



“I used to meditate, but I stopped.”
 “I meditate sometimes, but I don’t have the discipline to do it every day.” “I meditated for a while, but now my schedule is too hectic.”

I’ve heard these comments in just about every meditation class I’ve taught. Students come with an earnest desire to practice regularly and a taste for the peace they know they can achieve if they sit for meditation every day. Yet somehow volition and action don’t connect, and the early eagerness dissipates with the passage of time.

Why? When you cultivate the desire to be quiet, and sit for meditation, part of the mind takes it as a signal to move in and wreck havoc. I always caution students to be wary of the part of the mind that rebels at being tamed through meditation; it is determined to get its way and will employ every possible strategy to win. Its methods are so sneaky and subtle that we often don’t notice that we’re being sabotaged. So if you find that you’re not in the mood to meditate, and start sitting less, or if you suddenly discover that your schedule is so busy that meditation has been pushed out—be warned! The rebel mind is at work!

mind

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So what to do? To begin with, take it as a given that the mind will try to undermine your meditation in one way or another. Even after years of regular practice it will, from time to time, still try to put us “out of the mood” for meditation.

Half the battle is won in simply knowing that we need to arm ourselves against attack.

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Stick to It

The more regularly we practice, the more we can fortify ourselves against invasion. This is why meditation teachers advise their students to sit every day. The session can be as short as 15 minutes or even 5 minutes—just don’t leave a breach in your defenses by missing a day. Regular practice creates a new groove in the mind that strengthens our determination and willpower. Every time we sit this groove deepens, and as it does it creates a more comfortable place for the “I-vote-for-meditation” part of the mind. Gradually we move from fighting our impulse to meditate to looking forward to it. And eventually we start to feel disap-

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pointed if our meditation time is swallowed up by something else.

Don't Push It

Forcing ourselves to sit longer or to do practices that are too advanced is self-defeating. Many of us have turned to meditation because we were stressed out from doing too much and pushing ourselves too hard in other areas of our

lives. So why add to our burden by making meditation into yet another chore? Regard it instead as time out, an opportunity to relieve tension instead of creating it. When we don’t push ourselves too much in today’s session we’re more likely to look forward to tomorrow’s.

In other words, keeping your sitting time within your comfortable capacity undermines the mind’s resistance to meditation. It’s more important to sit for a specific period of time. If you sit longer than your capacity to focus allows, you’re mostly just daydreaming or dozing anyway.

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Take One Step at a Time

Like many other skills, meditation is most easily mastered one step at a time. The first is learning to be comfortable in a sitting posture; the second is mastering the breath. Unless the spine is straight, the breath smooth, and the body comfortable, your ability to focus is nil.

So exercise patience and spend a few weeks or months training your body to be comfortable when your head, neck, and trunk are properly aligned. If this requires a lot of effort, use a wall for support. This has another advantage—the wall will tell you when you are beginning to slump. Simply concentrate on the sensations in your body—nothing else.

When your posture is steady and comfortable and you no longer need the support of the wall, turn your attention to the next step: focusing on the breath. Watch it as it moves. See what it does. Then gradually train yourself to breathe diaphragmatically so that your breath is slow, smooth, even, and free of noise, jerks, and pauses. When your body is comfortable and your breath is serene, you are ready to begin focusing on a mantra or whatever object of meditation your teacher or tradition suggests.

eight tips
to keep
your
meditation
on track

4 Remember—Preparation Is Practice

There are a number of practices that make sitting for meditation more comfortable. These include hatha yoga postures and relaxation exercises as well as breathing and cleansing techniques—practices that can easily be overlooked when we decide to increase our meditation time. But skipping them is a mistake because they set the stage for a comfortable and successful sitting session.

Hatha yoga postures and relaxation exercises work the knots and kinks out of the body. In addition to easing the tension we've accumulated during the day (or the stiffness that creeps up on us while we sleep), they also stimulate circulation and sharpen concentration, refreshing us and making us more alert for our sitting practice.

The breath is the connecting link between the body and the mind, so working with the breath is relaxing to both. It builds a subtle bridge from the outer to the inner world, and allows our minds to make a smooth transition from the buzz of everyday concerns to the still place within.

Cleansing practices help rid the body of the sludge that makes us sleepy and tempts us to curl up under a comforter for a nap instead of meditating. One of the simplest is the nasal wash, in which you fill a small, spouted pot (a Neti™ Pot) with a saline solution, pour the water into one nostril, and let it run out the other. This not only cleanses the nostrils, it also leaves the mind clear and energized. When you do this simple practice for a while, it becomes a habit you won't want to break.

So you see, the mind is less prone to distraction after you do the preparatory practices, and you can go deeper into meditation more quickly. This will reinforce your desire to meditate and make you less inclined to skip a day. Even if you spend three-quarters of your allotted time doing supportive practices, and only one-quarter on meditation, it is time well spent.

5 If You Like It, Do It

Go ahead and work the most on what you enjoy. By beginning with what you're most inclined to do, you'll make noticeable gains more easily than if you do what you think is "good for you" or what you've been told you're "supposed to do."

Many students like to begin by focusing on the breath. This brings immediate benefits. When you watch the breath it slows down and smooths out, and as it does, the flow of thoughts also slows, switching the mind into a quiet state. Moreover, breath awareness is a versatile technique—you can do it anywhere, any time, in any position. It becomes a form of meditation in action by allowing you to maintain an internal awareness while the mind is otherwise engaged with the external world.

Other students prefer to emphasize hatha poses in the early stages. Working with the body gives the distracted mind a tangible focus, and the habit of focus cultivated in the poses can eventually be transferred to a sitting practice. What is more, a balanced and systematic practice of postures makes the body more flexible and strengthens the nervous system, making it easier to sit.

Then there are those whose natural inclination is to focus on meditation and skip working with the body. An interesting

reversal often takes place with these students, for as they become more serious about their meditation practice, they realize that their bodies are too stiff to enable them to sit properly, and they turn to a hatha class for help. (Usually it's the other way around.) Either way, there's a balancing out at some

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point, a realization that a little of everything is more helpful than a lot of only one.

6 Clean Up Your Act

How many times have you gone to sit for meditation, feeling overtaxed, overworked, overwhelmed, and in need of a little peace? You look forward to escaping your everyday life, but instead you find yourself replaying and re-editing scenes from the day, working out tomorrow's problems, or trying to extricate yourself from this internal chatter. If you're angry, anxious, irritable, or hyped up, the thought of meditating loses its attraction. It's like swimming upstream—the external current is too strong, and you give up.

If you remain watchful during the day there'll be less to undo when you meditate. What should you be watching? Basically, observe the same things you watch when you're sitting—your breath, thoughts, and feelings. By watching your breath and state of mind during your interactions with others, you will catch the early symptoms of imbalance, and you can make corrections before you get too far off center. Some early warning signals are: chest breathing, holding the breath, and breathing rapidly or erratically. If these are present, you are likely to be engaged in strong negative emotions. Stop, center yourself with your breath, and observe your emotional responses. Then act instead of reacting.

When you act in a way that creates disharmony, the voice of the conscience speaks up as soon as

you attempt to meditate, and undermines your peace of mind. That's why the *yamas* and *niyamas* are the first two rungs on the eight-runged ladder of raja yoga. These regulations and observances help us behave in a way that allows our daily lives to move along in a smooth flow, and narrows the gap between our external actions and our formal meditation. For example, the first yama is *ahimsa*, the practice of non-harming. When you practice ahimsa in thought, speech, and action you will hurt no one, and

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■ Watch Your Diet

What we eat affects our state of mind. Sooner or later we will have to come to terms with this if we are serious about meditation even though it means changing some cherished food habits. It is best to begin by studying yourself. Notice what foods support your meditation and what foods hinder it. Do you feel groggy after eating certain dishes? Do some foods make your mind race? What do you eat that leaves you feeling calm and alert? Pay attention to the size of your meals and the amount of time between eating and sitting—both of these affect your meditation practice.

According to yoga, there are three categories of foods—*tamasic*, *rajasic*, and *sattvic*. Tamasic foods leave us feeling sleepy, dull, slothful, and inert. They include meat, foods that are high in fat, and food that is stale or overcooked. Rajasic foods leave us hyped-up both physically and mentally. They include stimulants like hot spices as well as caffeine and sugar that provide energy, followed by a sudden crash. Sattvic foods are the most desirable because they leave us feeling calm, alert, and energized. These include fresh fruits and vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts and seeds in small amounts, and quality dairy products.

Experiment, and find out how different foods affect you, and what eating habits support your meditation practice. But don't try to change everything all at once. Instead, make one or two changes at a time; when you're comfortable with those, make a few more. We don't need a diet that is 100 percent sattvic, but gradually moving in that direction will engender a more sattvic meditation.

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■ Keep Good Company

Satsang is the company of saints and sages, or at least those who are more advanced in their spiritual growth than we are. Satsang also involves the company of like-minded people, in this case those who are interested in improving their meditation practice. This is a more powerful tool for spiritual growth than most of us realize. Because our environment has a great effect on our state of mind, immersing ourselves in an atmosphere in which everyone is striving to grow boosts our own growth and reinforces our desire to become meditators. The yogis tell us that the mind is like a river. One riverbank symbolizes worldly existence, with its attachment to sensory pleasures, likes and dislikes, and egoistic goals. The other bank symbolizes spiritual illumination, with its peace of mind, enjoyment of the moment, and selfless service to others. Satsang helps the river of mind flow toward illumination.

For this reason, many students find it helps to take classes regularly. Even if they've taken the class before, the atmosphere reinforces their goals and keeps them on track. If you are in an area where classes are not offered, and you don't know others who are pursuing the same path, or if your work and family commitments make it impossible to attend classes and group meditations, satsang takes other forms as well—reading the

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ancient texts and the words of the enlightened ones, and listening to tapes on spiritual subjects. The main point is to keep the mind in the meditative groove by contact with the minds of others who are on the path.

In the End

These eight strategies are designed to tame the mind and train it to enjoy the benefits of meditation. One reinforces the other, and if you employ them in concert you will find that instead of resisting meditation, the mind will begin to find delight in it. Instead of romping uncontrollably in the external world, the mind will develop an inner relationship with the object of meditation. Then, instead of rebelling against meditation, it will rebel against anything that disturbs meditation. At that point, meditation will have become an integral part of your life.

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