a sangha) can help a lot. Sometimes, going it alone works best. (It worked for the Buddha, didn’t it?) As Norman Fischer has written, “If you want

to meditate, there is virtually no excuse not to.” And, even if you still find ways to avoid practice, Norman says, that might be fine: “Sometimes that’s the way to finally begin serious meditation practice: by not doing it for ten or twenty years, until finally there is no choice.”

So let’s see what happens when we put down our excuses, and take a gentle, realistic, and committed approach to meditation practice. That’s when things will really get started (again).

—Rod Meade Sperry | Editorial Director, Lion’s Roar Digital



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How to Start a Meditation Practice

Zen teacher **Norman Fischer** proposes a two-week trial run to get your meditation practice started and looks at how to deal with some of the obstacles you may encounter.

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE over the years have asked me for advice about how to establish a daily meditation practice at home. Although there are thousands of Buddhist meditation centers around the country, most meditators do some or all of their practice at home on their own. In many cases, this is a practical matter. Most people don't live close enough to a Buddhist center to meditate there regularly. Or, for one reason or another, they don't feel comfortable with any of the local centers available to them. Or they feel that for them meditation is a private and personal matter, not a communal religious practice. Anyway, most meditators, for a variety of reasons, meditate at home. I do myself.

It wasn't that way when I began Zen practice. The conventional wisdom then was that you could never practice on your own. You needed to practice with others—that was the way it was done. You needed instructions from a teacher. You needed support—maintaining the disciple to sit on your own would be too difficult. Besides, meditating alone could be dangerous.

Conventional wisdom has changed. These days many people find that it is entirely possible to meditate on their own. Not that lack of discipline is unknown—keeping up with regular practice remains a struggle for some. But many go beyond struggle to find enjoyment and ease in their daily practice.

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When people ask me how to get a home meditation practice started, here is what I tell them: the practice begins the night before. Before you go to sleep, set the alarm for half an hour earlier than usual, and say to yourself: “Tomorrow morning I am going to get up to sit. I want to do this, and it is going to be pleasant and helpful.” Hold that thought in your mind. Then, as you are falling asleep, say this: “Am I actually going to wake up early and meditate?” And answer yourself: “Yes, I am.” And then question yourself again: “Really?” Take this seriously. Think a little more and answer yourself honestly. If the answer is, “Yes, really,” then you will get up. You are serious about it. But if the answer is, “No, I

have to admit that I am probably going to reset the alarm and turn over to get that delicious extra half hour of sleep,” then save yourself the trouble. Reset the alarm now and don’t even try to get up.

This little exercise may sound silly but it is very important. It addresses the main difficulty we have with self-discipline: we are ambivalent. We both do and don’t want to do what we think we want to do in our own best interests. We find it difficult to take our good intentions seriously, especially when it comes to our spiritual lives. We have confusion at our core about whether we are capable of confronting ourselves at the deepest possible human level—maybe if we do we will find ourselves to be unworthy, trivial people. Since we imagine that meditation promises a self-confrontation at this level, we are deeply ambivalent.

Most of this convoluted thinking is not conscious. This is why the before-bed self-dialog is important. It provides a simple way of confronting the issue. “Really?” It’s a way to surface what we really feel and, gently and honestly, deal with it. Otherwise our long habit of sneaky self-deception will likely prevail. We will not do what we’re not really clear we want to do, which will give us further evidence that we can’t do it. ✨



No Agenda, No Obstacles

If you're not trying to get somewhere, says **Judy Lief**, nothing can stop you.

GENERALLY, WE DEFINE something as an obstacle because it stops us from achieving a goal we've set. If you're walking along a trail and a big tree has fallen across your path, that's an obstacle. You either have to turn back, climb over it, or go around it. Chances are you cannot simply lift up the tree and clear your path. Instead, you have to assess the situation and find an appropriate response. You need to figure out your options, and to do so, you need to know yourself: your strengths and limitations.

On the other hand, if you're not trying to get somewhere, the tree is no longer an obstacle. It's simply a tree lying across a path. It could be quite lovely, with furry moss and a woody fragrance. It could be home to many living beings. It could be a nice place to sit.

So, is the tree in itself an obstacle or not?

We need obstacles, because when we face and overcome them, we experience growth and forward movement. In fact, we intentionally create obstacles to challenge ourselves and develop skills. We make obstacle courses. We struggle to beat our last time in a race, lift a heavier weight than before, or get to the next level of our video game. Once a game or a challenge becomes too easy, we lose interest. Without obstacles, there's no growth, no reward.

This need to challenge ourselves is apparent even in little babies. My four-month-old granddaughter has a project: to learn how to move about. She spends many of her waking hours diligently working on this project. First, she worked really hard learning how to roll over without getting her arm stuck. Once she could do that, she struggled to lift herself up into a crawling position. Soon she'll move on to the next step. We seem to be born like that: we need obstacles at every step of our life, in order to learn and develop.

How does this relationship to obstacles apply to our spiritual path? Do we need obstacles to deepen our meditation practice and gain a feeling of accomplishment and growth?

There are many lists of typical obstacles encountered in meditation practice—things such as drowsiness, physical discomfort, restlessness, distraction, and impatience—and there are various suggestions from experienced practitioners about how to deal with them. It's encouraging to learn that your own particular obstacles are not all that unique. They've been known about and worked with by countless practitioners who came before you.

However, if you focus too much on obstacles and how to overcome them, it can backfire. You begin to relate to obstacles as more solid than they actually are. At the same time, you become more entrenched in your view of what is supposed to be happening while you're meditating. You're guided by "the meditation experience according to you."

Developing a solid view or opinion of what you're supposed to experience when you meditate can be pretty appealing. If you're trying to manufacture a particular experience, you can enjoy pushing through obstacles to get there. You can measure your meditation according to the standards you've set up. You can document your progress. You can succeed!

That's all great. It's good to make progress and overcome obstacles as they arise. But eventually, it's time to revisit the whole idea of obstacles. To do that, it makes sense to clarify where you're trying to go with your practice.

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Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once commented that rather than using the term “meditating,” it might be better to simply say “experiencing.” Experiences arise moment by moment, as does meditation practice. However—seemingly instantaneously—we label these experiences one way or another: good, bad, desirable, undesirable, etc. As soon as we create those labels, we enter the

world of obstacles and antidotes. We find ourselves subtly struggling to shift what is to what we think should be. This habit runs very deep.

Our attempts to manufacture experiences we presume will be better than what we're already experiencing can be very subtle. As you're meditating, you can notice the many moments of micro-managing, the many little adjustments you make to shape your experience.

Because you're trying to make something happen, you also need obstacles to overcome. You need to form allegiances and take sides. This may be subtle and somewhat hidden, like cyber warfare, but it's still going on. And even if you manage to overcome your obstacles while you're on the meditation cushion, once you get up and return to your life, they come roaring back.

The heart of meditation practice is not that easy to grasp through conventional thinking. It can seem as if nothing is happening, that we're getting nowhere. It's hard to simply trust the practice. We keep coming back to thinking we have to do something to make it work. But meditation works best when it is left alone to work its wonders.

Once you have established the ground of settling your mind and working with the coarser obstacles to practice, you could begin to question the whole notion of obstacles. Obstacles arise due to your desire to get somewhere, to do something, to be somebody. They're an expression of your desire to control and your discomfort with unedited experience. As you let go of the

need to push your practice and try to make something happen, there are fewer obstacles. You're not going anywhere, so there's nothing to disrupt, nothing to obstruct.

No matter how much we toss around words like “being” and “presence,” it's not so easy just to be, not to do. Meditation practice isn't about doing things a different way, and it's not about becoming a different and better person. In fact, it's just the opposite: it's about unraveling the whole paradigm of trying to get somewhere and be somebody. Glimpses of meditation happen all the time, even to beginners, in the moments when we forget to try to be meditators.

The whole project of meditation, with its obstacles and antidotes, is manufactured experience: it sets the stage and so has its place. However, it's important not to cling too much to that production. When you stop trying so hard, when you have less of an agenda, obstacles fall away quite naturally. It's not that you have overcome them. They just have nowhere to land. They have no reason to be. When you drop your agenda, meditation becomes very simple. ✿



The Miracle of Everyday Mindfulness

When we practice mindfulness in our daily lives, says **Thich Nhat Hanh**, we open to the wonders of life and allow the world to heal and nourish us.

EVERYONE HAS THE SEED of suffering inside. Sometimes it slumbers in the depths of our consciousness and sometimes it manifests as a very noticeable energy. When suffering manifests, it's difficult to feel joy or happiness. The practice of conscious breathing and mindful walking or mindful sitting can help us handle the suffering inside. Our suffering is not only our own suffering. It carries within it the suffering of our father, our mother, and the many ancestors who have transmitted it to us.

Our suffering also reflects the suffering of our people, our country, our society, and our world. When we understand the nature and roots of our suffering, then compassion and love can arise. We go home to ourselves and get in touch with the suffering inside. Practicing conscious breathing, we generate the energy of mindfulness and concentration. These are the energies with which we can recognize and embrace our suffering. If we don't have the energy of mindfulness, the suffering may overwhelm us. But if we breathe in and out and allow our body to be relaxed,

we can generate the energy of mindfulness and concentration, and with that energy we can embrace our suffering and hold it tenderly.

Suffering and Happiness Inter-Are

There are people who wish to find a place where there is no suffering, like heaven, the Pure Land of the Buddha, or the kingdom of God. We may think that “up there” there is no suffering; there is only happiness. But when we look deeply we see that suffering and happiness inter-are, just as the mud and the lotus interpenetrate each other. A lotus can only grow in mud. If there were no mud, there would be no lotus flower. There’s a very close connection between suffering and happiness, just as there is between mud and lotus. Real happiness is possible when we have the right view of suffering and happiness. It’s the same as front and back, right and left. The right cannot exist without the left; the left cannot exist without the right. Happiness cannot exist without suffering.

Happiness is made of non-happiness elements, just as the flower is made of non-flower elements. When you look at the flower, you see non-flower elements like sunlight, rain, earth—all of the elements that have come together to help the flower to manifest. If we were to remove any of those non-flower elements, there would no longer be a flower. Happiness is a kind of flower.

If you look deeply into happiness, you see non-happiness elements, including suffering. Suffering plays a very important role in happiness.

When we live mindfully, we try to live in such a way that we can generate the energies of mindfulness, concentration, and insight throughout the day. These are the energies that bring us happiness and the clarity that we call right view. When we have right view, we're able to practice right thinking. Right thinking is based on right view; it's thinking that's characterized by nondiscrimination and nonduality. According to right view, there can be no happiness without suffering. Our thinking can make us suffer, but it can also make us free. We need right thinking to help us stop our suffering.



My dear suffering, I know you are there in me.
I am here to take care of you.

If there is a group of people living in the same environment, some may be happy and others unhappy. There are those among us who have the ability to appreciate the presence of the sun and get in touch with the trees, the fog, and all of the wonders of life that are around and inside us. But there are some people who don't have the ability to get in touch with these wonderful things. They only see suffering. The conditions of their lives are exactly the same as those of the people who are happy, so why are some people happy and others not? The answer is that the one who is

happy has right view. The other is suffering because he doesn't have right view, so his thinking is not right thinking. Suffering is relative. Something that causes one person to suffer may not cause another person to suffer.

Being Fully Present in the Body

With the practice of mindful breathing and mindful walking, we bring our mind back to our body. When the body and mind are together, we can establish ourselves in the here and now and get in touch with life and all of its wonders. We may say to ourselves, “Breathing in, I am aware that my body is here.” Breathing in, coming back to the body, and getting in touch with the body is already mindfulness—mindfulness that my body is here and that it is a wonder.

Our feelings, emotions, and perceptions often feel like they're overwhelming our bodies and minds. Mindfulness helps us get in touch with all of these things that are going on. Body, feelings, and perceptions are objects of our mindfulness. There are many other beautiful things inside and around us that we can also make the objects of our mindfulness. Every morning when we wake up, we can breathe in and get in touch with the miracle that is life. There are things that are wonderful, that can heal and nourish us. Mindfulness puts us in touch with those things. That is the first function of mindfulness: it brings us joy and happiness.

Too Much Thinking

Thinking can be productive and good. But most of the time, our thinking is not productive. Our thoughts pull us away from the here and now. It's only in the here and now that we can encounter real life and be in touch with our body and the other wonders of life. When we get lost in our thinking, we're not there for life. It's very important to learn how to stop all of that unproductive thinking. It doesn't mean that thinking is inherently bad, because in fact thinking can be good. But so much of our thinking causes sorrow, fear, or anger to arise. We need to learn to stop thinking in order to begin to feel. If you can feel the presence of your body and the wonders of life that are available in the here and now, you can get the nourishment and healing you need— from the sunshine, the fresh air, the beautiful trees, your lungs, your in-breath and out-breath.

As you breathe in, you become aware once again that you have a body. There's a kind of happy reunion between mind and body. It may take only a few seconds for you to become anchored back home, in the here and now. We have to be in the here and now in order to truly live our life. The past is no longer with us and the future is not yet here; only in the present moment are the wonders of life available. The secret of meditation is to bring the mind home to the body and be in the here and now. It's very simple. Stopping the thinking will help tremendously.

Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight

When you're practicing mindfulness of body, your body becomes the only object of your mindfulness.

Breathing in, I know my body is there. Breathing out, I know my body is there.

When mindfulness is strong and focused like that, concentration is born. The object of your concentration in this case is your body. When mindfulness and concentration are powerful enough, you can make a breakthrough into reality; you get insight and realization, and you discover things. Mindfulness, or *smṛti* in Sanskrit, is the first energy. Mindfulness brings about concentration, *samādhi*, the second energy; and together mindfulness and concentration bring insight, *prajna*.

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To meditate means to generate these three kinds of energies. You don't have to ask for them to come to you from outside. Everyone has the seeds of mindfulness, concentration, and insight within himself or herself. With the practice of mindful breathing,

mindful walking, and mindful sitting, we help these seeds manifest as energies. These are the three kinds of energy that make an enlightened being.

These energies make you awake, bring your body and mind fully together, and put you in touch with all of the wonders of life. You stop running and trying to find happiness somewhere else. You see that happiness is possible in the here and now.

When you're fully aware of what is there, and you can maintain that awareness and keep concentration alive, then insight arises. This insight can help free you from your worries, fears, longing, and searching. With insight, you recognize that there are more than enough conditions for you to be happy right here, right now. This insight brings freedom, joy, and happiness.

The Holiness in You

The energies of mindfulness, concentration, and insight can be generated by practicing mindfulness of breathing, of walking, of sitting, and of all your other daily activities. When you are inhabited by these three wholesome energies, there is holiness in you.

We speak of holiness, but oftentimes we don't know exactly what it is. To me it's very clear that holiness is made up of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. When you're inhabited by these three energies, you are a buddha, an enlightened person. In Christianity we speak of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can be interpreted as the quality of presence that is there when we have

mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Wherever these three energies are, life is there, healing is there, nourishment and happiness are there. So it's possible to generate the energy of holiness. When these energies of holiness are in you, you don't suffer anymore; you're free. I can call you "Your Holiness." Everyone can be holy if they know how to generate the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. It's not too difficult.

When I pour tea, I like to pour the tea mindfully. When I pour the tea mindfully, my mind isn't in the past or the future, or with my projects. My mind is focused on pouring the tea. I'm fully concentrated on the act of pouring tea. Pouring tea becomes the only object of my mindfulness and concentration. This is a pleasure and it also can bring many insights. I can see that in the tea there is a cloud. Yesterday it was a cloud, but today it is my tea. Insight is not something very far away. With mindfulness and concentration you can begin to develop the insight that can liberate you and bring you happiness.

There is mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of pouring tea, mindfulness of drinking tea, mindfulness of walking, mindfulness of brushing teeth, and so on. When you breathe mindfully, you focus your attention on only one thing: your in-breath and out-breath. This is concentration on your breath. When you are really concentrated on your breath, insight can come right away. You may get the insight that you are fully alive, and to be truly alive like that is a miracle.

Insight Is Not Something Far Away

Insight is enlightenment, awakening. You're enlightened about the fact that you are alive. You wake up once again to the miraculous reality that you are here, still alive. There are many insights that can happen while you breathe in mindfully. You breathe in and you realize that your legs are still strong enough for you to walk, jump, and run. When I practice walking, I'm very happy and grateful that I can still walk. Many of my friends from my generation can't walk anymore.

Thanks to mindfulness, concentration, and insight, every step can generate the energy of joy and happiness. That is meditation. Bringing your mind home to your body, establishing yourself in the present moment, and touching the wonders of life make joy, happiness, and freedom possible in the here and now. Everyone can do it.

Everyone can pour his tea mindfully. Everyone can drink her tea mindfully. Instead of allowing ourselves to think of the past or the future, we focus our mindfulness on drinking tea. We are fully present in the here and now. The only thing we touch is the tea. If I'm mindful of my body and established in the here and now, I become real. When I'm real, life is also real. The tea I'm holding in my hands is real. It's because I'm real that the tea becomes real. The encounter between the tea and me is real; that's real life. If you're possessed by fear, anger, or ruminative thinking, you're not truly present and your tea is not truly there. That isn't true life.

Generating the Energy of Mindfulness

The energy of mindfulness makes things real and alive. The practices of mindful walking, mindful sitting, and mindful breathing help generate the energy of mindfulness. They are the basic practice. You can also take a shower in mindfulness and enjoy the entire time of taking a shower. When you prepare your breakfast, if you allow mindfulness to be there in every moment, it can be a time of genuine happiness. You can wash the dishes in the same way; getting in touch with the water and washing each plate and bowl in mindfulness can be a joy. You don't need to hurry up and finish. You can enjoy washing the dishes. Washing dishes in this way is just as profound and holy as doing sitting meditation or walking meditation.

When you go to the toilet, you can choose to urinate in mindfulness. You can take the time and enjoy urinating. Why hurry? This time is given to us to live. Happiness and freedom are possible during the time you urinate. You needn't urinate in a hurry so you can go off and do other things. This is why in meditation centers we put a flowerpot in the washroom, to remind us that this is also a meditation hall. Enjoy the time you take to shower, to prepare your breakfast, or to urinate or defecate. It can be very pleasant. When you brush your teeth, brush in a way that makes freedom and joy possible. You have two or three minutes for tooth brushing. Make them happy moments. If you can be happy while brushing your teeth, then buttoning your jacket can also be a joy. With mindfulness and concentration, we can enjoy every moment that is given to us. This is the art of living. 🌸



Whatever Arises in Your Mind, Be Present

How does meditation work? **Phakchok Rinpoche** and **Erric Solomon** say it gives your distracted mind a job. With practice, you can learn to be present with whatever arises.

THERE IS A FAMOUS STORY about a monk named Shrona, who asked the Buddha about the best way to meditate. The Buddha asked Shrona, who had been a musician before he was a monk, what was the best method to get sound out of his instrument: “Was it when the strings were very tight or when they were very loose?” Shrona answered, “Neither, the best sound came when the strings were neither too loose nor too tight.” Buddha rejoined, “It’s the same for your mind in meditation; it should neither be too concentrated nor too relaxed.”

Meditation is a process of getting to know how our mind works and training our attention to rest where we place it. In Tibetan, the word for meditation is *gom*. Gom literally means “getting familiar with” or “getting used to.” By practicing meditation, you can get used to remaining present, undisturbed by whatever thoughts or emotions arise in your mind.

However, our mind normally behaves like an excited monkey, jumping from place to place. Our mind thinks about this and then it thinks about that. We sit down to meditate and at first we are present, watching our breath, but after a few moments we are lost in a daydream. We may have started out by watching the breath, but soon we are on an island enjoying a piña colada at the beach and next we are thinking about all the money we have to save to get there. Before long, several minutes have passed and we realize we forgot all about the breath. The monkey mind jumps here and there almost without stopping.



Meditation is neither about cultivating nor rejecting, but rather about learning how to be present in the face of whatever arises in our mind.

Our monkey mind is constantly talking to us and telling us what to do. We don't know how to guide it. Our mind is under our control to some degree, but a few minutes on the meditation cushion should convince us of how little control we actually have over it. When the monkey mind tells us something, we react in one of two ways: we follow it, or we fight with it. If our mind tells us something is good, we follow it. If our mind is telling us how funny our partner looks in that outfit, we struggle with ourselves not to mention it and try push the thought away.

Some people think meditation is about sitting there, clearing the mind by blocking thoughts and emotions. They struggle with their mind, thinking “I must meditate, I must keep a quiet mind, no emotions, and CONCENTRATE!” Other people try to meditate by blissing out, thinking meditation is all about peace, openness, and reaching a special level of consciousness.

Meditation is neither about cultivating nor rejecting, but rather about learning how to be present in the face of whatever arises in our mind. In the beginning, we may need to calm our mind in order to not become overwhelmed and distracted by our thoughts. Eventually, as we gain experience, we will actually be able to use turbulent thoughts as a support for our meditation. Until then, we need to be able to settle our mind. Once our mind settles, we don’t have to remain in a tightly focused state of concentration, nor do we have to create a blissful experience.

If we are too tight in meditation, we are blocking our senses, and that can be quite an exhausting struggle. If we are too open and relaxed, we may feel good, but this can easily result in strengthening our fondness for creating experiences. Whether we prefer a state of control or creating a pleasant state of openness, we are still worried about circumstances, even if they are just mental states.

The mind is naturally open; we don’t need to do anything to open it up. If the mind weren’t already open, nothing would be able to appear in the mind. Yet everything that appears to us, appears in the mind. Otherwise, how else would we know about

it? We don't need to block out or cultivate anything. We just need to get used to remaining present: aware of—yet undistracted by—whatever sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, and emotions appear.

Think about having a party. If you're an experienced host, when you have a difficult, disruptive guest, you won't immediately argue with the guest and try to throw him out. That could easily ruin the evening for everyone. Instead, you will flatter and schmooze your guest, find common ground, and give him something pleasant to do. Perhaps you offer him his favorite drink (unless he's already had one too many), a plate of the tastiest food you have, or the most comfortable chair to relax in. Once given the space to relax, the guest becomes more agreeable, more open to suggestion.

We don't have to fight with the restless quality of our mind, nor do we have to follow it around, getting completely lost in thoughts. The monkey mind needs something to do, or it starts creating all kinds of problems. So, let's give the monkey mind something to do. Let's be a good host.

First, we can tell the monkey mind to pay attention to the breath moving in and out. For a few moments it behaves, but then monkey mind thinks something like "Piña coladas are so delicious!" and we become distracted. But we don't need to get mad and rigid—we can gently remind the monkey mind that its job is to focus on the breath.

In this way, we gradually tame the restless monkey mind, making our mind more pliable and more workable. Negative thoughts and emotions hold less and less sway over us. This is the actual fruit of meditation: mastering our mind. Calmness of mind may be a nice side-effect, but the real fruit of meditation practice is that our mind becomes more and more flexible and less and less a prisoner to habitual ways of reacting. We are able to place our attention where we want, and thoughts and emotions, while still arising, won't distract us. We can choose to follow them if it suits our needs, but we are no longer blown about, like a leaf in the wind, as each thought or emotion breezes through.

Meditation with an Object

As you begin meditation practice, the discipline of the practice is to bring your attention to an object and leave it there. If you become distracted, simply bring your mind back to the object. Give the monkey mind the job of remaining mindful of the object of your meditation. By remaining mindful of the object, the monkey mind stops jumping all over the place. This will interrupt the habit of following after every thought and emotion that rises in your mind. No matter what thought or emotion comes to mind, you can always react the same way by returning your attention to the object of your meditation.

One of the most popular ways to practice meditation is by placing our attention on our breath—in this case, our breath is an object for meditation. But we can use anything as an object: sights,

sounds, sensations, even thoughts. As the monkey mind calms down, we become more settled in the present moment, undistracted by any thoughts or emotions that pass through our mind. This is the goal of using an object for our meditation practice: to be fully present in the moment, which is what we mean when we say non-distraction.

Meditation without an Object

As you become more and more familiar with non-distraction, you will find that you can drop the method of using an object. Eventually, non-distraction itself is all the support you need for meditation practice. This is called meditation without an object.

It's important to point out that non-distraction is not a state that we cultivate or create. It is a natural quality of our mind, but it is normally obscured by our thoughts and emotions. When we no longer allow our attention to be carried away by a chain of thoughts, non-distraction is revealed. It is where we rest in the natural awareness of our own mind, free from the distraction of rising thoughts and emotions.

This awareness is pure knowing, without having to be aware of something. Our minds are naturally aware, but usually we are distracted by what we are aware of. If you are following thoughts and emotions, involuntarily thinking about them, that is distraction. When we rest in awareness in itself, that is non-distraction. We can be aware of everything around us, but non-distraction doesn't depend on an object in order to be aware.

We get direct experience of this awareness whenever we're practicing meditation with an object and we realize we've become distracted. That moment of knowing we've become distracted is the arising of awareness that is naturally free of thoughts and emotions. Of course, we may also have the thought "I am distracted." But that is a thought, not the knowing awareness itself. In other words, we know we are distracted whether we have the thought or not. If we have the thought, "I am distracted," awareness notices the thought. As we return our attention to the breath or whatever object we are using, we return to meditation. If we follow the thought, we return to distraction.

“The monkey mind needs something to do, or it starts creating all kinds of problems. So, let's give the monkey mind something to do. Let's be a good host.

Normally, we mentally grasp on to objects by thinking about them. We constantly evaluate experiences and try to grasp after the things we like. We also can try avoiding them, but, ironically, that is grasping too! In meditation, we use this habitual tendency to grasp in a way that skillfully relaxes the habit. We do that simply by using an object to be mindful of, using the monkey mind's habit of grasping in a special way that allows the grasping itself to naturally relax.

We use our natural awareness to make sure we are being mindful. This has two purposes:

1. It keeps the grasping monkey mind busy (by being mindful) so that it can't distract us, and
2. It allows us to gradually become more and more familiar with awareness itself. The more familiar we become with our awareness, the more we enter into non-distraction.

Relaxed Spaciousness

Beyond these two main aspects of meditation that—mindfulness and awareness—there is also a third aspect we need to bring into our meditation practice: relaxed spaciousness. If our mind is too tight in meditation, we become overly concerned with holding the object of meditation in mind. Meditation becomes an ordinary practice of grasping the object and avoiding forgetting about the object.

When we bring in a relaxed and spacious attitude to meditation, we don't have to block anything or grasp too tightly. We allow our natural awareness to maintain mindfulness, but we don't chase thoughts and emotions away. Just like when the skillful host gives the difficult guest a little space so they can relax, we allow thoughts and emotions the space to rise and then fall naturally away. We spaciously bring our attention back to the object, and the power of thoughts to distract us naturally dissipates.

We can explore using different kinds of objects to bring us into the present moment. We can place our attention on our breath, or use an image of a Buddha, a candle or any other visual object. Any sensation can either be a distraction or be used to bring us

back to the present moment. Gradually, as we become more and more familiar with remaining in non-distraction, we can drop the method of using an object. At that point, we no longer need an object. The only “object” we need is awareness itself. Then, we can rest our mind in its own naturally spacious, mindful awareness, free from ordinary thoughts and emotions. ❁

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The Science of Meditation: What We Know and What We Don't

While people have believed for thousands of years that meditation works, the search for scientific proof is just beginning. **Kira Newman, Jill Suttie, Hooria Jazaieri, and Jeremy Adam Smith**, of the Greater Good Science Center, assess the current state of the evidence — what we do, don't, and might know.

DURING THE PAST TWO DECADES, we've discovered a lot about mindfulness. Specifically, there have been many studies of meditation, which is one of the best ways to cultivate moment-to-moment awareness of ourselves and our environment. But sometimes, journalists and even scientists (who should know better) overstate the benefits.

Indeed, the science behind mindfulness meditation has often suffered from poor study designs, lack of funding, and small effect sizes. As a result, there is still a lot we don't understand about mindfulness and meditation. Here's a rundown of questions that seem fairly settled, for the time being, and questions researchers are still exploring.

Meditation almost certainly does sharpen your attention.

It's not surprising that meditation would affect attention, since many practices focus on this very skill. And, in fact, researchers have found that meditation helps to combat habituation—the tendency to stop paying attention to new information in our environment. Other studies have found that mindfulness meditation can reduce mind-wandering and improve our ability to solve problems.

There's more good news: studies have shown that improved attention seems to last up to five years after mindfulness training, again suggesting trait-like changes are possible. Do these benefits apply to people with attention-deficit disorders, and could meditation possibly supplant drugs like Adderall? We can't yet say for sure. While there have been some promising small-scale studies, especially with adults, we need larger randomized controlled trials to understand how meditation might mix with other treatments to help both kids and adults manage attention deficits.

Long-term, consistent meditation does seem to increase resiliency to stress.

Note that we're not saying it necessarily reduces physiological and psychological reactions to threats and obstacles. But studies to date do suggest that meditation helps mind and body bounce back from stress and stressful situations.

For example, practicing meditation lessens the inflammatory response in people exposed to psychological stressors, particularly for long-term meditators. According to neuroscience research, mindfulness practices dampen activity in our amygdala and increase the connections between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex. Both of these parts of the brain help us to be less reactive to stressors and to recover better from stress when we experience it.

As Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson write in their book, *Altered Traits*, “These changes are trait-like: they appear not simply during the explicit instruction to perceive the stressful stimuli mindfully, but even in the ‘baseline’ state” for longer-term meditators, which supports the possibility that mindfulness changes our ability to handle stress in a better, more sustainable way.

Meditation does appear to increase compassion. It also makes our compassion more effective.

While we may espouse compassionate attitudes, we can also suffer when we see others suffering, which can create a state of paralysis or withdrawal.

Many well-designed studies have shown that practicing loving-kindness meditation for others increases our willingness to take action to relieve suffering. It appears to do this by lessening

amygdala activity in the presence of suffering, while also activating circuits in the brain that are connected to good feelings and love.

For longtime meditators, activity in the “default network”—the part of our brains that, when not busy with focused activity, ruminates on thoughts, feelings, and experiences—quiets down, suggesting less rumination about ourselves and our place in the world.

Meditation appears to improve mental health—but not necessarily more than other steps you can take.

Early research suggested that mindfulness meditation had a dramatic impact on our mental health. But as the number of studies has grown, so has scientific skepticism about these initial claims.

For example, a 2014 meta-analysis published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* examined 47 randomized controlled trials of mindfulness meditation programs, which included a total of 3,515 participants. They found that meditation programs resulted only in small to moderate reductions in anxiety and depression. Furthermore, there was also low, insufficient, or no evidence of meditation programs’ effect on positive mood and feelings and substance use (as well as physical self-care like eating habits and sleep).

According to the authors, meditation programs were not shown to be more beneficial than active treatments—such as exercise, therapy, or taking prescription drugs—on any outcomes of interest.

The upshot? Meditation is generally good for your well-being, yes, but so far it doesn't appear to be actually better than many other steps you can take to stay healthy and happy. It should definitely be considered an adjunct to, not a replacement for, other kinds of treatment for mental conditions like bipolar disorder.

Mindfulness could have a positive impact on your relationships.

There are many, many studies that find a positive link between mindfulness and relationship quality, which is probably a byproduct of the effects we've already described.

For example, in one 2016 study, researchers measured mindfulness of 88 couples. Then they took cortisol levels in each couple before and after they discussed a conflict in their relationship. Unsurprisingly, cortisol levels spiked during the discussion, a sign of high stress. But levels in the most mindful people—both men and women—were quicker to return to normal after the conflict ended, suggesting they were keeping their cool.

This result is echoed in many studies of mindfulness in romantic relationships from beginning to the very end—in fact, there are quite a few studies which find that mindfulness makes breakup and divorce easier.

Mindfulness is also linked to better relationships with your kids. Studies have found that mindfulness practice can lessen stress, depression, and anxiety in parents of preschoolers and children with disabilities. Mindful parenting is also linked to more positive behavior in kids. A small 2016 pilot study used neural

imaging to see how mindfulness practice changes the brains of parents—and then asked the kids about the quality of their parenting. The results suggest that mindfulness practice seemed to activate the part of the brain involved in empathy and emotional regulation (the left anterior insula/inferior frontal gyrus) and that the children of parents who showed the most activation perceived the greatest improvement in the parent–child relationship. We must remember, however, that these studies are often very small, and the researchers themselves says results are very tentative.

Mindfulness seems to reduce many kinds of bias.

We are seeing more and more studies suggesting that practicing mindfulness can reduce psychological bias.

For example, one study found that a brief loving-kindness meditation reduced prejudice toward homeless people, while another found that a brief mindfulness training decreased unconscious bias against black people and elderly people. In a study by Adam Lueke and colleagues, white participants who received a brief mindfulness training demonstrated less biased behavior (not just attitudes) toward black participants in a trust game.

However, social bias isn't the only kind of mental bias mindfulness appears to reduce. For example, several studies convincingly show that mindfulness probably reduces sunk-cost bias, which is our tendency to stay invested in a losing proposition.

Mindfulness also seems to reduce our natural tendency to focus on the negative things in life. In one study, participants reported on their general mindfulness levels, then briefly viewed photos that induced strong positive emotion (like photos of babies), strong negative emotion (like photos of people in pain), or neither, while having their brains scanned. More mindful participants were less reactive to negative photos and showed higher indications of positive feeling when seeing the positive photos. According to the authors, this supports the contention that mindfulness decreases the negativity bias, something other studies support, too.

Meditation does have an impact on physical health—but it’s modest.

Many claims have been made about mindfulness and physical health, but sometimes these claims are hard to substantiate or may be mixed up with other effects. That said, there is some good evidence that meditation affects physiological indices of health.

For example, practicing meditation lessens the inflammatory response in people exposed to psychological stressors, particularly among long-term meditators. Also, meditators seem to have increased activity of telomerase, an enzyme implicated in longer cell life and, therefore, longevity.

But there’s a catch. “The differences found [between meditators and non-meditators] could be due to factors like education or exercise, each of which has its own buffering effect on brains,”

write Goleman and Davidson in *Altered Traits*. “Then there’s self-selection: perhaps people with the brain changes reported in these studies choose to stick with meditation while others do not.” In other words, we should use caution when championing results.

Meditation isn’t good for everyone all the time.

Some seem to believe mindfulness practice will invariably induce a sense of peace and calm. While this can be the experience for many, it is not the experience for all. At times, sitting quietly with oneself can be a difficult—even painful—experience. For individuals who have experienced some sort of trauma, sitting and meditating can at times bring up recent or sometimes decades-old painful memories and experiences that they may not be prepared to confront.

In a new study published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, Jared Lindahl and colleagues interviewed 100 meditators about “challenging” experiences. They found that many of them experienced fear, anxiety, panic, numbness, or extreme sensitivity to light and sound that they attributed to meditation. Crucially, they found that these experiences weren’t restricted to people with “pre-existing” conditions, like trauma or mental illness; they could happen to anyone at any time.

In this new domain of research, there is still a lot we do not understand. Future research needs to explore the relationship between case histories and meditation experiences, how the type of practice relates to challenging experiences, and the influence of other factors like social support.

What kind of meditation is right for you? That depends.

“Mindfulness” is a big umbrella that covers many different kinds of practice. A 2016 study compared four different types of meditation, and found that they each have their own unique benefits.

During *body scan*, for example, participants saw the biggest increases in how aware they were of their bodies (unsurprisingly) and the sharpest decline in the number of thoughts they were having, particularly negative thoughts and thoughts related to the past and future. *Loving-kindness meditation* led to the greatest boost in their feelings of warmth and positive thoughts about others. Meanwhile, *observing-thought meditation* seemed to increase participants’ awareness of their thoughts the most. Previous research also suggests that observing-thought meditation has an advantage in reducing our judgmental attitude toward others.

Taken together, these and other studies suggest that if you’re tackling a specific issue—say, feeling disconnected from your body—then you can choose a practice aimed at helping that issue, like the body scan. Loving-kindness might help in conflict with others, while observing-thought meditation can help break rumination.

“The type of meditation matters,” explain postdoctoral researcher Bethany Kok and professor Tania Singer. “Each practice appears to create a distinct mental environment, the long-term consequences of which are only beginning to be explored.”

How much meditation is enough? That also depends.

This isn't the answer most people want to hear. Many of us are looking for a medically prescriptive response (e.g., three times a week for 45-60 minutes), but the best guide might be this old Zen saying: “You should sit in meditation for twenty minutes every day—unless you're too busy. Then you should sit for an hour.”

To date, empirical research has yet to arrive at a consensus about how much is “enough.” Aside from the raw number of minutes, other factors may interact to influence the benefits of mindfulness practice: the type (e.g., formal sitting meditation practice vs. informal meditation practices, mindfulness vs. compassion), the frequency (multiple times a day vs. multiple times a week), and the quality (sitting and actually doing the practice vs. doing the practice “on the go”).

While it's possible that in the next 10-15 years we will see a CDC-style recommendation regarding meditation practice, to date, the empirical data on the topic are still inconclusive. Our recommendation? Try out different durations, types, and frequencies of meditation and jot down how you feel before and after the practice—and see what seems to work for you.

This article was largely adapted from content in *Greater Good Magazine* (greatergood.berkeley.edu), which covers the science of a meaningful life.

Meditation Instructions



Loving-Kindness

JoAnna Hardy teaches us the famed Buddhist practice of *metta*—offering love to ourselves and others.

WHEN I WAS INTRODUCED to the practice of *metta*—most often translated as lovingkindness practice—I definitely knew it wasn't for me. It was too mushy and sentimental for my pragmatic mind. It was reminiscent of the wishful praying that I thought was reserved for the type of faith I had left behind.

I didn't really believe that I—or maybe any living being—could possibly find the happiness, safety, ease, and freedom being offered through *metta* practice. Maybe we didn't even deserve it! When I put my hand on my heart, as we are often asked to do during this practice, I felt numb and disconnected. I thought of loving-kindness as an unnecessary additive to the more important four foundations of mindfulness. I ignored the practice for many years.

Then, a wise and insightful teacher saw me struggling and assigned *metta* as my daily practice for three months. It wasn't because my teacher thought I was not a kind and loving person—I am—but I needed a way to love all beings, and to offer that love to myself too.

I discovered that while loving-kindness is taught in many ways by different teachers, ultimately it is an equalizer and an antidote to hatred and aversion. It is a state that can be developed through

practices that help us cultivate the unconditional, expansive qualities of the heart. Metta is the great balancer to insight and mindfulness practices.

When I discovered other translations of the word metta, like care, friendliness, goodwill, and benevolence, the practice began to feel more accessible and less lofty. Metta felt like something I could touch and cultivate daily. The great balancer began to do its work. My doubt began to melt.

“

Metta is a state that can be developed through practices that help us cultivate the unconditional, expansive qualities of the heart. It is the great balancer to insight and mindfulness practices.

In trying times such as these, it seems difficult to imagine that we could soften our hearts and find love amid all of the suffering we hear about daily. Yet, the prescription of the Buddha is that even in the darkest of places and times, our heart-mind has the capacity to be free from the burdens of hatred.

Here is a four-step instruction for metta. These steps are for practicing loving-kindness for yourself. You can also practice metta for others in different categories, such as people close to you, friends, people you are neutral toward, people you find difficult, and ultimately all living beings.

Initially, set aside 15-20 minutes to do the four steps. As you develop your practice, you can add more time as you wish. Setting a timer is helpful.

1. Put your body at ease.

Find a physically comfortable space. Sitting in a comfortable chair or lying down is helpful. If you feel at ease on a meditation cushion, that is fine too. The idea is to find a posture that allows the body to be in as much ease as possible. Allow yourself to feel held and supported by whatever you're sitting or lying on. Closing the eyes can help to facilitate ease. If that's not comfortable, then allow the eyes to be open and gazing softly at a singular point.

2. Soften the belly and chest.

Intentionally soften the belly to start. Feel the expansion and contraction as each breath fills the belly and chest area. Allow your breathing to facilitate space in your belly and chest area. Take your time; there's no rush. If you feel tension, that's okay.

3. Recall feelings of love and kindness.

Focus on the heart area. Placing your hand on your heart can add to this step. See if you can recall feelings of care, kindness, and friendliness. Let them permeate your heart area. Stay with this while moving into the next step. If the feelings seem inaccessible or difficult right now, stay with the spaciousness and breathing into the belly and chest areas.

4. Do the recitation.

Reciting phrases is a classic way of practicing metta. Whether we believe the phrases in the moment or not, it's still useful to say them; they give the heart and mind something to land on and to aspire to. You can express them in any way you want, with these basic sentiments in mind. Repeat these phrases for the length of your practice period:

May I be safe

May I be healthy

May I be happy

May I be at ease

May I be filled with loving-kindness

May I be peaceful

In metta practice, it is normal for the doubting mind to pop up and challenge the notion of loving ourselves and others. Don't let this doubt stop you. It is important to know that metta is not a practice of perfection, but one of cultivation. This is our practice—freeing our heart and mind from the clutches of fear, hatred, and confusion, regardless of what is happening in the world around us. I am happy to report, after trying it myself, that this skeptic is now convinced! ✨



Shamatha Meditation

Shamatha meditation—mindfulness or concentration—is the foundation of Buddhist practice. **Lama Rod Owens** teaches us a version from the Vajrayana tradition.

SHAMATHA MEANS “peaceful abiding” or “tranquility.” Also called mindfulness or concentration meditation, shamatha is an important introductory practice that leads to the practice of vipashyana, or insight meditation.

The purpose of shamatha meditation is to stabilize the mind by cultivating a steady awareness of the object of meditation. The traditional practice of shamatha uses different kinds of supports or anchors for our practice. Eventually, this leads to practicing without supports and meditating on emptiness itself in an open awareness. For this particular practice, the instructions will be for shamatha meditation using the breath as the focus of our practice.

Shamatha meditation allows us to experience our mind as it is. When we practice shamatha, we are able to see that our mind is full of thoughts, some conducive to our happiness and further realization, and others not. It is not extraordinary that our minds are full of thoughts, and it is important to understand that it is natural to have so much happening in the mind.



Shamatha meditation allows us to experience our mind as it is.

Over time, practicing shamatha meditation calms our thoughts and emotions. We experience tranquility of mind and calmly abide with our thoughts as they are. Eventually, this leads to a decrease in unhelpful thoughts.

When we experience stable awareness, we are then ready to practice vipashyana, in which we develop insight into what “mind” is by investigating the nature of thoughts themselves. In the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism, the ultimate goal is to practice calm abiding and insight in union, which opens the door to realizing the true nature of mind.

Traditionally, shamatha practice is taught through instructions on the physical body and then looking at the meditation instructions themselves.

The Seven-Point Posture

The seven-point posture of Vairochana is an ancient set of posture points that are said to align the physical body with our energetic body. The posture has been practiced for thousands of years by Hindu and Buddhist yogis. The seven points are:

1. Sit cross-legged.
2. Hands in lap or on knees.
3. Have a straight back.

4. Widen the shoulders to open the heart center.
5. Lower the chin.
6. Open mouth slightly with the tongue resting on the roof of the mouth.
7. Eyes open, gazing about four finger widths past the tip of nose.

A Body-Sensitive Posture

We all have different bodies and capabilities. It is important to adjust this demanding traditional posture to meet the needs of our own bodies, and not struggle to adapt our bodies to the posture. What is most important in terms of body posture is keeping the back and spine as straight as possible and remaining comfortable. So the seven points of a more body-sensitive posture could be:

1. Sit on a cushion or a chair, stand, or lie down.
2. Arrange your hands in any way that is comfortable.
3. Hold your back as straight as possible.
4. Keep your shoulders relaxed and chest open.
5. Hold your head at whatever level is comfortable.
6. Keep your lower jaw slightly open.
7. Keep the eyes closed or open.

The Meditation

There are many kinds of breath meditations. Some have been written down, while others have only been transmitted orally from teacher to student. The following is a basic breath meditation from the Vajrayana tradition:

1. Adjust the body into a comfortable position, and start the practice by becoming aware of your breath. Notice the inhalation and exhalation.
2. As you notice the breath, continue to let go of thoughts as they arise. Each time you are distracted by clinging to a thought, return to the breath. Keep doing this over and over again.
3. Eventually, as you exhale, become aware of your breath escaping and dissolving into space. Experience the same thing with the inhalation.
4. Slowing down, begin to allow your awareness to mix into open space with the breath on both the inhale and exhale.
5. To deepen the practice, begin to hold the breath after the inhalation for a few seconds before exhaling. By doing this, you are splitting the breath into three parts: inhalation, holding, and exhalation. Keep doing this.
6. As you inhale, begin to chant om to yourself. As you hold, chant ah. As you exhale, chant hung. Chanting these sacred syllables helps to further support awareness and is believed to purify our minds.
7. As you continue with exhalation, relax more. Continue awareness practice, letting go of thoughts and returning to the breath. Do this for as long as you can. ✿



Zazen

Jules Shuzen Harris teaches zazen, the meditation practice at the heart of Zen Buddhism.

THERE ARE MANY FORMS of meditation that offer you the opportunity to cultivate stillness and open up space in your life. One such form, zazen, has both outward and inward instructions in how to engage your awareness in the immediate, uninterpreted experience of the present moment. Zazen is being awake but letting go, experiencing your present moment awareness without thought or story.

As a central form of meditation in Zen Buddhism, zazen is usually coupled with study and teaching to help develop greater clarity in our practice. Zazen often includes a specific practice, such as counting your breaths, to focus your attention and develop your powers of concentration.

There has been a lot of attention recently on the many practical benefits of meditation. It reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, and is effective in working with depression, anxiety, and anger. These are all good reasons to meditate, but ultimately Buddhists practice zazen and other meditations to realize what Buddhism calls our true nature, which is beyond self-identity with its self-imposed limitations. From a Buddhist perspective, our main problem is attachment to our deluded idea of who we are, and what we need to do to maintain this delusion.

To make real progress in zazen, we must make a genuine commitment to practice. We may not recognize dramatic changes in our lives right away, but that's okay. One aspect of relating to our practice is to approach it with a balance of effort and patience. To find that which is beyond our ideas of self, we need to engage in our own experience of practice. Books and articles, however well written, are no substitute.

“Zazen is being awake but letting go, experiencing your present moment awareness without thought or story.”

You should preferably sit in the morning, starting with ten minutes a day for the first week. As your practice develops, gradually work up to 20-30 minutes a day. Here are some simple instructions to get you started:

Space

Find a quiet space to sit. It may help to create an uncluttered space, free of as many distractions as possible. Working to create an outwardly clear, calm space reflects our care for our practice and also supports the interior aspects of our zazen. A *zabuton* (soft mat) and *zafu* (cushion) will offer support for upright sitting.

Posture

Give careful attention to your body and posture. If you are just starting out, try a number of different ways to sit in order to find one that's comfortable for you. There are several options. Sit with both legs crossed so each leg rests on the opposite thigh (full lotus); sit with one leg resting over the opposite calf (half lotus); sit on your knees with your legs folded under you, straddling a cushion like a saddle; sit on a low bench with your legs tucked under the bench; or sit in a straight-back chair.

Comfort

The sitting position that works best for you will depend in part on your flexibility. Stretching prior to each sitting will help alleviate tightness and discomfort. As your meditation practice evolves, the pain you may experience at the outset will become less of an issue. Though there may be some discomfort as the limbs stretch in unfamiliar ways, gradually the body adjusts.

Attention

Whatever position you choose, your back and head should be erect. Your ears should line up with your shoulders and your chin should be slightly tucked in. Sit quietly with your eyes open and unfocused. Lower your gaze to a 45-degree angle. Bring your attention to your breathing. First, inhale and exhale through your

mouth while rocking right to left three times. Bring your hands together forming a zazen mudra (left hand resting on right hand with the palms facing up and the tips of the thumbs just touching).

Breath

Now you are ready to concentrate on your breath. Focus on the inhale and count one, then focus on the exhale and count two. Inhale again, counting three, and exhale again, counting four. The goal is to get to a count of ten without thoughts crossing your mind. If thoughts come up, start over at one. Breathe through your nose in a natural, unforced rhythm.

Thought

Refrain from trying to stop your thinking—let it stop by itself. When a thought comes into your mind, let it come in and let it go out. Your mind will begin to calm down. Nothing comes from outside of mind. The mind includes everything; this is the true understanding of the mind.

Your mind follows your breathing. While you are following the breath, drop the notion of “I am breathing.” No mind, no body—simply be aware of the moment of breathing. Drop the ideas of time and space, body and mind, and just “be” sitting. ❁



Tonglen

Pema Chödrön teaches us “sending and taking,” an ancient Buddhist practice to awaken compassion. With each in-breath, we take in others’ pain. With each out-breath, we send them relief.

TONGLEN PRACTICE, also known as “taking and sending,” reverses our usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure. In tonglen practice, we visualize taking in the pain of others with every in-breath and sending out whatever will benefit them on the out-breath. In the process, we become liberated from age-old patterns of selfishness. We begin to feel love for both ourselves and others; we begin to take care of ourselves and others.

Tonglen awakens our compassion and introduces us to a far bigger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness of shunyata (emptiness). By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being.

Tonglen can be done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have died, or those who are in pain of any kind. It can be done as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time. If we are out walking and we see someone in pain, we can breathe in that person’s pain and send out relief to them.



Breathe in for all of us and breathe out for all of us.
Use what seems like poison as medicine.

Usually, we look away when we see someone suffering. Their pain brings up our fear or anger; it brings up our resistance and confusion. So we can also do tonglen for all the people just like ourselves—all those who wish to be compassionate but instead are afraid, who wish to be brave but instead are cowardly. Rather than beating ourselves up, we can use our personal stuckness as a stepping stone to understanding what people are up against all over the world. Breathe in for all of us and breathe out for all of us. Use what seems like poison as medicine. We can use our personal suffering as the path to compassion for all beings.

When you do tonglen as a formal meditation practice, it has four stages:

1. Flash on Bodhichitta

Rest your mind for a second or two in a state of openness or stillness. This stage is traditionally called flashing on absolute bodhichitta, awakened heart-mind, or opening to basic spaciousness and clarity.

2. Begin the Visualization

Work with texture. Breathe in feelings of heat, darkness, and heaviness—a sense of claustrophobia—and breathe out feelings of coolness, brightness, and light—a sense of freshness. Breathe in completely, taking in negative energy through all the pores of your body. When you breathe out, radiate positive energy completely, through all the pores of your body. Do this until your visualization is synchronized with your in- and out-breaths.

3. Focus on a Personal Situation

Focus on any painful situation that's real to you. Traditionally you begin by doing tonglen for someone you care about and wish to help. However, if you are stuck, you can do the practice for the pain you are feeling yourself, and simultaneously for all those who feel the same kind of suffering. For instance, if you are feeling inadequate, breathe that in for yourself and all the others in the same boat and send out confidence, adequacy, and relief in any form you wish.

4. Expand Your Compassion

Finally, make the taking in and sending out bigger. If you are doing tonglen for someone you love, extend it out to all those who are in the same situation. If you are doing tonglen for someone you see on television or on the street, do it for all the others in the same boat. Make it bigger than just that one person. You can do tonglen

for people you consider to be your enemies—those who hurt you or hurt others. Do tonglén for them, thinking of them as having the same confusion and stuckness as your friend or yourself. Breathe in their pain and send them relief.

Tonglén can extend infinitely. As you do the practice, your compassion naturally expands over time, and so does your realization that things are not as solid as you thought, which is a glimpse of emptiness. As you do this practice, gradually at your own pace, you will be surprised to find yourself more and more able to be there for others, even in what used to seem like impossible situations. ❁



Hugging Meditation

Nothing warms the heart like a loving hug. To make the experience even deeper and more healing, **Thich Nhat Hanh** teaches us this practice of hugging meditation he created.

IN MY HERMITAGE I have planted beautiful trees. When I do walking meditation, I often stop and hug one of the trees, breathing in and out. It's very nourishing. The tree gives me strength, and it always seems to me that the tree responds to my hugging and breathing.

A tree is always available, but I'm not so sure about a person! Often, we're not really there with the people we love. We get caught up in other things, like our work or the news on TV. Hugging meditation is a practice of awareness. If we're not available, how can we hug someone? We return to ourselves to become totally present and available for the other person. If hugging isn't done in this spirit, it's only a ritual without content. When we're mindful and present, hugging has a deep power to heal, transform, and bring reconciliation.

We may practice hugging meditation with a friend, our child, a parent, our partner, or a tree. The hugging can be very deep. Life is there. Happiness is there. Sometimes the hugging is not very deep and the hugger only pretends to be there, perhaps by patting

you on the back—I have some experience of this! When someone hugs you with all their heart and presence, you feel it. When someone takes your hands in mindfulness, with their presence, their concern, you feel it. So hug like that—make life real and deep. It will heal both of you.



When we hug, our hearts connect and we know that we are not separate beings.

Hugging meditation is something I invented. In 1966, a friend drove me to the Atlanta airport, and when we were saying goodbye, she asked, “Is it all right to hug a Buddhist monk?” In my country, we are not used to expressing ourselves this way in public. But I thought, “I am a Zen teacher. It shouldn’t be a problem for me to do this.” So, I said, “Why not?” and she hugged me, but I was rather stiff. Later, on the plane, I decided that if I wanted to work with friends in the West, I would have to learn the culture of the West. That is why I invented hugging meditation.

Hugging in public is a Western practice. Meditation, conscious breathing, is an Eastern practice. The two come together in hugging meditation. I think it’s a good combination. For Buddhist practice to be rooted in the West, new dharma doors should be opened. I think hugging meditation can be considered one of these doors. The practice of mindful hugging has helped so many people to reconcile with each other. When we hug, our hearts connect and we know that we are not separate beings.

It's a pleasure to hug someone we love. But don't think it's something easy. Maybe we want to hug the other person, but they aren't available—they're caught in their anger, worries, or projects. Hugging is a deep practice and both people need to be completely present to do it correctly. That's why it's not always easy. So, we have to learn how.

Hugging meditation is a chance to practice our awareness of impermanence. Each time we hug, we know it may be the last time. Our deep awareness of the impermanent nature of things inspires us to be very mindful, and we naturally hug each other in a deep, authentic way, appreciating each other completely. This can be a good meditation to practice when you are angry with each other.

Close your eyes and practice breathing in and out to bring your insight of impermanence to life. Visualize yourself and your loved one three hundred years from now. Where will you be? In that moment, you know the only meaningful thing to do is to open your arms and hug the other person.

Step One

The first thing to do is to make yourself available. Breathe in and out, and come back to the present moment, so you are really there. Then go to the person you want to hug and bow to them. If they have practiced mindfulness, then they will do their best

to abandon the things that are possessing them and make themselves available to you. They will smile and bow, and you will know that they are available. Now hugging is possible.

Stand facing each other with your palms joined, breathing in and out three times. You can say silently:

*Breathing in, I know that life is precious in this moment.
Breathing out, I cherish this moment of life.*

Step Two

Take the person in your arms. While hugging, breathe consciously and hug with all your body, spirit, and heart. While you hold the other person, they become real, and you also become real. You can say silently something like this:

*Breathing in, my loved one is in my arms. Breathing out,
I am so happy.
Breathing in, they are alive. Breathing out, it is so precious
to be alive together.
Breathing in, it is so wonderful to have them in my arms.
Breathing out, I am very happy.*

You may then release the other person and bow to each other to show thanks. 🌸



Zen Koans

John Tarrant demystifies Zen koan practice. Yes, it's paradoxical, poetic, and totally personal. And so is life.

The koan: *The coin lost in the river is found in the river.*

A KOAN IS A LITTLE HEALING STORY, a conversation, an image, a fragment of a song. It's something to keep you company, whatever you are doing. There's a tradition of koan study to transform your heart and the way you move in the world.

The path is about learning to love this life, the one you have. Then it's easy to love others, which is the other thing a practice is about.

Koans don't really explain things. Instead, they show you something by opening a gate. You walk through, and you take the ride. Before anything is explained, there is the sky, the earth, redwood forests, pelicans, rivers, rats, the city of San Francisco. And you are part of all that. We're all part of that. In the land of koans, you see that everything that happens in your life is for you. There is no one else it can be for. Your life counts.

It's familiar to reach for things you already know about, and meditation means stepping beyond that. It's not training your mind because that is something you already know about. What's required is more strange and also less effort; it's outside of easy or hard, yesterday or tomorrow.

“Koans don't really explain things. Instead, they show you something by opening a gate.

You might think meditation is difficult—that your job as a meditator is to change your mind about reality and see through your illusions. But the ambition to improve your state of mind is part of the consciousness that finds fault with itself and lives in pain.

With a koan it's different. You just keep company with the koan, and it draws your attention to something you already have but might not have valued. Reality is on your side.

There are many koans. If you have heard of a koan and it stayed with you, you can try that one out. It can be like an ear worm—it seizes you and won't go away. In this way, a koan can choose you. It is for you the way your life is for you. No one else's opinion really counts. If no koan has already grabbed hold of you, here's one to try:

The coin lost in the river is found in the river.

How do you work with this koan?

1. First of all, don't try too hard.

Just repeat the words of the koan to yourself a bit.

The coin that's lost in the river is found in the river.

You are joining a timeless conversation and you are forming a relationship with the koan, so you can let all that happen without worrying about it.

2. You show up.

Have the life you have, and let the koan into it. Think of it as play. Everyone wants to develop meditation as a skill, but building a skill is just making your life smaller than it is. Before that, meditation is showing up for your own life. It's personal; something in your life will rise to meet the coin that was lost. It will not be what you expected.

3. Trust what you don't know.

Usually if we want to understand something we take it up to the top floor and find a shelf with a label for it. If we do that with meditation, we are still outside of our own lives. Instead, you can let the koan into your heart and your body. Let it change you.

4. Experiment.

Fall into the koan, make mistakes, try to misunderstand it, find its virtues. You can't break a koan. Ask yourself questions: "Is this a coin?" "Is anything really lost?"

5. The koan can be your friend.

It can be the good dog that follows you around. So you can stop struggling. Just wondering about that coin will change you; you'll begin to notice it everywhere. Keep company with the koan whatever you are doing. Even when you are asleep it might be there, an unnoticed kindness.

6. Any part of the koan is all of the koan.

Your mind presents all sorts of things—coins, lost and found, hidden treasure, the ever-flowing river. Loss is itself a kind of coin. Even if you were delirious, dying, or just really excited, the gold would be there. The practice is robust like that. Secretly, inside any state there's the glint of something that has always been here. You just show up in any condition and you start to notice.

7. You don't need a special state of mind.

There are many calm and clear states of mind, but the meditation is not about chasing after them. Meditation occurs before any states of mind become fixed.

8. Have confidence in yourself.

The most important thing is not to judge, criticize, assess, or find fault with anything that arises in your mind. This includes how you are doing with the koan. If you can't help it and you do judge, criticize, assess, and find fault with yourself, don't criticize that. Then the compassion has somewhere to come in.

Any final suggestions for trying this?

We can turn toward whatever arises. No moment of life is unworthy of us or wrong, and every being has a treasure that was never lost. It's fine to enjoy your koan, to let it become you, to relish your life. Ah, the coin!

You might be doing it right. ❀



Walking Meditation

Leslie Booker offers step-by-step instruction.

IN THE FOUR foundations of mindfulness, as laid out in the famed *Satiphatthana Sutta*, the Buddha offers four postures for practicing meditation:

*A monk knows, when he is walking,
“I am walking”;
he knows, when he is standing,
“I am standing”;
he knows, when he is sitting,
“I am sitting”;
he knows, when he is lying down,
“I am lying down”;
or just as his body is disposed
so he knows it.*

Walking meditation is often described as a meditation in motion.

In this practice, you place your full attention on the process of walking—from the shifting of the weight in your body to the mechanics of placing your foot. Walking meditation is an integral part of retreat life in many traditions and is used to offset and shift the energy of sitting practice. It is a bridge to integrate practice into daily life and can be more accessible than a sitting practice for many people.

Find an unobstructed space where you can walk in a straight line for about ten feet. This short walking distance is the instruction given in the Theravada tradition. Others prefer to walk for greater distances. Bring your attention down to your feet and slowly shift your weight from side to side and front to back. Being in bare feet can bring more awareness to what needs to happen in the body to create balance.



Walking meditation is a bridge to integrate practice into daily life and can be more accessible than a sitting practice for many people.

Coming into physical stillness, lift the crown of your head up, slide your shoulders down and away from your ears, and lift your chest with dignity and pride, as if you were a king or a queen. You can clasp your hands behind your back, hold them in front of your body, or let your arms hang loosely to the side.

Lifting your right leg, notice the weight redistribution in your body. Place your attention on what the left side of your body needs to do to hold your full weight—spreading the toes, engaging the core. Extend the right leg forward, placing the heel on the ground and rolling onto the ball of the foot. As your weight shifts forward, notice how the heel of your left foot begins to lift. Swing the left leg forward and repeat.

Adding verbal cues is a great way to establish synchronization and rhythm within the body. As the mind begins to wander, use a simple verbal cue like “lifting, moving, placing” as a reminder to bring the mind back to the body. Incorporating a gatha, a short verse to support practice, is a common technique used in Thich Nhat Hanh’s communities. Here’s one that might be used for walking meditation:

(Breathing in) “I have arrived”;
(Breathing out) “I am home.”

(Breathing in) “In the here”;
(Breathing out) “In the now.”

(Breathing in) “I am solid”;
(Breathing out) “I am free.”

(Breathing in) “In the ultimate”;
(Breathing out) “I dwell.”

When you get to the end of your short walking path, come to a complete stop and take a breath. Turn a quarter of the way, maybe taking another breath, then fully turn all the way around, facing where you just came from. Start over with finding your posture and establishing your balance. Again lift, move, and place the foot.

At the beginning of this practice, you might notice that your steps are very calculated and robotic. See if you can begin to find more fluidity as you connect the breath with movement, perhaps

letting go of the phrases and just allowing this to be a fully embodied practice. Start with about a ten-minute session, slowly building up to 30–45 minutes.

When you have come to the end of your practice, stand still, seeing where there is energy in the body and what is still. Notice what has risen to the top and what has been let go of. ✨