

Getting Started: Overcoming Obstacles to Meditation

By Sandra Finkel

Whether it's a group of business executives looking for stress relief from the considerable demands of their life, or a group of spiritual seekers seeking enlightenment, meditation is a powerful and effective technique to bring about a calm, focused mind, increased awareness and a greater sense of control over one's reactions to events. From my perspective as a meditation teacher and stress reduction coach, some of the biggest challenges come at the very beginning. I will explore issues in getting started and establishing a meditation practice.

Meditation is a mind training technique with numerous variations. Initially, some single-pointed concentration method, such as focus on the breath, is taught in order to stabilize the mind. After that, meditation techniques apply a disciplined mind in various ways, such as exploring the nature of reality or generating positive states of mind. When it comes to teaching beginners how to meditate, the initial instructions are fairly basic. It's simple to explain, although not necessarily easy to do.

The challenge in meditation and other stress reduction work is that it's not about merely conveying information. **It's about behavior change.** Helping others to find the discipline to practice on their own and overcoming barriers to practice is the most important hurdle. In this way, it's similar to adopting any healthy habit, such as exercise or healthy eating habits. We all know exactly what we ought to be doing. It's doing it that's the challenge.

Making meditation a daily practice is the way to reap the benefits. This can be extremely challenging for people who already have enormous demands and little free time, and who are already sleep-deprived. So, my first job is to inspire the participants to meditate on their own, by demonstrating its value and helping them overcome internal resistance and external barriers.

Each time you notice a distracting thought, let go of it and return your focus to the breath — it builds up mental discipline, mental muscle. So, as more thoughts arise, so do more opportunities to let them go, and that mental muscle strengthens.

Overcoming resistance. There are a number of internal barriers that arise when beginning any new endeavor. This is the realm of limiting beliefs, unrealistic expectations, procrastination, lack of commitment, and so on. Commitment is essential. Although a health scare or other wake up call sure gets people motivated, it's helpful to find compelling reasons to act before that occurs.

Normalizing expectations is also important. I've had people tell me that they've tried meditation before and they just aren't good at it. Why? Because they can't quiet the mind, there are so many thoughts arising. This is like someone who is physically out of shape claiming they can't exercise their body because they're too out of shape. It is the perception that they aren't doing it well enough or that they've failed in the past that is the obstacle. It is very helpful then in getting someone to just accept what is happening and working with it by letting go of expectations and turning anything that arises into part of the practice.

Removing "shoulds" also helps with resistance. Most people enjoy the calm and quiet that meditation brings. Choosing to gift yourself with this time feels much more enticing than feeling there is yet another obligation that one ought to do.

Creating structure. Attending to the external conditions that support a new practice is important. I often suggest starting with a small time commitment, say just a 5 to 10 minute meditation session per day. Once that's established as a routine, it's easier to expand the time. My teacher, Ghelek Rimpoche, says that it's good to start with a relatively brief meditation session and to stop when you're really enjoying it. That way you'll be motivated to return.

It also helps to find a consistent time each day to practice, often linking it to one's established routine. When it becomes routine, it doesn't require much effort to remember it. Also, meditating first thing in the morning is great because then it's done for the day, and unexpected activities later in the day won't crowd it out.

I have some clients who never grow their daily practice much beyond ten minutes. Even though the depth of their meditation may be less so than someone whose session is 30 minutes or longer, I've found that it's more useful to meditate routinely than to do a longer session sporadically. Even the busiest person admits he or she has ten minutes.

I often give talks and workshops on stress reduction and introduce participants to some



Illustration by Mary Gentry

simple meditation techniques. They could go off from there and practice daily, but that almost never happens. Joining a class or working with a coach over six or more weeks is really necessary for most people to make it a habit. Just knowing I'm going to ask them whether or not they meditated during the past week is motivating.

Other approaches include meditating with a buddy or checking in with a partner to support each other. Without structure, the person often winds up feeling like a failure, because they tried it a few times but couldn't sustain it on their own. That failure label is so de-motivating. Better to create the proper support for the practice in the first place.

I often hear from a new student that they forgot to practice. They just expected to remember on their own without reminders.

One would never schedule a doctor's appointment without putting it on their calendar, checking to be sure of the time and

making sure that they showed up on time. Some-

times, something as simple writing it down makes it a real commitment and the action flows.

Once someone does find the time to meditate daily and makes it part of their routine, we can work on refining the quality of the meditation itself. I rely on the meditator's self reports of what's happening during the session to know what's arising. Two common imbalances that arise within the meditation session itself are discursive thoughts and mental dullness.

Discursive thoughts. This is the scattered mind of a hundred thoughts per minute, everything from planning future events to rehashing old arguments. It can include judgments and commentary on the thoughts themselves. For some people, when they shut their eyes and room is quiet it is absolutely cacophonous inside their heads.

Each time you notice a distracting thought, let go of it and return your focus to the breath — it builds up mental discipline, mental muscle. So, as more thoughts arise, so do more opportunities to let them go, and that mental muscle strengthens. This is extremely useful in everyday situations where, if you are alert to your thoughts and feelings and can let go of the unproductive destructive ones—the anxious projections, the clinging to past events—and return fully to the present moment, your response will be much more skillful.

Mental Dullness. At the other extreme is the condition of a dull, sleepy mind. Some people fall asleep within moments of shutting their eyes. Although, taking a cat nap can feel refreshing, it's not meditation. Meditation involves alertness along with calm abiding. I've found that many people don't get enough sleep at night or sleep poorly. I once asked a group of 40 corporate managers about their health habits. When I asked how many felt they got enough sleep, not one person raised their hands. It's not surprising that when given a rare opportunity to rest, the body complies.

There are many techniques for addressing mental dullness. Getting enough sleep at night is helpful. Some people do well to keep their eyes slightly open, letting in a bit of light, while they meditate. Counting breaths can keep the mind focused and alert.

Although many are drawn to meditation practice for the delicious, serene state they can learn to conjure at will, I get most excited by seeing students apply lessons derived from meditation to their life. Years ago, a woman in my meditation class was suffering from anxiety disorders. She'd wake up 4 or 5 times each night with panic attacks. It also happened to be a very stressful time in her life. She was moving to a new house, her son was getting married and her business was in transition. Frankly, I had concerns about meeting her needs in a group setting, a coaching relationship offering more opportunity for personalized attention to her issues than a class, but I did my best.

After just a few sessions she offered the most amazing testimonial. She had just returned from a week's vacation that was the first time in memory she had had a real vacation from her work. In the past she'd constantly call work, checking on matters, unable to let it go. This time she never once called the business, and was able to stay in the present moment and thoroughly enjoy her week away. Oh, yes, and she no longer woke up in the night with panic attacks since she began meditating daily. Cases like this one reveal the incredible power of meditation and mind training and highlight the tremendous satisfaction in doing this work and making a difference.

Once someone makes meditation a daily part of their routine it is an amazing gift for life. They have developed the wonderful habit of presence and self-awareness. I've run into students years later who still meditate routinely to great effect. But as with other new activity, the biggest challenge is initially establishing the new healthy habit so that it becomes routine.

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