

letter to a new meditator

Everything you ever wanted to know about meditating, but didn't have a teacher to ask.

Dear One,

If I had to tell you only one thing about meditation, it would be this: Meditation is your personal experiment, performed in the laboratory of your own mind and body. Your practice will be inspired by teachers and guided by the practices that the great explorers of meditation have handed down to us. Yet in the end, the form your practice takes is uniquely yours.

It took me a long time to realize this. In fact, the main reason I began teaching meditation was to spare other people from having to wait as long as I did to figure it out. Of course, when you begin your meditation practice, and as you're establishing the habit of sitting, you need the structure and direction of an established protocol. Following basic techniques helps you set up the discipline of regular sitting and teaches you how to get your body comfortable, find inner focus, and keep your mind from running rampant. But as you continue, things shift. You start to catch the meditation current, the inward-flowing slipstream that takes the mind inward. You begin to **experience periods of quiet**, even contentment. You realize that meditation is actually a natural state and that it will arise on its own if you give it time. And you discover some of the benefits of sitting for meditation—how a practice helps you hold steady in times of emotional turmoil, how creative solutions to problems present themselves naturally when you enter a certain state of quiet. You'll



find out that even when you don't think you've had a "good" or "quiet" meditation, the rest of your day feels sweeter, calmer, or more energized because of the time you spent sitting.

At the same time, subtler questions start to arise. You might find yourself stopped by the same inner walls and wonder how to get past

them. You might notice that your practice has become routine and wonder how to make it more interesting. You might feel that your heart is blocked or that you simply want more excitement in your sitting. So you begin to play a bit with your practice, to experiment, to get a little creative. It's important to give yourself permission to do this. Otherwise, chances are your meditation practice will start to feel stale.

A successful meditation practice requires balancing polarities: focus and letting go, structure and freedom. You need to work with guidelines for posture, concentration, breath awareness, self-inquiry. But you also need to know when it is time to let go of the "rules" and follow the signals that are coming from your own consciousness. And this requires openness, creativity, and discernment.

So I offer you here a few essential principles for navigating this paradox and for finding your own best meditation practice. Some are basic. Others are subtler and might be new to you. They will help you to skillfully walk the edge between

structure and freedom, between tradition and experimentation, so you can engage for yourself the essential mystery at the heart of meditation practice—how, by doing "nothing" with radical attentiveness, you can enter into the very heart of love and wisdom.

GET COMFORTABLE

The first principle for successful meditation is to make yourself physically comfortable enough to meditate for at least half an hour at a time. The one absolute rule for meditation posture is that your spine be erect. As long as your spine is straight and your chest is open, comfort trumps form. This might sound radical if you've been trained in classical yoga or Zen, but trust me—at least in the beginning, it's more important that you are able to forget about your body while you're meditating than that you train yourself in postural perfection.

Use props to support your hips and knees and, if you need to, your back. If you're on the floor, make sure your hips

are elevated at least three inches above your knees, so that your back doesn't round. If sitting on the floor is too uncomfortable, sit on a chair. If it's hard to sit upright, sit against a wall and stuff pillows behind your lower back. Use as many as you need to support your spine and push you into an upright posture. Your aim is not to create a perfect meditation asana, but to support your body so it will let you turn inside.

Next, choose a simple core practice, and do it daily until it becomes a habit. Your core practice is your base, your foundation for turning the mind inward. Doing the same practice every day establishes a groove in your consciousness, and this groove becomes a pathway into the deeper layers of yourself. For a beginning meditator trying to establish a practice, this is imperative. But even experienced meditators benefit from having a clear protocol for signaling the mind that it's time to turn inward. From there, you can play with other practices, always with the knowledge that you can come back to home



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base. When you're beginning a meditation practice, start with 10 minutes and increase your meditation time 1 minute a day until you've reached a half-hour. This will allow you to cut the basic groove of practice. If you want to go deep in meditation, you often need to sit for at least 45 minutes to one hour to get quiet enough to sink deeply inside. But, here's the good news: A daily 20-minute practice—especially if you do it twice a day—will improve your focus, stabilize your emotions, give you access to a deeper level of creativity, and treat you to more prolonged glimpses of your peaceful source.

YOUR CORE PRACTICE

So how do you find your core practice? Traditional meditation paths make it simple. The teacher gives you a technique, and you're required to do it for a certain amount of time—months or even years—before you're encouraged to try anything more elaborate. But most meditators don't operate within that kind of traditional framework anymore. We

live in a spiritual smorgasbord—a world so rich with juicy, alluring, and available meditation practices that you could spend years trying them out. You go to a retreat and are taught, say, lovingkindness meditation. Or you're given a mantra or a practice of silent “Who am I?” self-inquiry. You engage the practice deeply while you're on the retreat. You even practice with it for a while at home. But then the glow of the retreat wears off, and you learn another practice in yoga class, and you do that one for a while.

And so it goes, until you begin to feel that you “know” 10 or 20 techniques, that you've been there and done that with many of the classical practices of the great meditation traditions—but you aren't really poised in your interior Self. To use a well-known metaphor, you're drilling so many wells that you don't go deep enough to find water.

So how do you find the right core practice for you? If you don't have a teacher, the best approach is to deliberately try out

several classical practices. Take enough time with each one to feel your way into it, and notice the results. A practice is working for you when you find that it activates

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the meditation current. Another of the paradoxes of meditation is that the technique itself is merely a portal. Your goal is not to become a master of technique, but to allow yourself to enter the natural state of meditation.

Most core practices fall into five basic categories: mindfulness, mantra, inner body, visualization, and self-inquiry. Breath awareness as a practice is actually a metacategory, since nearly every form of meditation involves attention to the breath. Each type of practice trains your

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attention in a particular way, and each will have its own effect on your inner state. They are often combined, but when you are beginning your practice, it's best to start with one. In general, you'll want to work with one practice for about a month to get a clear sense of how it affects you.

There are several things to consider when choosing your core practice. First, your core practice should attract, even hook, your mind. You should be able to attach your attention to the practice with enough pleasure so that you can follow it past your surface thinking into a deeper state. If a technique doesn't feel pleasurable at least some of the time, it's not the right technique for you; if you don't get some enjoyment out of it, you simply won't do it. Of course, nobody's meditation is always enjoyable. Meditation can be boring at times, even excruciatingly so, and there will be days when sitting for your allotted time feels like a struggle. But if your practice is consistently tedious, it means that you're not connecting, and that is often a sign that you aren't doing the right core practice.

Second, your core practice should feel natural. If you're not a visual person, you probably don't want to adopt a visualization practice right away, because it will be too much of a struggle. And last, your core practice should effectively—given enough sitting time—begin to quiet your mind and turn it toward its source, toward the deeper awareness that is the field behind thoughts and emotions.

AS NATURAL AS BREATHING

Mindfulness, which can be defined as simply paying attention—to your breath, your body, or your surroundings—is one of the most widely practiced methods. Mindfulness of the breath is the most basic and natural meditation technique, because when you follow the flow of the breath, it automatically causes your mind to turn inside. You can use it not just in seated meditation but at other times, too.

Observe the rise and fall of the breath, noting the coolness of the breath touching your nostrils on the inhalation, and its slight warmth as it touches the nostrils with the exhalation. As you notice

thoughts arising, simply note “thinking” and return to your focus on the breath. Another way to practice mindful breathing is by observing the part of your body that moves with the breath. It might be your upper chest, your diaphragm, or your belly. Instead of trying to “place” the breath, simply observe the breath as it rises and falls.

THAT'S MY MANTRA

Practicing with a mantra gives you a focal point for the mind—a meditative thought to substitute for your ordinary mental-ogue. The right mantra carries with it a feeling of comfort and sweetness that lets you easily sink inside. The best way to experience a mantra is to receive it from a teacher who has practiced it herself, but certain traditional meditation mantras have an embedded power of their own. The best known of these is Om.

Sitting quietly, inhale slowly with the thought “Om.” Exhale slowly with the thought “Om.” Feel the energy and vibratory quality of the syllable as it impacts your inner body. When other thoughts arise, bring your attention back to the thought “Om.” Let your focus on the mantra syllable be soft. Allow your mind to merge with the mantra, as if you were a boat merging with the current of a river.

COME TO CENTER

Another classic way to bring the mind inward is to focus on one of the subtle-body spiritual centers, usually the heart center or the third eye. This heart-centered practice is based on a centering prayer from one of the Christian contemplative traditions. It directs your awareness toward the seat of higher emotions, allowing your attention to sink gradually inward. Sitting quietly, bring your attention into the center of the chest, behind the breastbone, deep inside the body. One way to find this spot is to measure five finger-widths below the hollow of the collarbone, and then bring your attention inward from this spot to the very center of the body. Let the breath flow as if it were flowing into and out of the center of the chest, touching this place in the inner heart. You might imagine, if you like, that there is an

beyond the core

Once you've developed your core practice, there are certain classical contemplative practices from the great traditions that every meditator should know. Each addresses one or another of our basic human imbalances. Just as you work with a core practice for a few weeks or months to see if it "fits," so you should practice with one of these classical contemplations several times a week for a month, until it starts to open up for you. As you become more skilled at navigating the inner landscape, you'll come to know which of these contemplative practices would be helpful at a given moment—to shift you out of a stuck state, to open your heart, or to help you connect with a feeling of wholeness. Here are a few such practices.

LOVINGKINDNESS (METTA) MEDITATION

In lovingkindness meditation, you move through four stages of wishing that you, a loved one, a neutral person, an enemy, and the world have happiness, health, and freedom. The book *Lovingkindness*, by Sharon Salzberg, is a great source for learning about this practice.

TAKING AND SENDING (TONGLEN) MEDITATION

In tonglen meditation, you breathe in a heavy emotion or some other form of suffering, then breathe out happiness, peace, and healing, directing it first to yourself, then to an individual you know, then to a group of people somewhere in the world, and finally to all beings. One

effect of this practice is to help you recognize that your emotion is not just personal. You'll realize that any form of emotion or physical suffering you feel is universal, and you'll begin to experience a true sense of kinship, compassion, and even oneness with these other beings. Pema Chödrön's book *Start Where You Are* has a good step-by-step version of tonglen as well as teachings on the deeper meaning of the practice.

GROUNDING MEDITATIONS

These can range from feeling your feet connecting to the earth as if they had suction cups attached, to imagining a thread of energy flowing from the base of your spine into the center of the earth. Grounding practices are taught in many traditions, including martial arts traditions like tai chi and qi gong.

CHAKRA MEDITATIONS

A really juicy chakra meditation can transform your inner body by connecting you to the subtle-energy centers that run from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. Try imagining energy in the form of light running up through the center of the body, in front of the spine, connecting all seven chakras right up to the crown. When the energy reaches the crown, feel that a waterfall of light pours down through your head and bathes your body. Anodea Judith's *Wheels of Life* has useful material on the chakras, and there are a number of chakra meditations available through iTunes and Amazon.com.

opening in the chest wall and that the breath is flowing in and out horizontally. Or you can simply feel that the inhalation ends at the heart center and that the exhalation rises from there.

As you gently focus your attention on the heart center, choose a word or phrase that helps you turn inward. It should convey a feeling of safety, of connection to love, to the Divine, or to inwardness itself. "Trust" is one such word. "Love"

is another. Think this word to yourself with every other exhalation, and feel as though you are dropping it into the heart. Let your mind gently release and settle into the heart center.

WITH THE MIND'S EYE

If you are a visual person, it's energizing to have a visual element in your practice. I often recommend the classic visualization in which you imagine a flame in the center

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of the head, in the third-eye center. The third eye, or ajna chakra, can be found by placing your finger on the forehead, between the eyebrows, then taking your attention from that point into the center of the head. Sitting quietly, bring your attention to the third-eye center. Inhale, feeling the breath rising to this center. Exhale, feeling as if the breath flows downward from this center and out the nostrils. Or, you can imagine the breath coming in and out through the forehead, as if there were a nose there. Imagine a thumb-sized golden flame in this center. Imagine that, as the breath flows in and out through this center, it touches the flame and makes it glow. Let your focus on the flame be soft. Feel its golden warmth.

THE PLACE BEYOND THOUGHT

Shankara, one of the great teachers of the Indian Vedantic tradition, famously defined the true Self as “the witness of the mind.” Self-inquiry practices take many forms, but their goal is to move past your concepts about yourself and bring your attention directly to that inner witness. Using the natural tendency to think as a trigger to look beyond thought, they can bring you into direct contact with your own pure awareness, the consciousness or intelligence that is your true Self.

Begin by focusing on the flow of breath, cool on the inhalation and warm on the exhalation. As you notice the mind wandering, ask, “What knows I’m thinking?” Then wait and notice what arises in the wake of the question. Within a few minutes, you should become aware that there is indeed a “knowing,” an impersonal awareness that observes thoughts as they arise. Little by little, see if you can remain present to this knowingness, the witness of your mind.

DEALING WITH DISTRACTION

Whichever core practice you choose, you’ll need to have strategies for working with thoughts that arise during meditation. The most basic is simply to remember to refocus. As soon as you notice that you are thinking or spacing out, you bring your attention back to the mantra, to the breath, or to any other practice you’re

doing. Over and over again, you’ll lose your concentration, get lost in thought or reverie. This is normal—it’s been happening to every meditator since the yogis of prehistory sat in their caves. So you do what they did: Recollect what you’re supposed to be doing, and come back. Over time, you develop better focus. The Buddhist teacher Alan Wallace maintains that meditation practice is the best cure for our current epidemic of attention deficit disorder. The focus you practice in meditation will certainly improve your ability to stay with a task—any task.

Another basic strategy for dealing with thoughts is to mindfully observe them as they arise and subside, without attaching to them. Strangely enough, just noticing that you’re thinking—without following the thought train—will usually dissolve the thought all by itself. Whenever you notice yourself thinking, simply say to yourself, “Thinking.” Another tactic for breaking your identification with thoughts is to imagine them as clouds in the sky and see them drifting away, dispersing into the background of the mind.

STAYING FRESH

Once you’re comfortable with your core practice, you can begin to practice it creatively. Find ways to get inside the practice, to work with different attitudes and approaches that help it stay fresh for you. One of the most powerful ways to shift the tone of your practice is to experiment with different spiritual attitudes. For instance, you could infuse your breath practice with the awareness “I am being breathed by the universe,” or breathe in and out with the thought “Let go” or “I am loved.” You could practice mantra with attention to the energy that the mantra’s vibration creates in your body, and notice how your experience deepens when you feel the mantra energetically rather than just as a thought.

As you go deeper into your core practice, you’ll start to notice that in each session there are energetic shifts. You might sense your energy softening, or you might feel yourself sinking, as if you were falling asleep or into a state deeper than sleep. You might feel sensations in the crown or

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¹Moyad, M. et al. *Adv Ther*. 2008; Oct; 25(10): 995-1009.

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the center of your head, or tingles on your skin. You might have a feeling of expansion in the heart. Colors might appear, or visions of faces or landscapes.

These shifts are invitations to move to a more inward level, to ride the shifting energy into a deeper, more expanded inner state. When such a shift happens, see if you can just go with it and catch the meditation current, the natural energy that will take you beyond technique and into the meditative state itself. This is when your meditation stops being routine and begins to become a creative and challenging form of inner exploration.

THE ART OF BALANCE

Along with your core practice, take time once or twice a week to try something different, to bring balance to your regular practice. This could be the time to explore one of those juicy practices you learned at a retreat—to sample something from the spiritual smorgasbord. Experimenting with a different practice can help you develop those parts of your being that remain unexplored or underdeveloped in your regular practice.

We know we need balance in our outer life—some sort of equilibrium between work and recreation, or social time and alone time. We don't always realize that we need balance in our inner life as well. Any core practice you do will open and expand certain aspects and qualities of your inner being but may leave others totally unexplored. If in your basic practice you're strengthening your focus, try spending time just sitting in a relaxed way, not trying to focus your attention, yet maintaining your posture and intention to meditate. If you've been doing a self-inquiry practice, or opening the third-eye center, yet noticing that your heart feels dry or closed, you'll want to find time to experiment with a heart-based practice like mantra. But if you're doing a heart-based practice that unleashes emotions or subtly invites you to associate successful practice with feeling good all the time, you'd benefit from spending time each week with a detachment-inducing witness practice—perhaps

sitting nonjudgmentally with whatever arises, being the one who observes it all.

STAYING THE COURSE

Sometimes you'll experience periods of great depth and excitement in your meditation practice, and at other times it will feel dry and boring, or like a struggle with thoughts. There will be weeks of peace, and weeks when sitting for meditation brings up emotions like grief, anger, and

**When you sit to meditate,
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your own mind and heart.**

fear. Be willing to sit through boredom and resistance, and recognize that meditation is a journey that will take you through different emotional layers. This is part of the purifying effect of meditation—a process that is sometimes called “samskaric burn-off,” during which your buried tendencies come up to be released. Let them move through you without hanging on to them or trying to push them away. Layers of “stuff” are being removed from your system!

The people who get the most from meditation are the ones who welcome it in all its seasons, realizing that when you sit to meditate, you are inviting both an intimate encounter with your own mind and heart, and a deep opening to the universe itself. The field of a meditator's exploration is her own inner being. Yet the great surprise that awaits you in that journey is the recognition that by knowing your unique inner Self, you ultimately know the wholeness, the vastness, of the universal Self. Everyone knows that the drop is contained in the ocean, wrote the poet Kabir, but few know that the ocean is contained in the drop. Keep meditating, and you will. ❀

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