

HOW TO MEDITATE

-Elizabeth Lesser

I began my meditation practice when I was nineteen—that’s when I sat for the first time. I don’t mean sitting in the everyday sense, in a dining room chair or on a school bus. I mean, when I first sat cross-legged on the floor, on a hard, round pillow called a zafu, in an austere temple room called a Zendo. I closed my eyes, and listened to the instructions from the Zen master, a small Japanese man dressed in black robes: “Here is your spiritual practice,” he said. “Follow your breathing. Follow one breath in through your nostrils and all the way down to the bottom of your belly. Let that one breath settle there, ever so lightly, and then let it leave the way it came in. And then do that again. Put all your attention on the breath: coming in...settling ...rising...leaving. When thoughts arise, return to breath: coming in...settling...rising...leaving. And then do that again. And again.”

I waited for the rest of the teaching—the philosophy, the morals, the promises; there had to be more to meditation than just perching on a pillow and breathing in and out. But nothing more came. Instead, I heard the rustle of the monk’s robes as he took his own seat and then the clack of a wooden paddle against the bowl of a bell. And a ringing sound so clear I could almost see the vibrations radiating out, filling the colorless Zendo with delicate, dancing music.

And then silence. A quietude so profound it seemed to have form, as if a huge, living presence was abiding in the space. Now what? I looked around the bare room where twenty or so people were sitting on identical black pillows, facing the wall, backs straight, eyes closed. No one seemed concerned that the teacher had uttered only a few sentences and then lapsed into a black hole of silence. So, for 45 minutes we were just going to sit there, shouldering the heavy emptiness of nothing? No thinking, no talking, no moving, no reading, no music or food or TV? What could be the point of that? As the minutes dragged on and on, I began to panic. How would I ever get through the session?

Thus began my adventures in the science, art, and practice of mindfulness. Over the years I have studied a variety of meditation forms, from cultures all over the world. This diversity has led me deeper and deeper into

the most essential core of all traditions: *mindfulness*—a non-denominational form of meditation that trades repetitive, recycled thinking for fresh, unregulated consciousness. It's a vacation from the hypercritical mind, a way to fall in love with life, just as it is, which allows us to get up off the meditation cushion and fall in love with ourselves, just as we are, and with each other, and with the world—in all of its beauty and all of its terror. We make peace with the paradox of life as a human being, here on planet earth.

The how-to of meditation is more straightforward than the why-to. Books, audio programs, and classes abound. While books and tapes are good introductions to mindfulness meditation, I believe they are not as powerful as learning from a teacher, in a group (*sangha*, or community of seekers, as it is called in Eastern traditions.) If meditation is something that appeals to you, I suggest finding a class in your local area or visiting a retreat center. Many hospitals, YMCAs, churches, or yoga centers have weekly meditation groups. The following instructions (adapted from my book, *Broken Open*) are meant to help you begin meditating, or to revive a stalled routine.

Ten-Step Meditation Practice

1. PLACE AND TIME: Find a private and quiet place where you will not be disturbed by people, children, calls, texts, emails, etc. Choose an amount of time you are going to meditate. Set a timer (don't use your phone!) Begin with just one minute, and work your way up over a few week or months to a longer routine—a half-hour perhaps.

2. SEAT AND POSTURE: Assume a comfortable posture sitting cross-legged on a pillow on the floor or on a straight-backed chair. Keep the spine straight and let your shoulders soften and drop. Do a brief scan of the body, relaxing parts that are tight. Relax your jaw, your neck, your belly. Rest your hands lightly on your thighs.

3. BEGINNING: Close your eyes (or keep your open eyes focused gently on a spot on the floor.) Take a deep breath in and let it out with a sigh. Do this three times. As you sigh, release anything you are holding onto. Remind yourself that for these few minutes you are doing nothing but sitting still. You can afford to drop

everything else for the time being. The pressing details of your life will be waiting for you at the end of the session.

4. **BREATH:** Bring your attention to your breathing, becoming aware of the natural flow of breath in and out of the body. Observe your chest and belly as they rise and expand on the in-breath, and fall and recede on the out-breath. Witness each in-breath as it enters your body and fills it with energy. Witness each out-breath, as it leaves your body and dissipates into space. Then start again, bringing your attention back each time to the next breath. Let your breath be like a soft broom, gently sweeping its way through your body and mind.

5. **THOUGHTS:** When a thought takes you away from witnessing the act of breathing, take note of the thought without judging it, and then gently bring your attention back to your chest or your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out. Meditation has been described as the practice of “unconditional friendliness.” Observe your thoughts with friendliness and then let the breath sweep them gently away. Pema Chodron says that in meditation, “what we usually call good or bad, we simply acknowledge as thinking, without all the usual drama that goes along with right and wrong. We are instructed to let the thoughts come and go as if touching a bubble with a feather. This straightforward discipline prepares us to stop struggling and discover a fresh, unbiased state of being.”

6. **FEELINGS:** When feelings arise, do not resist them. Allow them to be. Observe them. Taste them. Experience them but do not identify with them. Let them run their natural course and then return to observing your breath. If sadness rises, allow it to do so. If you cry, cry. If anger appears, do not fight it. Let it come, and then let it go. If you find yourself stuck in a feeling state, shift a little on your seat, and straighten your posture. Get back in the saddle and gently pick up the reigns of the breath.

7. **PAIN:** If you feel pain in the body—your knees for example, or your back—bring your awareness to the pain. Surround the area in pain with breath. Witness yourself in pain, as opposed to fearing the pain, or immediately responding to the pain. If the pain is persistent, move gently to release tension, and return to your posture and breath. You may need to lean against a wall or the back of your chair, or you may want to straighten your legs for a while. Avoid excess movement, but do not allow pain to dominate your experience.

8. **RESTLESSNESS AND SLEEPINESS:** If you are agitated by thoughts or feelings, or if you are sure you just cannot sit still, or if you are bored to distraction, come back to your breath and your posture again and again. Treat yourself gently and patiently—even with a sense of humor—as if you were training a puppy. Do not give up. Likewise, if a wave of sleepiness overtakes you and you feel yourself slipping into sleep, see if you can rouse yourself by breathing a little more deeply, keeping your eyes open, and sitting up tall. Sleep and meditation are not the same things. See if you can be as relaxed as you are during sleep, yet at the same time, awake and aware. Sometimes, the body is telling you that you need more sleep; but most of the time in meditation, sleep is yet one more distraction—a ploy of the mind to keep you from experiencing unregulated consciousness.

9. **COUNTING BREATHS:** A good way to deal with all of the above impediments to concentration is to count your breaths. On the in-breath, count “one,” and on the out-breath, count “two.” Continue up to “ten.” Then begin again. If you lose count at any point, return to an in-breath, and start over at “one.” As thoughts and feelings, pain and discomfort, restlessness and sleepiness arise, allow your counting to gently override their distracting chatter.

10. **DISCIPLINE:** For one week, practice meditation each day, for one minute, whether you are in the mood or not. The next week, add another minute, and continue until you have committed to a regular practice of ten minutes. See how you feel. See if your habitual patterns of thinking begin to loosen, and if you experience moments of freedom and peace. See if those moments bleed over into your life, your relationships, your work. If you notice a difference (or even if you don't) consider lengthening the time of your meditation sessions, or joining a meditation group or taking a retreat and receiving more in-depth instruction and support in your practice.