

Meditative Skills

Ancient Wisdom for Every Day



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Meditative Skills



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Is this you?

"I'm not sure what to do: I've read all the books, I've made time in my life to take courses and go to yoga and meditation classes, and I'm still not sleeping well and am drowning in stress. I just have no idea how to make this better, it's just not working!"

Hi, my name is Anka Hoerster. I've worked with many women and men like you, helping them transform their stressful lives with simple but powerful somatic and meditative skills. The key is not what we do but how we do it.

In my experience, these are the three things that keep many people stuck:

- Holding a view that sees only to-do's and fixed goals, and no space
- Lacking insight into what really nourishes your vital energy and natural intelligence (and making poor choices based on that)
- Losing self-awareness when things get tough (when it's most needed)

If you get these things right you'll realize that:

- You actually have the power to add effective breaks and make good choices throughout the day.
- You feel so much better if you practice self-awareness and self-care.
- You are much more energetic, resilient, and successful in everything you do if you refine the way you are in the moment.

You can build a life with less worry, stress and pain; and more joy, rest, and nourishing connections with everyone around you.

Enjoy this book as a small gift and a new first step.

Welcome

Everyone can find a more meditative life. Somatic and meditative skills can help you to develop and maintain overall health and a calm and clear mind. These qualities can free you from unnecessary stress and begin to reveal your natural inner balance—and maybe even unseen possibilities.

Out of my professional skills and experiences I've developed services and courses that reveal our inner balance. This is the natural balance between doing and resting, which most of us have forgotten. To restore this intuitive knowledge, we will make use of your natural ability to gain more awareness, openness, and insight into your thoughts and sensations.

This little book can show you a few basic skills to help you regain your natural wellbeing and balance. You might be familiar with some of them already but discover new aspects.

In my own life I see that knowing about them and applying mind-body practices regularly does not mean that I live in an integrated way in every moment. But practice gradually makes perfect, and I know when and how to balance myself with the right intervention for *my* situation.

By understanding how *your* mind and *your* physiology affect you and influence what you do, you can enjoy your life more.

You can notice and exactly understand how and when you need another effective break. With each successful break comes more, good energy — no coffee required!



Initial Observations

In this book I'll mix information and experiments with reflections for you to consider about how you currently live your life. I invite you to just see what your default is and observe what the effects of it are.

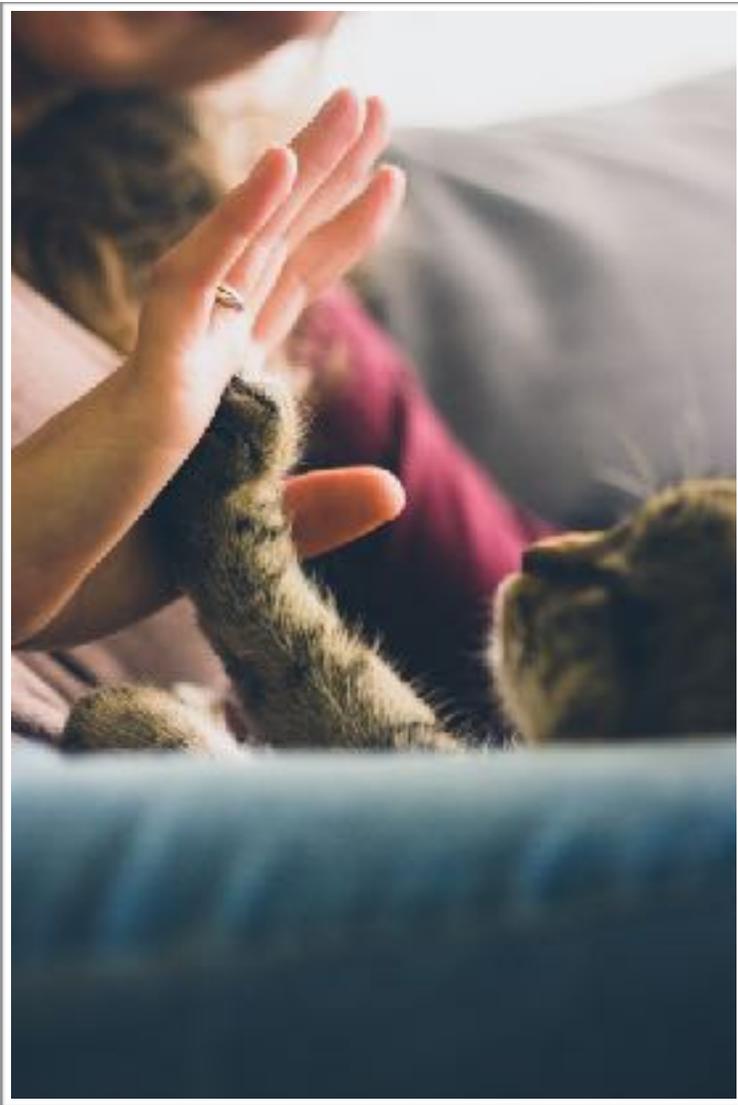
To reflect on how your mind and your physiology work, observe what you currently do in your breaks, especially in those sneaky or unconscious ones. This will give you some helpful insights.



Relaxation

What are your methods to calm down and relax?

They might be more or less conscious, and you might use them by default. Maybe you like to visit a friend for a coffee or you take your bike or running shoes out.



You might be practicing yoga, meditation, chi-gong, or autogenic training. You might like to walk, sit on park benches, lie on the grass or on a beach, just enjoying being there.

Four postures
The four postures of lying, sitting, standing, and walking each have their own benefits for body and mind. Maybe one or two of those are your preferred postures for relaxation? Interestingly, each can be used for both energizing and relaxing activities. How do you use them?

The Secret of Just Noticing

Just noticing helps us to be in the moment and open. We can just notice whatever we are doing, where we are, how our breath or body moves, what our senses are receiving.

To experience ease, to feel energy and well-being, it helps to enjoy something. But joy, as with so many other “positive states,” usually doesn’t come easily — especially not when we are in a difficult life situation. Trying to be joyful, like trying to meditate, can make each very difficult. But there are natural ways to find joy and meditation without having to create them.



If you pause and focus on something neutral or positive outside of yourself, like someone walking by, a cup of coffee, a beautiful image, an insect, or your cat rolling in warm sand, you will feel something. Maybe you feel a little settling peace, or maybe you even feel joy. Just notice. Just let yourself become a little more conscious when you do that.

Naturally noticing things, without running after them, just noticing, opens the door to simple enjoyment. Noticing that enjoyment helps us stay focused in a positive way. It keeps the “door” open to even deeper experience.

Explore your own present experience:

1. You might observe joyful feelings as they come and go. This little [video](#) might be a starting point.
2. Choose a few moments during the day to notice or enjoy something. How is that experience? Just notice:
 - What do you choose?
 - Does your object change?
 - How do you feel afterwards?



The Power of Presence



Having observed your own style of relaxing and your own way of noticing or enjoying, you have applied the skill of being present. With your presence you were able to really be there, to notice and then remember what you have experienced. Simply being there, being aware of what is, that is the key to this moment and to developing your own consciousness.

So often we are rushing about and we don't really experience the one present moment. This moment...and this...and this. These are the small pieces that form our life.

If you allow yourself to be present right here and right now, then you can also be aware, be mindful and meditate. Right here you can discover and enter the space of mind. This is a place in which a lot might be going on. If you repeat being present more often, a lot of good things are waiting for you.

This is also a place we might like to avoid, especially if scary and unpleasant things are happening. Then we might tend to follow our desires, worries, or we space out. The key is to just observe.

Here is a little [video](#) that might help you by going along with it.

- Find some moments during the day in which you allow yourself to stop and just be.
- Notice what that feels like and see how just being present might change your experience.

Know Your Nervous System



Formed in the past, alive in the present

During evolution those humans survived who were best able to adapt to the given circumstances and to remember, avoid, and survive dangers.

We are the descendants of thousands of generations of ancestors who fought, fled, and played dead in order to survive and thrive.

In a relatively short span of time, our life circumstances have changed radically since those who had to survive in nature. These days we navigate fast-paced traffic, sleep in locked houses, sit for hours on chairs, and tend to go to our refrigerator instead of to our backyard for lunch.

Antagonists or friends?

Your biology and your nervous system is basically the same as those of your prehistoric ancestors. Within your body many biological functions, hormones, and other chemical reactions are at work all the time. And there are always two modes that are regulating your main activities.

Most of the time those two systems work as antagonists. They balance and regulate each other like a gas pedal and a brake:

- **The sympathetic nervous system (SNS)** initiates “fight and flight” functions. This helps us in scary, dangerous, or simply *stressful* situations. For example, the blood flows especially into those regions that need to work in fight or flight situations, such as the large muscles in the legs and arms. The heart and respiration rate rises higher than normal to meet these needs.
- **The parasympathetic nervous system (PNS)** mainly regulates “rest and digest” functions. It stimulates digestion and relaxation — which we can do when we are out of danger. At those times blood needs to be sent to the inner organs and the heart and respiration rates can be slow. (If you’d like to read more about the nervous system, you can find a good simple overview [here](#).)

If you try to relax or meditate while stressed out, you can feel that it’s much more difficult than when you are calm. You might have heard that meditation can help us to relax. And while this may be true for experienced meditators, starting out on the journey you might find it difficult and instead, meet imbalances in your nervous system.

Active balancing

Most of us are chronically stressed, which means we have an overactive sympathetic nervous system. Knowing what activates the parasympathetic nervous system and applying this knowledge regularly and before resting activities will help balance the two systems and allow our minds to settle.



In order to activate the calming system...

You can do conscious breathing, scan the body with your attention, yawn, evoke positive emotions, and funnily enough, fiddle your upper lip (!). These all activate the PNS.

As you might have noticed, these are some of the practices that show up in any relaxation program. Here we want to recruit the powerful natural circuits in your own body so they become your allies in relaxing into meditation.



Elements of a Meditative Way of Living



For a more meditative way of life we can learn to consciously choose more often, how to use our ability to be mindful and aware. We can also learn to allow ourselves tiny breaks in which we just are.

The more you experiment and just notice during those slightly different activities, the more you will develop your own route into a more meditative life. At the end of the book I'll share my own favorite methods.



Consciously Choosing

Mindfulness, awareness, and simple being
As you saw above, conscious breathing, relaxing, body-awareness, and also positive emotions activate your calming parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). You can *consciously choose* this support whenever you need it. An activated PNS enables a different way of experiencing and supports you to go deeper within relaxation.



Mindfulness



When we can actually be where we are, not trying to find another state of mind, we discover deep internal resources we can make use of. Coming to terms with things as they are is my definition of healing.

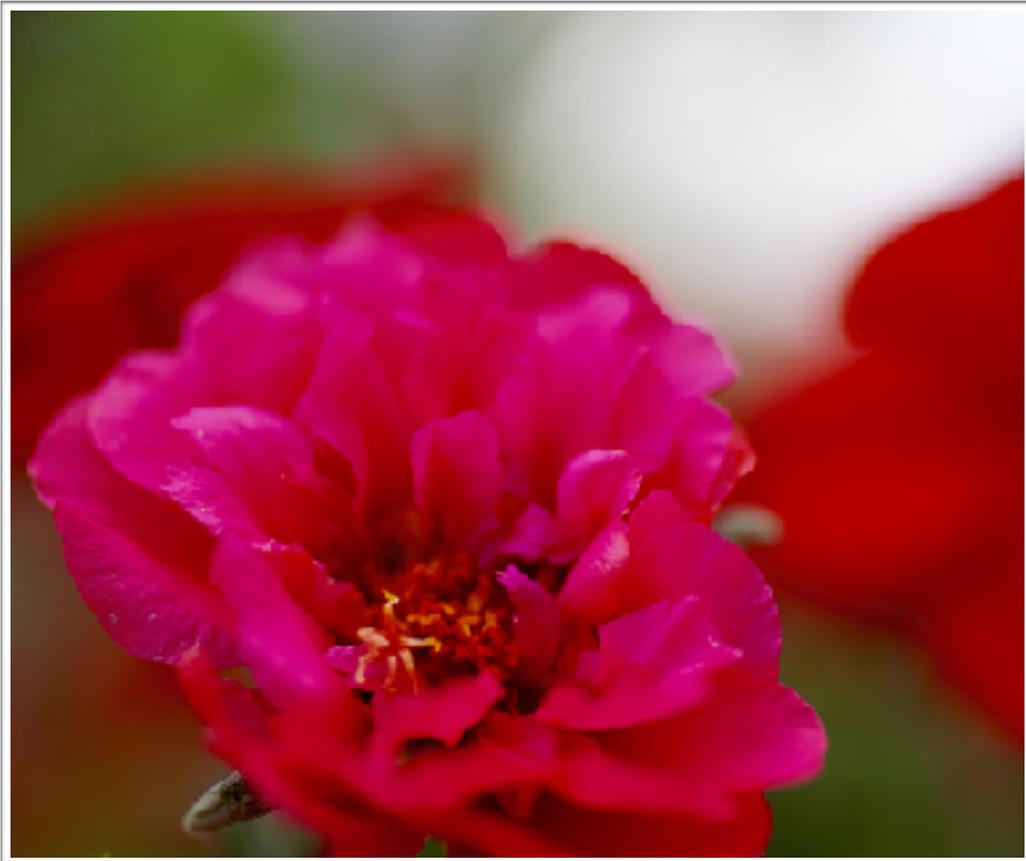
(Jon Kabat-Zinn)

To be in conscious relationship to what you are doing or experiencing, to hold it, and, in some sense, to befriend it—that is where the healing or transformative power of the practice of mindfulness lies.

You can do nearly everything in a mindful way, with a mind that notices what is and what you are doing right in that particular moment. If you do so, you are right there, you experience the moment as it is.

With time, being mindful creates the habit of living in this way more often. The more you practice this, the easier it will be. Mindfulness can become an ever-present choice in your daily life.

Awareness



Awareness is always there, but it doesn't do you much good until you bring consciousness to it, even for brief moments. You can allow yourself to have a time when you just dwell in that inner resource of the "only-ness" of awareness, that awareness is only aware. Within awareness, things tend to find their equilibrium again.

(Adyashanti)

Do you understand this “only-ness” of awareness?

Usually we speak of being aware of something. We think of awareness and attention as the same thing. Because of awareness, you can cook a meal or drive a car, for example. But awareness is deeper, broader, more pervasive than attention. It’s nothing more than being aware in an exceptionally broad way. More on this later.

If you suddenly “click in” to awareness—just notice it—you might notice that it has no other function than just being aware. It just is aware. No judgments, nothing beyond that. It just is. It’s very relaxing. And you can just be, just rest as that, as awareness. Do you see?

- Wherever you are, just be aware of your current environment.



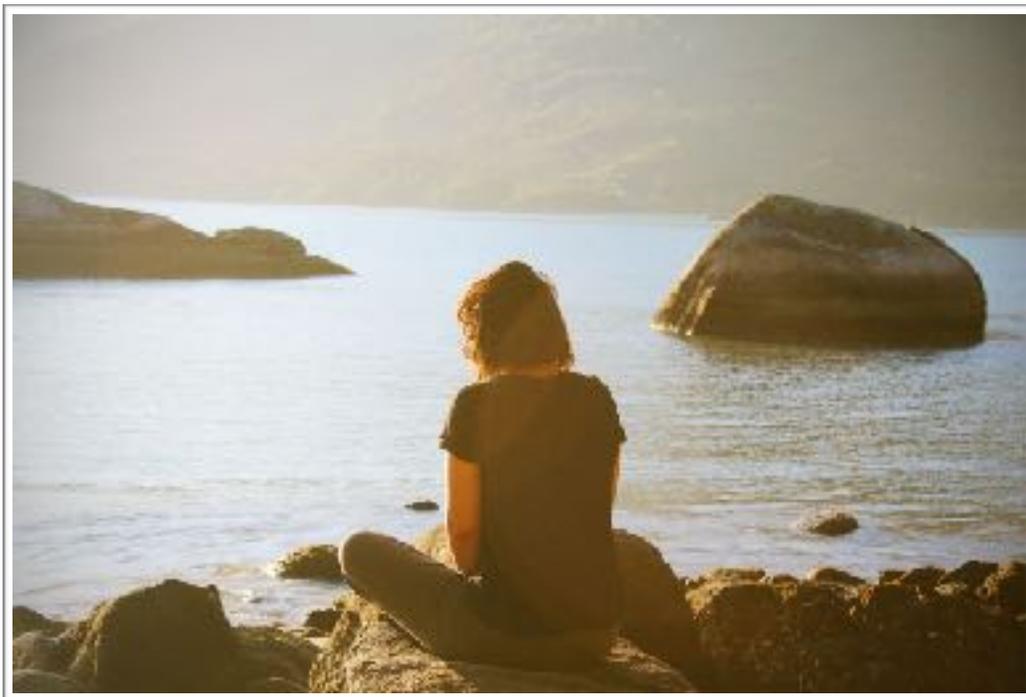
Just Being



*In a time and world where doing is so important and so often required, it is difficult, and also a relief, to **just be**.*

You might long for a time to "just be," but don't really see it as an option for yourself. Just being may feel luxurious and not within reach. Or it might seem too simple, too boring, or perhaps even too woowoo for you. It might seem impossible to mix with life in a busy city. But actually, it isn't.

Terms like awareness and mindfulness, presence and meditation are, essentially, just words. As with the flavor of raspberries, we need to make our own experience in order to know what that actually is. So what does it feel like and how can you find your own experience of them? You really can discover this for yourself.



Experimenting

The simple act of pausing and being aware, or doing something with all of your attention, being present in a conversation, or just observing your own breathing, noticing how the air streams in and out at your nostrils—all of these are your own personal data points, your learning experiences.

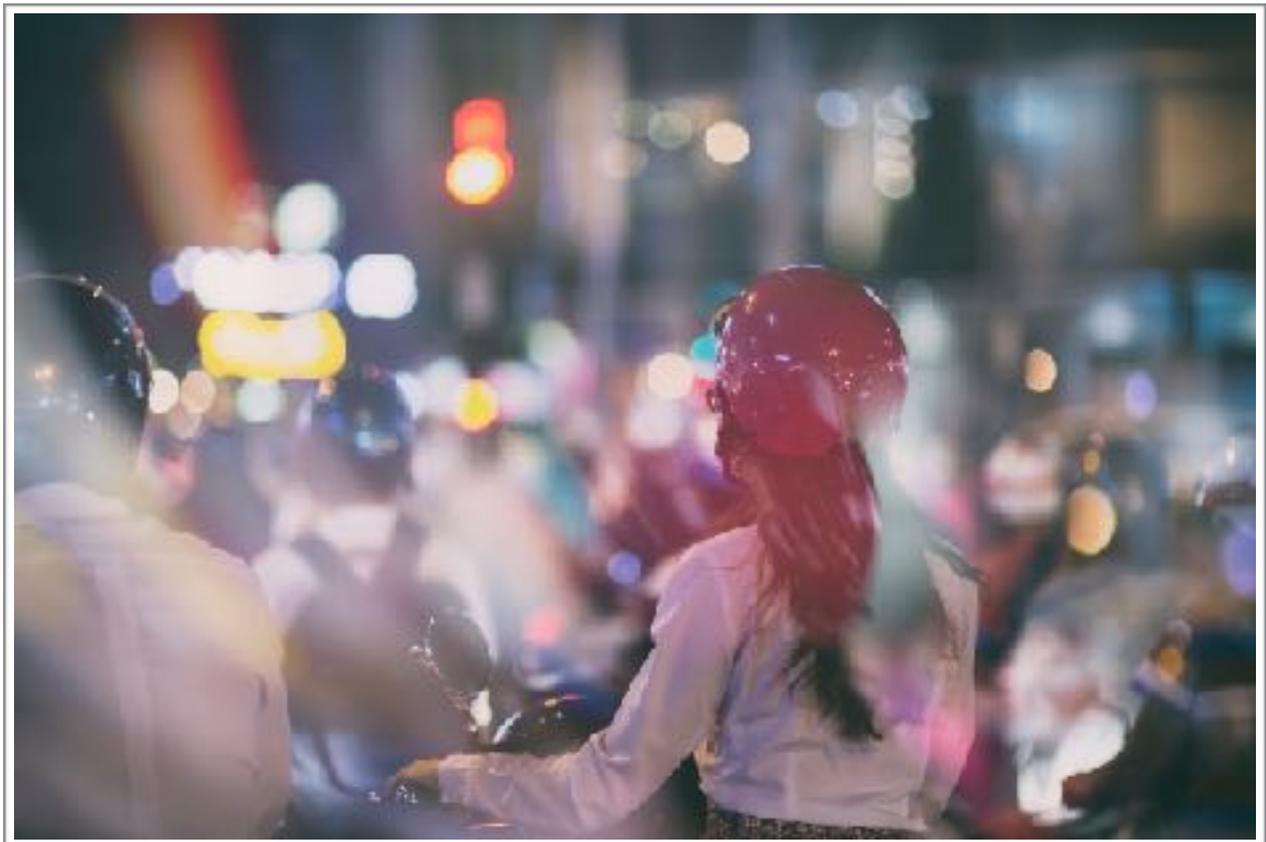
As you gain experience, you can check it with what you read or with meditation teachers. There is no goal but fully living life, and no right or wrong. Precious experience can come just while stopping for a moment, breathing and noticing, before life goes on.

Allowing ourselves to be mindful of an activity enables us to enjoy its little details and its feel. This is “being mindful” not because we think we’re supposed to, but because it’s interesting, it’s playful, it can be like entering into enjoyment.



Being “in the moment,” brings a sense of being fully alive. The only moment you can experience fully is this one! The more you do that, the more you are really here, present right in your genuine world. You might discover that “here” is more fulfilling than you guessed.

- Here is a [10-minute video](#) that might inspire you.
- While going about your day, find some moments or activities (seeing, listening, moving, talking, breathing, eating, drinking, smelling, touching, washing the dishes, walking down the street...) and experience them mindfully.
- Naturally your mind wanders, so it's great if you can be mindful again and again.
- Notice what that feels like.



Being Aware

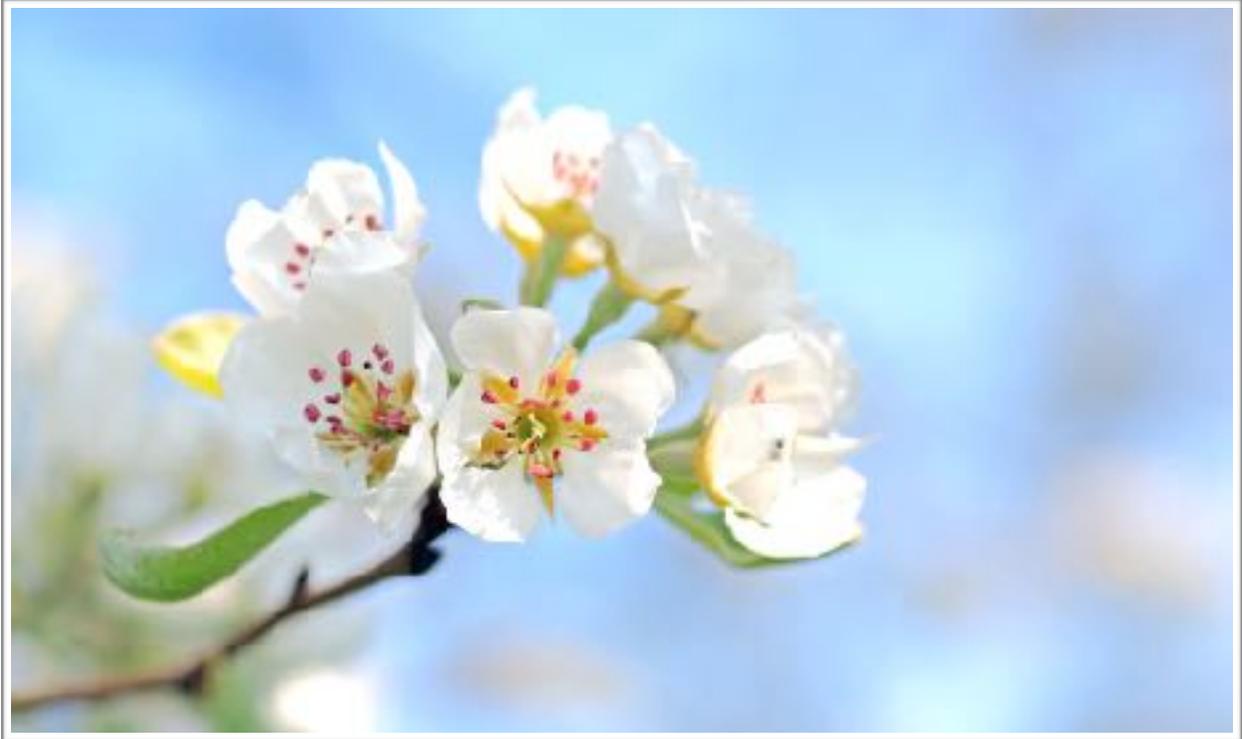


When we are aware of what is we can be there in a very intimate way. This ability, this awareness is our entry door to meditation.

Choose some moments during the day and be aware of them as they are:

- What do you notice?
- Are there any thoughts?
- How is it to stop and just be aware?
- Without focusing on one particular thing, just be aware of the wholeness of this moment.
- How do you feel afterwards?





Meditations



There are numberless traditions and methods of meditation, and this can be confusing at times. I've chosen and presented here some forms that are easy to implement into your daily life and that might naturally help you to relax.

Attentive and calm breathing, listening, and walking can bring you into your body and into the here and now in a fast and natural way. This activates your PNS (parasympathetic nervous system) and allows for restful moments and inner peace.

Getting Used To

*In Tibetan language the word for meditation also means
"getting used to."*

By meditating you are using your mind in a different way than usual, and so you get used to a different way of being.

If we see photos of people meditating, it might look a bit strange to see them just sitting there, perhaps with closed eyes and relaxed faces. We don't often see images of meditators, whether in big groups or alone, sitting on a chair or on the floor, in a bus or in nature. Instead we see active people using their mental and physical capacities to move about



and manage their daily lives. Images of rest are entirely passive: lounging or sleeping.

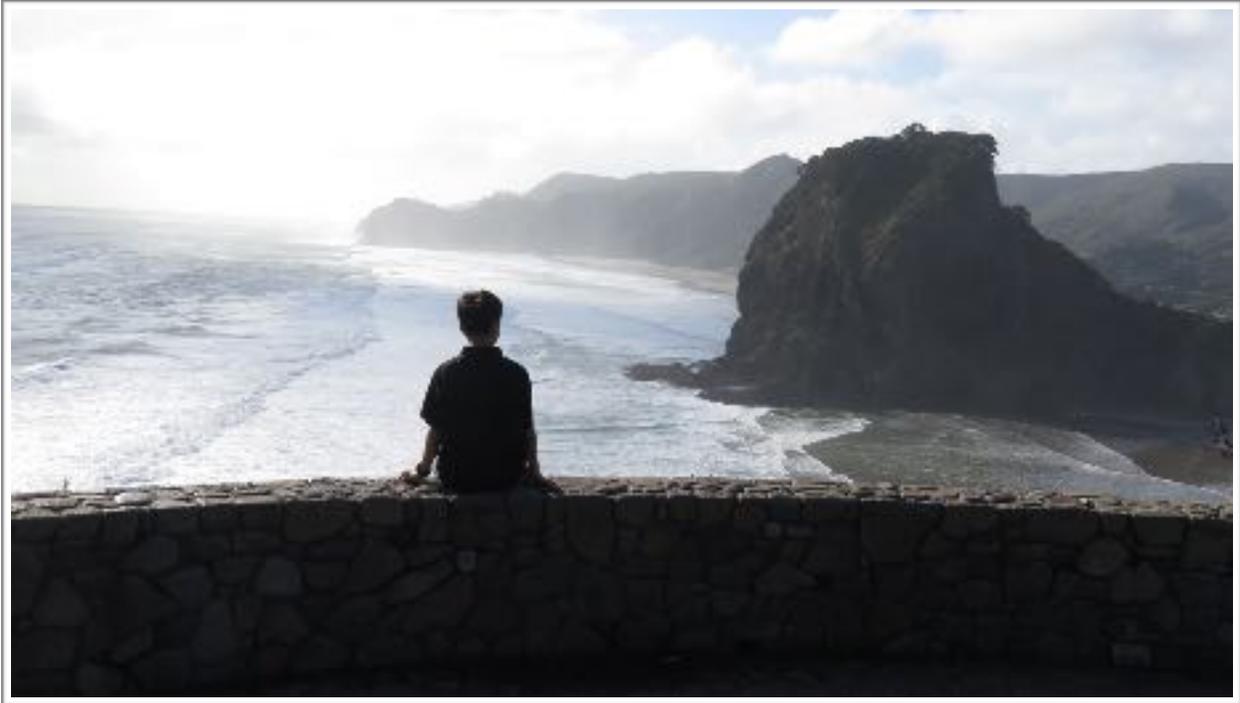
Meditation uses another mode of your mind. It's a kind of active resting. You actively but gently keep your attention from its habitual moving about, and this allows you to relax it from its ordinary use. You are just allowing your awareness to be as it is in that moment. Like a horse just standing in a field, rather than running about everywhere.



Nevertheless your mind will act as it normally does and that means you will notice wandering thoughts and maybe even nervous and busy activity, even though nothing might be required of you. The more you allow your mind to get adjusted to this different mode of being, the more manageable, pliable, and even calm it will slowly become.

Though this might take some time and go through different phases, this practice enables you to have a mind you can use and place as you like rather than a pattern-driven, busy, and nervous mind.

Being Awake and Relaxed



*A relaxed "awakeness" allows for an awake relaxedness
and the other way around.*

You have experienced many varying states of wakefulness and relaxation in your life already. Perhaps you've noticed:

- You can be awake but feel too drowsy to be active.
- You can be very awake but still feel tense and tired.
- You can feel tired but be too nervous to relax and recover.
- You can be exhausted but feel too awake to sleep.

(Just to mention a few!)

Meditation and the different experiments presented here allow us to get to know our own body and mind much better. And...we can notice our thoughts, but we don't have to believe them.

Doing little experiments with interest and curiosity, you can discover what is the best way to balance *your* mind in a given situation. You get used to the support of these methods to better influence your own state of mind and your wellbeing.

Mini Meditations

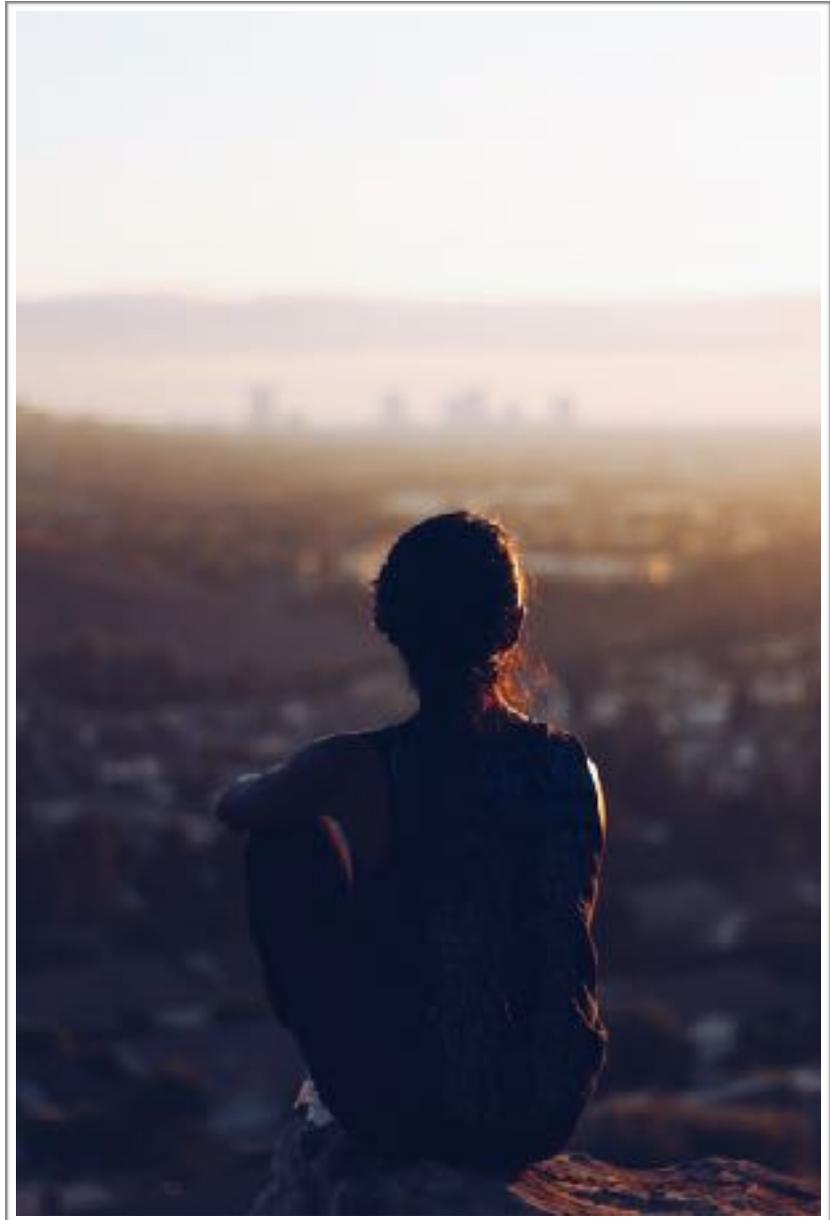


When you season your days with short, calming mini-meditations, you can use your normal life as a playground, as a testing and training field.

In general it is highly recommended to do some formal exercises in safe and undisturbed situations, too. In this way you can learn the different methods in their pure form and you can observe and exercise your mind in a more optimal situation without a lot of outer distractions.

There are many opportunities: With some experience you can use your daily walking times, waiting times, and even emotional challenges to investigate, play, and train.

You might find many situations that allow you to enjoy walking, listening, breathing, eating, and watching, all in a conscious and focused way. This can transform ordinary activities into chances to use your inbuilt, biological balancing methods and calm your nervous system on the go.



Just Being



With relaxation, presence, mindfulness, and awareness you have key methods that allow for meditation to happen. Though you will notice that your mind is naturally jumpy, those different methods can enable you to let it move while you stay within your chosen focus.

After having experimented with these meditative exercises a bit, see how it is to pause for a second or two and: Just be...

- What do you notice?
- How is it? Is it interesting or boring?
- Did you naturally take a deep breath?

And then : Just be again...

- See if you can take these tiny moments of just being, like little contacts with the "now" in its wholeness again and again throughout the day.
- How is that?



Breath Meditation



Many meditations involve focusing on the breath, and this is one of the most direct and easiest ways to begin meditating.

We can basically meditate like this in every posture and every place. Our breathing is there at all times. But there are some suggestions for a supportive upright physical form. These might help to have a good start:

A Supportive Posture

It is good to sit while doing this breath meditation. Sitting in general is conducive to meditation, especially sitting upright with the spine as straight as possible while remaining relaxed and comfortable. The mind is more likely to remain alert in this posture.

Find a comfortable sitting posture on a chair, without leaning back, without touching your back against the backrest. Don't strain in any way to make the spine straight, be comfortable so that you can relax while holding this posture.

Your feet are touching the floor, your hands are resting on your knees or thighs. See if you can find a comfortable posture in which you can remain for a few minutes.

A Supportive Text

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Take a few moments to “**simply be there.**”

Notice whatever is being experienced in the moment — sounds, physical sensations, thoughts, feelings — **without trying** to do anything about it.

Continue like this a little while, allowing yourself to settle down.

Now bring the attention to your breath. Simply **notice the breath** as it moves in and out as your body inhales and exhales. Notice how the breath moves in and out automatically, **effortlessly**. No need to manipulate it in any way.

Notice the sensation of the air moving in and out at your nostrils, the way the body moves as it breathes.

The **mind will wander** away from the breath — that’s fine. That’s what our minds naturally do. It’s a normal experience in meditation. When you notice that you are no longer observing the breath, **easily bring your attention back** to the sensations of your breathing.

Let all of your experiences — thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations — **come and go in the background** of your awareness of the breath. Notice how all of these experiences — thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, awareness of sounds and smells — come automatically and effortlessly like the breath.

After some minutes, slowly open your eyes again. **Notice** the space around you and move your body.

Notice for a moment: **how do you feel now** after this meditation. How is your mind, your body?

How was this experience?



Listening Meditation



This experiment is similar to meditating with your breath as an object, and is easiest with closed eyes. Usually vision is our dominant sense, under constant daily use. So having your eyes open while directing your attention to another sense might easily distract you.

Here you can move about in a similar way as in the previous experiment:

- Sitting on a chair with your feet on the floor and your hands on your legs or knees, choose an object. It can be a specific sound, background

noise, music, the wind, even birds singing. Simply direct your attention towards it as you did with your breathing before. I love the sound of Sunday morning birds for this.

- Again gently close your eyes, sit in a comfortable, upright posture and “listen” to whatever appears in your awareness. There might be different sensations from your body, thoughts, and emotions. Notice everything as it is and take a moment to find yourself into it.
- Then direct your attention towards the sense impressions of your ears. Some noises or sounds might be in the foreground, some in the back, some loud, some silent. Maybe you can even hear your own heartbeat and your breathing.
- It’s easier to choose one focus within the different auditory impressions. Sounds will come and go. You may notice more change compared to focusing on your breathing, but in the background there is the constant rhythm of your breathing all the time.
- Rest aware of the coming and going, loudness and silence of your chosen impressions. Your mind will start wandering, because this is what our minds do. If you notice that your focus is gone bring your mind gently back to the chosen object.

Maybe you’ll notice a special integrating quality that comes with meditating on sound. Listening closely can bring you to a deep source of calm and a feeling of being at home with yourself. Music therapy and the many musical elements in all cultures use this special quality of sound.

- Continue this process of listening and coming back to your chosen object for some minutes.

- End the experiment by opening your eyes and moving your body. Come fully back into the situation and the day.

Like our breathing, listening is our constant companion in life. We can close our eyes, but not our ears.



Our nervous system sorts out all sounds and noises, privileging some as more important than others. We hear those and others move into the background.

We can also select what matters to us, and those will move to the forefront, while those we don't wish to hear can move into the background, and maybe even out of hearing altogether.

Walking Meditation



Walking meditation is one of my favorite activities, because walking is already so integrated into our life. Just a slight change in intention changes an ordinary act into something rather extraordinary.

There are very many styles of walking meditation, using various speeds and points of focus, levels of formality and informality. It's absolutely enough if you'd just like to apply mindfulness and awareness to your own way of walking.

- Start by standing in a safe and simple environment and focus your eyes on the ground or somewhere in front of you. What do you notice?

- Be aware of your breath. It might help to close your eyes first to become aware of how you are standing and balancing your body.
- Then, when you feel ready, open your eyes, notice your feet and your body and start moving forward with small steps first. Going very slowly (in the right circumstance) can be fascinating and highly concentrated, but at other times, use any pace that feels comfortable to you, as long as you can stay focused. It does not need to be a snail's pace.
- As you move your feet and your body, notice your balance, the different sensations in the soles of your feet, in your legs and body. Your breath is always there as an anchor in case you are looking for one.
- Walk in this way for a few minutes and if you notice that your mind has wandered just bring it back to the sensations of walking.
- When you are done, notice for a moment what's happening now. What does it feel like in your body and mind?

Feel free to apply this technique in different passages as you move through your day.

If you find your own pace and relaxed mode, this can be an oasis of calming and grounding wherever you go. You might be surprised to find that the sweet spot is just a tiny bit slower than you would usually go.



Eating with Awareness



We are so used to eating in our habitual ways and often in a rush or while doing something else. But eating and drinking are actually moments in which we can nourish ourselves in much deeper ways than we usually do. To investigate this possibility let's try some easy experiments:

- First just observe your next (usual) meal, drink, or snack and see how you typically eat and drink.
- Next try eating and drinking with a little more awareness. (First perhaps, put your phone away!) Is there a way of doing this that feels natural? Maybe a bit slower than normally? What does this feel like?

If you are present with your body, your awareness, and your thoughts, the effects of eating and drinking are different.

- Having experienced this example of mindful eating, did that inspire anything in you?
- Consider the idea of “**Nourishing myself in a deeper way**” when you eat. As you eat, don't just use your mouth, but feel how the food and drink affects your whole body. Feel the enjoyment, the *nourishment* of that. Do you feel you have a sense of what this feels like?

You can try a more formal approach by simply go along with the following video. This [classic mindfulness eating exercise](#) can be done while eating a raisin (or whatever else you have handy).



- For an interesting talk on how mindfulness and awareness affect everything we do, with a special focus on dieting issues, see MBSR teacher Michelle DuVal [here](#).
- A helpful summary by Harvard Public Health on different focuses around food: The [seven practices of mindful eating](#).

But most important again: see if you can get to know your habits, find your own way into eating in a more mindful way, and see how this can benefit you in your day-to-day life.



Body Awareness



It can be very relaxing and calming to notice our own body very closely, as we saw before. To come into the here and now can calm our nervous system and let us know what we need right now.



One of the most well-known exercises used in MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) is the body scan. MBSR was created by Buddhist physician Jon Kabat-Zinn over 35 years ago to help patients with stress-related problems. It offers 8-week courses that support stress reduction and have powerful, medically proven results.

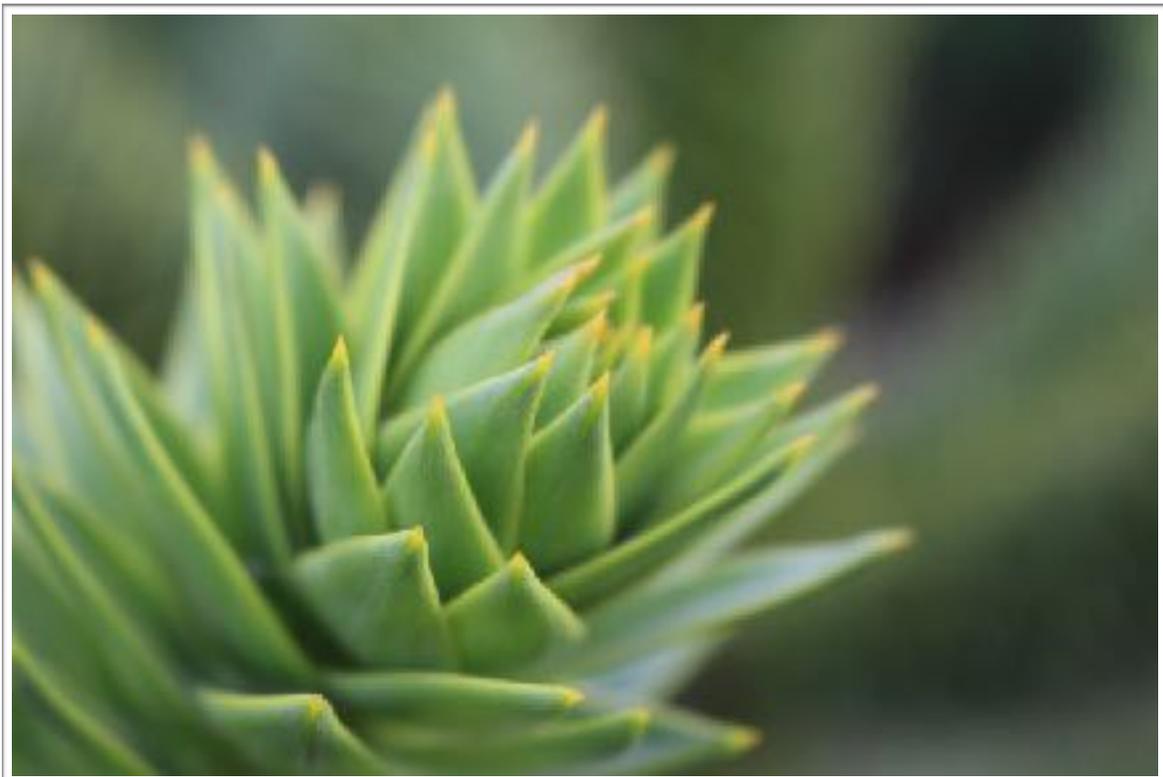
The Body Scan



In a body scan, your attention moves through your body in a guided way, just noticing with a nonjudgmental attitude. It's usually done lying down.

Other approaches such as autogenic training apply similar methods, with these results:

- Directing your awareness consciously and calmly towards your body encourages relaxation.
- Directing your awareness away from constantly racing, circling thoughts towards a more stable focus calms your mind and your whole being.
- Calming your body is calming your mind, too.



The body scan is a guided exercise that takes about 20 minutes (you can find longer and shorter versions as well). Since it's usually done lying down, you might tend to fall asleep. This is more likely to happen during your first times doing it, or when you are really tired. With some experience you will find your mind awake enough even though you are lying down.

Many who do the body scan regularly find amazing results.



Daily Body Awareness

If you don't enjoy it, or if it's not possible for you to find 20 minutes for the formal body scan during the day (or even better, in the evening before bed), you can take mini body-awareness breaks on the go.

You can notice your body in any moment in its wholeness. Or you can sense where you feel pressure, where your weight rests, your skin touches something. You can also track the strongest or loudest sensation present. Some seconds might be enough to notice a reduction in tension as that sensation fades.

Awareness moments like this spread out in daily life can allow you to reconnect with yourself and give your mind a break from its skilled functioning during your multiple activities.

Those who enjoy the body scan might notice that their awareness of tension in the body begins to happen more and more spontaneously. We begin to check in with our body without having to remember to do

so. Awareness of the tension brings a natural letting go of it. A habit is established and our awareness naturally begins to scan and release for us —stress reduction on autopilot!

Two suggestions:

- Allow for a few short moments of awareness of the body throughout the day, no matter of standing, sitting...
- Do the [body scan](#) for 20 minutes lying down.



Meditation posture



Just as you take a certain posture to concentrate while working or listening to a talk, it's very helpful to take a good posture for meditation.

The Back

Depending on the purpose of your meditation, your posture might vary. But in nearly all meditation instructions, a straight, upright back is key.

You can observe this yourself: If you want to be present, alert, and open to new information, you sit up in a good posture. If you want to relax sleepily curled up on your sofa, you choose a different posture.

The straight back rises from a relaxed and upright pelvis into a long and well-centered neck. Your head balances on top like a cherry on top an ice cream cone. Your chin is slightly tucked in towards your chest.

This last point with the chin is not to be overdone, but you may find a slight adjustment there is very helpful to naturally keep the neck long and the mind from scattering.

Relaxed Arms and Legs

If you are sitting upright in a comfortable cross-legged posture on the floor, or with a straight back on a chair (yet relaxed, without arching the lower back), then your arms and legs can be relaxed. The upright core allows the periphery to relax naturally.

- Often in the beginning a cross-legged posture on the floor is not very comfortable. So please start on a chair. You may decide later that sitting on the floor can provide a nice, grounded feeling.
- On a chair it's good not to lean against the backrest and to sit comfortably relaxed and straight at the same time. Your legs are straight and the soles of your feet are touching the floor.
- On the floor a small meditation bench or a stable cushion under your pelvis is very helpful. Your legs are under the bench, on both sides of

the cushion, or in front of the cushion crossed on the floor. It's important that the cushion is high enough for your posture to feel balanced, relaxed, and stable, generally with your knees below your pelvis. Cushion height is a key point to reduce strain on your knees and neck, and may take some experimentation. You might feel good with small pillows below your knees if they don't touch the floor otherwise.

- Your arms are hanging relaxed from your upright shoulders and your hands are resting in one another in your lap, or each on a thigh or knee. Your arms may provide some support, but in a relaxed way, without strain or stiffness.



The Art of Taking a Break



In nature there are the different phases of sprouting, growing, blooming, ripening, and dormancy. The oceans ebb and flow, the seasons come and go, and day follows night. Our bodies breathe in and out, and activity is followed by rest.

White space or free time is so important for an authentic feeling of freedom. Active time and down time need to be in some kind of balance for us to be healthy and well. This one point I could teach forever.



Many of us are living with too much stress and too little recovery. Modern life often leads us to do too much in relation to what we are actually able to do in a healthy way. We often want to do so many things, yet we notice that it's also necessary to relax from doing in order to rest and sleep well.

So notice in which way you are balancing activity and rest and add a bit more not-doing here and there. Not doing doesn't really mean TV time, it means finding your own way to **consciously relax** using any of the skills we speak of here. Especially you'll feel the difference if you add it in the evening before you go sleeping.

Rest and Meditation Feel Good



Merely a couple decades ago meditation was seen as a strange, New Agey thing. But times have changed quite a bit, and these days wherever we look we can see meditation being discussed: in academia, medicine, corporate settings, health clubs, and even in public schools. And did I mention: it feels good?

Some of the most famous meditation teachers and researchers were Sixties and Seventies dropouts from renowned American universities. Dissatisfied with the status quo, they travelled to Asia and other remote areas of the world to research other approaches to understanding and developing the human mind.

Though many came back loaded with interesting teachings, new questions, and powerful experiences, their former professors were not especially interested. Not at first, anyway. But these pioneers piqued the interest of some famous celebrities and many other seekers, and their findings slowly made their way into the culture and into respectability.

Today Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues from other disciplines can look back at rich careers, decades of successful work. The former pioneers are now nearly retired. They give talks, write books, and share their experience and their knowledge with thousands of patients, followers and students.

In the last two decades the number of research projects in the field of relaxation and meditation has dramatically increased. And especially with the help of the new disciplines within the neurosciences, surprising findings are now showing up on a daily basis.



Some scientifically proven benefits of meditation:

Deeper relaxation; better concentration and depth of breath; lower breathing rate, lower pulse frequency, and lower blood pressure. Meditation can support prevention and recovery from disease; cause positive changes in the brain and immune system; raise our sense of wellbeing; relieve the suffering of difficult emotions; and slow down the aging process.

And there are many, many more benefits that are yet to be found! It appears that science is starting with the physical, and gradually making its way to the cognitive, the ethical, and the psychological. (And maybe one day, the spiritual?)

Some more Research...

So how and why do meditation, mindfulness practice, and relaxation affect us so strongly?

You might be interested in this [meditation research](#), a field which has especially taken off since medical assessment methods have been able to measure, map, and picture what's happening in our brain and within our nervous system.



What is a Meditative Lifestyle?

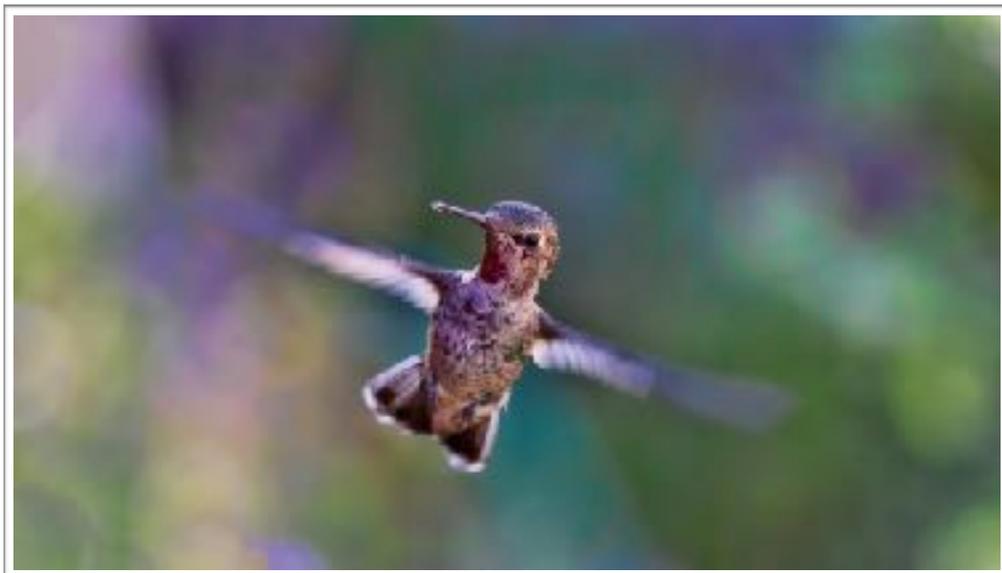


First I'd really like to thank you for having read through til the very end. It is very beneficial, but not easy to move into a field and activity like this. I believe you will have noticed some effects along the way.

Here I'd like to present my favorite methods to you.

I think a meditative way of life can mean a lot of things to different people. Depending on our character and our practice preferences we choose methods that suit us best.

After having lived and practiced full-time in retreat for seven years, my wish has been to continue retreat life in our normal everyday world as



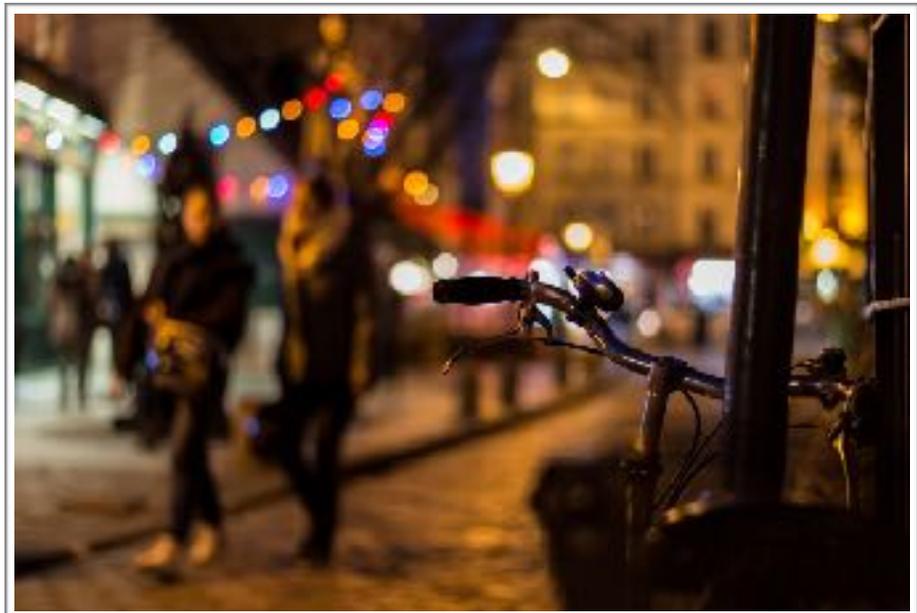
much as possible. How can I maintain key elements while working and living in busy and distracting normal circumstances? By now I've been experimenting on this project for another seven years.

In the beginning my pace in everything was quite slow and multitasking was nearly impossible. Every moment seemed to be very special to me and I was over-flooded by sensations. I found my way back to a normal pace and am multitasking again if need be.

Still I find joy in nearly everything and my awareness likes to be open. Every experience, every situation and connection can be uniquely beautiful if I'm really present. But there are enough moments in which I'm also so involved with something that not much openness is left.

I'm writing this to give some insight into the way a meditative life works for me. It can work for everyone in their own way, because the principles discussed here apply to all minds, even though we are all different. There is no right or wrong way: you can find yours! I hope this inspires you to find your own way to live with more rest, awareness, balance and self-care.

I'm curious to learn more about what works for you! Let me know [here](#).





My Own Meditative Way of Life

- Knowing that no matter what is I can be aware of it. Awareness is bigger than anything.
- Whenever something gets complicated, disturbing, and exhausting, I focus on the situation AND my own experience of it, outside and inside, seeing how they affect one another. If I'm blind to my own

reactions I feel tight and claustrophobic. If I see them, I can immediately relate.

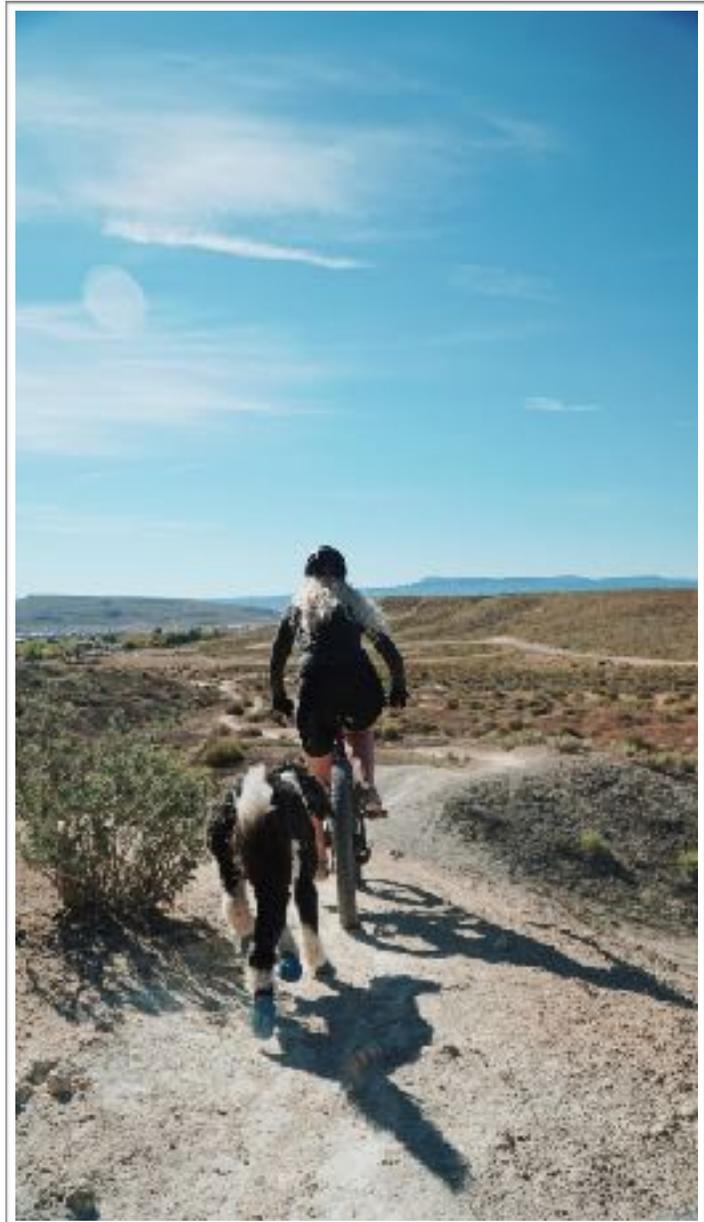
- Knowing that there is always the choice that I can notice and focus on the bigger picture. No matter what, there is always space.



- Whenever possible, I schedule my days with enough time (space) before, between, and after different appointments and activities. This prevents the often unnecessary stress of a shortage of time.
- This also means that I tend to leave quite early when I'm on my way to an appointment. It enables me to be fine even if something takes longer and often, to take a short break or even go for a little walk before the next thing starts. This prevents most situations where hurrying would be required. Hurrying is stressful and can almost always be avoided.
- I take all red lights, lines, or other "inconveniences" as blessings from the universe, allowing me to take a blissful break. This switches an out-

of-my-control annoyance into an in-my-control holiday.

- Whenever I remember it, I take one or a few deep and pleasurable breaths. Then I move on to the next task.
- In between activities I take tiny breaks (probably nobody notices them). I stop doing anything and enjoy deeply what that feels like in the body to have finished another task. There is a short moment of accomplishment. In this way a mixture of gratitude, effectiveness, and contentment sinks into my being.
- No matter how small and banal the accomplished activities are, I acknowledge or even celebrate them. This creates positive tendencies, deepens satisfaction and counteracts tendencies of self-criticism and doubt.
- No matter what I'm doing in work or private life, I try to stay in focused and clear activities with natural concentration and engagement for some time. Especially these days it's very easy to follow every idea and



distraction. If I have a good idea while meditating or doing something else, I just write it down.

- If I'm interrupted in what I'm doing, I maintain my focus and shift it briefly to the new concern, and then shift back. I might have some positive stress doing so, but it prevents me from falling into distraction, upset-ness and negative stress.
- It's important to me to know there will be empty spaces in my calendar. If every day is overfilled with plans and appointments it feels too tight to me. Free time even if short allows for deeper breaths and a general feeling of openness, creativity, and freedom.
- And finally, and perhaps most important, I pray for others whenever I can, especially whenever I notice suffering. I wish others happiness, joy, peace, and health.
- Expressing love for all living beings in this way is wonderful to feel and not always easy to live. But this is a topic for another book. :)

If I view daily life as full of duties and things I need to get done, it feels like a burden. And maybe it really is a burden sometimes. But if I see life as **inherently spacious** and see that clocks just mark certain points, I don't get caught in seemingly claustrophobic experiences.

As I take my timeless little breaks again and again, I see the many beautiful moments of space and time making music with the appointments and long stretches of work, and everything works out quite well.

Good rest and all the best for you!

Love,

Anka



About the Author



Anka Hoerster is a teacher, coach, and nurse who supports smart and sensitive people who are struggling with stress and overwhelm and who really want to find their way back home to more integration, balance, and love.

Born as a curious and sensitive child, Anka was encouraged to explore the world. She studied different arts, eventually becoming a nurse and receiving a Master's degree in education.

Years in modern work life and on full-time meditation retreats followed and lead to a career as a coach in the mind-body field. Anka has also been inspired by working with those of us who are reflecting on and celebrating their life at its end.

Please find more to read, to enjoy or to join and sign up for an introductory coaching session at:

meditativelife.org

