

How to Begin a Meditation Practice

Getting Started and Dealing with Potential Obstacles

by Norman Fischer

Thousands of people over the years have asked me for advice about how to establish a daily meditation practice at home. 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 monastery or meditation center to practice there daily. 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.

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.

Assuming you do get out of bed in the morning, splash cold water on your face, rinse out your mouth, put on some comfortable clothes (or stay in your sleeping clothes if you want), and immediately sit on your cushion. Do this before you have coffee, before you turn on the computer, before you activate your day and realize you don't have time for this. Burn a stick of incense to time yourself, or use a clock or one of the many excellent meditation timers now on the market (which will prevent clock-watching). Decide in advance to sit for twenty to thirty minutes. A bit more is good if you can do it.

Try this for the ten weeks of the class, taking a day or so off each week. If you miss a day, that's OK. Don't fall into the unconscious trap that "Since I missed a day I guess I can't do this, so I might as well not even try, or try less hard tomorrow because this missed day has weakened me." This is the way we think! So anticipate this and don't fall for it. Be gentle with yourself, but firm. Imagine that you are training a child, or a puppy — a cute little creature who means well but definitely needs adult guidance.

Decide in advance that you will meditate for ten weeks. It is much easier to commit to meditating almost every day for ten weeks than committing yourself to meditate every day for the rest of your life. After the ten weeks of the class, stop and ask yourself, "How was that? Was it pleasant or unpleasant? What impact did it have on my morning, on the rest of my day, on my week?" Usually positive results are apparent, and, seeing that the practice has been beneficial, you develop a stronger intention to return to it. So then, after a hiatus, commit again to practice, maybe now for a month, with the same break built in for evaluation. In this way, little by little, you can become a regular meditator. Taking breaks from time to time doesn't change that.

Many people ask, “Is it necessary to do this in the morning? Is there some magic to the morning? I am not a morning person.” Yes, I think there is magic to the morning. Monastic schedules the world over include early morning practice. Practice seems most beneficial at that time of day, when your psyche is in a liminal state and the world around you has not quite awakened. Also, you are more likely to do it in the morning, before your day gets engaged and you remember all the things you need to do. In the middle of the day it is harder to rein yourself in, and at the end of the day you may be too tired or wound up. You may feel more like a glass of wine than meditation practice, which will likely feel pretty uncomfortable as your body notices all the aches and strains and kinks of the day. Actually, practice at the end of the day is very good for just this reason – while often uncomfortable, it does help you process all your stress and feel calmer afterward. But if you are trying to establish a fledgling practice, thinking you will sit restfully at the end of the day is probably not going to work as well as catching yourself at your weakest (which is to say your strongest): in the morning, when you are both more and less yourself, before you have fully assumed the armored, heroic personality with which you feel you must approach the world of work and family. (I must note here the obvious fact that all of this might not be true for you: we differ enormously as individuals, and in these intimate matters one size does not fit all. I am describing what I have found to be true for myself, and for many other meditators).

Be careful of judgments. If you are meditating in the morning feeling half asleep, with dream-snatches passing by, and your mind not crispy focused precisely on the breath, the way you think it is supposed to be... this is perfectly all right. It is considered normal that the untrained mind wanders. The biggest obstacle to establishing a meditation practice is the erroneous idea (firmly held by most people who want to establish a meditation practice) that meditation should calm and focus the mind. Therefore, if your mind is not peaceful, you are certainly doing it wrong. Struggling with something that you are consistently doing wrong, and in your frustration can't seem to get right, does not inspire you to continue (unless you are a masochist, and there are more than a few meditating masochists).

Better to assume an open and accepting attitude. There is no doing it wrong or right. That is not to say that there is no effort, no calm, no focus. Of course there is. The point is to avoid falling into the trap of defining meditation too narrowly, and then judging yourself based on that definition, and so sabotaging yourself. You evaluate your practice on a much wider and more generous calculus. Not: Is my mind concentrated while I am sitting? But: How is my attention during the day? Not: Am I peaceful and still as I sit? But: Is my habit of flying off the handle reducing somewhat? In other words, the test of meditation isn't meditation. It's your life.

Dealing with the various practical obstacles to regular meditation is easy compared with the deeper self-deception issues I have been talking about. Once you get a handle on these, the practical problems are easy. Kids get up early? Then get up half an hour earlier than they do. But that's not enough sleep? Well, that half hour of sitting will be much more important for your rest and well-being than the lost half hour of sleep. Or you can just go to bed half an hour earlier.

No place to meditate? There is always somewhere – all you need is the space for a cushion on the floor or a proper chair. But better to have a clean and well-cared-for spot, even if only in a corner of an otherwise busy messy room. Keeping that corner neat and clear is a preliminary to the meditation practice itself.

Your spouse doesn't want to meditate and resents that you sneaking out of bed to sit? Patiently explain to your spouse that the main reason you are meditating is to become a more loving and helpful person. You are sneaking out of bed not to assert your independence but for the opposite reason: to be more loving. Have that conversation (lovingly) with your spouse. Ask them to help you do this ten-week experiment and evaluate the results: have you been more loving, have you helped around the house, with the kids, etc., more than usual, with more willingness, more cheerfulness? (Of course, having had this conversation, you now have to do these things.)

In short, if you want to meditate there is virtually no excuse not to. But human confusion is very clever, so it is still possible to talk yourself out of it. If so, be my guest. 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.

As the world speeds up and history's trajectory becomes more drastic, more people are feeling the need to do something to promote well-being and foster a sustainable attitude. It is difficult to remain cheerful if you are under stress, difficult to believe in goodness and happiness if the world you live in doesn't offer much support for them. Gentle and realistic, meditation practice can provide the powerful attitudinal boost we need. It doesn't require pre-existing faith or excessive effort; simply sitting in silence, returning to the present moment of body and breath, will naturally bring you closer to gratitude, closer to kindness. And as you commit yourself to these virtues you will begin to notice, to your surprise, that many people in your life are also doing this, so there is plenty of companionship along the way.

Adapted from an article by Norm Fischer, founder of the Everyday Zen Foundation. He served as abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center from 1995-2000.