

So You Want to Try Meditating...

Jon Yaffe

I decided to write this introduction to basic meditation when David and Lee, one of my two sons and daughters-in-law, recently told me they have begun meditating as a family activity; along with their teenage sons, Jay and Sam. I offered to send them some basic meditation instructions that I had in my files, which they agreed might be helpful.

When I looked at the handout I had in mind, however, I felt it fell short. I wanted it to be both clearer and more inspirational. I was partly to blame for its shortcomings. Years ago, I had been given a set of instructions as a handout, which on several readings I found a bit heavy-handed and not quite on point. I revised it slightly quite a while ago and have used it on and off ever since, but never gave it the real overhaul it deserves.

So, I sat down to do just that. As I got into it I found that the instructions themselves were quite brief, but felt they simply would not be clear to a true newcomer. There was a need to explain things in detail; not just to describe what to do, as seen from the outside so to speak, but to touch on the internal experience of practice as well. As a result of adding this elaboration, I found myself writing more of an article on beginning concentration than simple bare-boned instructions. I do provide a concise set of instructions at the end, but you should know you're going to be in for a bit of reading as we go. I certainly hope you find it worthwhile and helpful.

Why Meditate?

Many people take up meditation to calm themselves and reduce the stress they experience in their lives. Clearly, these are worthy goals. For those who are profoundly agitated or disturbingly stressed achieving these may represent a powerful life transformation.

For those meditating in the Buddhist tradition calming and stress reduction are indeed attainable, but these are among the earliest of many rewards within the reach of practice. Indeed, in addition to their immediate value these and other achievements can be seen as *skillful means* for moving on to yet further stages of a very rich journey.

Becoming calm and reasonably free of stress is a skillful means for learning to direct, focus and steady our attention. In turn, mastering these is a skillful means for learning how to see the world clearly, in both its inner and outer aspects; without distortions or distractions. Seeing clearly, in its turn, positions us to experience insights; to come upon simple but profound truths about life and how to live it well, freed from confusion and delusion. These insights lead to our making better and better decisions, as our refined understanding leads to our choosing wiser actions. These have helpful, harmonious impact on ourselves and others, which often has the consequence of furthering a calm sense of well-being and minimizing stress.

In a sense, then, this path takes us in a broad circle which brings us back to our original goals, while at the same time allowing us to continue journeying - by retracing our steps with ever greater awareness and refinement. Throughout this process, this journey, we experience growing happiness, joy and contentment. The mind becomes a trusted friend; calm, steady, honest and reliable. Life makes sense, and we grow to be at peace with it.

All of this is set in motion, almost miraculously, by “just sitting on a cushion”!

While We’re Talking About Sitting...

There are few practical matters to consider, regarding sitting itself.

The Gear

There are three basic types of “sitting gear”:

- Cushion on a pad
- Bench on a pad
- Straight-backed Chair

The key idea for both cushion and bench is that your spine will be far more comfortable if your buttocks are elevated four or five inches above floor (or pad) level. Of course, you *can* sit flat on the ground if you want, but you’re likely to be uncomfortable during longer sittings if you do.

A specialty cushion made for meditating is a good idea. Called a *zafu*, these usually are packed very firmly with either kapok or cotton batting, or with buckwheat hulls. The former gives consistent solid support, while a buckwheat cushion can be shaped a bit before you settle down onto it, and then gives firm support that cradles you in the shape you gave it. The latter is especially helpful if you have an injured tailbone or other condition that tends to make pressure while sitting uncomfortable.

If you are brand new to meditating and don’t have a true *zafu*, but want to get the feel of sitting on one to try it out, you can improvise a cushion. Take two bath towels, fold them lengthwise so they are a foot or so wide, then lay them out over-lapping a bit and roll them up tightly. You’ll get a roll about eight inches thick and quite firm, which is very similar to a *zafu* to sit upon. You probably can do the same with a quilt or throw.

With any such cushion, the general advice is to sit on the leading third of it, so that a good half of your weight comes off cushion. You will be more comfortable if your knees and ankles share some of the burden. Some teachers favor pulling one or both feet up onto the opposing knee, in a position known respectively as a half or full lotus. This tends to be comfortable for the spine, but can be hard on the knees and ankles. If you stick with either lotus position you most likely will grow to be comfortable with it, but a gentler position is known as the Burmese. It simply has your feet pulled up as close as possible to the opposing knees, resting one in front of the other on your pad.

The pad, called a *zabuton*, is usually a square about thirty inches on each side, with about two inches of medium density padding. It is big enough that your cushion rests on it at the back while your folded legs are supported by it at the front. It supports your ankles and feet while eliminating pressure points you would feel on a hard floor.

Meditation benches are low affairs, with a cross-mounted board to sit on – about a foot and a half wide (sometimes lightly padded and upholstered) with eight inch or so supports at both sides. To use it you assume a kneeling position, place the bench behind you (straddling your calves) and sit back onto the cross piece. Benches can be quite comfortable, although some people take a while to get used to their feet being somewhat flattened-out and resting on their tops.

You can use a cushion to sit in the same kneeling posture you'd take using a bench; by positioning the cushion on edge instead of laying it flat, then straddling it in a kneeling position and sitting back onto it.

Cushions tend to be more popular than benches, but both can be very comfortable once you get used to them. The kneeling position, regardless of how achieved, tends to elevate the spine more than the sitting position, which some find more comfortable. The choice is strictly yours.

If you live in a large community, you may find local stores that sell meditation supplies. If not, these are easily found online. Search for “Meditation Supplies” for national vendors, or add your city name for a local search. If cost is a concern, consider checking Amazon to get an idea of prices at the low end of the scale for whatever items interest you.

Also, there's nothing at all wrong with meditating sitting on a straight-backed chair. The primary concern with chairs is choosing one that is firmly but comfortably padded, and the right size for you; meaning that your feet sit comfortably flat on the floor or carpet with your thighs evenly (and gently) supported.

As a general rule, stay with whatever sitting gear you choose throughout any single meditation sitting. On the other hand, it's fine to choose different gear for multiple sittings, especially at longer retreats.

Give Your Practice a Special Setting

Consider this for a moment: you have the choice to view your meditating as something really special, or as something rather mundane and prosaic. Which do you prefer?

If you opt for it being special (which I strongly advise), be aware that for many of us the experience of special things tends to degrade over time. Given this tendency, what can you do to make meditating special and help it stay that way?

In some respects, this is a great question to leave somewhat unanswered. That is, ask and answer this for yourself, and keep asking. Keep finding your own fresh answers!

That said – and not dismissed - one of the things you can do is create a special place in your home, to encourage and support your practice. It doesn't have to be large; it may in fact benefit from being small and intimate. General considerations would be that your meditation space should be reasonably quiet and secluded, away from heavy traffic areas in your living space. It should be a calm and “friendly” space, as free as possible from distracting sensory inputs: away from strong odors such as smoke, strong perfumes and cooking smells; free from harsh lighting, jarring noises and so forth. Decorations should be calming and inspirational; perhaps some beloved books or art work. Your designated meditation area may be part of a larger space, but should be mentally reserved for meditation and meaningful reflection. When you are in this space, your motivation to meditate should be sustained by your immediate surroundings, and when you see the space from outside of it, for example as you walk past it while moving across different areas of a larger space that contains it, it should remind you - in a welcoming way - of the opportunity you have to meditate later.

Timing Matters

Another aspect of setting is time of day. It would be lovely if we all could meditate at any time of day with ideal results, but as a practical matter you will find some times work better for you than others. This might be due to external conditions – work or family duties can be genuine obligations – or internal factors, such as you not being a “morning person” or being fatigued in the evening. Try sitting at different times, and discover through your own experience the time or times that work best for you.

Give each selected time several tries. We are variable creatures, and our days can have ups and downs. It's best to decide on your preferred sitting time based on multiple trials rather than just one. Whatever your preference is, when it is clear to you make a determined effort to meditate then, regularly. Although there certainly will be times when responsibilities or plans preclude it, strive to establish a daily practice. Your discipline will be rewarded.

Another matter for trial and discovery is how long your home sittings should be. For many people it works to start sitting for just a short period of time, say ten or fifteen minutes; then extend your sittings by five-minute increments until you are comfortable sitting for thirty or forty minutes.

Starting with shorter sittings helps prevent initial discouragement. When we first settle into practice the untrained mind may resist the discipline meditation asks of it. It's best not to give it (you, that is) an obvious excuse or justification for giving up. This is not to assert that meditation is a perfect practice for everyone, or necessarily for you. But it is a

practice worthy of earnest effort and an open mind. Give it the best chance of working for you that you can!

Oh, one last timing matter: a timer! You most likely have a smart phone, and it most likely has a Clock app that features a countdown timer. This is fine to use, although you might want to pick an alarm tone or melody you find pleasant if yours is currently somewhat jarring. A nicer option might be to look at your phone's App Store and find a meditation timer. There are a variety of free and inexpensive ones you can download. Most give you a choice of alarm tones that mimic various meditation gongs or bells. You might find one or more of these pleasant and even quietly fun.

Especially if you invite others to sit with you, you might enjoy getting meditation bell. These typically look like small brass bowls, about 4 or five inches wide. Some are decorated with attractive etched designs. They come with a short wooden striker, some of which are partly covered with felt or other padding material – which lets you choose between striking the bowl with either a sharp or somewhat muted effect. When sitting with a group, you can strike the bowl once at the beginning of the sitting, and one or more times (many people strike it three times) at the end.

(The hard side of the striker can also be used to gently and smoothly circle the rim of the bowl, which raises a gentle constant ringing tone. You may find this very pleasant, although it's not used this way as a meditation bell).

All Right, Already. Can We Sit?

Yes! Let's do that.

Settle onto whatever gear you prefer for your sitting. Gently close and relax your eyes (not as you read these instructions, of course; but afterwards, as you put them to work).

Assume a position which is upright and alert, yet relaxed. This instruction may seem unambiguous, but in fact there are many ways to be alert and many ways to be relaxed.

It may not be apparent, but you could easily be alert in ways incompatible with being relaxed. You could be alert, for example, because you are fearful or feel challenged in a threatening way. Turn you mind from any tendency you might have to associate being alert with being stressed. Here, instead, you want to be alert with a spirit of *curiosity* and *interest*. What sensations, experiences, and possibly even insights will meditation bring? More specifically, in each instant of ever-flowing, ever-changing experience, what will *this* meditation bring?

Similarly, it's possible to be relaxed in ways incompatible with being alert. You could be relaxed because you feel lazy, drowsy or indifferent. Turn you mind from any tendency you might have to associate relaxation with being disengaged or in a mental fog. Here, instead, you want to be relaxed in a spirit of *confidence* – confidence that comes from

appreciating that people have practiced and valued meditation for some 2,600 years; confident through knowing that you are just as capable, worthy and deserving of success as any of those who've come before you.

Continuing this preliminary “settling in”, set aside – as best you can – any memories, thoughts or emotions you may be carrying just now. These could reflect preoccupation with or residues of the past, be it far distant or from just moments earlier; or they could be plans or worry about the future. It's even possible to get enmeshed in expectations about how *now* should be. Put all of that aside. Instead, turn your attention to the variety of present-moment *experiences* arising in the body. Notice feelings of contact and weight – pressure you may feel in the buttocks, knees, ankles and feet in the position you've chosen. Notice any touch sensations you may feel, from your hands as they rest in your lap or on your thighs, from your clothing as it rests or pulls on parts of the body, and so forth. Notice too any sounds that arise and pass away, the sense of temperature – is the room too warm, too cool, or just right? – the motion or stillness of the room air, and so forth.

While tuning into the body, take a moment to notice any areas of tension you may discover. You can quickly scan your body with your awareness from head on down, to detect tightness, heat or pain around the eyes, the jaw, shoulders, etc. If you come across such bodily stress, simply acknowledge its presence – with a minimum of irritation or frustration - and invite it to relax and release. You may find it helpful to combine this quick “body scan” with a breathing visualization. As you encounter an area of tension, gently draw your attention to it on the in-breath, and on the out-breath visualize the tension flowing out of that area and entirely out of the body, as if you were exhaling it. If you experience a sense of partial release when doing this, feel free to repeat this for as many breath cycles as you wish, hopefully observing further relaxation with each breath. If the tenseness is insistent, let it be. Perhaps it is serving a helpful role right now, and you can return to invite its release later.

This is a continuation, a deeper movement if you will, into becoming alert and relaxed in a wholesome manner. Give this process as much time as you find it needs. The amount of tension you carry in the body, and your facility at working with it, may vary considerably from time to time; so let the time this takes vary organically. As a beginner you might find it helpful to give this part of the “settling-in” process several minutes at the start of your sitting. Later, it may be a relatively fleeting thing, hardly necessary at all. As your meditation practice becomes established, you most likely will experience an overall reduction in tension and stress (although you will certainly experience ups and downs, of many sorts).

Alert and relaxed, now turn your attention to the breath.

We will take the breath as the primary meditation object for cultivating concentration. Buddhism identifies many objects as suitable for meditating upon, with some being optimal for different persons and/or best for different types of meditation. But the breath is recognized as the finest “all purpose” object. It is always present and accessible to us

and it has, among other useful properties, the qualities of being both ever-present throughout life while at the same time being fluid, perpetually in a state of flux. Its constant presence makes it suitable for learning to focus and hold our attention upon, while its fluidity lets us cultivate a quality of attention which is ever-sensitive to subtle changes.

Begin by taking one or more deep breaths, until you know with confidence where the direct experience associated with breathing is clearest in your awareness. Typically, this will be feeling the passage of air at the tip of the nose or inside the nasal cavity, or feeling the rising and falling of the chest, rib cage or belly. Wherever the experience is most prominent – whether in one of these typical places or not – once you find it arouse the intention in your mind to focus your attention on this one spot. Let doing this continually be your goal throughout the sitting.

This involves, first, mentally turning towards and locating this area, at the beginning of the sitting *and* each time you realize the attention has drifted from it. That is, find it, and establish a connection to it, a sense of settling in as an observer. Then, shift the quality of your effort to emphasizing *sustaining* your attention on that spot. These are two distinct qualities of effort. To offer an analogy, in yoga practice the difference between these two would be equivalent to assuming a posture cleanly, on the one hand, versus holding that posture perfectly steady for quite some time, on the other.

The awareness arising in your consciousness should be purely sensory, and of course should reflect maintaining focus on the breath. If other sensations impinge on or tug at your awareness – a pain in one knee, the sound of a passing vehicle or chirping bird, etc. – do your best to maintain your focus on the breath. If you lose focus, if your attention is redirected – onto the knee, the source of sound, etc. – as soon as you realize this take a moment to note that your contact with the breath is now truly gone. It may be recovered quickly – indeed, additional instructions are to abandon this new object of awareness as soon as you can after becoming aware that the attention has drifted, to return to the breath – but please do note that you have, if only for the briefest second, “lost it”.

There is an important insight to be gained here, into the nature of consciousness. That is, consciousness can hold only one object in attention at a time. True multitasking is not a possibility. Rapid sequential tasking *is* possible – the mind can toggle quickly between different sensory inputs, thoughts or actions – but it cannot truly focus on one object without losing focus on all others. This has tremendous significance in terms of what it means to be mindful – on the cushion and in daily life. When you have a conversation with someone, for example, if your mind drifts into considering what you want to say next you should be aware that you are no longer really listening to the other person. You might just as well leave the room. Similarly, there is no such thing as texting *while* driving; there is only texting *instead of* driving.

It's reasonably easy to note a shift in sensory focus. After all, ordinarily your knee is nowhere near your nostrils. And, it may be easy to note when thoughts or emotions take you far from the breath (or another chosen object). Breath awareness, for example, is

clearly distinct from thinking about what you'll have for your next meal, about something important coming up later in the day, or about how embarrassed you felt when you did that stupid thing you'd rather not talk about!

For many of us, a far more challenging thing to note is when the mind shifts from being immersed in direct awareness of physical sensation to *thinking about that immersion* or *commenting on something closely related* (e.g., thoughts of how good this feels, how well you're doing at meditating, how long until this sitting is finally over, etc.).

Because we tend to believe in multitasking, we may believe that maintaining clear focus is simply not that important. In addition to not cultivating a mind that can hold its focus, we may not even have developed the ability to notice when we lose focus or when our attention is broadly scattered. We may be careless observers.

Hopefully, pointing this out will help sensitize you to what you may encounter when cultivating the ability to concentrate. You may discover the mind is undisciplined, has abundant bad habits, and/or actively resists you asking it to behave. "Bad habits" may include the conditioned tendency to be harsh and judgmental when coming up against any perceived shortcomings – resulting in condemning thoughts directed either internally, at yourself, or externally, at whatever is challenging you.

Negative self-talk is reinforced by thoughts that it is deserved, or even helpful. It's important to see and appreciate that the very opposite is true. If the goal is to focus on the breath, and at some point you awaken to realize your attention has shifted or drifted, please recognize that the time you take to internally berate yourself (or indulge in any form of annoyance) is further time spent away from the breath. Remember that consciousness holds only one object of awareness at a time. Whenever you are busy beating-up yourself, the sense of anger and inadequacy all you can be aware of as long as this continues.

Let it go! Let any form of distraction go! Set mental chatter aside.

When you awaken to the discovery that the mind has drifted, grown preoccupied with thoughts (seemingly relevant or not) or that you've grown sleepy or dull, notice whether or not this "waking up" is simply a return to clarity. If so, without any fuss redirect your attention to re-establishing a connection with the breath, and then stabilize your attention there. If, on the other hand, you note feeling startled or caught in some form of reactivity (the thought, "Ugh, I messed-up again"; or some such), take a second or two to release the reactivity and any accompanying tension, and to re-establish the mental posture of alert relaxation. Then, return to the breath.

With practice, you will likely experience a shift in the way you view thoughts. It is common to be very attentive to the content of whatever thought presents itself, whether it is happy, angry or whatever. This leads us to proliferate additional thoughts that support or challenge the content or "message". If an angry thought arises in response to a frustration or failure, for example, we may generate new thoughts that reinforce our

feeling that way. This process tends to take us from a single event or occurrence to a global generality; from “I didn’t get it right this time” to “I never do anything right, ever!” By recognizing when thoughts arise and simply letting them fade - in effect not getting caught in content and thus avoiding any tendency to proliferate additional thoughts – we come to see thinking simply as an ongoing process, with thoughts arising and passing away of their own accord - regardless of their content. With this shift, we can become free from the tyranny of ugly thoughts, just as we become free from the enticement of attractive ones. We can be at peace with just letting thoughts come and go, regardless of their seeming “significance”.

I’ve been discussing times when the mind has drifted away from your concentration object without you being aware of it. When this happens, there is a quality of *awakening far from the breath*, if you will; and there is a tendency to think something on the order of “Wow. How did I get from there to *here*?” This may happen quite often. But, on the other hand, there will be times when instead you can feel a faint mental tug, as the mind is just beginning to drift or pull away from the breath. When this occurs try to boost the effort you are using to maintain concentration, perhaps by reasserting your original wholesome intention to meditate; sending yourself a quiet but confident internal message such as, “You can *do* this!” This may well firm-up your weakening focus.

What I’m describing is very similar to walking a balance beam and wobbling a bit as you almost lose your balance. By refining the ability to recognize whenever the body begins losing its center-line balance, you may be able to recover (even if it means shifting your stance and waving your arms a bit) and stay up on the beam. However subtle or awkward the effort to restore your balance, this will be less disruptive than falling or jumping from the beam, and then having to get back up on it again.

Some “Tips of the Trade” to Monitor and Advance Beginning Practice

The heart of this skill is becoming clear as to just what the mind is focusing on. It can be tricky to be aware of transitions in awareness, especially when the mind begins sliding from resting in direct experience to commenting about it. If you find this is challenging for you, consider adopting the practice of *mental noting*.

This involves stepping back just a bit from whatever is going on in consciousness, in order to label it in the very simplest of terms, then immediately stepping back into the experience just noted. A sequence of experience notes might go like this: “Observing (i.e., the breath, but keeping the note as brief as possible), observing, observing, commenting (e.g., when the mind says “this is going well”), observing, planning (when you think about that meeting you have later today), and so forth...

As an exercise, to give you a sense of how volatile the mind is, you can continue noting for a time, regardless of how actively the mind may drift. Or, of course, whenever the note reveals that the mind had drifted from the breath and is not returning to it, on its own

accord so to speak, you can invoke intentional effort to redirect the attention back to it, as described above.

Another technique you can use to monitor the stability of your concentration is *counting your breaths*. The instructions are simple and less challenging to follow than noting: establish the breath as your meditation object and begin observing its associated sensory experience. Starting at “one”, count each full breath, in and out, *during which your focus is completely uninterrupted*. Go up to ten and then back to zero, in steps of one. If at any point your focus shifts to another object or you slide into internal commentary or other thought – or if the mind gets into an autopilot groove and you count past ten, forgetting to reverse course - restart the count at “one”. When you can go all the way to a count of ten and back, the mind is becoming concentrated and you may want to stop counting and rest in deeper silence, continuing to appreciate the breath and your stability of mind.

For beginning meditators, or for any of us when the mind is restless, counting can be a very humbling exercise – somewhat akin to playing Monopoly and repeatedly landing on the space that says, “Go directly to Jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect \$200.” Sticking with the board game metaphor, especially for those prone to frustration and self-criticism the practice of returning to the breath and restarting the process time and again is a wonderful way to work on “becoming a ‘good sport’” with ourselves. We get to develop both self-compassion and the mental discipline we clearly see we need.

Both *noting* and *counting* give the “observing mind” an extra chore to do, in the interest of monitoring and improving the stability of concentration. These can be both over-emphasized and overdone. So, if you try these out please use them prudently. The effort that goes into them should be the smallest investment of energy sufficient to follow the instructions. For example, the counting process should be so light as to not pull the attention away from the breath completely, and “sound” of the count in your mind should be akin to a whisper. If you find either technique tiring, or if you find you cannot be kind to yourself in handling the feedback provided, set the technique aside for now and return to the simple core instructions.

So, in a nutshell, this is beginning Concentration Practice: invoke a positive attitude and quiet the mind, then “find” and focus on the breath. Hold that focus as best you can. Adjust your level of effort to suit your moment-to-moment experience. If your awareness is comfortably settled on the breath, relax and enjoy your steady focus and the refreshing simplicity of uncomplicated sensory experience. If you feel the tug of attention beginning to drift, increase your level of effort slightly to hold it in place. If the mind loses its focus, or drifts to another object, awaken fully to this, release any reactivity and/or tension that might arise with this awakening, and then redirect the attention back to the breath; in effect starting over.

At this level of practice, that’s it!

Make meditating in this way a part of your routine, even if only on a trial basis. Over time you'll find the mind will learn to settle down. It will become more manageable and steady. It will see and experience things more patiently, with more clarity and with far less drama. You'll become calmer and clearer about what is and is not happening; what does and does not require fixing. By learning to be present and observe your experience without interfering with it, you'll come to appreciate both mind and the world around you in a new and very wholesome way.

Sometimes this will feel effortless, while at other times you will recognize it as real work. You may find there is a bit a cosmic joke in all of this – that the road to serenity has its ups and downs! But through all of it I believe you will find there to be a growing sense of “rightness” to what you are doing, and a growing sense of wholesome joy!

Enjoy, and be ready to be pleasantly surprised!

Concise Review

- In the space you created and set aside for meditation and reflection, settle into your sitting position.
- Start your timer
- Gently close your eyes
- Adjust your posture, mental as well as physical, to be upright and alert with interest, while at the same being relaxed; confident in the value of your practice.
- Notice any tightness or tension you may be holding in the body, and invite it to release.
- Turn your attention to the breath, finding where your experience of breathing is clearest and most vivid (e.g., in the nostrils, the movements of the chest, etc.).
- Invoke the intention to focus and steady your attention on that one spot.
 - If your awareness is comfortably settled on the breath, relax and enjoy the refreshing simplicity of uncomplicated sensory experience.
 - If you feel the tug of attention beginning to drift, increase your level of effort slightly to hold it in place.
 - If the mind loses its focus or drifts to another object; awaken fully to this, release any reactivity or tension that might arise with this awakening, and redirect the attention back to the breath.
- As a gauge for your progress, you may want to count breaths or add noting to your practice.
- Be diligent but kind to yourself. This is not a race; it is a journey of discovery.