

Body Meditation

Introducing Hindu Practices

by Richard Jewell, *M.A. in Theol., M.Div.*



What is “Body Meditation”?

Body Meditation means using your body, your senses, and your physical sensations to meditate. And it works! Especially for beginners. With this handbook, you can try it freely, privately, and safely.

Meditation is “focused attention for inner growth.” Thousands of scientific studies now show its effectiveness. With meditation, you can achieve better concentration and self-control, greater calm, improved heart rate and blood pressure, lower stress levels, possibly a longer life for your DNA, and greater compassion and empathy.

Body Meditation has been practiced by mystics of all religions, including Christianity, for thousands of years. The methods in this handbook come especially from sages in India who long have encouraged each person to use physical body points to help them find peace, strength, and love.

The author, Richard Jewell, has meditated more than 11,000 hours for sixty years. A former college professor and multiple award-winner for his teaching, he now offers this handbook’s meditation lessons in colleges, community programs, and churches. You may find two other books of his on meditation at Meditationary.org and YogaSutras.org.



The Sanskrit word “Om” with the elephant Ganesha sitting inside

To Ann, my excellent editor, and even more so
my great life partner in love, teaching, and the spirit

This book is purely an informational guide. The practices within it do not substitute for treatment or care of medical, physiological, or significant psychological illnesses and ailments. For such problems, please consult an appropriate healthcare professional or therapist in conjunction with the advice given here.

Body Meditation: Introducing Hindu Practices by Richard Jewell, M.A. in Theology, Master of Divinity, San Francisco Theological Seminary; M.A. in English, St. Cloud State University

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Cover: The dance of creation. Chola dynasty statue depicting Shiva-Shakti dancing as Nataraja ([Los Angeles County Museum of Art](https://www.lacma.org))

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Introduction:

What Is Body Meditation?

This handbook is a simple guide to several sets of meditation practices. It moves from “Beginning” through “Intermediate” and then to “Advanced” The techniques are simple: you may work on them alone.

The word “meditation” is such a broad term! It includes many practices—from mental activities you might already be doing (e.g., carefully learning a new exercise, song, or dance) to many wonderful and even strange methods. Its definition is “consciously focused attention for inner growth.” What it is *not* is a wandering mind, sleepiness, or hazy daydreaming.

What kind of practices can meditation include? “Mindfulness” is one—a very popular term in the West now among personal-life trainers and psychologists. Meditation also includes Zen and Buddhist practices. In addition, any form of heartfelt and mindful prayer, chanting, or singing in any religion is meditation. You also can focus your attention in or on nature or on an image, or simply open yourself to watching what happens within.

“Body Meditation” means, very simply, using your body, your senses, and your physical sensations to meditate. It is not just physical exercise. Nor does Body Meditation require you to flee to a desert or monastery.

All methods of meditation aid focused attention. However, Body Meditation is especially useful for beginners because you may use touch and body sensations to help you focus.

How Can Your Body Help?

First, here’s the big headline if you haven’t already heard. Your body is not evil. You always can make bad choices in life, of course. And your body can do the same. But it also can be a temple of beauty,

strength, and peace.

Are you condemned to hell by thinking too much about your body? Not at all. Unfortunately, that kind of thinking occurs not just among some conservative religious sects, but also in a few philosophical and New Age groups. However, most mystics throughout the world and time reach the realization that the physical self is key to developing yourself into a better, clearer, more awakened person. Brain, body, and soul work hand in hand.

Is Body Meditation Real?

As of the publication of this book, there are well over two thousand scientific studies on meditation. Dozens are studies with excellent control groups and very specific research questions. They create what scientists consider highly accurate results.

The best of these studies show that depending on the type of meditation you practice, results are good. You can achieve greater calm, lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduced stress levels, possibly greater longevity through DNA repair, improved muscle mass, and better mental concentration.

Studies also show a great need for such improved focus. A 2015 Microsoft report on “Attention Spans” says that humans have been sliding backward from 12 seconds in 2000 to just 8 seconds in 2013, coinciding with the cellphone revolution. In addition, two Harvard psychologists reported in a 2010 *Science* study “A wandering mind” that people spend 47% of their awake time “thinking about what is not happening” —and that “doing so typically makes them unhappy.”

Experienced meditators will tell you that meditation can increase your attention span to as much as 18 seconds or more. And the more you practice, the less your mind will wander.

All these physiological traits also indirectly can improve your ability to sleep, maintain healthy habits, create better relationships with others, and live with greater alertness in the world. Not a bad

group of practical results. How do you want to live your life: in the circling winds of the hurricane, or in its calm eye?

Where Does Body Meditation Come from?

The short answer is, “Everywhere.” Mystics in all major religions have been using their bodies to meditate since the beginning of human time.

Most of the methods in this handbook come more directly from India. This is because Hindu sages has written about individual meditation in great detail for three thousand years and handed down oral directions much longer. These wise men and women always said, “Use your own body to find peace, strength, and love.” They’ve developed a zillion (well, maybe just several thousand) ways to do this.

My own history is that I’ve practiced this handbook’s meditation methods, some more than others, for 11,000 hours over sixty years. Why? I’ve always been a little impatient, with excess energy. Has meditation helped? You bet! In my teaching, students and colleagues often have told me how “laid back” and relaxed I seem as a person. I’ve become a much happier, calmer, centered human being. (I do admit to a brief setback of a decade or two when I had kids, but they became the occasion for even more meditation!) I also developed more compassion for others (helpful, too, when raising children and working with students).

Similarly, my meditation skills have helped me in my relationships. I have become an increasingly more open, loving, and focused person in my marriage of over thirty-five years and, I hope, in knowing my kids and grandkids and in my friendships and business relationships.

And there always is so much more to do, learn, and accomplish, even after sixty years. Body Meditation works—especially for beginners. With this handbook, you can try Body Meditation freely, privately, and safely. Have a fruitful journey!

Lesson 1: Preparing

Posture, Place, Time, and Goals



Sambandar in meditation. An ancient child prodigy, he followed Hinduism's expression of female divine beauty, harmony, and energy—Uma, Parvati, or Shakti.
--Somaskanda, Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo by author

How can you start? I have heard terrible stories of people who try to meditate and hate it. And that is so wrong! You need a little discipline, yes. But it's not like you must scrub toilets or count slowly to a million. Meditation should—and can—be fun.

Don't Be Official!

I started “officially” meditating at seventeen. I was terrible at it. I sat on the floor of my bedroom, folded my legs under me, straightened my spine with my hands in my lap, and tried to make my mind blank. I succeeded very well—at putting myself to sleep. That happened several times. I gave up.

But wait—years later, I discovered I had been meditating regularly long before then, using what Hindus called Jnana Yoga. I did it while driving a tractor.

When I was thirteen, many of my friends on our Midwest farms were starting to work in the fields. I was very excited (my mother less so) when my dad finally let me drive our tractor alone in a clover field, raking hay into rows. I felt so mature.

What I didn't count on was the boredom.

Going up and down a quarter-mile field for hours quickly loses its coolness and leaves you wondering what to do during each long row. I looked at birds, watched clouds, and stared at the puffs of dust on gravel roads miles away until I knew whether each one was a car, truck, or tractor.

Then I turned inward. I'd recently become a big advocate of reasoning, so I started and finished logical arguments, pro and con.

Without my knowing it, my practice represented the simpler levels of Jnana Yoga.

Then one day, at fourteen, I elevated it. I was wondering why a friend of mine was being so thickheaded about a belief of his. I held his face as an image like a bubble in my head. Soon other bubbles—thoughts and images—gathered around it. This (again unknown to me) was Jnana Yoga with an image. I called it my “mind experiments.”

I worked those fields throughout my teenage years. I used my mind experiments until my brain was exhausted. And I learned much

from this way of thinking.

What is the point I'm making? Actually, there are two. The obvious one that you likely already have guessed is that you don't have to sit cross-legged to meditate. Anytime or place is fine if it works.

The second point is far more important. When have you meditated without realizing it? Many higher, deeper moments in our lives are a form of meditation.

Have you embraced the sheer beauty of a sunset, a painting, or loved one's face? Those several moments are a deep contemplation—of the Beautiful. Have you been caught up almost to the point (or past it!) of ecstasy while dancing, singing, or lovemaking? You were experiencing, if briefly, Joy or Bliss. Have you focused so intently on a speech, a video, or a page of text that you feel like you have been a blank slate drinking it in? That moment is a focus on Knowing.

All such altered states—and there are many more, such as great Peace, a sense of God's presence, a feeling of great strength of will—are states that you can find on purpose. Science says they are within us, waiting to come forth. That's meditation.

Must you sit?

You can start by using the classic pose of sitting cross-legged on a mat in a quiet room alone. That is most common, and if you like it, that's great.

But you also can do it elsewhere: while lying down before or after sleep or a nap. On your porch or balcony. With a meditation app on your device. While exercising. During a nature walk. In a museum. On mass transport to and from work. My own favorite is to go to sleep meditating, and to wake up and lie there, meditating again, for a while.

However you lie, sit, stand, or move, it generally is better to have the two sides of your body equally balanced, and to have your hands and feet closer together, if not actually touching. I'm a side sleeper, so

sometimes I will be on one side as I meditate in bed, but then I will switch to the other side to balance myself.

Find a position that best suits you! Keep yourself somewhere between being too sleepy or too energized to meditate. Deep breathing in any position can help make your posture work.

Must you be alone?

Certainly, most people—especially when they are starting—need to be in a quiet space with a group or alone by themselves. Sometimes meditating with others feels more intense, and people may also like the discipline of being guided together. Church, synagogue, and mosque services also count if you're paying attention during them.

In addition, it's perfectly fine to meditate within yourself while others are around—who's going to notice, except that they might think you've become a little quieter. Before I retired from teaching, I would meditate in the midst of the classroom while talking to students, which helped me better know what to say.

Is once a day for 30 minutes required?

Not at all. Meditation is like learning to cook or play a sport. The more often you practice (with focus and mindful choices), the faster you'll reach your goals. This is what most experts say—including scientists who study meditation's effects on the brain. Moreover, if you want to meditate several times a day, that's fine, too—you aren't going to blow out any brain cells.

You say you only have time once or twice a week? That's still great. You'll learn to train your brain better and faster. Weekly is far better than nothing.

Should you go for half an hour? Again, that gives you more learning time. But if you can only manage 5-10 minutes, that's really good, too.

Whatever frequency and amount of time you choose, though, it is helpful to make it regular. So try to settle on a time of day—and if

weekly, your choice of day. This helps your mind and body not just remember your time slot but ramp themselves up unconsciously, ahead of time, so you can slide into your meditation more easily.

Some people even use a “meditation minute,” which in the world of meditating is like quickly drinking an espresso instead of slowly sipping a regular cup or two of decaf. To have a meditation minute, you first must already know a method you like. Then you take a minute during work or family life to shut yourself off in a quiet space (bathrooms are especially convenient—if they are clean!) and quickly go to your normal focus point. Some people find the results very refreshing (but others, not so much).

In my own practice, I have multiple times during the day when I remember to go to my main focus point. I will do this, find myself refreshed or redirected (I tend to breathe shallowly, so often my “med. minute” is a reminder to breathe deeply), and then continue with my normal activities.

President John F. Kennedy used to send his cabinet out of the room for a ten-minute break so he could take a “nap.” Maybe he actually drifted off. But it’s just as likely that he was meditating (by whatever name he called it)—and felt much revived when the others returned.

What are your goals?

Do you have to be looking for God or some kind of ultimate enlightenment? Not at all. If that’s what you want, that’s great. But even for such lofty goals—which are very realistic—you need baby steps.

These small steps may include simply looking for more peace or calm in your life or mind. Possibly you want to stop or slow down the constant flow of “inner dialogue,” as it’s often called, that most of us have: humans are a talkative species, whether out loud or in our heads.

Perhaps you want to interrupt or dissipate strong emotions that are troubling, recurring, even crippling. You may be experiencing physical discomfort or pain on a regular basis, and you’d like to use

meditation to help better live with the pain or alleviate it. These goals, too, can be reached through meditation.

Some of you may have experienced, at one time or another, a great light, a sense of greater or higher love, or even a touch of bliss or other experiences that seem to have a strong spiritual component to them. If you'd like to have more of such experiences, or even simply find them, meditation can help with these goals, too.

But like becoming an excellent cook, athlete, or good human being, you need time, determination, and practice. That is what this manual is for.

Remember to Breathe!

What is the big deal about breathing? It is one of the fundamentals of good meditation practice—and of a better life itself. For your actual time spent meditating, you want to breathe a little bit more deeply than perhaps you do now, especially at the beginning of each meditation session.

Many of us—too often in each day—take short, shallow breaths. These keep us alive, but they aren't great for our health. They certainly don't help us relax. And they are "stress breathing": breath that maintains and increases stress. In stress breathing, our body has to work hard to overcome a lack of oxygen by using up lots of food energy. As a result, when we stress breath, we need to feed that stress with coffee, snacks—especially lots of sugar and cheap carbohydrates, and other drugs. Some people make up the energy deficit by running on adrenaline all day, then collapse at night.

Instead, all you have to do is breathe deeply. Even a few right breaths every fifteen minutes can make a big difference. And meditating is one of the best times to learn how.

But what is a "right breath"? It is longer, deeper, energizing, and relaxing. James Nestor, author of *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*, tells us the perfect breath is about 10-12 seconds long: 5-6 seconds of inhale, 5-6 seconds of exhale, and if you want, perhaps a second or

two after each. If you time Christian monks saying their “Hail Mary” chant, he says, their breathing falls into that pattern, and the same is true for Hindu monks chanting their most common mantra, “OM.” The pattern is universal.

There are, as you may be aware, hundreds of breathing patterns taught by thousands of meditation teachers to hundreds of thousands of meditators each week. (One wonders if all that heavy breathing might be enough to lift the whole earth.) In another chapter we’ll take a closer look at other methods. However, for getting started, Nestor’s 10-12 seconds is very basic and enormously useful.

So, start with a slow, deep breath in through your nose for 5-6 seconds, then slowly out for the same. Repeat for a minute or two. Two suggestions: use a timer if that helps, and keep your mouth gently closed the whole time. (Nestor has compiled all kinds of research and personal experiences showing that frequent mouth breathers are far less healthy.)

Then you can do one of three things: (1) You can keep breathing like that, practicing the pattern to embed it in your habits, as a meditation in itself for ten to thirty minutes. (2) You can let that breathing just be an introduction to your meditation and, after the first few minutes, ignore your breathing. (3) Or you can keep breathing like that as you meditate in some other way.

In the long run, Nestor claims, learning to breath that way through much of your waking hours is healthier. And you also can learn and experiment with other breathing patterns.

Three Rules for Not Hating Meditation

Rule one: “Be comfortable!” Don’t sit there in pain until your half hour is up: scratch that itch if you can’t ignore it, shift to a different position, or meditate standing or walking. Don’t sit there completely distracted by hunger, sleepiness, or the noise next door. Don’t sit, period—at all—if you’d rather walk or lie down. Beforehand, feed yourself a little and/or take a nap so you have energy. Choose a time of day

when you're alert. Get away from noise or use earplugs. In short, treat meditation like a first date: plan ahead.

Rule two: "Focus your attention!" Don't be a scatterbrain—or, at least, fight it. We all have wandering thoughts, some of them sending us a few inches or feet away in our bodies or memories, others taking us on long road trips to other places, times, and often-bothersome events. Instead, cut it out, or at least some of it. Almost all methods of meditation have in common an attempt to decrease the scatter in our minds. Choose a meditation method that aids this.

Rule three: "Experiment!" Try different methods when you're first learning to meditate. Especially, be willing to use physical "reminders"—tap some part of your body, set a timer for every minute or two on your device, or repeat in your mind or out loud a reminder word like "Nose nose nose" (yes, meditating on your nose not only is okay but is a classic Hindu method).

In Conclusion

Comfortable, focused experimenting is like a sailing yacht that can take you to many interesting ports. Sometimes your meditation ocean may seem a bit rough; other times, calm. Either way, captain your ship. Use what works. You know your body better than anyone else. Breathe deeply to unfurl your sails, and move forward. Maintain your focus, and head in whatever direction you want as you start sailing.

Lesson 2:

Beginning—Five First Touches

Breath, Body Tour, Energy Points,

Pains & Pleasures, and Movement

And now it's time to start meditating! Here are five beginning methods in a list with discussion of each. Which one most grabs you? Try it out! Then experiment with another. Try several over an hour, a day, or a few months in any order you want. Practice mindfulness with a single-pointed focus as you try each one.

FIVE EASY BEGINNINGS

- A. Just Breathe.**
- B. Take a Grand Tour.**
- C. Touch Your Energy Points.**
- D. Touch your Pains and Pleasures.**
- E. Rock and Roll.**

A. Just Breathe.

A common beginning method in Eastern meditation, especially Hinduism and Zen Buddhism, is to focus entirely on your breath. Sit, stand, or lie down so your head and spine are aligned. Then start by breathing slowly in and slowly out, once every 10-12 seconds. If you wish, you may pause at the end of each outflow of breath for another 1-6 seconds. There are very many patterns for breathing, and many books and classes for it, but this pattern is perhaps the most common.

However, you simply may choose whatever pattern works for you—or no pattern at all. For a “just breathe” meditation, simply focus on your breath. Watch it go in and out. If you can hear it, then listen. You can breathe completely through your nose, or breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. If your mind strays, bring it

back to your breathing. You may tap your nose or throat gently to help you remember to focus on your breath. Try breathing with your head straight or slightly tilted back or forward to see what works best.

In this method, you are learning “mindful breathing.” Many people find it relaxing, even energizing. How long is recommended for this meditation? Any length is good. Try 25-30 minutes. Too much? Try 10 minutes. At home or work, escape to the bathroom and do it for a minute. Any slow, deep breathing helps. Too boring? Then switch to another type of meditation.

B. Take a Grand Tour.

You deserve a break today. Here’s a vacation! Instead of visiting faraway ports, take a grand tour of your body. Start at the top; work your way down. It is sort of a self-massage using your mind. (Driving yourself around your body is far better than driving yourself insane.)

Start by getting comfortable lying on your back, sitting, or standing straight, legs together. Keep just enough muscle tension to keep your spine fairly straight, but not rigidly so. Take some deep, slow, clearing breaths. Then start with your head.

Begin with the very top, if you can. Let it relax entirely. Feel the relaxation. If you feel energy or even your heartbeat there—or anytime during your grand body tour—consider them part of relaxing.

Move your relaxation down to your forehead, your temples, your ears, and your nose. Stay there a bit; then move down to your mouth and jaws. Pause there longer: let your jaws and lips relax into a position in which your mouth remains closed but loose, and your teeth are not clenched. This may take some practice.

Then move down to your neck and shoulders. You may be one of the gazillion people who hold a lot of tension in your neck and one or both shoulders, so you may need to stay here a bit longer. Keep breathing, even send encouraging messages to your neck and shoulders telling them to let go, slump happily, and enjoy doing nothing. Adjust your arms if you need to.

Once you have all these higher parts relaxed, doublecheck them and relax them again, if needed. Then it is time to go to your arms. Let them hang. You may place your hands beside you loosely, on your lap, or anywhere close to your body but where they can relax. Work your way down your arms, either one at a time or both simultaneously, to your fingertips and slowly back up.

Check your head, face, neck, and shoulders briefly, fix them as needed, and then move on down to your chest. Take a few deep breaths to make sure your chest, inside and out, is relaxed. There it should feel comforting to you.

Move on down to your stomach next. Don't hold it hard. Let it go. The better you relax your stomach, the more easily you can take really good deep breaths—stomach breathing means deep breathing, so let your belly go! (You can worry about whether or not anyone's watching you later, when you're done meditating.)

Now slide your awareness around to your middle and lower back. Relax it; then move down to your butt muscles. Let them go. Then move around to your front, keep your stomach still relaxed, and then concentrate on relaxing your crotch.

If at any time you feel pains in your stomach area, most likely it is just digestive processes and will soon pass. (If the pains persist or become intolerable, then shift positions. If they continue even after that, go see your doctor.)

Finally, begin working on your legs as you did your arms, top to bottom, one at a time or simultaneously, all the way down to your toes. Spot check your other body parts and re-relax them as needed.

There! Your grand tour is done. If you're still awake (this meditation is, by the way, a great way to go to sleep at night—my father taught it to me when I was a kid), then just glory in the sensation of being so relaxed. Feel it for all it's worth for at least a minute or two, longer if you wish. Bringing a peaceful, calm mind, heart, and soul to yourself actually is an important accomplishment. Congratulations!

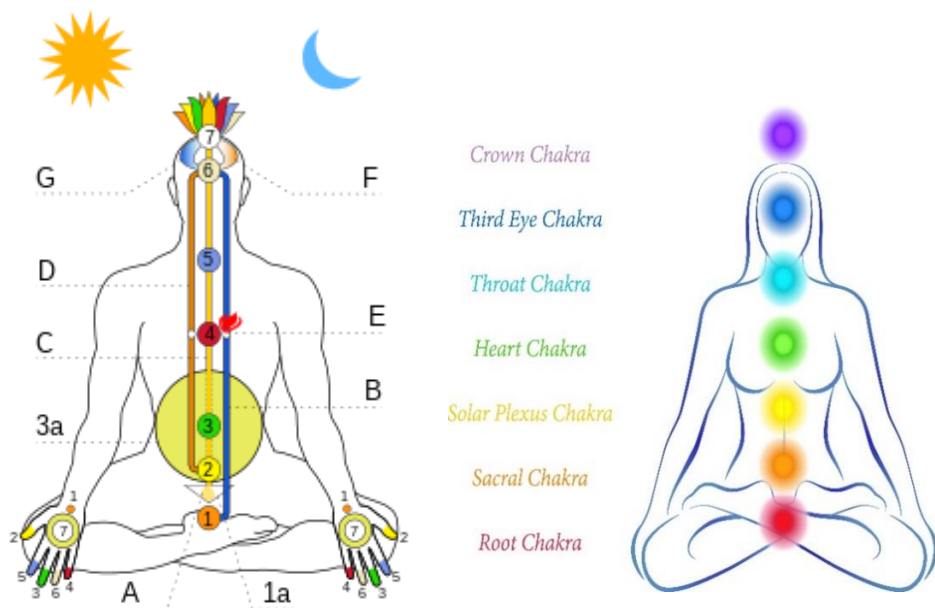
C. Touch Your Energy Points.

What are “energy points”? They are places where your nerves come together, like the strands of a big net joining each other.

Hindu and Chinese medical manuals written thousands of years ago agree with modern science in their descriptions of hundreds of places in our bodies where nerves meet. Acupuncture and acupressure make use of these meeting points when they are just under the skin. You can give yourself your own acupressure massage by meditating and massaging with your fingers on your major energy points.

Hinduism describes seven main points called “chakras.” Many systems East and West systems use them for healing and meditation. They are illustrated below and listed on the next page:

The Hindu Chakras or Energy Centers (Illustrated)



ANCIENT & CLASSICAL VIEW based on The Yoga-kundalini Upanishad (Wikipedia, July 2022)

MODERN VIEW from Mandalas Life, <https://mandalas.life/2018/chakras-the-healing-power-within-us>

The Hindu Chakras or Energy Centers (Listed)

1. Crown (Top of head or 1" above). *Violet; also gold and white
 2. Third Eye (Between your eyebrows). Indigo
 3. Throat (Voice box/larynx/Adam's apple). Light blue
 4. Heart (In it or centered beside it in chest.) Green; also pink
-
5. Solar Plexus (modern systems) or Navel (medieval). Yellow
 6. Front Top of Sacrum (Between navel & base of trunk). Orange
 7. Base of Trunk (Between legs). Red; also black and gold

*Colors vary. The rainbow system in order was first developed by Charles W. Leadbeater in his 1927 book *The Chakras*. Earlier systems have a variety of color systems.

Why is there a horizontal line between chakras 4 and 5 above? This is there to show that the top four energy centers are the safest.

The "Heart" center, a location for feelings of love, is by far the most popular throughout the world in meditation and prayer. The "Crown" is perhaps the second most common as a point for spiritual meditation. Eastern and Western yoga systems say you should not meditate much on the lower three points without the regular guidance of a guru or adept. Here in this book, a gentle touch on all seven usually is safe, but if you have any doubts, stick with the top four.

Why does "5" above have two different points? In early-medieval India c. 100-300 CE in the first book about chakras, the navel was considered the fifth point. However, as modern physiology gradually discovered the great number of nerves meeting in the solar plexus (the soft midpoint in the chest directly under the ribcage), modern chakra systems began to use this other point, instead. Either works. A compromise is to concentrate for the fifth point on the solar plexus and upper stomach; and for the sixth, the lower stomach and sacrum.

Here's how to start touching your energy centers in five easy steps. Before you start, take several deep, cleansing breaths as in "A. Just Breathe" above.

Then, **first**, place your fingers on the top point, the crown of your head. Using both hands can be more balancing, but one hand also is fine.

Breathe deeply, and use your fingertips to feel the very top-center of your head. Tap, rub, or even gently rap on it (knock, and the door shall open!). You also may let your fingers stray around the top half of your head, touching or rubbing—a good noggin massage can be a pleasure and a help.

Second, take another deep breath, and then move your fingers down to your third eye—the spot between your eyebrows. Touch, rub, or massage on and around it in the same way as with your crown. Relax your forehead and eyes.

Third, breathe deeply again and move down to your larynx, voice box, or Adam’s apple (which probably should be renamed “Adam and Eve’s apple”). If you can’t find it, hum: it will vibrate. Relax it, along with your mouth, jaws, and ears.

Fourth, breathe deeply once more. Then place your fingertips or entire hand on your heart, or beside it on your breastbone. Tap or rub. Relax chest, shoulders, and arms. If you wish, feel your heartbeat.

Fifth, at this point, you may stop by taking several final, deep, clearing breaths. You can repeat the cycle—going down again from your head or up from your heart—as many times as you wish.

If you want to continue downward through the bottom three energy centers, you may do so. Is it safe? Simple external touching like this usually is, but deeper meditations on the bottom three centers may not be. Note, though, that if you are having troubling emotional problems or unexplained pains in your lower body, you might want to read Chapter 7 before you continue.

Congratulations! You now have completed a Hindu chakra energy-centers meditation! You can use it regularly to develop greater relaxation, calm, and focus. Or you can use it as a brief introductory clearing of yourself before starting a longer meditation. Either way,

this energy-points touching can generate physical feelings that rightfully should be yours, whether in daily life or deepest meditating.

And—like the meditations above in “A” and “B,” you also can use your energy-point touching to give yourself a few minutes of relaxation at work or home so you return to your boss, colleagues, spouse, or kids in a thriving (not just surviving) mode.

D. Touch Your Pains and Pleasures.

Do you have certain places on your body that are painful or pleasurable? You can focus on them. Doing this with pain points brings more blood to the area, which means more oxygen and more healing or relief. If the pain is intractable, then concentrating on it, feeling every bit of it, conversely helps you learn to experience it as something apart from yourself—sensations of the body without your own tightening, tensing, or experiencing emotions about it.

Touching a pleasure point is healthy, too. It can help you relax the area, spread more blood and oxygen to it, and spread the pleasure to surrounding areas. In time, you can learn to spread pleasure to large areas of your body: a very life giving and healing act. Spreading a pleasure point also can help dissolve emotional pains. This is because some emotional troubles depend on physical tension within your body; bringing feelings of pleasure or calm to those areas can make the emotional troubles feel like they are dissolving or disintegrating.

You can begin with deep, long breathing. If you wish, you also may spend several minutes on a grand body tour as in “B” above, or energy-point touching as in “C.” Next, follow this pattern:

Touching Pain and Pleasure Points

The Method:

1. Find a point on your body that hurts or gives you pleasure.
2. Circle or rub it with your hand or fingertips to find its center.
3. Then tap, push, or poke that center. Be as gentle or as firm as you want. However, with pain, firmness even causing more pain at the

pressure point, may work better.

4. Maintain or increase the pressure for at least a minute as you continue deep, slow, calm breathing.
5. You then may try stroking the point outward from its center to heal the pain or spread the pleasure.

Two alternatives for pain:

6. You may use both hands to firmly stroke your body beginning one or two feet away from the body point and moving toward it. By doing so, you may bring more blood to that point. Repeat as many times as you like.
7. Another technique for pain is to find the same touchpoint on the other side of your body; then touch or rub both, imagining them as one spot, or imagining that the neutral feelings within one are passing to the area of pain in the other.

Note of Caution:

8. If you have severe pain, or moderate pain that won't go away for days, seek medical advice.

E. Rock and Roll.

Psychotherapist and meditator Dr. Marianne Bentzen says in *Neuroaffective Meditation*, "Slow, precise, and repetitive movements activate deep autonomic structures" (p. 85). This means that such movements can start up brain and nerve connections that affect your heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, digestion, sexual arousal, et al. Bentzen finds gentle rocking often helps her patients in meditating.

You can use this slow, repetitive movement in any meditation practice, especially the basic ones in this chapter. Simply include them with your initial breathing, or add them for a minute or two before or after your starting breaths:

Meditations That Rock

1. **Arm dancing:** This is a way to make a plain movement fun and even beautiful, if you wish. Simply let your arms circle and sway

for a minute or two in any direction that feels good. Balance the movements somewhat—use a similar movement for each arm, either simultaneously or one after the other. Express yourself—your feelings, doubts, and especially hopes and positive emotions.

2. **Leg dancing:** If you like, do the same with your legs as you did with your arms. Fling them out! Let them take on a life of their own! Your lower limbs may be more likely to express your less known feelings because they are closer to the lower, “hidden” areas of your psyche.
3. **Head rolling:** Let your head roll gently and slowly left and right. If you’re sitting or standing, you may circle it completely one way, then back again. Feel the tightness in your neck. Let all tension dissipate from your shoulders, forehead, jaws, and neck. You may want to time this to your breathing.
4. **Back arching:** Relax your shoulders, back, and hips as much as you can. Then gently arch your back. Slowly return it to its straight position. Repeat five-ten times. You may want to breathe out when arching your back, and then breathe in when returning it to earth.
5. **Crotch clenching:** Relax your hips and stomach. Then clench the muscle in your crotch (at the base of your body—the muscle that you tighten when you need to go to the bathroom but are holding it). Clench the muscle firmly, along with your lower stomach, and then slowly let it go. Do this several times. Breathe in deeply when you relax it; breathe out when you clench.
6. **Kriyas:** A *kriya* (which means “action”) is a spontaneous body movement such as a twitch or jerk. Such movements happen in meditation sometimes, especially in intermediate and advanced stages when they even can be frequent. They are safe if they do not become so violent as to hurt you, and as long as you are able to stop them by moving, relaxing, or other conscious decision. Allowing them helps clear the body and prevent negative or wasteful energies in your body. Each *kriya* provides a space of relaxation, clarity, or peace to the area of the body where it occurs—a time and place for observation or Presence.

Each of these movements provides more oxygen to your muscles and your body in general, and helps relax you while making you more alert. Each one also affects your brain in such a way that you may be able to concentrate a little longer and more easily in meditation.

Be Your Own Guide

You can guide yourself through any of these simple beginning meditations. Simply place the instructions in front of you and follow them, step by step. You also, as part of using your body, can talk yourself through each step, saying, “Now I am doing Step 1—finding a point of pleasure on my body”; “now I am doing Step 2—circling or rubbing it”; etc. Whatever you do is fine if it helps you concentrate better in continuing the meditation. Each of these methods has been used for thousands of years by Hindu meditators—and in many other religions, as well.

Lesson 3: Breathing*

*Why Bother? Breathing Well,
Hindu Breathing, and Simple Breathing*



This “Seated Jina” reflects the major religion of Jainism, a 500s BCE offshoot of Hinduism. (Sculpture: Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo by the author.)

“Lesson 2” started you on breathing—enough for beginning a meditation practice. You can skip this chapter if you’re in a hurry to learn

*“Lesson 3” is adapted from “Appendix C” of www.YogaSutras.org, © 2022.

other meditation methods. However, breathing is special in the world of meditation. If you'd like to learn more, here are practical tips.

Why Bother to Breathe?

Of course we all have to breathe! But what really matters in meditation and health—is *good* breathing. Hindus call it *pranayama* or “spirit practice.”

Good breathing—along with attention—is the most common denominator of good meditation for millions of people over thousands of years of human civilization. In fact, the word “breath” also means “spirit” in many languages: *pneuma* and *psyche* (Greek), *prana* (Hindu), *chi* and *ki* (China and Japan), *ruah* and *ruach* (Hebrew), and among Native American Peoples, *hah oh*, *oenikika*, and *orenda* (Tewa, Cree, and Iroquois). In these and other common tongues, “to breathe” means “to fill yourself with spirit.”

You don't have to think of inhaling spirit, though, to understand the principle. Breathing slower, longer, and deeper refreshes, heals, and even may exhilarate.

James Nestor says in his deeply researched book *Breath*, “Mammals...live the longest [that] breathe the slowest.... This is as true for baboons and bison as it is for blue whales and us” (104). Unfortunately, the average American breath is the opposite of slow: 18 shallow breaths per minute (80). Nestor demonstrates, using a large body of scientific studies and research on meditation, that longer, deeper breaths through your nose can improve your health dramatically, while “mouth breathers” develop significant health problems.

Good breathing is, in short, one of the finest restoratives available. It is free, easy, and highly effective.

Breathing Well

Meditation adepts West and East have been teaching breathing methods for thousands of years. There are zillions of books—well,

maybe just several thousand, but they're everywhere—breathing well is popular! Fancy techniques are in style. Yet starting out is simple. Basic, simple good breathing is, well—basic and simple.

First step: Thich Nhat Hanh, a highly respected author, mystic, and Vietnamese Zen Buddhist, suggests in *The Miracle of Mindfulness* an easy start he calls “Taking hold of one’s breath.” “Whenever your mind becomes scattered,” he says, “use your breath to take hold of it again. Breathe in lightly a fairly long breath, conscious of the fact that you are breathing a deep breath. Now breath out all the breath in your lungs, remaining conscious the whole time of the exhalation...” (p. 15).

Inhaling and exhaling: Researchers Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius offer more details of breath practice in *Buddha’s Brain*:

1. “Inhale as much as you can....” Deep breathing “stimulates the PNS” (parasympathetic nervous system), which will “lower stress...and improve your long-term health,” making “calming, soothing, healing ripples spread through your body, brain, and mind.... When you’re relaxed, it’s hard to feel stressed (Benson 2000)” and you also may have “reduced the cellular damage of chronic stress” (Duse et al. 2008, 83, 104).
2. “[E]xhale slowly while relaxing. A big inhalation really expands your lungs, requiring a big exhalation.
3. Be aware of your body as you practice your deep breathing. “Parasympathetic fibers are spread throughout your lips; thus touching your lips stimulates the PNS.... Be attentive to physical sensations.... For example, notice the sensations of breathing, the cool air...and warm air,...the chest and belly rising and falling....” They even recommend lip touching as you breathe.

Counting Breaths: Typically, most meditative breathing has repeating patterns. You inhale and exhale about the same length of time. And, Nestor concludes, the ideal is 5-6 breaths per minute: that’s one full breath every 10-12 seconds. Why every 10-12 seconds? It’s because this is similar, he says, to that used by religions throughout the world:

When Buddhist monks chant...*Om Mani Padme Hum*, each spoken

phrase lasts six seconds, with six seconds to inhale before the chant starts again. The traditional chant of *Om*...used in Jainism...takes six seconds to sing, with a pause of about six seconds to inhale. The *sa ta na ma* chant...in Kundalini yoga also takes six seconds to vocalize.... Japanese, African, Hawaiian, Native American, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian—these cultures and religions all had somehow developed the same...breathing patterns (82).

Science also supports this pattern. Nestor describes how Italian researchers in 2001 measured physical reactions of two dozen subjects who recited a Buddhist mantra and also a Latin version of the Roman Catholic “Ave Maria” rosary. The researchers didn’t tell their subjects how long each mantra or Ave Maria should be said. Even so, “the average number of breaths for each cycle was ‘almost exactly’ identical,...5.5 breaths a minute.” In addition, consistently, subjects’ “blood flow to the brain increased” and their “heart, circulation, and nervous system [were] coordinated to peak efficiency.” This medical coordination ended when the subjects stopped the chanting (82-83). He lists experiments elsewhere with similar results.

Hindu Yoga Breathing

Many popular breathing techniques in the West in this century come from India, where scriptures thousands of years old described them. About 2000 years ago, a Hindu saint named Patanjali extracted basic meditation advice from these scriptures and developed a practical handbook he called the *Yoga Sutras*. In it, among many other suggestions, he talked about *prāṇayāma* or yogic breathing (Sutras 2.49-53). His method is simple and basic:

Yoga Sutras Breathing

Inhalation	or	Inhalation
Exhalation		retention/hold/pause
retention/hold/pause		Exhalation

Some Hindu experts comment that the “retention/pause” step is

a doorway to finding God. Others suggest a pattern of as little as 1/3 inhalation and 2/3 exhalation. Patanjali himself says that different variations can provide a variety of results. He recommends it among two or three dozen options from which you can choose to start meditating. But he implies that such breathing becomes just a backdrop, a support system, for more important mental activities that begin happening in meditation. He especially suggests developing a good breathing pattern, then applying it to your favorite meditation method.

Simple Breathing with Patanjali and Nestor

Here are three examples of combining Nestor's and Patanjali's breathing systems—the scientific wedded to the ancient. The patterns below have Nestor's timed seconds, and they have Patanjali's pause added. Feel free to count your breaths ("1001, 1002," etc.) or use a timer. You also can estimate—perfect timing is not necessary.

Some people start with a shorter cycle, then gradually increase the number of seconds. (In my own practice, starting with a 6 + 6 second cycle (12 seconds), I build to a 10+20 second cycle: 1/3 + 2/3, or 30 seconds). Most important: learn what works comfortably for you.

Simple Breathing		
Total Breath of 9 Seconds	Total Breath of 12 Seconds	Total Breath of 15 Seconds
Inhale 3 seconds	Inhale 4 seconds	Inhale 5 seconds
Exhale 3 seconds	Exhale 4 seconds	Exhale 5 seconds
Pause (or push out) 3 secondsz	Pause (or push it out) 4 seconds	Pause (or push it out) 5 seconds
(or use 3 + 6 sec.)	(or use 4 + 8 sec.)	(or use 5 + 10 sec.)

Two Notes: (1) Pauses above aren't required and may occur before or after exhaling. (2) You may exhale longer than you inhale.

Summing Up

If you want to take breathing seriously, try any new breathing

pattern for at least five or ten minutes, perhaps for several meditations. Again, focusing on just breathing itself as a beginning method can be very effective, and it builds good habits. You may use it for as long or as little as you want at a time. Some schools of meditation recommend doing nothing but breathing exercises for meditation each day for days or weeks, which creates a generalized positive awareness of body feelings. If you use this method, then as you continue breathing, let yourself become aware of these body feelings.

Breathing deep and long is important, so much so that as you develop a meditation practice, you should include better breathing as much as you can. Breathing well is the third side of the support triangle for good meditation and a good body life. That triangle is good breath, healthy food, and daily exercise.

Special add-on: Here are two handy techniques that ancient yoga experts discovered. One helped them sleep; the other kept them warm and awake on their mountaintops in winter.

Sleep: To fall asleep more easily, try ten to forty sleep breaths. Inhale slowly and deeply; then exhale sharply. The best modern development of this technique is explained in much more detail in the “Wim-Hof Method” online. I use it every night to help me fall asleep.

Warm Up: Since ancient times, yogis also have practiced using breathing to keep themselves warm without needing a fire (especially important in the mountains!). This breathing technique not only can heat you but make you more alert. I use such breathing occasionally when I am outdoors in cool weather. Use it by breathing in a pattern opposite of the sleep breath: exhale slowly and deeply, then inhale sharply, repeating it ten to forty times.

Warning: For both sleep breath and alert breath, start with a little, and only in appropriate situations. First try five or ten breaths. If you receive little or no affect, then try more. *Don't* try them in adverse situations: don't use either when driving, for example, at least initially. The sleep breath might put you to sleep behind the wheel, and the alert breath might make you too dizzy or overexcited to drive safely.

Lesson 4:

Intermediate—Clearing Your Mind

*Sounds, Images, the “No” Meditation,
Quieting, and Emotions*



Buddha, famous for “nirvana” or “no-mind.” As a Hindu meditator, he started the major religion of Buddhism in about 400 BCE in India.

You’ve heard about mine fields after wars—and how soldiers may spend years finding buried bombs and digging them up. Similarly, Hindu meditation is a time of peace—in the midst of the busyness and minor wars of your regular life—to clear your “**mind fields.**”

One of the foundational works on Hindu meditation is Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* from about 2000 years ago. No one quite knows who Patanjali was, but he managed like no one before him to summarize a

wealth of meditation methods from India. His sources included the ancient Hindu scriptures, the *Vedas*; probably some Buddhist ideas from centuries earlier (Buddha started out as a Hindu prince and yogi); and Patanjali's own experiences. His whole emphasis in learning meditation is to clear the mind—the “mind fields”—which to him meant tossing out ideas, memories, and emotions during meditation.

What's it like to have a clear mind? It is incredibly relaxing and restful. It leaves you quite alert but without having to constantly put up with all the little thoughts—ideas, memories, and emotions—that constantly traipse through most people's heads.

Some of the most common Hindu meditation methods that Patanjali and others offer involve visual images, mantras, and additional techniques of sight, sound, and feeling. Such techniques also are natural to many other cultures' spiritual systems throughout history. They are Body Meditation because they use your physical senses. Those offered here require only a little bit more concentration than the beginning methods offered in “Lesson 2.”

So, climb up on the intermediate diving board here at the local meditation swimming pool, and prepare to jump in. If you practice swimming with these methods enough hours, science and millions of meditators say that your reward usually is better focused attention, deeper calm and peace, and greater health.

FIVE METHODS OF CLEARING YOUR MIND FIELD

- A. Sound: Humming, Mantras, and Chants**
- B. Just Say “No!”**
- C. Imaging: What Feels Good**
- D. Quieting: A Head, Throat, and Heart Vacation**
- E. Emotions: Disassembling**

A. Sound: Humming, Mantras, and Chants

Have you ever lain on an old motel-room bed attached to a coin-fed vibrating machine? Or maybe you've received a soothing massage

from someone with a handheld vibrator? That's just part of what humming, mantras, and chants can do.

First is **pure humming**, simple and without intellectual meaning. Say "Mmm" or "Hum." *The Humming Effect* by science researchers Goldman and Goldman says humming confers reduced stress, calmness, better sleep, slower heart rate, and lower blood pressure.

How to Hum

To hum, relax your jaws, keep your lips together gently, and let your throat vibrate in a medium to low tone:

1. Start by inhaling for 4-6 sec.; then exhale for 4-8 sec. by humming.
2. Let the sound vibrate in your throat and nose, and spread beyond.
3. Place your fingers on your throat as you hum so you can feel the vibration, if you wish.
4. If you have intruding thoughts, let them go, or observe them without engaging in them. Or dissolve them into the humming.

You also are welcome to sing, wordlessly, a short or long musical phrase—something you know or invent. But don't allow any associated words or images: no Broadway musical, just the background melody. You also slowly may hum scales up and/or down. The Goldmans say one study suggests "mmm" sounds are effective but "sss" sounds are not. They also suggest trying different vowel sounds.

Mantras and chants are humming with words. A mantra is a chant and vice versa: a word or phrase that vibrates. You should choose one that means something special to you. Two of the best known mantras from ancient India are the word *Om* or *Aum* (untranslatable, but roughly defined as "Holy"), and the phrase *Om mani padme hum* ("Holy jewel-lotus divine" or "Holy jewel-lotus goddess"). The West has its ritual chants such as "Hail, Mary, Mother of God," "My Lord have mercy on me," "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God," and "Allah is great."

Or, like a kid in a candy store choosing what to put in their bag of delights, make your own!

Select Your Own Mantra or Chant

1. Find a word or phrase with deep meaning that feels like a strong, good rain within you: for example, “Peace!” or “Let there be Love in the World.” Experiment until you find your favorite sound and meaning.
2. You should be able to say it or draw it out like a 5-6 second hum above, feeling it vibrate in your throat. You may use your fingers to feel your throat vibrate.
3. You can, instead, count: a series of numbers as long as you want, or your breaths.

Whether you choose a traditional mantra or make your own, say it in a medium or low tone. Let it rumble around in your throat, vibrating outward. Intertwine it with long, slow, deep breathing. And maintain mindfulness throughout: sound, meaning, and vibration. Higher-tone humming is okay, too, if it helps you clear yourself more.

The Goldmans also suggest that you can send sounds—whether humming, mantra, chant, or song—to one or another part of your body. You can do this, they say, to heal that part of your body or to calm, clear, or energize it.

B. Imaging: What Feels Good

You can, instead of a mantra, choose a visual image on which to meditate. The best image is one that in some way gives you pleasure, hope, or another positive feeling. As with a mantra, you don’t just choose something that objectively seems useful. You must find an image that has a special feeling, that makes your soul vibrate and seek higher and deeper being.

Perhaps as many as a billion people keep an image of a holy person or aspect of God in their homes for meditation and prayer: Krishna, Shiva, Shakti (Shiva’s female aspect), Buddha, Jesus, etc. Sometimes people combine this with a candle—or use a candle flame alone.

Many others like to meditate upon an internal color they love or

which has a spiritually vibrant meaning to them here and now. The rainbow colors of the chakras are listed on page 17. Still others like to use a beautiful visualization of an object such as a flower—an image that takes them to higher, deeper places of special joy, peace, or strength. Some people sit or walk in nature where they feel surrounded by healing images of living trees or flowering plants that begin to transport them into a finer, better state of being.

A small percentage of people even incorporate artistic development into their meditation. For example, you can create—in your head—a painting, drawing, sculpture, dance, song, story, or other art form. This should be a practice of focused attention on what is highest or deepest within you.

Note, especially, that artistic meditation is not an excuse for a wandering mind or self-centered story development about your own trip through life. Meditation should take you beyond normal ideas and memories, beyond incorporation of your emotions into your ongoing story of your life, to a timeless place of centered calm, love, and inner fortitude, at the least.

What image works best? Pick whatever feels right for you. Your winning choice should hold you in its arms and grace you with feeling strong, uplifted, loved, restored, and/or calm. Choose an image, and then experiment to see how it works:

How To Use Your Image

1. Start by breathing slowly and deeply.
2. The image should bring you a feeling of greater calm/peace, happiness/joy, or strength/willpower.
3. Focus single-pointedly on it.
4. You should be absorbed into it, or let it absorb itself into you.
5. You may use it alone, or add a mantra sound.

Afterward, you should feel more relaxed and refreshed. The more you can slow or stop your wandering mind from scattering—and the better you can hold your attention on the image—the better it is for you.

C. Just Say “No!”

The “No! Meditation,” as I like to call it, is one of the more effective ways to stop your wandering mind. When you are alert and a stray or unneeded thought comes into your head, you just say “No!” to it.

The “No!” Meditation

1. Start with slow, deep breaths. Relax your head, neck, and shoulders.
2. Observe your flow of thoughts. Be the Watcher—look at each one as it enters your awareness.
3. Then simply say “No!” at each thought. You may say “No!” to all of them, or you may select just those that are old, repetitive, and/or useless.
4. If a tough or sticky thought—especially part of an emotion—doesn’t want to go away, then just keep repeating “No!” ever more loudly in your head and body (or out loud, if you’re alone). This may take several or more meditation sessions.
5. You also may use inner visual images such as imagining a fence or wall you put up each time a thought tries to enter your mind. You even may use images of force such as imagining pushing it away with your hands, even punch at it, throw a lightning bolt at it, etc.

As you become skilled at it, you may even see thoughts before they enter: Patanjali says in *Yoga Sutras* that they look like “burnt seeds.” Once you achieve a mental silence this way, notice how relaxed your throat is. Examine the feeling, bathe in it, and remember it. Then you’ll be able to find it more easily another time.

D. Quieting—A Head, Throat, and Heart Vacation

How would you like to take a vacation from your thoughts by using your head, throat, and heart muscles? It’s best at first to visit just one spot at a time. But eventually, with practice, you can clear all three of wandering, scatterbrain thinking. And it all involves the Hindu

“chakras” or “energy wheels.”

As explained in Chapter 2, the traditional chakra system says there are seven major energy points aligned with the spinal column. Some are mentioned in the ancient *Vedas*. But the first complete organized system did not appear in writing until the *Yoga-Kundalini Upanishad*, sometime in 800-1600 CE. This method eventually spread to other parts of Asia and to the West.

Three of these chakras (as on pp. 11-12) are the third eye between the eyebrows, the throat chakra, and the heart center (in or beside the heart). Each of these three chakras are relatively safe points on which to concentrate in meditation. And each has its corresponding muscles that affect it in its body points. If you relax your muscles in and around them, you slow or stop certain kinds of thinking.

Throat: The throat chakra is perhaps the easiest of these three to explain, even though it requires some of the most extensive practice for those in need of clearing it. This energy center deeply affects your “inner talk” or inner voice—the part of your brain and body that participates freely in scatterbrain thinking and wandering thoughts. This is because of the voice box.

The voice box, also called the larynx, is composed primarily of two vertical muscles that vibrate when you talk out loud. However, scientists now realize that they also vibrate slightly when you use inner talk. And if you can completely relax the muscles of your voice box, most or all of your inner verbal conversation with yourself also will stop in a normal waking brainwave states. Proof of this lies both in the experience of meditators and in what happens to people who have strokes and lose the use of these muscles—they often can’t think, or at least can’t process normal verbal thinking in their brains.

To relax your voice box, you must practice relaxing your entire throat and jaw. The two of them often work interactively, so relaxing both may be important. You can practice this in any position, but sometimes the most effective postures for it are sitting or lying down.

Start your throat meditation with deep, slow breaths and a brief body scan. Then scan, in particular, your jaw, throat, and if needed, your shoulders. Then focus your attention on your throat. Feel it, if you wish, with your hands or fingertips. Feel the its muscular fluctuations as you talk, hum, and swallow. Learn to relax them. This is a somewhat difficult practice for most people—it took me many hours. Gradually, though, you will learn to relax your entire jaw and throat.

One proof of beginning success in doing this is that, like some stroke victims, you may have more trouble breathing. That is because as your throat relaxes, your passage for air narrows temporarily. If that happens, simply shift your position so you can breathe more easily, and keep relaxing. You'll notice a gradual decrease, even to the point of cessation, of your verbal inner talk.

Head: The same is true to some extent for visual images and memories. However, quieting them works a little bit differently. You begin in much the same way: start with deep, slow breathing, then a brief body scan. Next, scan especially your forehead, eyebrows, eyes, cheekbones, and temples. Feel them with your fingertips and hands, especially as you try talking, thinking, or imagining something.

After learning to keep these muscles relaxed, learn to feel the “flatness,” the relaxed stillness, between your two eyebrows and between your two eyes. Focus there—wherever you feel the most relaxed and quiet center between them—and let a blankness develop. This blankness may be grey, white, dark, or even of some bright color. Let it take over your sight. Some people develop a special image. This, too, is an acceptable focus point; colors and images may come and go from week to week, but it is fine to continue using whatever regular image appears there to you, as long as it is still and calm.

Often this blankness may become filled with inspiring, intuitive ideas—flashes of intellectual illumination—that can be very interesting and exciting. However, for the truly clear mind, you want, gradually, to keep to the blank or single-view image. It is this very single-ness of view, this one-pointed attentiveness, that blocks out or

dissolves the revolving visual memories and ideas of the world.

In this same way, external visual objects work, too. To use them—for example, a candle flame or a tree—mindfully watch the object, neither straining hard nor relaxing too much: simply watch it; if you wander from it mentally, come back whenever you can; and maintain your focus on it as you best can. If you remember, check your breath and take a few deep breaths if you need to; scan your face and head and relax your body parts again, if necessary.

Practice this as often as you want for as long or as short a time as you choose. The more hours you put into it, the more training you are giving to your focused attention. Eventually, mindfully, if you use this type of meditation long term, you'll find other energies coming into it. If they feel right, good, and pure, let them come, or let your focus widen from the core of your still-the-same image.

Heart: In the world of meditation—and in real life, too—the heart is such an amazing place. Not only can it deliver such powerful feelings of love, joy, and bliss. It also can become a strong source of peace and quiet in your body.

For now, let's talk about it in its role of relaxing and clearing the body. Though it can help dispel thoughts by its power, the more important role it can play in bringing calm is to destroy or dissolve emotions. Emotions are a particularly messy, complex tangle. They usually are composed of three elements: memory, physical sensations, and thoughts about the first two. Calm attention to them in the head and throat can help break them up. But the heart sometimes can do this more powerfully. There are two ways in which it can break up negative emotions.

In the first—the more difficult—you practice concentrating in the center of the heart itself as you breathe long, slow, deep breaths. You can aid your focus by placing your hands or fingertips over your heart and rubbing or massaging the area.

With practice, this can bring greater calm to your heart. A number

of scientific studies (see Goleman and Davidson) show that even basic meditators can learn, in meditation, to slow their pulse rates and lower their blood pressure. Such physical symptoms accompany many negative emotions, especially anxiety, worry, doubt, anger, and fear.

Focusing on the heart can be so powerful that it can put you to sleep. I use it for this purpose on nights when my energy is too high for falling asleep easily. Focusing on the heart like this generally is safe if it has a calming effect. Even if you lose consciousness, your heart will work normally—just as when you faint, your body returns to breathing normally.

The second, and perhaps easier, method of clearing emotions using the heart is to pour on the love. Learn love power. In your meditations, practice generating strong feelings of love that come from your heart, the center of your chest, or your chest in general. This is, in fact, the most popular method of meditation in the world: developing love power, whether you simply feel it or you direct it toward a living meditation adept, a saint, or a form of God.

Once you've developed this love power—or perhaps you already have it—then clear your emotions as follows:

Clearing Emotions with Love Power

1. Start by breathing deeply and regularly throughout this meditation: for it, oxygen is essential. You also may use your fingertips or hands to touch your heart or chest as much as you want.
2. Invite the emotion to come to you. Can you see it? Some people see a thick, grey tumbleweed, a lightning-laced storm cloud, or a menacing dark shape entering their awareness. If so, you may immediately move to “Step 4.”
3. Is the emotion already in you? This is more common. If so, back off from it a little so you can observe it. Then dissect it. What are its components of memory, physical sensation, and thought? Choose any one of these components.
4. Then blast it with love. If it's a horrible anxiety, love it. A great

fear? Love it. A sworn enemy? Love them. Whatever the image, memory, or physical feeling, hit it with a strong, continuing flood of love.

5. Generating so much love uses a lot of physical energy, as if you have been exercising, so prepare to be tired afterward.
6. If the emotion is especially habitual, strong, or “sticky” in you, you may have to practice this love meditation for a number of hours over days, weeks, or months. Like any other learned skill, though, time and practice create significant long-term results.

E. Emotions: Disassembling

Do you experience emotional storms? Are they brief, passing sprinkles, or are they filled with thunder and lightning that leave floods in their wake? Almost everyone experiences negative emotions to some degree, and for some people, a storm can be long and strong. Meditation may help. But you will need to stage a breakup with your squall—divorce it. Give it the heave ho.

How? First, you need to see its parts. An emotion has two, three, or sometimes four main elements:

Parts of an Emotion

1. **Sensory Trigger** (Sight, Sound, Taste, Touch/Feel, or Smell)
2. and/or a **Thought** (Memory/Words)
3. **Resulting Body Feelings** (Fear, Anger, Trembling, Recoiling, etc.)
4. and **Resulting Swirling Thoughts** (with the Feelings)

Often your emotion may have three or all four of these parts: for example, if a person you dislike intensely suddenly comes over to you and, before you see them, yells “Hi!” and pats your shoulder, you experience them with sight, sound, and touch; you might recoil in fear and then feel anger; you probably have one or more memories (of why you dislike them); and you may experience a rush of mental thoughts or images.

If these feelings go away immediately after the encounter, you are calmer than perhaps a majority of people. If they last, and especially if the emotion is “sticky” — it just won’t go away — then meditate upon it:

Breaking an Emotion

1. Use deep, slow breathing to calm yourself.
2. Then observe the emotion: Watch it, stare at it, forgetting all else.
3. Back off from it: remind yourself, “this is not me; it’s just my body reacting.”
4. Do not get caught in rationalizing, justifying, or in any way adding to it.
5. As you keep breathing, use a body scan to relax your body more.
6. Then let it gradually go away. Here are a few methods:
 - a. As you become calm, watch it recede, dissolve, melt, or blow away.
 - b. Push it away: put it in a box and throw it out of you.
 - c. Block it from you: build a wall or fence that keeps it out of you.
 - d. Blast it with love power that you have developed in your heart. (See also “Dealing with Big Emotions” next in “Lesson 5”)
 - e. Hand it to your deepest inner True Self or the outer Ultimate Presence.

If none of these work, then you may need to write about it. Keeping a diary or journal is as effective for some people as counseling. Do consider counseling, too, as this also helps many people. Once you’ve weakened the emotion in this way, you may want to try meditation again, too.

Lesson 5:

Bliss Self, Small Self

Joy-Peace Self vs. Troubles, Wandering Mind, Big Emotions, and Story of Me

Hinduism has a long and honored tradition—going back to its Aryan-Iranian beginnings many thousands of years ago—of tending not to separate the soul from the body. Unlike some traditions in the West with a goal of leaving the body, Hinduism often honors what the body can help you become. Life is not, say most Indian sages, for us to prepare to die and go to a heaven above; rather, it is for us to allow the blossoming of an ever healthier and more perfect mind and body.

In that process, you discover that you have a better self—a stronger and surer personality. And you don't need to leave your body behind for a heaven after you die. Rather, your heaven and hell—wherever else they also may be—are here on earth.

And you can develop what Hinduism calls a “Bliss Self” here and now. You do it in part by paring away the lesser, smaller parts of your small self. But you also can learn to recognize your developing better personality—what can be called a “joy-peace self”—and use these wonderful parts and pieces to find and establish more of it within you.

Overall, the process is one of letting your imperfections drop away or of dissolving them over time, and accepting the positive energies that replace them. In short, you develop your new personality around your ever deepening Awareness.

The Joy-Peace Self

What does this “Bliss Self” look like?

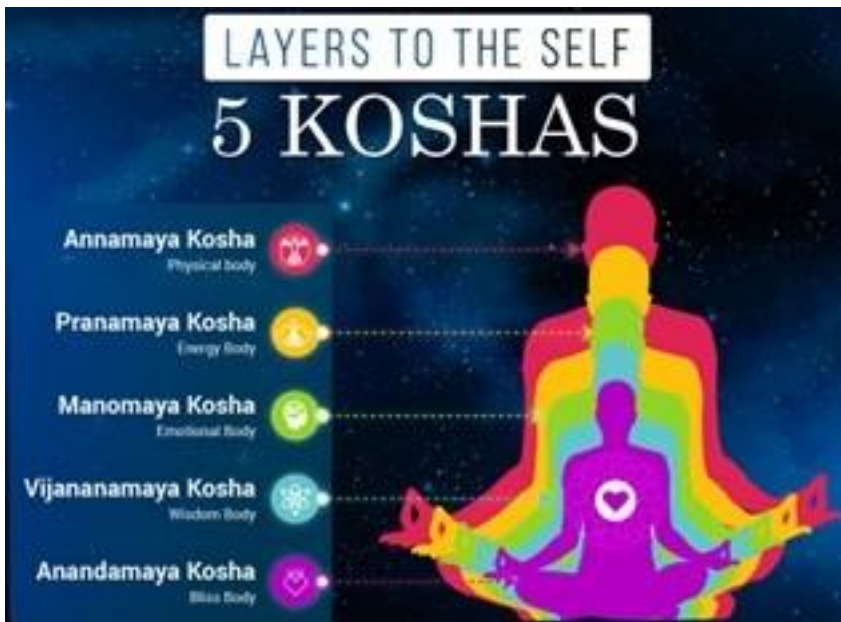
Back in the 1960s, two British bands sang about the self as layered like an onion. The Beatles offered “Glass Onion.” And The Incredible

String Band looped through a whole album: *The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion*. Both groups were referring to the ancient Hindu concept of a person's self being a series of rings in an onion. Similarly, the Hindu many-petalled lotus is a symbol of how there are many "petals" — aspects and energies — at each level of your personhood.

The ancient Hindu *Vedas* developed a system describing the self's onion rings: the *kosha* or "sheaths," that surround a person's consciousness. There are five koshas—five rings. If you add the center, your innermost Awareness, you have six strata like the rings of a tree:

Basic Awareness and Five Koshas (Sheaths) of the Self

0. **Core:** Basic awareness (in the heart in white circle below)
1. **Bliss Body:** Innermost layer (purple-violet, with heart)
2. **Higher Mind:** Intuition/sense of knowing (blue)
3. **Regular Mind:** Normal mental and emotional life (green)
4. **Psychic Layer:** Energy body (chakras, nerves; yellow)
5. **Outermost Layer:** Material body (red)



<https://fitsri.com/yoga/koshas>

More than two thousand years' worth of theories, books, and teachings abound regarding the koshas. The most helpful fact about them here, though, is that in Hinduism, they are a roadmap to the positive vision of your "Bliss Self" that you build by meditation and other forms of yoga, step by step. The *Vedas* say that your best self is a clear fountain of light that you can carry around in mind and body. Some of its major attributes, as paralleled with the previous list, are:

The Joy-Peace Self

0. Core: Clarity—An alert, pure, undivided awareness
1. Innermost Layer: Underlying joy/love, peace/calm, and/or strength/fortitude
2. Higher Mind: An intuitive, more-direct sense of knowing
3. Regular Mind: Logic, controlled verbalizing, imaging, and feeling
4. Psychic Layer: Energy that is balanced and steady
5. Outermost Layer: Good health in body parts

A similar "Joy-Peace Self" appears in many religions. In Judianism and Christianity, for example, it is called the "gifts" or "fruits" of the spirit (see p. 52). Hinduism also describes them in its ancient *Astanga* Yoga—as listed here from a variety of English translations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (2.41-42):

***Astanga* Yoga's Signs of the "Bliss Body"**

Peace (*Sat*): Balance and rising awareness (*sattva*) develop in you.

Kindness or benevolence: You become more heartfelt and loving.

Concentration: Better attention is yours—more ability to focus.

Sense control: You learn to better guide your five senses, thoughts, and feelings, rather than their controlling you.

Discovery of the True Self: You find your Atman (the companion of Brahman): an Awareness of Awareness or spark of the divine.

Contentment: You gain more feelings of quietude and acceptance.

Joy: You develop an underlying sense of happiness in life.

As stated above, these personality traits are, themselves, like meditation experiences. Once you begin experiencing one of them, you can step into it—or let it wash into you. It is your “Bliss Body” that you are constructing, and one feeling is a building block leading to another.

Troubles

Unfortunately, many humans—much of the time—have lives that are missing most or all of these attributes. In Hinduism, the problems that get in the way are called *dukkha*, which means “suffering” or “troubles.” In his *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali uses *dukkha* in its original sense of physical pain and resulting psychological troubles; Buddha (who was a Hindu) used *dukkha* in a more general sense of “suffering” in his famous Four Noble Truths.

The original word means “bad axle hole.” In early Hindu times, a bad axle hole was a grave problem. Because so much commercial travel then was by carts, a bad axle hole could mean anything from a distractingly bumpy ride with a squeaky wheel to a complete breakdown that might suddenly dump you on a perilous roadside alone at night.

But, says Patanjali (and Buddha), meditation and mindfulness can clear such troubles away. Doing so allows the bliss body—the Joy-Peace Self—able to come forth. These troubles are, he says, swirling darkneses that whirl around our heads and bodies, causing us no end of distraction, emotional discomfort, and even stress-induced physical discomfort and pain.

Patanjali emphasizes that these daily negative whirlpools are not your real You. And they definitely are not the awakened personality of the Good Self that you can become. He says that for the better Self to appear, you must learn to clear away these negativities.

But what if you can’t just snap your fingers (or go into meditation) and immediately make all your troubles go “poof!” into the air? Part of the normal human condition, says Patanjali, is having such

troubles. Moreover, he offers a number of methods for clearing them. “Lesson 2” and “Lesson 3” already have provided many of them for starting. And *Astanga Yoga* shows you can develop a Joy-Peace Self.

However, in intermediate or advanced meditation, you may stumble across deeper, more complex “troubles” that require deconstructing or disassembling, bit by bit. You may find yourself taking them apart as if you must destroy an old wood shed or small house by hand, board by board. How do you do that? The first step is to identify them. Here are four of the more common trouble-complexes that impede good mediation, and a brief description of each one:

Four Major “Troubles”

Wandering Mind

Anxiety

Big Emotions

Story of Me (Several Versions)

Wandering Mind

The 1990s sitcom *Ally McBeal* displayed a secondary character, a young, brilliant lawyer named “Jenny.” She was a little strange. As she talked about a case or argued in court, she might suddenly turn her head, look up, and offer a non sequitur such as “Oh, look, is that butterfly a monarch?” or “Do you think rain ever falls upside down?”

She is prototypical of a problem 95% of humanity has. In meditation, it is called the wandering mind or, sometimes, the scatterbrain. It can mean brief interruptions of your conscious, intentional thinking both in your daily life and in meditation. Or it can mean that your mind just keeps churning on with all kinds of ideas, memories, and/or feelings—and you just cannot seem to turn it off. In fact, one of the most common requests I hear in meditation classes is different versions of “How do I turn off my brain?”

What are the dimensions of the wandering mind? First, it is too much—or unwanted—thinking. Second, you tend to repeat old ideas to no good effect. You also tend to recall memories that don’t help or

even keep making you feel bad. Another problem is that you rehash emotional jolts that catch you once again in loops of worry, doubt, fear, anger, or other mild to strong negative emotions. Gradually, you come to realize two important facts about such thinking: first, much of it is unnecessary; second, it spells “stress.”

Another version of the wandering mind actually occurs in what some people call a meditation session: letting your mind drift comfortably. There’s nothing wrong with doing this if it relaxes you. But it’s not meditation. In meditation, you focus your attention so you can stop the flow of normal thinking. This means you either learn to be a very alert Observer who tries to watch the thoughts without adding to them, or you try to clear your verbalizing from mind and voice box.

How do you get rid of a wandering mind? If you are working on an initial focus for meditation, try breathing exercises and/or another of “*Beginning: Five Starting Touches*” in “Lesson 2.” This may at least calm and slow down your scatterbrain thoughts, allowing you to become more conscious of them.

If you are able to sustain a focused attention, then you may want to use one or more of the methods in “Lesson 4” to block out your thoughts with an image, a meditation sound, the “No!” meditation, or, especially, by quieting your head and throat. And becoming more aware of your Bliss Body—your Joy-Peace Self, also helps.

Anxiety

Are you often on edge? Wake up with your heart racing and your mind whirling? Jump easily when you hear loud or sudden noises? Worry a lot? Can’t fall sleep because of your worries? Have trouble calming yourself?

There are many techniques that can help you, and they all need your mindful attention to work well. Especially important is to find a time and place for meditation that is quiet, private, and relaxing. Scientific studies support the following methods.

Mindful Anxiety Reduction

- Enjoy a 20-30 minute hot bath, shower, sauna, or hot tub.
- Break a fast-and-shallow breath problem: use slow and deep breathing as in “Lesson 3.”
- Use body scanning, humming, and/or imagery meditation as in “Lesson 2” and “Lesson 4.” Humming in particular can create endorphins, the body’s natural opiates.
- Mindfully receive—or give yourself—a gentle to medium-pressure massage.
- Concentrate on the heart while breathing slowly and deeply, waiting for it to calm.
- See the related advice below for breaking up or dissolving “Big Emotions.”
- Use MBSR yoga: “mindfulness-based stress reduction” (taught in thousands of medical centers and clinics).

MBSR in particular has a large following among psychologists and therapists. Usually it consists of an intensive eight-week program given by trained personnel. It uses a mix of such meditation techniques as mindfulness of your inner experience, work on breathing and scanning your body, a focus on an object and/or a mantra, careful eating, and meditating while walking or moving. Scientific results suggest it helps combat not only moderate to extreme anxiety but also some forms of depression, pain, hypertension, and other ills.

Noteworthy, too, is that recently, teenage suicide has been better prevented with another type of behavioral therapy that involves mindfulness meditation: DBT or “dialectical behavior therapy.” It is an offshoot of cognitive behavioral therapy. Usually it (and MBSR, above) are done in conjunction with a trained therapist.

You also may be able to decrease anxiety by allowing your Joy-Peace Self to gain more control. Breathe deeply, find your calmness, and rest in it.

Big Emotions

In the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man enter the dark forest, looking from side to side with scared glances. They link arms and chanting repeatedly, "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" They immediately are confronted by one these great fears: the Lion (the one who becomes their friend and final member of their group).

In meditation, as in life, the dark forest and its potentially fearful beasts are our emotions. And well we should be cautious of them. Most people have big emotions at least some of the time, and many people feel plagued by them: they try limiting or avoiding such emotions by using physical activity, drinking, drugs, sex, or constant work or simple refusal to be aware of their thoughts and feelings. Others suffer through the emotions until they go away, eventually, if only for a time.

The older and wiser you become, the more you discover that some of your emotions are stronger around certain people and situations. If you hang out with those who have positive emotions (a good idea), then you will feel more of such emotions. If you spend a good deal of time with those who display negative emotions, then you will doom yourself to experiencing those, instead. And going back to a place that was emotionally evocative to you brings back the old feelings.

The problem, of course, is that emotions seem to be everywhere. Avoiding them is like trying to escape mosquitos in the summer woods or bees in a field of flowers. And everyone, even the best of people, have negative and confusing emotions sometimes.

How can you control any of these through meditation? There are several ways:

Dealing with Big Emotions

1. Follow normal advice in staying away from a lot of negative emotions.
2. If constant positive emotions are so intense as to be troubling, limit your exposure to those, too.
3. In meditation, follow the advice in “Lesson 4” for “Breaking an Emotion” (see p. 40).
4. For advanced meditators only: Instead of using “blasting” it with “love power” from your heart chakra, you can develop a strong “willpower-fortitude” force in your chakra at your solar plexus or navel (see pp. 16-17): a feeling of power, strength, and will. Let it build in a pure way with no thoughts, no images, no other feelings in meditation. Then when a big emotion hits you, aim back at it with a streaming blanket of willpower. (However, be aware that this may make you more sensitive to feelings of anger and fear that also will need to be broken apart in meditation by willpower.)
5. For advanced meditators only: Do the same as in “4” above, except go to your sacral chakra (between your navel and the base of your trunk) and develop a strong “peace-calm” force. Then, in meditation, aim it at a big emotion that troubles you. (However, be aware that this may make you more sensitive to feelings of doubt, loss, disappointment, and sorrow that also will need to be broken apart in meditation by your newfound peace-calm force.

Story of Me

I once knew a bright, accomplished professional singer so full of herself that in every direct encounter and letter exchange, she was busy with many questions about how I, and others, felt and thought about her. She was all about “Me,” never once asking about my life or interests. She wanted information exclusively so she could feel better about herself, and to change herself to fit in with others. She was a classic example of what psychologists call a narcissist.

We all do this to some extent—it’s an especially prominent part

of 'tween and teen years in the West. You develop your own story—and its secondary sub-stories that tie in—in three parts: you are your own hero or heroine, your difficulties are the villains, and the results are the lessons in life you have learned through hard experience. However, in meditation—at least during it—you need to set it aside.

Other Story of Me selves can get in the way, too. There are “dominator” talkers who take over a conversation, leaving little for you to say. Others such as “drama queens” and “kings” make big emotional productions of conversations and their lives because, they think, their own strong emotions justify it. Still others are much quieter but, outwardly and inwardly, they are True Believers who have already decided what their own story is, they're sticking by it, and that's who they are—forever, they think.

Usually each of us has at least a little of one or more of these types of small selves. The problem lies first in when that small self becomes too excessive. Second, during meditation, its size and strength may keep it from being paused for a time.

One Story of Me is particularly troubling because it is based on a misunderstanding of meditation and spirituality: the “Shining Ivory Tower.” Through meditation or other spiritual practices, someone develops the ability to have brightly illuminated ideas that help them understand whole branches of thought and human behavior. They then think they are done with their one type of spiritual experience or growth, and they're ready to help humanity with blazing concepts.

Such people may be profound in a narrow slice of life. But if they've stopped meditating, they may be of little help to others. In addition, their “illuminated self” is still just a thinking self. Instead, a whole world of awakening, of meditative liberation from mere words, exists. Beyond words, meditation can take you into higher and deeper experiences in any religion's spiritual practices.

A similar, related Story of Me condition is the “My God Is Better Than Yours” malady. It strikes tens of millions of people, perhaps more, at some point in time.

I contracted this after my first spiritual experience. I received a classic-Christian “born-again” moment: a white light came down from above, into the top of my head. At the time, I was attending a two-week summer Bible School when I was fourteen. It was a great initiating experience—an important turning point in my life. But I also immediately became spiritually ill with “My God Is Better Than Yours.” I interpreted my experience through the lens of the conservative, evangelical, Protestant Christian church in which it happened.

What mistake did I make? I assumed, as people often do in conservative branches of most religions, that everything my church said was true and other religions false. Worse yet, it now was my duty to save others. I proceeded to try to teach others what to do. My motives were good, but teaching morality to my buddies was like trying to stage a production of the *Bhagavad-Gita* or *Hamlet* in the middle of a soccer game. I gradually became much less dogmatic. And I slowly discovered that Body Meditation offered many practical ways to recapture the experience I’d had.

Is the Story of Me self entirely evil? Not at all. Many Western psychologists now believe we are drawn—perhaps even prompted by our genes—to form a Story of Me: a fundamental self based on the dramas and difficulties of our own life. Each of us, they say, self-selects the memories that fit one’s own story, forgetting the facts that don’t fit. Psychologists believe this can be a healthy process as long as you don’t become like Narcissus, the mythic Greek who so loved his reflection in a pool of water that he never left it. If you are open to new experiences, people, and memories, then your Story of Me is normal.

But above all, Story of Me is *not* meditation. Meditating means clearing your mind of our stories—past, present, and future. How do you clear yourself? Mindfulness is a start: back yourself away from your thinking and let it flow while you remain the Observer.

Another step is to use any of the techniques in this book’s eight lessons to interrupt the workings of a smaller self and establish, instead, a more aware “Meditation Self.” This Meditation Self can

consist of qualities in the “Bliss Self” or “Peace-Joy Self” mentioned above regarding the Hindu koshas.

Or you can, as a goal, model it after other Western or Eastern profiles of a healthy personality. Examples abound: Hinduism’s Eight-limbed Yoga (*Astanga Yoga* in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*); similar to it, Buddha’s Eightfold Path or his Seven Factors of Enlightenment; the Abrahamic Ten Commandments of Moses, or the Golden Rule found in Hinduism in the *Mahabharata*, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions.

Judaism’s Isaiah 11.2-3 and 32.16-17 offer the “gifts of the spirit”: wisdom, good sense, guidance, strength, knowledge, and honor of God; justice, peace, quietude, and security (*Tanakh Online*). St. Paul’s Christian “fruits of the spirit” similarly suggests “love, joy, peace, a quiet mind, kind acts, well-doing, faith, [g]entle behaviour, control over desires” (Galatians 5.22-23, *The Bible in Basic English*). The Christian mystic Francis of Assisi’s well known “Peace Prayer” is like minded: peace, love, pardon, faith, hope, light, joy, consolation, understanding, love, forgiveness, and eternity.

Astanga Yoga’s description of the *kosha* Bliss Body—experiencing peace, kindness, focus, sense control, the True Self, contentment, and joy—is one of the best guidelines in the world. You can find this Joy-Peace Self naturally. Or you can meditate your way to it.

Eventually you can go beyond your own multiple small selves to an increasingly better, more here-and-now, mindful condition. That situation or realm is your “I,” your pure Awareness or True Self, what Hindu Buddhists came to call your “Buddha nature.” It is your living in the Presence. The next chapter discusses such states.

Lesson 6:

Advanced—Seeking Presence

Awareness, Love-Will-Peace, Saint, Superconscious, Clearing



Hindu meditation emphasizes female energies more than do many religions. Devi Uma aspect of spirit, Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo by author

Are you advancing quickly in meditation, or looking for a next major step? Hindu meditation emphasizes how an individual can come to know God. This Ultimate Presence, say Hindu mystics (and many Western ones), can be found within or beyond you—with practice.

Is Spirit Real?

Does a thing called “Spirit” really exist? Science is beginning to prove that “something” actually is there. Researchers know, now, beyond a doubt, that at the least, you can find a purer, clearer self within you. After thousands of studies, science still cannot prove that some kind of “Spirit” exists. However, Goleman and Davidson say in *Altered Traits* that, increasingly, scientific data from the best several dozen studies does offer proof of one kind. They tell us that such studies “confirm that remarkable, positive alterations in brain and behavior” — “the very idea of ‘awakening’” — “are not a myth but a reality” (8).

Many such alterations improve

health. Duke University's Harold Koenig examined 3300 scientific surveys and found that, overwhelmingly, inner belief in "transcendence"—belief in God or a spiritual reality—improved twelve different markers of a healthy life. His report "Religion, Spirituality, and Health" in *ISRN Psychiatry* shows that within humans, at least, a biological ability to experience transcendence is alive and well.

This chapter offers five different meditations on "Spirit"—whatever that means to you—with descriptions first, then a set of practices:

True Self and Ultimate Presence
Satchidananda—Peace, Strength, Joy/Bliss
A Saint or Bridge Figure
The Eighth Chakra
Clearing Your Mind

True Self and Ultimate Presence

Ancient Hinduism talked about this higher Self that each person can become. It is called the *Atman* or *Purusha*. Western mystics sometimes call it the "spark of God within." It is your own Awareness in its purest form, your basic consciousness.

Hinduism contrasts this *Atman* with the *Brahman*—the overall God. Whereas *Atman* is within, *Brahman* is outside a person. The two are one, according to Hindu mystics, but are named separately because that is how they appear. Here in this book, I call them your True Self within, and the Ultimate Presence everywhere.

What are the Western Versions?

Western religions for over two thousand years have tended to emphasize the Ultimate Presence—or God Beyond. However, even in these religions you can find hints of the mystical True Self. The Jewish Torah's word for God, *Yahweh* (YHWH) is *I Am That I Am*. This is much like the ancient Hindu *Upanishads'* *Tat Tvam Asi* or *That Thou Art*.

The highly respected apocryphal New Testament Gospel of Thomas may have been, according to some scholars, a source for other Gospels. It shows Jesus saying, “[D]ivine Reality exists inside and all around you.... [K]now your true Self...” (*The Luminous Gospels*).

Modern Christian mystic Richard Rohr has a similar comment in *Immortal Diamond*. He says that this “True Self” or “immortal diamond” is “God [and] human...at the same time, the Gospel of Matthew’s “treasure hidden in the field” and “pearl of great price,” and the indwelling Holy Spirit.”

Satchidananda—Peace, Willpower, Bliss

Another important element of Hinduism is its trinity that describes all that the Ultimate Presence—God—is. The term is a compound word: *Satchidananda*. Broken down, it means

1. *Sat* – Peace (the “Peace That Passes Understanding”). Great calm
2. *Chit* (*Chid*) – Consciousness-force. Great strength/power/fortitude
3. *Ananda* – Bliss (Joy, Love Power). Great happiness and love

A Saint or Bridge Figure

A third element of Hinduism is, as in other religions, focusing on a very spiritual figure to find God. In India, this might mean someone like Krishna or Buddha, or it might mean a great meditation adept, living or dead, male or female. Equivalent points of focus in the West are those who started religions or helped the starters—Jesus, Mary his mother, Muhammad; a saint such as St. Francis, or even an angel.

The Eighth Chakra

The traditional chakra system also offers a suggestion. Most healers and meditation adepts who use the chakras describe seven of them, from just above the crown to the body’s base. However, some Hindu mystics and others who use chakras tell us there is an eighth chakra even higher above your crown. It is a “superconscious” point about 12-14 inches above you. It is the true “crown” of your psychic

body, the point at which your purest energies, they say, come and go.

Clearing Your Mind

Much of this guidebook makes use of methods recommended by Patanjali in his ancient *Yoga Sutras*. The emphasis in the early parts of this book is to clear your mind during meditation. By “mind,” Patanjali means everything under the mind’s control: ideas, memories, emotions, and the body’s semi-autonomic processes (the ones we can learn to control) such as desires, resistance, and excitation.

Once you have cleared them in meditation, he says, you will be filled—in meditation—with *samadhi*, the clear light of being: of presence within oneself that is a pure awareness independent of all human traits. He describes several levels and types of *samadhi*. These bear similarities to other Eastern descriptions such as Buddhist *nirvana* and Zen *satori*, as well as awakened states described by Western mystics.

Practicing These Five Methods

How can you use these five aspects to meditate directly upon your True Self/Ultimate Presence? Here are some practical steps:

Five Meditations on True Self/Ultimate Presence

Start of Each One: For each of the five listed below, begin a normal meditation with breathing and attention.

End of Each: If you can maintain your focus as below, continue for several minutes. Practice often. You’ll find that immediately after, your focus may change what you otherwise would have done—in small or sometimes big ways. Sometimes you may slip into a more complete, all-encompassing experience of the Self/Presence. If so, stay there, bathe in it, let it wash over and through you, as much as possible so you can remember it and try to return to it, even if in a smaller way.

You also may experience twitches or other spontaneous movements. In Hinduism, they are called *kriyas* or “movements.” They are controllable, so you may confine them just to your meditation in

private, if you wish. These, too, are a sign of success: the body is resetting itself to a better default. Observe the instants after them.

1. Turn Your Awareness upon Itself.

- (a) Discover your *Atman*/True Self by becoming increasingly aware of your attention and awareness.
- (b) Bend your attention back upon itself: focus on your focusing.
- (c) Usually, you'll find yourself thrown back out of it into normal awareness, or into a brief second or two of unconsciousness. This means you have been successful for the time being. Repeat and repeat again as a meditation.

2. Focus on Love, Strength, or Peace (Satchidananda).

- (a) Focus your attention on your heart chakra or within your heart itself (Bliss/Love), your solar plexus or navel (Power/Strength), or on your stomach at the level of your sacrum (Peace, Calm).
- (b) Concentrate calmly but intently on that point, generating a powerful energy or force there. Keep your mind otherwise clear.
- (c) Do not start thinking of other people or memories, or your generated energy will expend itself in that direction.
- (d) Hold your focus steadily on the energy. Place yourself in its midst. Imagine it is a flame that consumes you, a river that fills your whole being. Bathe in it.
- (e) When you feel your concentration waning, let it go.
- (f) (*Note:* Using the chakra energy of bliss/love, power/strength, or peace/calm opens your mind and emotions to more energy passing through that chakra. You may want to try this type of meditation only once a week at first. If this practice becomes too much, then stop and try a different kind.)

3. Focus on a Highly Spiritual Figure (Saint or Bridge Figure).

- (a) Focus your attention on your chosen person or figure.
- (b) Imagine you are in that person's heart, head, or both. Or invite the person to come into you. Open your head or heart.
- (c) Bathe in the essence of the person, not their thoughts, no teachings,

nor your imaginings about them.

- (d) Do not start thinking of other people or memories, or your generated energy will expend itself in that direction.
- (e) Hold your focus steadily on the feeling of the presence of the figure. Place your whole being. Bathe in it. When you feel your concentration waning, let it go.
- (f) *Note 1:* You are creating the feeling of a strong connection between you and your chosen figure, which may create unexpected and/or swift changes in you. If the changes are too much, stop and try other meditation methods.
- (g) *Note 2:* Never try this on a person without their full permission.

4. Find Your Superconscious Chakra.

- (a) Focus your attention on your crown chakra. Or, if you wish, you may concentrate on your heart, throat, or third-eye chakra, and then climb your way up to your crown chakra.
- (b) Then imagine a point about 10-12 inches above your crown. If it helps, stretch your arms above your head and touch your fingertips together at that high point.
- (c) You also may imagine a person or figure from "3" above standing or sitting at that high point, or even aim your favorite mantra at it. The color purple also is associated with this 8th chakra.

5. Clear Your Mind.

- (a) Use the techniques in this book to clear your mind, in meditation, of all ideas, memories, emotions, and controllable feelings.
- (b) In this clarity, rest and wait.
- (c) That sustained clarity itself is a beginning type of *samadhi* or state of being spiritually awake. Other such experiences await you.

Shortcuts

Some will tell you there are no shortcuts to finding the True

Self/Ultimate Presence. You must, they say, go through the steps laid out in such ancient scriptures such as Patanjali's Eight-limbed (*Ashtanga*) Yoga in Hinduism, or, very similar to it, the Buddha's Eightfold Path to Liberation—or other paths such as the Jewish Ten Commandments, St. Paul's Christian exhortations about developing faith and love, the Five Pillars of Islam, and other mystic founders' systems. All of these—if perceived and followed mystically and with meditation—are legitimate paths to living with the True Self/Ultimate Presence.

On the other hand, there actually are shortcuts—if all you want is an awakening experience. But they come with serious problems.

Pain is one shortcut. In India, people called “fakirs” are part of the normal street scene. They lie on beds of nails, walk on burning coals, and stick pins through their tongues and lips. Pain, they say, releases certain chemicals and experiences in them that help them transcend normal life. Similarly in the West from ancient times, self-torture has led to doorstep-of-death fasting, self-flagellation, wearing of thorns, and many other painful meditation practices.

Another seeming shortcut available from Hindu spirituality is to raise Kundalini. It is the energy “snake” that is said to reside at the base of the spine, ready to uncoil and jump upward through the chakras, awakening each of these energy centers to spiritual powers. Teachings about the kundalini snake may have developed by viewing it in meditation or in body dissections beginning as early as 1000 BCE.

Such dissections would have shown the long, snake-like vagus nerve intertwined with the backbone. It has two channels stretching from the colon to the brain. It is unusual in that it sends nerve messages in both directions, brain to organs or vice versa (parasympathetic and sympathetic), with the result that it alternately can calm or excite them, as often experienced in meditation.

A third sometime shortcut in India was a drug preparation called *soma*. The exact meaning is lost, now. Some interpreters believe it means plant-based concoctions that are either psychedelic or similar to the drug “speed.” People have quipped that a psychedelic trip can

show you God in a day.

A fourth shortcut is to use sex to find spiritual awakening. Certain schools of secretive Hindu yogis use it in India and Tibet. Western versions usually include a partner, though this is not required.

However, all four pose important risks. First, no matter how quickly you have an awakening event from them, and no matter how important it may feel, your one experience is not going to change you very much. Its strength and power will dissipate over the weeks and months unless you commit to weekly or daily meditation—or unless it is one small part of a regular practice. Such an experience may help you with proof that awakening to spirituality is possible. But if it changes your daily life, it may be for the worse, rather than the better.

Second, you'll likely find the experience anyway, simply by practicing meditation for months and years. Dozens of research studies show, according to Goleman and Davidson, that advanced meditators—those with 10,000 hours or more of meditation practice—are the people permanently changed. They also are the people more likely to experience a number of awakened states, permanently and in passing.

Third, these “shortcuts” almost always require a spiritual director for safety. This often means a guru, priest, or psychologist physically available to you regularly. Otherwise, you can open yourself to serious psychological (and occasionally physical) harm—and to lower, darker emotions and energies from within yourself or others. Such forces not only are hard to handle but also can distract you from meditation unless you have someone experienced in them to guide you.

Your Best You

The five primary methods in this chapter are safe using normal caution. Ultimately, seek your True Self/Ultimate Presence. It will guide you far better than your own reason, emotions, or even intuition can. It gradually can become your most important Self. The payoff is enormous. You become an ever more perfect version of your best “you” than you can imagine.

Lesson 7: Darknesses

Pains, Despairs, Evil, and Drives



The avatar Rama and his wife, Sita, trample the demon Ravana.

There is a saying that good luck comes from marrying in the rain because it's harder to pull apart a wet knot. Similarly, when we are "married" to our darknesses, pulling them apart may seem like tugging hopelessly at cold, wet knots. They and their sources within us are storms in our lives.

Storms of Life

Do Hindu practices recognize life's thunders and lightning? Yes.

Hinduism long has divided the powers of the universe into three forces: the creative energies, called *Brahma*; the power of sustaining, *Vishnu*; and a destroying or removing action, *Shiva*. The darkneses in life often were represented in Hindu scriptures as the work of *Shiva* the Destroyer: a sort of divine, abrasive thunder and lightning that scares away useless thoughts and emotions, tears apart false selves, and floods your mistaken pathways in life. Myths say that when *Shiva's* third eye opens, all before it turns to ashes.

All such Hindu scriptural tales are ciphers or symbols for the very real pains, despairs, and seemingly implacable human drives that each of us eventually must experience. Sometimes they even help people learn better meditation: for example, pain—however unpleasant—can be an impressive focuser of your attention, acting as a type of inescapable mindfulness. Often, too, darkneses act as reminders to us of the need for a better inner life. In my “householder” years of meditating, I often was so busy with family and job that I would not remember to meditate until pain or a major difficulty reminded me.

And sometimes in the middle of the night even now, I cannot sleep: I am engulfed by my darkneses. And my small worry-self lures me: “Keep thinking about your troubles!” I willfully force my way through this hard to see stone wall to meditate. Then, finally, my mind calms, my body relaxes, and I fall asleep—or, sometimes, I rise to mindfully breathe, exercise, and move about, and then sleep later. And after doing this, in the next day or week, rested and relaxed, often I gain a sudden intuitive knowing of an answer to what was darkening me during that night of inner storm. That’s when I tell myself, “All that wasted worry—I should have meditated sooner.”

Meditation cannot always easily destroy every darkness. However, it can help you in some of life’s thunderstorms. Here are some methods you can try.

Pains

When physical pain and discomfort come, the temptation is to

freeze—tighten muscles and will—against them. Mindfulness and meditation combat this by letting your muscles relax, even if initially, upon doing so, the pain and discomfort may feel worse.

You may suffer from temporary or permanent pain—mild, moderate, or advanced. It may come from an accident, illness, surgery, migraine, or other source. You always should ask for medical assistance. Can meditation help? Yes—sometimes, usually as a supplement to medical and physical therapies.

One of the most important functions meditation can serve in continuing or intermittent pain is to help you come out of its storm and be the Observer. If you have not learned to do this yet, learn to set yourself apart from the pain. Rather than react to it, step aside. Don't fight it or work to control it. Rather, take a deep breath—or even begin a series of meditation breaths—and start observing the pain as if you were an outsider examining it.

To observe, you may have to plunge into it, at first, so you can fully examine it. Let it happen (if you can't avoid it). See and feel each aspect of it no matter how difficult, and get to know it—become your pain's "frenemy."

Once you have done this in a meditation session, then back off from the pain and simply observe it. Gradually disentangle streaming thoughts and emotions that it causes. As you learn to clear or diminish these, then you also can examine how different parts of your body react to the pain, and unhook those body parts from reacting.

Goleman and Davidson say in *Altered Traits* that in their informal surveys of hundreds of meditators, those with sufficient experience usually can feel their own heartbeats. Learn to do this, and then direct it to—feel it in—your body parts around your pain. Finally, send this awareness into the pain itself. You will be sending additional blood into it, thus extra oxygen. This sometimes can help alleviate some of the pain or even assist in healing it.

Again, these basic steps are as follows:

Observing Your Pain

1. Become the Observer.
2. Try deep breathing. (See “Lesson 3.”) Avoid fast, shallow breaths.
3. Disconnect thoughts, emotions, and body parts from the pain.
4. Learn to feel your heartbeat around and in the pain.

In addition, regarding breathing, some advanced yogis claim that you can alleviate pain better by learning to take longer inhalations and exhalations. You can learn to do this—just as deep-sea divers with no breathing apparatuses do—by learning to extend your inhalation by an additional second when practicing breathing. A normal meditation breath is a cycle of 10-12 seconds of inhalation and exhalation combined. Learning a cycle of a full minute is not unusual, over time, and with dedication you can extend it to two minutes or more.

Other mindfulness activities to deal with pain exist:

Additional Anti-Pain Methods

1. Aim a soothing, healing color such as emerald green or white on/in the pain.
2. Merge a similar image, external or internal, on or around the pain.
3. Send the vibrations of a deep humming sound or chant to the pain. Humming in and of itself can create endorphins, natural opiates that can decrease pain.
4. Use any repetitive movement mindfully that feels healing in the area of the pain.
5. A mindful muscle-warming exercise, especially a nature walk or run, may help.
6. Try slow, firm massage in a circular motion in or around the pain.
7. Do you apply heat or cold? Observe the experience mindfully.
8. Consider taking MBSR trainer-certified classes: see “Anxiety” in “Lesson 5.”

Some people wonder whether marijuana is helpful. Whether it aids or prevents mindfulness may depend on how it affects you as an individual. For pain relief, some users swear by it. However, as of this writing (2022), the science of it remains unsettled. The International

Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), for example, stated in 2021 that there is not enough quality research to fully answer this question.

Despairs

In Hinduism and indeed in most world religions and spiritual systems—and in life itself—plenty of sorrow, woe, and destruction exists. In meditation, the despairs can feel very personal. Here are three in particular that make meditation more difficult, and how meditating sometimes may ease them: the “Dark Night of the Soul,” depression/PTSD, and a feeling of evil.

1. Dark Night of the Soul: The “dark night of the soul” is a famous phrase—and experience—in Western meditation. It certainly exists in Hinduism and the rest of the East, too. However, Western Roman Catholic Christians have been particularly adept at describing—and experiencing—it.

“I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling; no, No One. Alone. The darkness is so dark,” says Mother Teresa of India in *Come Be My Light*. She neither was depressed nor had lost her faith, but she experienced the dark night of the soul for over half a century. Two other modern Roman Catholic mystics who have outlined it are Thomas Merton in *New Seeds of Contemplation* and Teilhard de Chardin in *The Divine Milieu*.

Medieval Catholic mystics also detailed it. St. John of the Cross’s book *Dark Night of the Soul* says, “Both the sense and the spirit, as though under an immense and dark load, undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief.” His friend and companion mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, wrote of similar sorrows, as did the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* two centuries earlier, as did twentieth-century mystics Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin.

For most, the darkness does not last long: a day, a week, several months. Sometimes it recurs over a period of years. It is not depression, for you are likely to carry on with a normal outward energy for

living. However, inwardly, during meditation or, simply when alone, you doubt everything in the midst of a debilitating loss of assurance and no positive feeling. You think nothing is sacred, nothing stands on a firm ground, as you question everything.

How do you counter it? You simply keep meditating. In meditation, let your encounter with the dark night empty you. Give up your turmoils, your doubts, and embrace the emptiness. Learn to clear yourself of the dark night's components. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* instruct a person in how to clear themselves of their ideas, memories, and emotions. The dark night is filled with doubts, fears, and many other negative emotions. To become fully clear, you must give up or reject, for a time, all rational and emotional thought and feeling.

If you need help—if it seems too much to bear alone—then find someone with whom to talk, someone who can listen with an open mind. Or write about it. Express your doubts. You may decide, later, to throw away what you have written, but for the present, it is fine to let your feelings out on paper, the better to examine them and reject them in meditation. In Roman Catholic meditation, this often is called the *Via Negativa*—the Negative Path. But it is a path with an ending. Exercise, eat healthfully...and meditate.

2. Depression and PTSD: Another type of darkness is depression. There are several kinds.

The most common, perhaps, is SAD or “seasonal affective disorder,” also known as the “winter blues.” It strikes a significant minority of people to some degree. Meditation won't help it much. The problem is that those who suffer from it tend to meditate less—dealing with it can aid better or more frequent meditation. It is biological. Too little sunlight prevents the body from making its vitamin D. Many handle this problem by sunbathing, using a sunlamp, or taking vitamin D supplements during cooler months.

Another form of depression is the temporary severe depression that strikes some people for several months. It appears to be biologically based, a “correction” the body makes in its feelings. Like SAD, it

tends to decrease meditation, so dealing with it—usually with a mix of counseling and prescription drugs—can help you and improve your meditation. Usually, it lifts on its own within several months.

A third type of depression is the ongoing mild, moderate, or severe depression from which a small percentage of people suffer. And a fourth problem—not in itself depression but often existing hand in hand with it—is PTSD or “post-traumatic stress disorder.” PTSD happens to some people who have lived through high-stress situations such as war or regular physical abuse.

For both groups, a new method of psychological counseling is developing that is under the direct supervision of a psychologist, combining psychedelic meditation with talk therapy. Yale University is trying ketamine sessions for some depressions. And MAPS—the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies—is experimenting with MDMA, also known as Ecstasy, at over a dozen North American sites. Johns Hopkins University also has had POSITIVE results with psilocybin psychotherapy in helping depression and addiction.

For depression, meditation and some of its forms such as prayer and chanting might help especially if you have a history of using them. In other words, if you already have a spiritual life established, try using it more. And one form of meditation—highly active *hatha* (physical) yoga—especially may help because of its intense exercise. However, medical help and counseling should take precedence.

3. Evil: Some people encounter strange darkneses that look, sound, or feel like evil. Hinduism and other religions have populated their versions of hell with all kinds of demons and other evil beings. In addition, people have felt malevolent forces, energies, clouds, or beings in human and even animal shapes.

A little-known fact in the West is that the Hindu and other Eastern pictures and three-dimensional facemasks of grimacing creatures actually are depictions of good forces angrily scaring away evil. Similarly, the gargoyles and scary-looking faces on ancient Western churches—for example, Paris’ Cathedral of Notre Dame—are not of

evil beings, but rather are carvings meant to frighten demons away.

In meditation, you also can “scare” evil away. What is evil? It is useless here to write theological arguments about the nature and existence of evil. Meditation deals with what you experience and feel in real time. You may be one of a large minority, possibly even a majority, of people who have at some point in their lives had a feeling of the presence of evil. If this happens to you in meditation, here are several techniques to counter it—no matter what you may believe about it.

Dealing with Feelings of Evil

1. Practice a strong breathing meditation until the feeling dissipates.
2. Use a clearing meditation: throw it out of your mind, or wall it off.
3. Build a love energy force in your heart and aim it at the darkness.
4. Give the darkness to your True Self/Ultimate Presence, or highest chakra.
5. Call upon a spiritual figure associated with love. Give it the evil.
6. Avoid attaching negative emotions to the evil feeling: don't add energy to it.
7. Use a purifying image or mantra that you aim at it, or that you use to build a safe bubble.
8. Exercise vigorously (Patanjali's “hot” movement) to keep it away.
9. Choose freeform (spoken creatively) prayer, aloud or internal.

Evil is a complex, whirling swirl of dark sharpness like a tornado of thorny trees. If you develop, over many weeks and months, a strong practice in calming, clearing, and/or loving meditations, you can use those clearing energies to push out or dissolve such whirlwinds.

Body Drives

In meditation, body drives are curious things. They may feel like implacable walls or giant rocks that cannot be budged. We learn such feelings about our drives when we are children: they are set in stone, we are told, for everyone, controllable outwardly only by strong will. However, it *is* possible to deal with them by meditation. Four body drives in particular can be very vexing to the act of meditation itself.

But there are ways to fight or change them:

Four Body Drives That Hinder Meditation

1. Resistance to or avoidance of meditating
2. Sleepiness or drowsiness whenever you meditate
3. Desire (for food, friends, sex, etc.) that crowds out meditation
4. Overexcitation/impatience that makes meditation too difficult

Must you become an ascetic to deal with body drives? Many spiritual systems hold dear the “ideal holy person”: the lonely monk or nun in her religious order’s cell, or in a desert cave or perhaps begging for food from village to village, a thin, impoverished but happy believer with no personal body drives.

Hinduism does have such ascetics. However, ancient and medieval India also developed a sophisticated health system called *Ayurvedic* medicine so that you could live positively with the drives, rather than deny them—much like the developments of modern medicine and psychology. And many Hindu meditation teachers are gentle about guiding their followers in dealing with their body drives. Here are several ways that you, on your own, can deal with the drives:

Meditating with the Body Drives

1. Try, first, to clear your mind and emotions, if possible. Choose guidelines in life that help moderate your body drives (no excessive food, alcohol, drugs, etc.). And in meditation, learn to work with higher energy centers within yourself before attempting to meditate upon the drives.
2. If sleepiness or overexcitation causes you to stop meditating, choose a different place, time, or method.
3. If you have a resistance or avoidance to meditation but still hope to do it, then set up small steps in your mind: imagine where, when, and how you will start. Place yourself there several times without meditating. Then, finally, meditate for a few minutes the first time, a few more the second, etc.
4. If you desire a companion for meditating, find a friend or group.
5. Take advantage of desire for food: rewarding yourself afterward!

6. Regarding some drives, you can meditate *during* your engagement in them: e.g., meditate while eating, having sex, or enjoying others' companionship.
7. To better meditate (and live life), continue to moderate the drives to fit ethics, social customs, and your own health. Body drives have a purpose: better survival. They offer warnings, prompts for action, and intuitive choices for healing. Don't ignore them totally.
8. However, if you can't stop a body drive from controlling you too much, then meditate upon it.
9. In advanced meditation, confront body drives with your True Self/Presence as if the drive were an emotion. Become its observer, disassemble it, and clear it away. It will come back at another time, but you then will know better whether it is needed and have more control in letting it happen.

Light in the Darkness

The darknesses usually yield to some light. At first, they may seem like insurmountable foes, unmoving, mountainous. But many of them, sooner or later, are susceptible to interventions using mindfulness and concentrated meditation.

The shadows sometimes are very deeply based in the body—how your genes and atoms work. For this reason, such deep gloom often may require medical or other therapeutic help. However, much of this murk also is part of our *semi*-autonomic body systems. “Semi” means we can learn some degree of control over them.

Their walls crack and open up to small amounts of light peeking in; the wild mountains suddenly have trails. And as you advance ever further on the pathways of meditation—in years and total hours—increasingly you can bring the sun evermore to shine on them.

Lesson 8:

Pleasures

The Arts, People, Sex, Nature, and Love



The avatar Ganesha, the dancing, joyful elephant of beginnings

How many of you saw the title of this Lesson and wanted to read it first? No wonder! Any statement that there actually can be heavenly joy on earth sounds enticing.

And it's true. Great beauty, a deep connection with others, sensuality, the healing bliss of nature and of love—all of these are spiritual energies in normal human lives. And you actually can make them happen. They are a form of "pleasure meditation" because they draw you into giving your mindful, focused attention to what you enjoy.

Hindu practices allow for as much joy in life as there is suffering. Their mystics teach the attainability of several ultimate pleasures. One is the ultimate experience of *Satchidananda*, or “Peace-Strength-Bliss/Joy/Love.” Another is *dharmamegha*, mentioned by Patanjali and described in ancient texts as an inner vibrant rain or fire. *Samadhi* and *nirvana* (the latter named by one of Hinduism’s greatest teachers, Buddha) are, in their more advanced states, full of peace, strength, and bliss.

How can you experience some of this? Many activities stimulate endorphins, the body’s natural chemical for making us feel good, and many meditation states—even humming—can start endorphins flowing. Here’s when, where, and how such positive states may occur, and how you can encourage them.

Meditation on the Arts

I love going to art museums. As I study a Van Gogh or an ancient Greek carving, for example, sometimes my appreciation swells into a special moment when the work of art reflects the whole universe of beauty within it.

A similar experience can happen when you follow the leading edge of completely engaging music, film, dance, a book, or so many other types of the arts. You don’t have to be an aficionado of the high arts: the simple pleasures of a country-music ballad or a finely-turned handmade pottery vase can offer equally profound feelings. Appreciating nature and fine foods from simple to complex are additional art forms to enjoy.

How can you use the arts to meditate? Here are some methods:

Artful Awareness

1. Enjoy it! Plunge into the pleasure of the beauty; let it expand inside, or enter into it.
2. Do not immediately start thinking, remembering, comparing, and contrasting—save that for later.

3. Be mindful of the positive way you feel and how you arrive at this feeling. Can you recreate the feeling later by remembering the art experience? Focus on the highest, best, or most intense positive point.
4. Observe yourself experiencing the feeling.
5. If you have experience as a meditator, connect the feeling with your True Self/Presence.
6. If you create the arts, set aside time from objective creation and organization, and meditate mindfully on your art work's high, positive effect on others.
7. Nature is art, too! Treat nature in the same way, sight, sound, touch, smell, and the taste of nature's foods.

The Great Pleasure of Company

I played in a high school rock band, and a single moment one night still is one of my best memories. The four of us were singing and playing to a very appreciative floor of dancers. Then it happened. A fusion. Suddenly I felt as if we all were part of a greater moving being. Their dance movements were controlling our hands working on our instruments and our vocal cords, just as much as we were causing their dancing. We were one great, united organism.

Why do so many people meditate, pray, sing soulfully, or otherwise focus their attention together, in groups? It helps focus their attention. First, you don't have to worry about what you'll do—a teacher guides you. Second, it is more comforting to many to be in a group. Third—perhaps most important—group meditation tends to make the resulting experiences more intense.

All three of these elements happen in nonmeditation places and times, too, sometimes becoming so intense that they create unexpected psychic and spiritual experiences. And a "group" can be just two people or many.

Moments like my rock-band experience happen at events rarely

recognized for their “spiritual unity.” It’s not just musical events. For example, it can be sports events, where ten thousand people might suddenly rise as one in a great burst of joy and strength as their team scores. Or it can happen between two people when they look knowingly in each other’s eyes, aware of exactly what the other person is thinking and feeling. These “unity” moments, these instances of shared knowing and acting, are glimpses into higher and deeper worlds. How can we encourage them using meditation?

Meditating on and with People

1. Treat social events, big or small, mindfully like art events above.
2. Find the special moments with others and give those instances your focused attention.
3. Remember them later and meditate upon the overall uniting feeling.
4. While socializing, mindfully clear yourself of distracting thoughts and emotions, especially negative ones. Imagine all of you exist in a clear bubble of positivity.
5. Learn to meditate in your own favorite ways, unnoticed, around others.
6. What is your best feeling around a loved one? Meditate upon that.
7. Share a meditation with someone else: agree to meditate simultaneously, or even within each other’s higher energy centers. (However, always first reach an agreement on concentrating within each other.)
8. In a group, feel free to focus mindfully in its center—for example, in the center between all of your hearts, or the central point above all of your heads.

Sexual Pleasures

Some spiritual systems suggest complete abstinence from sex. Not here! The Hindus are famous for perhaps the first lengthy sex manual is history, the *Kama Sutra*. They also developed forms of

sexual meditation in one type of *Tantra* yoga, or yoga focusing on the body's energy centers. Other religions have a place for sex, too. The Christian Old Testament's Song of Songs (Song of Solomon), considered scripture by Jews and Muslims, too, offers the deep sensuality of two lovers discovering each other. In the Christian New Testament, St. Paul exhorts his followers to marry so they will "not burn."

One night when I was seventeen, parking in a car outdoors with my girlfriend, we experienced a kiss with stars in it. During an especially long, deep, very mindful kiss, suddenly I felt like I had joined with her, gone inside her, and was experiencing my lips on hers from her own viewpoint. It was so amazing and jolting that I drew back. I looked in her eyes, and she in mine, and then she slid down in the seat and softly said, "Wow!" Above us, through the car's windshield, the stars were shining.

Why can sex be so great? Newberg and d'Aquili (1999) point out that even the deepest and most primitive layers of the brain are geared to ritual movement" (86). Psychotherapist Marianne Bentzen says in *Neuroaffective Meditation*, "Rhythmic ritual dances and prostrations...stimulate and synchronize large areas of the brain. Bentzen's statement suggests that when two mating humans synchronize their repeating movements, "cascades of...pleasurable neurotransmitters...spread experiences of intense presence and joy." Such intense pleasure can be addictive, hence the need for caution in becoming addicted to a merely casual partner who gives you such an experience.

Body Meditation is not about denying the body, but rather using physical abilities and needs to gain clearer, purer functioning of your own biology. One scientific study says frequent male ejaculation may clear cancer from the prostate. Male and female scientists also list many benefits of orgasm for both men and women. Sex, it turns out, may be a physical tonic for the body's organs and brain chemistry.

On the other hand, this does not mean you should engage in unregulated sex any more than you would throw caution to the wind when eating, drinking alcohol, or exercising (such as playing

“scratch” games of full-contact American football or hockey with no helmet). If a certain occasion, person, or type of sex causes you to have more troubles rather than fewer, then stop it. Avoid addictions to bad foods, alcohol, drugs, and bad people—and to so much sex that you have no time for other parts of life (such as meditating)!

But if you enjoy sex in healthy, positive, loving exchanges or self-stimulation, then mindful practice of it can increase your pleasure and intensity and give your body experiences that otherwise may be available only to meditation adepts. Here are some methods for practicing “safe meditation sex”:

Safe Sexual Meditations

During (or before or after) sex, try any one or combination of these focuses:

1. Be mindful of each small step and instant. Focus on the sensations.
2. Clear your mind of ideas, memories, and distracting emotions.
3. Mindful massage, regular or sensual, can help.
4. In massage, foreplay, or intercourse, gently guide your partner toward what works: otherwise, you will become distracted.
5. Try looking into each other’s eyes if it aids mindfulness.
6. Experiment with building love power in your heart to focus on your partner.
7. Build love power within your heart and focus it on both you and your partner.
8. Give yourself over to any strong, positive experience beyond words: e.g., great love, happiness, or joy; peace or calm; or inner strength and steadiness.
9. Try meditating on your own higher chakras. Reach an agreement to focus on each other’s chakras, deciding which ones and when to start. You also can decide whether to touch each other’s chakras, rubbing gently or firmly.
10. If you have no agreement on concentrating within each other, then feel free to focus on a midpoint between you: e.g., halfway

between the crowns of your heads or the centers of your hearts.

Final warning (sex seems to need lots of cautions!): Using these methods with a partner you do not know well can cause unpleasant psychological aftereffects and relationship addictions. The French, for example, have a nickname for orgasm and its immediate aftermath: *La petite mort* or “little death.” This is because it sometimes can cause a feeling of having died. Far worse negative experiences are possible, too. They are why loving sex in a respectful relationship is a minimum for good results in meditating using sex.

Nature Meditation

Some scientific studies suggest that being in nature (sometimes called “nature bathing”) conveys some of the same benefits physically as beginning meditation. Scientists tell us being in nature is calming, it lowers the heart rate and blood pressure, and it relieves stress. Imagine the benefits of combining it with meditation!

I camp in a tent for six weeks each year. One favorite place is mild with warm days and little breeze; the other can be so wild that sometimes the rains blast horizontally in winds of 40 mph or more. In both places, I feel the sun and moisture on my skin, and I pay attention to animals, insects, flowers, trees, and leaves. If a plant or creature interests me, I’ll stop and watch it with little or no thinking, trying to absorb its beauty and its essence. I come home each year very rested.

Hinduism has an explanation for the movements of nature. It declares that the universe started with a bang, or rather, more like a spontaneous dance. The dancing figure on the cover of this book illustrates this creation: a joyous beginning first started by a bunch of tiny, vibrating, humming strings (as with a musical instrument or vocal cords). They grouped into three main tendencies, the Hindu *gunas*. They are like three types of stringed instruments—called *sattva* (rising illumination), *rajas* (willful energy), and *tamas* (repetition, sameness).

Interestingly, this dancing creation of the universe sounds very much like a currently popular theory in physics. It’s called “string

theory” and includes vibrating strings smaller even than atoms. Check it out by searching for it online.

When I live in the woods for a while, I feel like I can get up each morning, stretch, and then say, “This is going to be a *willful energy* day,” or “Everything feels locked into *repetitive sameness* this morning.” It’s like reading an inner weather report of what is around me.

In addition, my meditations sometimes seem easier, more powerful, in nature. Try any one or more of these methods while walking, sitting, or lying in nature:

Meditating in Nature

1. Be mindful of each small instant of what nature does, and what you do in it.
2. Take deep, heartfelt breaths, smelling the scents.
3. Choose a particularly beautiful object—tree, cloud, flower, sunset. Watch it deeply, feeling its presence. Let it soak into you.
4. Or do the same with a particular sound in nature, listening as if it were a song.
5. Touch something (without harming it or making it afraid): water, bark, grass, a bug that’s landed on your hand. With your eyes open, observe each smallest part of it; then do so with your eyes closed, imagining you are it.
6. Give yourself a massage in nature, or trade massages with a nature-loving partner.
7. Meditate at home as if you are surrounded by nature.

All You Need Is Love

What is devotional love? The rock group The Beatles had a popular song (one of dozens) in the 1960s-’70s called “All You Need is Love.” The song—and the feeling—were and are wildly popular. Devotional love has been the most popular form of meditation in India for many centuries, perhaps thousands of years, and likely everywhere else, too.

Why is love meditation so popular? Three great reasons: It feels good, even fun. It makes a person feel stronger and more empowered. And it's safe.

In Hinduism, love is centered in the heart itself, or in the middle of the chest directly beside the heart: below, both of them simply are called the "heart center." Choose whichever you like best. You can meditate on "outpouring love" or "inpouring love." Here are some practices:

Love Meditations

Inpourings (Bringing It All In):

1. Start with breathing and calming. Then rest in your heart center.
2. Feel yourself cradled in your heart, safe and comfortable.
3. If distractions come, then from your heart center, use other meditation methods to calm or dissolve them.
4. Think of people or even universal powers who love you and what that feels like.
5. Let that feeling expand. Lie in the very heart of it, full of love.
6. Love your body mindfully in other ways for better health and concentration: Massage; in baths, showers, hot tubs, and saunas; dancing or other movements, real or imagined; imagining your body becoming water or feeling it dissolving, et al.

Outpourings (Letting It All Out):

7. Start as above in "1-3."
8. Using breath, your willpower, or even the help of your hands, voice, or imaging, generate a feeling of love.
9. Feed it as if you are building a warm, gentle, but strong fire.
10. Release it into the rest of your body, upward first, then downward.
11. Release it in an ethical direction: toward a person or group in need of help, etc.
12. Or release it toward a spiritual adept to whom you are devoted.
13. Or release it toward your own True Self/Ultimate Presence.

Love is powerful—be prepared for such meditations to change your outlook. Usually this will be for the better, making you a warmer, more compassionate person. However, if you direct your “love power” outward or down in yourself, you may encounter resistances. Love power can break through them in meditation; just be ready.

Summarizing Pleasure

Are you an emotional person who carries burdens of discomforting negative memories and thoughts? Bearing a daily—or even hourly—burden of such baggage is a very common problem for which people show up in my and other meditation classes.

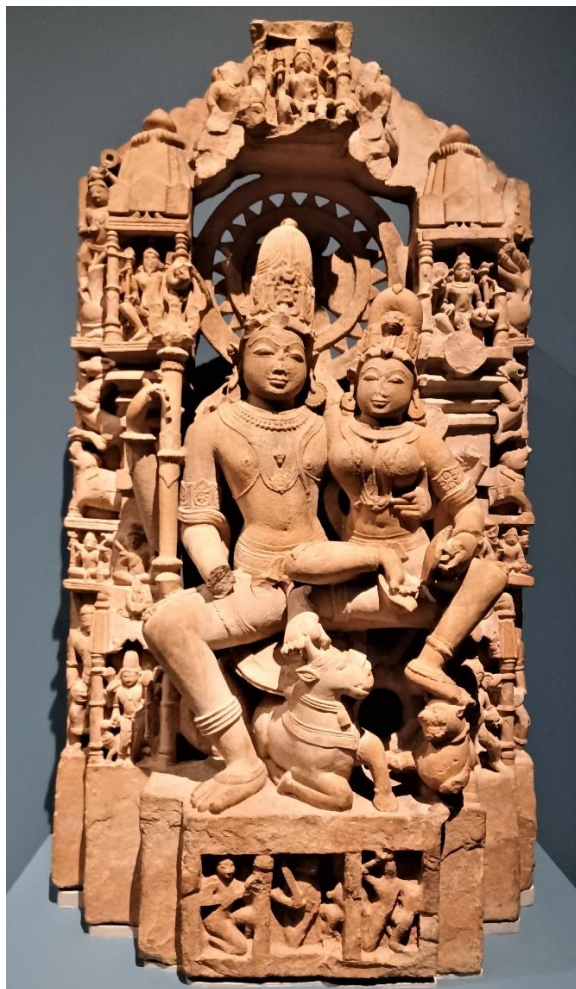
A large part of the world, perhaps a majority, drowns or replaces negative emotions by using alcohol, drugs, sex, unending online activities, or other forms of self-medication. Such attempts at escape are very understandable. Somewhat healthier methods are to drown yourself in work, in hard exercise, or in constant self-expression.

But facing your emotional storms may better help you grow. And mindfully finding pleasures sometimes can help dissolve your problems, at least for a time. This is why some people throw themselves into pleasure: as a form of meditation to cure their emotional ills.

The strengths of mindful pleasure are that you gain more practice in focused attention, you develop a desire for more meditation, and you prepare your mind and body for stronger energies that can fill and heal you in some meditation states. Disadvantages exist, too: you can develop too much attachment or even addiction to these pleasures, act unethically, and replace the needs of your spirit and body if you are not careful.

But for some, the pursuit of pleasure works—or at least can be helpful if done mindfully. The arts, socializing with people, sex, nature, and love are wonderful sources of awakening to higher and deeper states. They are available as methods—as pathways or instruments—for finding greater meaning. Meditation using them is not just okay: it can be wonderful.

Conclusion: What Is Your Journey?



*Shiva and Uma as the first family at the beginning of creation
--Uma-Maheshvara, Minneapolis Institute of Art. Photo by author*

Where do you start? How can you continue? Here are five suggestions.

First, “Have you already begun?” What are you doing now, or have done in the past, that possibly might be called “meditation?”

Have you prayed, chanted, or held an image of great meaning in your mind? Have you been deeply moved by a scene in nature, or by a great experience of visual art, dance, or music? What are the warmest, dearest moments you’ve experienced with other people? After strenuous exercise, have you experienced “runner’s high” or other states of great clarity? Have you bathed in nature or even soaked in hot water until you felt very much at peace? Have you had a specific spiritual experience or feeling?

These are starting points from which to build. Sometimes, the seemingly ordinary turns out to be special. An old yoga story is told of a great guru receiving a new disciple. The guru taught him how to breathe and assigned him the job of doing it several hours each day. After many weeks of this, finally the pupil broke down and exclaimed, “What is the point of my stupid breath?” The teacher calmly replied, “Between exhale and inhale, neither coming nor going, fall into the cracks to find God.”

In more direct language, a small event—a pat on the back when you most need it, a sudden sound that brings you to yourself, beauty that makes you weep—may be the tip of a great flame. Hold your hands to it. Encircle it and be aware. What is it? And what is the difference between it, which is the observed, and you, who is the Observer?

Second: “Experiment!” So many methods are available, a feast with many dishes, a house holding many mansions. Don’t make yourself go in the order you think you should. Choose, instead, what your intuition suggests. Or ask yourself, “What might I love,” “What sounds interesting,” or “What might I be a natural at doing?” Give each a try for a bit, then move to the next. Are you in a hurry? Then try two or three new methods each week.

Eventually, you'll want to adopt one or two main practices. But even then, there's room for trying new ones on occasion. In fact, when you reach more advanced stages of meditation, you will find that some methods overlap and even cause each other. For example, most methods lead eventually to becoming more observant of the flow of consciousness--mindfulness. In the long run, you can choose whatever method you prefer and know that it eventually will take you closer to other types as you move toward your goal.

Third, "What practices work best at several different points in your day?" For example, when you are at work, you might choose just to be observant during certain events (like that daily or weekly meeting you find boring), a type of mindfulness. In another part of your week, perhaps you'll try a regular sitting or walking practice of focusing on a specific energy point like your heart. And maybe every weekend, you'll pursue an experience of music or art that brings you great joy or peace, both of which are close cousins to higher states of consciousness. Dozens of opportunities await you.

Fourth, "How can you read and listen?" You don't need to do them constantly. But most people find books or online materials about meditation—or a good teacher of it—helpful. Read or watch what brings you closer to the heart of your own journey, or find a teacher whose guidance helps you. Or both.

Fifth, as you advance, "Where are the clear spaces or pauses?" In becoming more aware and mindful, you begin to feel, hear, or see a few seconds of unconsciousness that occur between moments of normal awareness. This may happen in several ways: between thoughts or breaths, from emptying your mind, through strenuous exercise, after spontaneous movements, in especially calm moments, and more. Such pauses feel like a tension release. They also are an opportunity. These unconscious instants are a door deeper into yourself—a waiting cloud or pregnant breath of possibility. Observe them, dive in, even invite Presence into them. They can lead to new experiences within you—and new steps on your chosen journey.

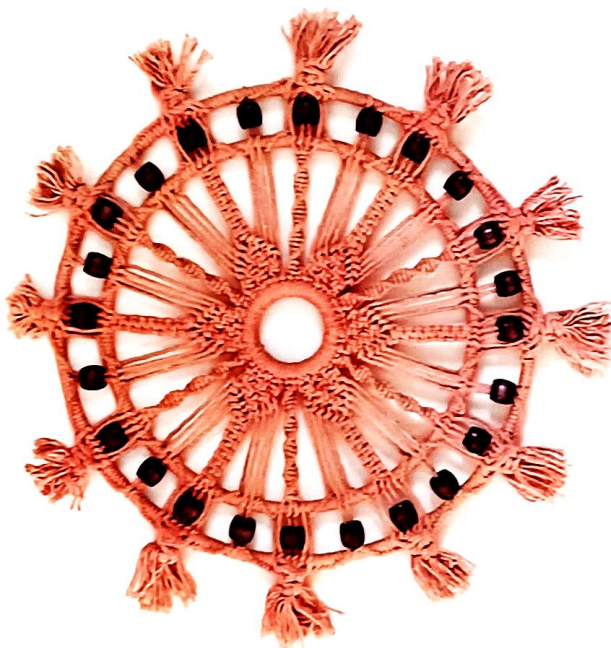
In my own voyage, I've meditated for 60+ years. I started as a young teenager bored to death on a tractor going up and down the same quarter-mile field all day. That experience led me for a few years to more mindfulness of sky and birds, and to the yoga-meditation practice of holding images in my mind. I also began trying prayer methods. In my mid-teens, I turned to existentialist contemplation, then to New Age experimentation.

In my early twenties, during a two-term study with a scholar from India—and trying out methods taught by his guru—I discovered how to focus on the space above my head and in my heart center, as explained in this book. I continue today, even while experimenting on occasion with additional methods.

If you are beginning to meditate, here is your official invitation to become like a weekend diner trying out new restaurants, or perhaps like a kid in a candy shop. Try this; try that. Continue being normal in most of your life. But develop some space and time for meditating. It is your big chance to earn greater calmness, love, body awareness, satisfaction with life, and closeness to Presence. Which would you like to pursue?

Appendix:

Practical Sources from Several Paths



This woven meditation aid is a yantra, a type of mandala, with a center lotus and fires at the wheel's spokes.

By Subject Area

A. SOURCES ON THE SCIENCE OF MEDITATION:

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Scoles, Sarah. "What happens when psychedelics make you see God," *Popular Science*, Nov. 9, 2020, www.pop-sci.com/story/health/psilocybin-hallucinogens-spiritual-science. Accessed 2 Aug. 2021.

B. SOURCES THAT ARE BEGINNERS' GUIDES:

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Keating, Thomas (Christian monk). *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*. Crossroad, 1996.

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C. OTHER SOURCES--LISTED BY TYPE OF SUBJECT:

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Being Present (Hindu/Psychedelic): Dass, Ram (Richard Alpert). *Be Here Now*. Lama Foundation, 1971.

Breath (American, Scientific): See "Nestor" in "Science of Meditation" above.

Breathing (Hindu): Iyengar, B.K.S. *Light on Pranayama: The Definitive Guide*. HarperCollins, 2013.

Breathing, Being Present (Zen Buddhism): Nhat Hanh, Thich. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*. Trans. Mobi Ho. With Eleven Drawings by Vo-Dinh. Mai. Beacon, 1987.

Buddhist Meditation (American Practitioner): Culadasa (John Yates) and Matthew Immergut. *The Mind Illuminated: A Complete Meditation Guide*. Touchstone, 2015.

Chakras: Simpson, Liz. *Chakra Healing (The Book of)*. Sterling, 2013.

Dreams: Morwood, Joel. "The Mystical Interpretations of Dreams." *Center Voice*, Summer-Fall 2003. *Center for Sacred Sciences*, <https://centerforsacredsciences.org/index.php/Articles/the-mystical-interpretation-of-dreams.html>. Accessed 5 June, 2021.

Hindu Yoga Meditation (Clearing the mind, True Self):

Jewell, Richard, *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras: A Western Guide to Ancient Hindu Meditation*. <http://www.YogaSutras.org>.

Satchidananda, Sri Swami, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: Translation and Commentary*. Revised Edition. Integral Yoga, 2020. Online revised edition: 2012, https://d-pdf.com/book/-download-pdf-the-yoga-s%C5%ABtras-of-pata%C3%B1jali-9781938477072#google_vignette. (Note: Ignore the download

button at the top; instead, go below the picture of the book and click on “DOWNLOAD.”) Accessed 1 Nov. 2021.

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About the Author

Richard Jewell has a B.A. in philosophy from Monmouth College, an M.A. in Theology and a Master of Divinity from San Francisco Theological Seminary, and an M.A. in English from St. Cloud State University.

He was a permanent (tenured) college English and Humanities professor, now retired, at Inver Hills College, a school in the MinnState system (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities). In addition to offering courses in writing, literature, and the humanities, he taught religion and philosophy. He also was a full-time composition specialist for five years for the English Department of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

Richard has been meditating using a variety of methods, especially Hindu practices, since 1962. He is experienced in Hindu, Christian, New Age, and Buddhist methods, ancient and modern. He now teaches meditation to college, church, and community groups in Minnesota.

You may download this book at www.BodyMeditation.org. Two other meditation books also are available: www.Meditationary.org—A Dictionary and Beginner’s Guide, and www.YogaSutras.org—A Translation and Western Guide to Ancient Hindu Meditation by Patanjali. Richard’s website is www.RichardJewell.org.

