

ESTABLISHING A MEDITATION PRACTICE

SIMPLE WISDOM FROM A PRACTITIONER

A sharing of 50 plus years of practicing and teaching meditation.
This article provides guidance to those wishing to have a regular meditation practice
and is primarily about “passive” meditation.

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By

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I have been practicing meditation since 1972, and teaching meditation since the mid-70s. It is apparent to me, that some people are naturally drawn to meditation, some are not. If you are not inclined to a formal, daily sitting meditation or contemplative practice, there are many other approaches to meditation that might nurture you. Since the topic of meditation is so broad, I am sharing primarily what has worked for me, and what has worked for people who have attended my meditation classes.

It seems because meditation is so mysterious, people want to give all their power and authority to someone else to tell them how to meditate. Only you can determine what is the best way to meditate for you. I invite you to try some of the meditations I share. If they do not work for you, let them go.

I approach meditation from the perspective that how we start the day influences and sets the intention for the day. Meditation is preparation for activity. Meditation as an end-goal in itself, is not something I teach. If you want to try to make your mind blank, sit for long periods of time with no thoughts, or long for flashy inner experiences of light, then you can stop reading, now.

What I teach is a simple way to return to one's inner, quiet nature. Meditation can be an enjoyable, peaceful practice that helps to ground oneself in that inner peace, so that peace radiates through your activity during the day. With regular practice, one becomes less reactive, more patient and loving.

In time, meditation will awaken your inner wisdom. You may find that you make more life-affirming choices, and that you may begin to cultivate a more contemplative life. A morning meditation practice need not be a long, time-consuming effort. Once you find a comfortable practice, it becomes a part of your morning routine. When I say I have been meditating for over 50 years, that it has just become part of my life, please do not be impressed. I could say I've been brushing my teeth every morning for 50 years, and that does not make me a more enlightened or evolved person.

Meditation is merely a way to clean the inner windows, and is a practice that is on-going and evolving. Life perpetually presents new experiences and opportunities. Meditation prepares us for life's challenges by anchoring and grounding us in the unchanging reality within.

Often, I hear complaints how difficult it is to meditate. I suspect when someone rushes around, reads emails and texts, turns on the TV, listens to the news, gulps down caffeine, and, then sits to meditate, it cannot be so easy to calm down. To jump from intense activity into a sitting posture for meditation, one's inner space is agitated by that lifestyle. This is one of the main reasons, I suggest a morning meditation practice. Some of the ancient yogic traditions suggest meditating between 4am and 7 am, or when the sun is just rising. I find that when I naturally wake up in the morning, the world is not so busy. That is the best time to meditate, before the delivery trucks start arriving, the business of the day has not yet begun.

Do your best to establish a daily routine. Come in tune with the natural rhythms of the morning. You may notice the birds begin to chirp; the sunlight begins to glow. There is a stillness. Take advantage of that time to begin your inner alignment. The best image I can give you is that of a glass of water with some dirt in it. If the water is constantly stirred and agitated, the dirt floats and clouds the water. Once the stirring stops, the dirt begins to settle, and the water becomes clear. If we compare this to the mind, if we are constantly focused outward, doing something, the mind will not settle. Take a few minutes to cease the agitation, and gently allow the inner space to come forward, then the mind will become less active and quiet.

I approach meditation from two perspectives. Passive meditation and active meditation. This article is inviting you to try passive meditation. "This approach involves a relaxed openness with a gentle surrender toward complete peace and sense of being without much effort and incorporating deep relaxation."ⁱ Within each of those styles, again there are endless practices. It seems to me, that the

closer we are to the soul, or to God, our inner self, the simpler we become. So, how do we begin this journey to simplicity?

I feel my guidelines for a meditation practice are universal for any meditation or contemplative practice. You are free to take what works for you, and eliminate or adjust what does not.

Guidelines for Establishing a Meditation Practice

1. Commit to your meditation practice.

Make a commitment to establish your meditation practice. If it works out that this is an occasional effort, or as needed, that is fine. However, to feel consistent benefits, do your best to take time every morning to start your day with your contemplative practice.

2. Establish a regular time for your practice.

No need to be exact; but, if sometime in the morning, before you begin your activities is helpful.

3. Sit comfortably to meditate.

The meditation practices I offer are done sitting comfortably. A comfortable chair that works for you is fine. The idea is not distracted by a hard floor, or your legs falling asleep, or straining to sit upright. I like to have pillows and blankets to be warm and relaxed. You are welcome to find teachers who will prescribe certain postures, hand mudras, eye positions, where to hold the tongue on the roof of the mouth. Take it easy here. Just be comfortable. If you study the flow of energy in the body, certain positions may change the flow of energy. You are more than that energy, so no need to focus on it. We want to gently allow our awareness to settle and turn within.

4. Sit in the same location for meditation every day.

Find a corner in your home to make as a dedicated meditation spot. If you have space and the luxury, perhaps, an entire room dedicated to your spiritual practice and study. What happens is that that location becomes a sacred space. If you sit on the sofa where you watch TV and eat popcorn, it may

not be so easy to turn within. When you sit in the same spot, day after day, your body becomes used to this, and settles in to the practice more easily.

5. Minimize disturbances. Remain still.

Do what you can to avoid being disturbed during your practice. If you live with others, let them know you are meditating, or wake up before them. Place your phone outside the room, so you won't be drawn to answer calls or texts.

Be natural. If you need to sneeze that is fine. If you have an itch, or feel uncomfortable, adjust yourself to be comfortable. Otherwise, when the body becomes more settled, so will the mind.

6. The stomach should be light.

What this means, is that you will likely find it easier to meditate if your stomach is not full. Meditate prior to a meal. In the morning, if you are hungry, have some fruit. Better to have a little something to eat than to be distracted by being hungry.

7. Start with a few minutes of meditation once a day.

Set a goal of meditating for just a few minutes. You can work up to five minutes once a day. The matter is not so much how long you meditate, but that you do, in fact, meditate. Five minutes is sufficient. In another article, I will invite you to build a practice to prepare for this meditation. With any meditation practice there is value in taking a few minutes to come back slowly. So, the overall morning contemplative practice may be 10 to 15 minutes; but, the actual time of silent meditation is about five minutes.

This little beginning of a mere five minutes will also be your first step on the spiritual Path. Once you get interested in and attuned to the thought of God, you will have a constant urge to think of him for a certain period every day.

No amount of prayer and chanting would be of any value if done as a ritual. These five minutes of thought, meditation or concentration on God or the Master are a thousand times better than any prayer. God wants love, pure sincere love. ⁱⁱ

8. Choose your focus.

The broader definition of meditation is about focusing on anything. A cat focuses on a mouse when it is about to pounce. The scientist focuses on what he is researching. In a formal meditation practice, an object of focus can be the breath, a word or phrase, or a name of God. Something uplifting. There are also open-eyed meditations where you can focus on a yantra, photo of a spiritual master, or some sacred art. Whatever you choose will be your focus.

A main challenge for meditators is the presence of thoughts. What is happening during meditation, is we consciously choose to focus on the breath, the word, or the phrase. Shift from the random thoughts to that chosen focus. It may help to consider the story of an elephant walking through a bizarre. Its trunk will flail about and knock over objects. But, if you place a stick in the elephant's trunk, it will hold the stick and will be able to walk through the bizarre with the trunk quietly holding the stick. The focus of meditation becomes the "stick" to quiet the mind.

9. When thoughts come to mind, let them come and go.

When you observe your mind wandering, gently bring your awareness to the focus of your meditation. Sure, thoughts will keep coming. The mind thinks, that is what it does. Don't be concerned with the content of the thoughts. Gently bring your awareness back to the focus of your meditation. Be gentle with your mind. If you are distracted by a train of thoughts, gently come back to the focus. I like to remind people, you can have a conversation on the phone, yet still hear the radio in the background. Your focus is on the phone conversation, and you are not totally distracted by the radio. In meditation, gently keep your focus, and thoughts in the background will become less distracting.

10. If you are too tired to meditate, give yourself the rest you need.

Overall, I hope that the importance of common sense is to be applied to meditation. If you are too tired to sit up and meditate, your body is telling you it needs a nap. So, if you can, take the rest you need. When you are refreshed, meditate for a few minutes.

11. Come out of meditation slowly.

Take time to slowly bring your awareness back from meditation. Stretch, take a few deep breaths, and open your eyes slowly. If you jump right up from meditation, it can be jarring. Even if you do not feel that your meditation was very deep, it may have been more settling to the body and mind than you realized. Be gentle and come out of meditation slowly.

12. After meditation enjoy the sense of inner peace and balance.

As I mentioned earlier, meditation is preparation for activity. The benefits of meditation are felt in daily life. If you did not experience full enlightenment (whatever that means), no worries. Hopefully, you feel a bit more peaceful, alert, and ready for the day.

Suggested Focus for Meditation

Please understand, these are only suggestions. You can apply what feels right for you. Many traditions use the breath as a tool to calm the body and mind. There are many approaches to altering the breath, counting, holding, exhaling longer than the inhale, etc. What I offer here is to merely observe the natural *breath as it is*. No manipulation, no stressing, counting, holding, or straining. The breath will go on regardless of what you do. Just observe that natural breath flowing in and out of the nostrils.

First focus option: The breath.

Gently bring your attention to your breath. Observe the inward and outward movement of the breath. The inhale will be cool, and the exhale will be warm. Again, this is the normal, natural breath. You are merely observing the breath. I have observed that kinesthetic people may find this suffices, and to focus on the breath is their passive meditation practice.

Second focus option: A word or phrase, or name of God.

Choose a word, perhaps a virtue. An uplifting phrase, perhaps a quote from scripture. It is best that the word or phrase be of spiritual value. A phrase could be something like, *"I am a part of the*

Infinite and Infinite God is within me." If you have a devotional nature, take your chosen name of God. Very gently, quietly within say that word, phrase or name. Let it go. Let it reverberate, and quietly dissipate, as if it were washing over you. When you feel stillness, quietly repeat it again.

This is not a frantic repetition. There is no need to try to do any certain number of repetitions. It is a gentle calling out, as if you are calling out a name over an abyss. Say it once, imagining it vibrating over you, and outward to silence. Or imagine an echo as you stand on the edge of that abyss. Allow yourself to follow the vibration of the word into the silence. When the vibration stops, stay in the silence, or repeat your word or phrase again. It can be like taking a piano key and striking the one key. Let the sound reverberate until there is silence. Then, again, strike the piano key. You are following the sound until it becomes fainter and fainter, into the silence. Enter the silence. Repeat the word or name when you feel the need.

Third focus option: A word or phrase synchronized with the breath.

Another way to meditate is to synchronize the word, phrase, or name of God silently with the inhale and exhale of the breath. Depending how you are inclined, you can split the syllables in half, and inwardly say the first half with the inhale, and the second half with the exhale.

An alternative is to synchronize the first half of the word or phrase with the exhale, and the second half with the inhale. Whatever feels most natural and works best for you, is the best for you!

If you aren't able to come up with a word or phrase, here are some suggestions. "Be still", think "be" on the in breath and "still" on the outbreath. Or, mentally repeat "So" on the inhale, and "Hum" on the exhale. The phrase "So Hum" is two Sanskrit words. So meaning "That" and "Hum" meaning "I". This could be interpreted as "I am one with the Universe".

Another example, if you are a devotee of Meher Baba, cultivate your devotional nature by thinking "Ba" on the inbreath and "ba" on the outbreath. Or, try, "Meher" on the inbreath and "Baba" on the outbreath. I recall Filis Frederick saying, "Thoughts you cannot control, but feeling you can

create.” So, if inclined, when saying Baba’s name, also think of His love, and generate a feeling of love for God.

Fourth focus option: Visualize an image of your spiritual master in your heart

This type of meditation could be how you start your meditation, then enter into a breath or mental repetition of a God’s name. Visualize your Master within your inner heart area. Take darshan in the heart, imagining what it would be like to sit at the Master’s feet. Be as Mary to Jesus, or a devotee at darshan. Again, feeling we can create. Create that feeling of a loving presence of a darshan with the Master.

Try these different ways to meditate, give it some time, and see what unfolds. Trust your inner wisdom, you will be guided.

ⁱ Carol E. Parrish-Harra, Ph.D., *The New Dictionary of Spiritual Thought* (Tahlequah, OK: Sparrow Hawk Press, 2002), 173.

ⁱⁱ *The Best of the Glow A Fifteen-Year Retrospective* Edited by Naosherwan Anzar, (SC: Sheriar Press, 1984) 1.