

Dailyness

How to
Sustain a
Meditation
Practice



Tommy Angelo

DAILYNESS

How to Sustain a *Meditation Practice*

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Why Meditate?

I was 45 years old and ripe for a whole life makeover when I started meditating. One week later, I knew that I wanted and needed to meditate every day of my life. For the first time, I had real hope of getting my act together. If I could stick with it. And that sent me into a panic, because of my history of not sticking with it. So, out of necessity, and to keep the panic down, I strategized from the outset, to protect my practice from whatever might threaten it.

Meanwhile, over in the revenue world, I played poker for a living for many years, and then I became a poker coach who specialized in helping poker players play their best more often. All of my clients received a crash course from me on meditation, and some of them went on to become dedicated practitioners. My heart soared when they told me about watching themselves break free of harmful patterns that seemed utterly unchangeable just weeks before.

Along with their success stories, I shared their disappointment, and sometimes despair, when they lapsed. The frustration of having tasted the fruit of meditation, and then going hungry. Sometimes they asked me to help them restart, and we'd talk about what happened that made them stop, so that it might not make them stop next time. I've helped some non-poker-players too, with their practice. These experiences taught me that some meditation problems are common to all.

It's nearly impossible to start a meditation practice and keep it going. It's like blasting a satellite into orbit. First you have to win an epic battle against inertia. Then you need to make adjustments until you achieve a stable orbit. But if you can do all that, inertia becomes your friend, and you can coast.

This book is here to help you achieve orbit and sustain it. The word *sustain* brings three of its meanings to the context of meditation. It

means *to keep a process going*. It means *to supply nourishment*. And the third meaning of *sustain* that applies to meditation is this: to undergo, to withstand. You keep your practice going by feeding it and withstanding it. This book will show you how.

Why meditate?

My favorite answer to that question is: to reduce unhappiness.

Sure, there are plenty of other answers. People meditate to boost productivity and increase focus. Or to improve their disposition – to make themselves more patient, less irritable, more yielding, less selfish. Other reasons to meditate are to attain spiritual enlightenment and to suppress stress. And then there's plain old curiosity – to see what will happen – because nothing else has worked.

Why do we desire so many changes in ourselves? It's because everyone wants less unhappiness in their lives, and each of the changes I just listed reduces unhappiness, for the meditator, and for the meditator's circle. What drives the changes? It's the simplest thing. Mindful breathing. Every mindful breath has the desired effect of reducing unhappiness.

If you think so too, and if you wish you did more mindful breathing, keep reading.

Here's a glance at the chapters:

First I propose that making a life-long commitment to never lapsing even for one day is a splendid idea.

Then we look at the foundations of a practice: posture, breathing, stillness, mindfulness, stretchy bendy stuff, resources, and community.

Then comes a whole bunch of strategies for staying on the path when you face obstacles such as lack of time, physical discomfort, interruptions, and traveling.

Next is the practice itself, in detail. First, how to begin your day. Then, how to use your intelligence, creativity, and zeal to speckle your days with the benefits of mindfulness.

The book ends with a one-page send-off called: You Have to Want It.

**Things That
Non-Meditators
Do Every Day**

Sleep
Wake up
Eat
Drink
Pee
Wear clothes
Do stuff
Read stuff
Watch stuff
Talk about stuff

**Things That
Daily Meditators
Do Every Day**

Sleep
Wake up
Eat
Drink
Pee
Wear clothes
Do stuff
Read stuff
Watch stuff
Talk about stuff
Sit still

The Dailyness Imperative

It's hard to start a campfire when all you have to work with is matches, moss, and twigs. But once you have a viable flame going, all is well. Just add kindling and logs, and you've got yourself a fire.

After the flames die down, the coal bed stays red-hot for hours. To start a new fire, you need only add kindling and logs to the coals. But if the coals go cold, all the way to gray, then you must start from scratch, huddled over a fragile tepee of twigs.

If you have ever exercised with regularity and then stopped, and then scolded yourself for months for not being able to reignite your fire, then you know what I'm talking about.

Dailyness is about momentum. You have to work to build up momentum, and then once you have it, you can maintain momentum without a huge effort. I'm talking about doing sitting meditation every day, no matter what, so that your coals never go cold.

Not only does dailyness eradicate lapsing, it also clears up any possible confusion. You never have to remember if today is the day you are going to meditate.

Daily sitting will relieve whatever worries you may have about the quality of your sitting. When you know you're going to meditate every day for thousands of days in a row, suddenly there's no pressure. With a lifetime of tomorrows, it doesn't matter how you perform today. You might be steady one day and fidgety the next, or maybe you feel like a slug and you are just going through the motions, grumbling the entire time.

I wrote all of that to say this: GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS!

It is necessary to sit on days when you feel logy and uninspired. Especially then. It doesn't matter if you were out partying like crazy last night. It doesn't matter if you have a cold. It doesn't matter if you traveled halfway around the world. To ensure that you will always have a practice until you can practice no more, you only need one thing: dailyness.

Setting Expectations

*If quick gratification is what you're after,
don't take up violin, or meditation.*

It's a wonderful ambition, to want to play music with grace and ease. And if I were your music teacher, I would want to help you get what you want. But first, you would have to convince me that you intend to practice every day. That's because I know from experience that when adults take up a musical instrument, they are, for the most part, deluded.

"How often do you intend to practice?" I ask.

"Three or four times per week," comes the reply.

At that point I feel duty bound to say, "Your expectations are not realistic. You will not improve fast enough to satisfy your need for progress, and before long you'll skip a few days of practice, and then a few more days, and then you'll quit altogether."

It's the same with meditation.

But let's say you did take guitar lessons and you practiced every day for five years without skipping one day. What would your playing sound like then? Would you have new friends that you jam with? Would it be a hobby you do by yourself? Will you be any good? Will you care?

Starting out, everything would be unknown, except for one thing: After five years of regular instruction and daily practice, you *would* be able to make music come out of that guitar. That's the promise of dailyness, at

anything. Stuff will change, profoundly. Abilities. Knowledge. Perspectives. And you never know where your dailyness will take you next.

Epiphanies and Revelations

When epiphanies and revelations explode into your mind while you're meditating, it's an upper, which means, look out for a downer. And that can come in the form of disappointment.

I like the epiphanies. I want more of those. And lucky me, I get to do this again tomorrow! Man, this dailyness thing rocks!

And then tomorrow comes, and you're doing your meditation, and you're all twitchy and bored, and your mind is miles away from feeling like a happy sage.

And so it goes. Some days will contain your best meditation ever, and most won't. To end disappointment in this regard, set your daily-progress expectation at zero and just show up. This way you can be happy about the good stuff when it happens but not unhappy when it doesn't.

Requirements

Dailyness requires that you be stubborn yet considerate, rigid yet flexible, confident yet afraid.

Stubborn – Meditation is like a weight loss program for losing mental weight. And we know it takes time and perseverance to lose weight. You have to be stubborn about changing, or nothing will change.

Considerate – For you to be comfortable with your practice, the people around you need to be comfortable with it too.

Rigid yet flexible – When you sit in meditation, be firm in your repetitions, while welcoming the unforeseeable detours. And when you

plan time for your practice, be firm with your schedule, while poised to adapt.

Confident – You need to have faith. Faith in what you are doing. You need to believe.

When you sit, do you believe you are doing the best thing for yourself that you can?

When you answer *yes* to that question, you're halfway there.

Do you believe you are going to put out the effort?

Answer *yes* to that, and you're home free.

Yet afraid – You need to be afraid of not meditating. It's a healthy fear to have. Like being afraid of not exercising.

Components of a Practice

Random Acts of Mindfulness

Random acts of mindfulness will power your spiritual train. They are the fuel, and the engine, and the wheels, and the track. Without mindfulness, nothing moves.

Among the nifty features of mindfulness is that you always know when you are being mindful, and you never know when you're not. That's because as soon as you realize you are not being mindful and you think to yourself, *I am not being mindful*, then at that moment, you are mindful, and you know it.

The word *mindfulness* is translated from an ancient word that has also been translated to mean *remembering*.

Mindfulness is remembering.
Remembering to be mindful.

It's a toggle. At every instant, we are either paying attention to what's going on in us and around us, or we aren't. Back and forth we go. That is, if we can...

r e m e m b e r

Here's the Merriam Webster definition of *mindfulness*. What's the scariest word?

Mindfulness is the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis.

Nonjudgmental. What a huge word. It's an integral part of Buddhist teachings: to witness our own thoughts, and to take note of the comparing and rating that goes on, and to develop an awareness of the resultant feelings of dissatisfaction and unease, in ourselves, and others. Then, this awareness allows us to replace our judgments with non-discrimination, sometimes.

The remainder of the dictionary definition of mindfulness, about being aware of what is physically going on around us, is easy to understand, and after some training, not that hard to do. The bigger challenge is embracing and implementing the nonjudgmental angle. That's what seems impossible, at first. And that's why I think that as novices, we earn full marks whenever we "practice heightened awareness on a moment-to-moment basis," even when we can't let go of the judging.

You're on a crowded subway car. The people behind you are shouting their way through a worn-out political debate. It's stupid. It's endless. It's annoying you. You decide to stand straight and inhale and see if you can hear the sounds of their voices and appreciate their humanity without being irritated by their articulated thoughts.

You stand straight. You inhale. And your moment of peace vanishes when one of them speaks again and your mind rebels: *Will they ever stop? And why are they shouting?*

What matters here is that you attempted to let go of your opinions. You practiced pliability.

Note that the word *judging* does not mean: *to judge negatively*. A positive opinion is still a judgment. When you say, "This is the best kale salad I have ever had," you are talking about a bowl of plants. Those plants are not superior to other plants until you say so. Like the people on the subway, in reverse.

Mindfulness works in mysterious ways. But you do have to work it.

Stillness

Water is wet. Fire is hot. Stillness is mindful.

Stillness is a change of sensation and perception that somehow makes things better. You might experience a jolt of vitality, or a wave of gratitude, or a glimpse of clarity that solves a sticky problem. And each time you do it, you are also training for future stillness. It's a win-win-win-win-win.

Ready? Go!

::: one-breath stillness break :::

Standing in an elevator, or sitting in your car, stillness is a fleeting gem that must be earned, and re-earned, each time. The ability to stop moving whenever you want to comes from doing the repetitive work of meditation, which makes sense when you consider that the foremost lesson on how-to-meditate is: sit still.

Intention

The defining feature of “a practice” is the intent to practice. If you commit to attempting to return to mindfulness, then you are a practitioner.

Mindful Breathing

Mindful breathing means awareness of in and out. If, at any given moment, you know whether you are inhaling or exhaling, then at that moment, you are breathing mindfully.

The Straight-Spine Posture

When we breathe, our body takes in oxygen and gives back carbon dioxide. The most efficient breathing occurs when your spine is straight. If you bend a tube, it's harder to push stuff through it.

Place your attention on the spot where your spine comes out of your sacrum. If your lower back feels locked in place, and also totally relaxed, that's what you're after.

At the other end, your spine and tubes are straightest and most relaxed when you "tuck in your chin" by tilting your head slightly down, using only the top vertebrae in your neck.

Several mindful breaths are often needed before the straight spine posture can find itself. One technique is to lift your upper body up when you inhale, and leave it up when you exhale. Do that a few times and you'll be uplifted.

The Four Postures

Straight spines are not just for sitting. You can also assume the position when you are standing, walking, and lying down. In other words, it is always available.

The mindfulness sutra says:

*When walking, the practitioner must be conscious that he is walking.
When sitting, the practitioner must be conscious that he is sitting.
When lying down, the practitioner must be conscious that he is lying down. No matter what position one's body is in, the practitioner must be conscious of that position.*

The first time I read that paragraph, it gave me an aha moment. I had always thought of *good posture* as something you either had or you didn't, like blue eyes, or a full head of hair. Turns out I can have good posture whenever I want to. All I have to do is think of it, and then do it. Just like any other mindfulness.

I recommend that you meditate in each of the four postures every day, to train at being mindful no matter where you are or what you are doing. It doesn't take much. In addition to your sitting practice, if you stand still for ten breaths, and walk as slowly as you can for ten steps, and lie on

the floor for ten breaths, that's about one minute each, dedicated to each posture. That's enough water and sunshine to grow those seeds – if you do it every day.

Your body becomes a mindfulness trigger that follows you everywhere. You stand, and you become aware that you are standing. Then the breathing and uprightness kick in, and you are suddenly less frantic. You walk, the same. You lie down, the same. You sit, the same. For practitioners of the postures, equanimity is commonplace.

Stretchy Bendy Stuff

Stretch Bendy Stuff means doing mindful breathing and mindful stretching at the same time, interspersed with stillness. It includes anything that resembles yoga or tai chi, and can also include sit-ups, pushups, jumping jacks, dancing, hula hooping – whatever gets you going, performed with mindfulness.

As to yoga specifically...

Consider the relationship in music between rhythm and notes. If you play notes with no rhythm, that's just sound. But when you bang out a rhythm on a drum, you are making music, without the use of notes. The essential ingredient of music is rhythm.

It's the same when you do yoga at home, the way I'm suggesting, as part of your meditation. It's natural and common to place emphasis on the notes – the stretching. But it's more musical to stay in touch with the rhythm – the breathing. Each stretch is a meaningless note until it is converted to music by the awareness of breathing in and breathing out.

*Home yoga is like playing guitar.
You don't need to know all the chords to be awesome.*

Input and Reminders

I chose the Buddhist version of meditation after I learned that they have been tweaking it for 2,600 years. Then I went book shopping, in search of must-read classics. Fifteen years and forty books later, I still return to the handful of books that got me going:

The Miracle of Mindfulness – Thich Nhat Hahn

Awakening the Buddha Within – Lama Surya Das

The Heart of Buddha's Teaching – Thich Nhat Hahn

Wherever You Go, There You Are – Jon Kabat-Zinn

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind – Shunryu Suzuki

I can grab any of those books, open to any page, read for a few minutes, and be better off. We all need a steady stream of input and reminders to keep our practice strong. We don't need much. But we do need it often. I like to mark up my books during first reading so that next time through I can hop to the parts I liked best. And there's so much more than books now. YouTube is a rich resource. Sound! Faces! Voices!

Set up something that works for you, to keep the input coming in. Reminders are everything.

Sangha

Buddhist communities of monks and nuns are called *sangha*. In recent decades, the usage of *sangha* has expanded to mean any associations you have that are centered around meditation practice.

The people who made up the word *sangha* are long dead. They could not fathom – none of us could, until it happened – the grouping of like-minded folks made possible by the internet. Thousands of websites and apps are dedicated to some aspect of meditation. Your sangha could be an online discussion forum where you ask questions and read about other people's experiences. Or a group on Facebook. Or an email pal.

For anyone plugged into the modern e-world, sangha is all around you. And for physical engagement, meditation centers provide opportunities to sit in group meditation, and to listen to spiritual talks. All of this is potentially high-grade sangha. To which I would like to add a word of caution, pertaining to impermanence...

If your practice is propelled by your association with one teacher or one group, you are at risk of calamity within your practice when life drift separates you from your human resources. The teachings remind us that nothing lasts, including relationships. I recommend that you establish a home practice and view it as bedrock. That's what stays with you right to the end. Your sangha relationships, in person and online, are added to that. They come and go, as decades go by. Your practice needs to be rooted in you. Capable of independence. Not reliant on others. Only then can you have a good chance at dailyness until death.

Medding

Medding is a catch-all word that refers to anytime someone comes back to or remains in the present by way of putting attention on what is observable in the herenow. Meditation is medding. Yoga is medding. As are all random acts of mindfulness, such as mindful standing, sitting, walking, lying down, eating, drinking, hearing, listening, and stopping. The word medding also applies to observing your own thoughts and feelings as they happen.

And of course medding includes breath awareness, such as following the ins and outs, or counting, or belly breathing, or just noticing.

Medding is the sustenance that sustains a practice.

I made this word up out of necessity, for when I help people with their practice. So desperate was I for a catch-all verb that I would say things like:

If you had mindfulness on the plane, you might not have screamed at the cab driver.

Compare that to:

If you had medded on the plane, you might not have screamed at the cab driver.

Here are a few more examples of this word in action:

Monks are medders who med all day.

I stood very still and medded in the cereal aisle at the grocery store and wow, that's a colorful place.

I haven't medded all day and I feel like crap.

And it works as a noun:

Thank goodness for medding!

Overcoming Obstacles



My friend Eileen wrote this to me:

THERE'S NO FUCKING WAY I CAN MEDITATE RIGHT NOW I JUST WOKE UP AND HAD COFFEE AND I HAVE TO GO TEACH AND I'M HYPER AND I WON'T CONCENTRATE OR BE MINDFUL AND THIS IS AN IMPOSSIBLE DEMAND THAT I SIT AND DO NOTHING BEFORE I LEAVE THE HOUSE ON THIS VERY BUSY DAY.

And then I meditated :)

This chapter is about overcoming meditation obstacles such as lack of time, physical pain, travel, and depression. And it's about dealing with the people in your life as they try to deal with you and your practice. You will have your own assortment of snags, large and small, and they will change as time passes. Managing your obstacles is where your skills at being *rigid, yet flexible* will be honed and tested.

Finding Time

To allow for all lifestyles and schedules, I am going to define *morning* as the portion of your day that follows your main sleep.

When to meditate is a no-brainer: Do it in the morning. Best is to do it first thing, before you engage the world.

Think of yourself as a violin, and each day is a new concert. When should you tune up? Before the curtain rises? Or during the show?

But I don't have time in the morning.

If you say so, then I believe you. I believe that you currently do not have enough time in your mornings to meditate. I also believe, actually, I know, that you could make the time, by waking up earlier.

How much earlier?

You need to wake up one hour before everyone else.

I am pausing.

For that to sink in.

If you live alone, same solution. Rise one hour earlier than you do now.

If that means going to bed an hour earlier than ever before, and if that means totally revamping your existing habits that are set in stone, well, you have two choices. Change the habits, or abandon your hope for a daily practice.

Finding time is not about sacrifice. It's about adding on to your existing wake-up routines, at the front end. You *can* have it all – solitude, and connectivity. We all have the same 24 hours, and lots of busy people do what I'm suggesting. They give themselves an hour in the morning. It's not that big a deal.

Why does it have to be an hour? Why can't I wake up half an hour earlier?

Because a half-hour allowance will feel rushed. And feeling rushed is the opposite of what you're setting out to do here. Let's take a look...

Before you meditate, you need to wake up. You need to be not groggy. By the time you pee and jog-in-place and drink coffee or whatever it takes to undo your sleepiness, you've got maybe 17 minutes left to attempt to still yourself. And there's an important email you need to write, tugging on your mind the whole time. Or you're angry at someone. Or you really need to eat something. Or defecate. Bottom line, you're not settled during your sit, not even close.

By not settling, your mind is performing exactly according to spec. It's just doing what it always does. Thinking, feeling, whispering stories in your ear, making plans. So overwhelming is the mind that even though you are conspicuously seated in a meditation posture, you are not aware that you are not aware of your mental activity.

On mornings like that, which are inevitable, how many mindful breaths will you draw during your practice? Possibly zero. That's what you're up against, with a 30-minute window.

It's audacious to think that we can tame our minds, given their history of totalitarian rule. But as it turns out, we can. *If we give it enough time and patience.* The power of an hour is that you have time for stops and starts – time for mental laziness – time for busy brain – time to poop – time to read and learn about meditation options – with many minutes remaining for periods of sustained breath awareness and stillness. There's time for a 20 to 30 minute sitting meditation, plus the other things you're going to want to do after you read the *Morning Meditations* chapter. With an hour, there's time for whatever you please. And you know it. Nothing needs to happen fast. Nothing needs to happen at all. Every day. In your private fort. That you built for yourself. Using nothing but time and space.

Okay okay, I'll schedule an hour as my default. But what about days when I only have half an hour?

When you find yourself with only half an hour before human contact, that's when you need to step up your game. There's no time today for lazy brain. Now your objective is to wake up with a purpose: to cram as much mindfulness as you can into your precious minutes alone. You do this by applying your best effort and attitude toward paying attention to all of your movements and all of your breaths for the whole half hour, including while you pee, make coffee, etc.

What if I oversleep and I'm running late and I have no time to meditate?

In that case, you play a simple game. It's called *Keep the Coal Bed Hot*. Here's my best tip...

Where is the one place you can rely on being alone every day of your life? I'll give you a hint. It's a small room, with a porcelain stool (after you put the lid down) that is well suited for sitting on to meditate. Just leave your cell phone in your purse or pocket, and donate some time to your sanity.

What if all I want to do is give meditation a test drive, without some huge commitment. What should I do?

What you should do is something, anything, anytime. One mindful breath is infinitely more than none. If an idea in this book makes you think, "I can do that," then jot it down, and make plans to do it. Time of day doesn't matter. And no amount is too small.

First you say go all-in and do an hour, then you say do any tiny amount. Which is it?

Both.

I still don't see why I couldn't do my sitting meditation in the middle of my day.

Several reasons...

You can't sustain dailyness for decades with a mid-day sitting schedule because any day could take an unpredictable turn that derails you. Something super fun might come up – a rare and special event that you would forever regret saying no to. So you don't. Or maybe you have kids, and money is tight, and a lucrative now-or-never opportunity arises that will have lasting effects – especially if you miss it. So you don't.

Why would you want to design your practice so that you'll have to choose between meditation and fun? Or between meditation and money? Over and over and over? You would need to double your meditation time to handle the stress brought on by your meditation schedule.

For your meditation to be easy – for it to be something you look forward to doing – it needs to be removed from everything else. That's why you do it first.

And here's a statistical motive. If meditation rates to improve the hours that follow it, but not the hours that precede it, then if you meditate first thing every day, all of your waking hours will follow a meditation. But if you do it halfway through your day, then only half of your hours will be post-meditation.

Do you want to be in tune for half your life? Or all of it?

What if I'm a night owl?

I have to be at work at 9am. It takes me two hours> to shower and eat and get to work. So I get up at 7. Or try to anyway. It's hard because I'm up until at least 2am every night, so I'm always behind on sleep, and I'm too tired to meditate when I wake up. No matter how much I want to, I just can't.

First let's define terms:

Night Owl – a person who is habitually alert and active at night

Early Bird – someone who wakes up early each morning without difficulty and is alert and active during the first part of the day

Morning Person – same as Early Bird

I searched the internet for “circadian system not a morning person” and similar searches, and I found lots of information on the causes of the differences between night owls and early birds, and what, if anything, can be done to modify the circadian rhythms of people who are genetically programmed to stay awake into the night and then sleep well past sunrise.

I read reports online from night owls who had changed into early birds. Blackout shades seem to be standard equipment for the job. And some have had success with melatonin. But even with those tactics and others, the driving forces behind their change were willpower and discipline. If you’re a night owl, you can change your sleep patterns, but you’ll still be wired up to be wired at midnight. Becoming a morning person the hard way is a war of nightly battles.

And then, there’s the easy way. It’s slow, but effective. All you have to do is not die. According to one study, as teenagers, only 7% of us are early birds, and by age 60, only 7% are night owls.

As to specific advice for night owls about maintaining a daily meditation, I got nothing. So please, if you are a night person who meditates daily or has tried to, and if you have suggestions for maintaining dailyness, please send them to me at tommy@tommyangelo.com, and I might add them to a later edition of this book.

What about taking one day off per week?

When my friend Kevin started meditating, he sat for 5 minutes a day. For the first three weeks, he skipped one day per week. That wasn’t by design. It just happened. Then he wrote me this email:

I've been doing sitting meditation 6 out of 7 days. I now realize how detrimental it is to miss a day. It's so much more than one day. I feel like I am starting over from scratch the next day. It makes me not want to miss any more days going forward. The continuity is super beneficial. Taking a single day off made me feel almost like I had never meditated in the first place. It was like I had completely relinquished any amount of skill I had accrued over the previous 6 days of practice. It was disheartening and a little scary.

A couple months later, Kevin wrote:

I have continued to skip days, about once a week. It's easier now, to recover from missing a day, but it still represents a surprising step backwards.

I do not see a permanent lapse in my future. Meditation is now a thing that I do. It's not a thing I'm trying out. Missing a day highlights the continuity that I am disrupting. But I'm not really at risk of lapsing. If I miss a day, I am extra dedicated to not skipping the next day. I'm unwilling to make not meditating the norm again.

I know other meditators besides Kevin who have a nearly daily practice. So it is possible to sustain a practice without dailyness. But at the outset, I think it's a very bad idea to aim for anything less than every day. Besides the disruption of progress, and besides the risk of lapsing, there's another reason. This is foundational. It has to do with the two mindsets.

Mindset one is: *How little can I get away with?*

Mindset two is: *How much can I do?*

A lackadaisical outlook is way better than no look at all. But a practice that is eager and ambitious is harder to derail and gains more benefits.

Unplugging

I used to say that the secret to meditating in the modern world is to unplug. By *modern* I mean, *connected to others by way of computers and smartphones*.

Then I coached some modern meditators, and I learned that it's not that simple. You can turn off the devices, but that does not distance you from the distraction. If you meditate at a time of day when you know that people are communicating with you in ways that require or expect a timely response, the pressure could build until your mind revolts, causing you to mindlessly end your session to be with your people. Or, you stay seated and meditate, but then you face blowback from them over your disappearance. The problem with the daytime plan is that it's neither sustainable nor stressless.

If, however, you meditate when no one expects you to be awake, then you're free from the noise of the world. And your busy brain will actually have a chance to relax. I'm not saying that it *will* relax. I'm saying that your only shot for finding time every day to be unplugged is to do it before you plug in.

What about meditating right before bed?

No and yes. For your main daily meditation of 20 to 30 minutes (more on that later), before bed is no good because if you wait until the end of the concert to tune up, it's too late. The show's over.

But a big *YES* to any amount of stretching and sitting before bed. That's a superb punctuation to a daily practice.

And if you like to read before bed, or in bed, spend ten minutes with a book that teaches about meditation and related topics.

With those habits, you'll probably sleep better, and you'll be more likely to be mindful when you wake up. Momentum.

And for all you nappers out there, try to begin your naps mindfully by consciously arranging your body and following a few breaths. That's my favorite part of a nap: settling in. Sometimes I quickly doze, and

sometimes the mindful breathing makes me snap to attention. When that happens, I either lie still and meditate for a few minutes and nod off, or I lie still and meditate for a few minutes and leap up from the bed wide awake.

What about when I can't focus?

You wake up, you drink some water, and you begin your practice with some mild stretching. But you can't focus on your breathing because there's an email niggling at your brain. Or maybe your mind is replaying yesterday's episode of an ongoing dispute at work, and now you are refining today's rebuttal. Or you just remembered something important, and now you're afraid you'll forget it.

Ten minutes later, when you settle into your sitting posture for your main meditation, you set your timer, and as the opening chime chimes, you realize that you did not draw a single mindful breath during stretch-bendy time because your mind has been composing an email or whatever.

What if you were to stop the timer, right in the middle of your meditation, and go to your computer and write that email? Or jot down the thing you're afraid to forget? Would the world stop spinning? No. Would your practice suffer? Not one bit. That is, if you give yourself an hour every day.

After you write the email or make a note, you resume your stillness, and now you can consciously set the matter aside and whew, follow your breathing for a few minutes.

Three good reasons to stop and restart during a sitting session:

- To relieve yourself.
- To attend to a time-sensitive issue for the sake of others.
- To remove a nagging thought, such as “buy light bulbs” or “call Harry.” I usually keep pen and paper next to me when I meditate.

I've stopped hundreds of times in mid-sit to write something down. I didn't use to. So I know what that's like too. This way works well for me these days. You'll have your own experiments.

But shouldn't I use my nagging thoughts as opportunities to be aware of how my mind works?

Yes. Usually. But not every time. Sometimes it's good to interrupt your sit. And sometimes you'll want to power through the distractions and hold that focus. That will be up to you, one instance at a time.

I know I should, and I know I won't.

I know I should be meditating, but I'm not, and if I'm honest with myself, I know I'm not going to start meditating anytime soon, so now I'm all stressed out over not doing the thing that would help me stress less. Huh? I think I should walk away from the whole prospect of meditating. I was happier before I knew about it.

I agree. Walk away. Right now the word *meditation* stirs anxiety in you. That's no good. It can only build resentment. Just tell yourself the truth, which is, "I am not a meditator and that's okay. There are many things in this world that I don't do, and meditation happens to be one of them."

Are you saying I need to let go of the idea of learning how to let go?

Something like that.

Weekends and Days Off

On mornings when you don't have to work and you have no commitments, do you like to lounge around lazily? As a daily sitter, you can still do that. After you sit.

You get up. You do your practice. Then you can climb right back into bed if you feel like it. On days like that, your meditation can be a dreamy part of your day that barely happened. But here's the thing. It did happen.

Depression

If you have already established a morning practice during non-depressed times, and then the funk hits, I think it's still possible to keep the coals hot by summoning the gumption – even if it feels like you're slogging through glue – to go through the motions of meditating, even if only briefly.

My friend Ross has much experience with meditation, and with depression, and with helping others. Here's what he had to say about the previous paragraph:

Telling a depressed person they just need to try harder is like telling a paraplegic to “just stand up.” They will see the word “gumption” and think, “I don’t have any of that.” Rather than suggesting that they push through the difficulty, you might encourage a mindful approach to the resistance and barriers they feel. Something to the effect of:

When the weight of existence has chained you down and it feels impossible to get out of bed, don't. Take this time to use the skills you have developed to be aware of the emotions, negativity, and/or barriers to a daily sitting practice. Try treating your sense of immobility as just another object in the field of awareness. Breathe into it, observe it, notice its texture and contours. Perhaps this will help you get out of bed, perhaps not. Either way, you have taken time on this day to practice mindfulness. More importantly, try not to judge yourself. If you do, bring your judging-mind into your field of awareness, notice it, breathe it. Greater awareness is the intent, and dailyness helps actualize that intention. Even though you may not be sitting, you are still breathing. If noticing your breathing is all you can do today, great. Tomorrow you may find sitting much easier.

Thank you, Ross, for that compassionate contribution.

I do have one data point to share on this topic, not as a boast, but as evidence. My first day of meditation was August 18th, 2003, and the

year now is 2019. During that 16-year span, I have done sitting meditation every day. It only takes one case to prove that dailiness is possible, so there you go. It's possible. Even for a person who funks.

Finding Space

Indoor Meditation

It's like the song from the musical, *My Fair Lady*. All you want is a room somewhere. Any room, anywhere, with only you in it, and something to sit on. At home, you might establish a meditation spot that doesn't change for years. Or you might vary your locations. On the road, finding indoor space to meditate can be a fun challenge, if you can keep the stress down. More on that later.

Outdoor Meditation

You'll need to do some exploring to find places outside for sitting meditation and standing meditation. Woods are a good place to look for private spots. And park benches can make you feel invisible, even though you're out in the open. If it feels weird or embarrassing to sit or stand stock still and straight where someone can see you, well, that's just one more of your thoughts to observe while you sit or stand majestically.

I found an excellent spot for standing meditation, on an urban walk, near my previous home. It was along some railroad tracks. There was a big gray metal box, a utility box of some kind, taller than me, and ten feet across. When I stood between the tracks and the box, no one could see me because there were trees lining the tracks on the other side. I had total privacy, out in the sun, right in the middle of the city. There was a dried drip of paint on the box at just the right height. I stood symmetrically and gazed at it for a few minutes about fifty times per year for three years.

Enjoy the adventure of finding places to be still, as part of a grand strategy for meditating wherever you find yourself.

Common Problems

I don't have the discipline.

I agree. You do not have the discipline to meditate. You face an unscalable barrier. Here's how the logic goes, for newbies and lapsers:

I am not disciplined. But I wish I were. I wish I had the discipline to meditate. If only I meditated, I would then develop the discipline I need to meditate. But right now, I do not have the discipline. So it's impossible for me to get started.

Dump the word *discipline* and think instead of *priorities*. If your house was on fire and you were inside, you would stop whatever you were doing and attend to the higher priority of saving yourself. If the top priority in your life was to meditate every day, and you felt urgent about it – as in, burning building urgent – then you'd see that making time to meditate has nothing to do with discipline, and everything to do with priorities.

My mind is too busy. I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

If I agreed to pay you \$1,000 for each time you said, "I am exhaling," to yourself while you exhaled, do you think you could do it then? In other words, your ADHD diagnosis does not preclude you from meditating.

What if I'm not doing it right?

Learning to meditate is like learning to dance. If you practice dancing every day, five years from now it won't matter which dance step you did first, or how awkwardly you did it. Plus, you'll know how to dance.

What if I'm hungover? Or I have a cold? Or I'm jet-lagged? How do I keep my dailyness going then?

You might as well list every wild pitch life throws at us because any of them can upend a practice. A sleepless baby, a relocation, a dying parent, falling in love, falling out of love. No words can prepare you for

every peril. But I will say that the best thing you can do – actually, it's the only thing you can do – is to think about this stuff. Make it a habit to anticipate whatever might jeopardize your dailyness...

You know you're going to get good and drunk tonight, so you tell yourself that no matter how frazzled you are tomorrow morning, you will not park on the couch and fall into a TV coma until after you have meditated for at least five minutes.

Or you're flying to Hong Kong tomorrow, so you gear up for airport meditation protocol.

Or this...

First comes a shivering shudder. An hour later, a nasty knot in your throat. Then, a sneezing seizure, and your fear is confirmed. You caught a cold. *There's no escaping it now. Ugh.*

As a practitioner, your next thoughts are...

*What's my meditation going to be like during my week of weakness?
How will I breathe through my nose when it's stuffed with snot?*

These are among the ancient mysteries that are revealed by partaking in the noble tradition of meditating when you don't feel like it. Here's how you do that. You just do it. Sit for 10 minutes instead of your usual 20 when 10 minutes exhausts you. When your nose is stopped up, you will breathe through your mouth whether you want to or not. Sometimes you will be aware that your nose is forcing you to breathe through your mouth, and sometimes not, toggling as usual. Then the 10-minute timer finally goes off, and you collapse. I just described a perfect meditation if you are weak with a cold and your sinuses are plugged.

When you start out, it's important to resign yourself to just doing it. It might take a few weeks to feel at ease during this bizarre new activity, which means it can take that long before you notice effects. So you have to hang in there, at the outset. Ideally, you will be motivated by noticeable progress to keep going, and over the next few months to a

year, you will develop actual sitting skill – the same as if you had taken up knife-sharpening, or archery, and then studied and practiced daily. It takes time, repetition, and education to get good at meditating. And the better you get, the easier it gets, and the more benefit you derive.

Drama

D r a m a. If you say it slowly, the word itself comes out like an exasperated sigh. Family frictions. Financial frustrations. Fickle friends. Drama will be part of your daily practice. Think of it as head noise. The irony is that the very thing that makes us unhappy enough to try meditation is the same thing that makes sustained concentration so difficult.

You are meditating. The noise in your head is loud today, and busy. It's hatching a revenge scheme at work. But you manage to sit still and follow your breathing anyway, for a whole minute, creating separation between your inner voice and the noisy voice. This can be enlightening, but also disconcerting, when it leaves you with an unobstructed view of your own selfishness.

And that's when meditation can be not much fun at all. But at the same time, you can smile, because you know that this is good and necessary work you are doing for yourself and your relationships.

Irksome Noise

I've been recording music ever since my mom brought a Wollensak reel-to-reel tape recorder home from the school where she taught when I was eight. All through my 20s, I played in bands and my living room was a recording studio. The equipment was low grade, and digital recording had not been invented yet, which meant that life at my house was a never-ending battle against pesky hisses and hums in my recordings.

As a result, I developed what one might call a neurotic aversion to background noise. So, when I got into meditation, and I read one book

after another that said to “find a quiet place to meditate,” it landed on me like fantasy because there are no truly quiet places indoors for a person of my, uh, sensitivities, what with the heating and cooling and plumbing and relays and clocks and refrigerators and all. Each of them adds to the mechanical cacophony at some point. And I’m just supposed to sit there and meditate through that?

Yep, I am. And I did. A bunch. First I outgrew my low-volume anxieties, and then I went after loud annoying backgrounds. And now I am impervious to all sounds, from motors humming to dogs barking to buildings growing to people talking on cell phones. It’s a miracle of mindfulness.

What Kind of Meditation Should I Do?

If someone eats unhealthy food all day every day, and then switches to healthy salads, the types of salad won’t matter. Their health will improve.

After your meditation practice gets going, that’s when your real research begins, because your fascination will drive you, and from then on, the things you learn about the spiritual path will make sense. It’s the same with fishing or cooking or anything else that can only be learned by doing it.

Once you’re up and running, then you can patiently experiment, and pick and choose from different kinds. Or stick with what you started with. It just doesn’t matter.

What matters is that the “What kind should I do?” question doesn’t hold you back. That’s a ploy that our idleness uses when it goes to battle with our motivation. If you get bogged down at deciding how to start, and that keeps you from meditating at all, then the con worked, and idleness won.

What kind of meditation should you do? The kind where you stop whatever you’re doing and sit still.

Guided or Unguided?

First let's look at what guided and unguided meditation have in common. Doing either one means you have committed time and effort to making yourself less unhappy. And any amount of either is way better than none.

Now the differences...

Walking is a great form of exercise and has many benefits, but it doesn't build muscle mass. To build muscle, you need to do resistance training, such as lifting weights. You push the muscles to their limits, over and over. Sitting meditation is like weight lifting for the mind. And guided meditation is like walking. Walking is not a better or worse form of exercise than lifting weights. They both rate to make your life better. That's why I think anyone who has benefited from guided meditation should look into sitting meditation, not as an alternative, but as an add-on, and see how it fits. Likewise for sitters who have not been guided.

One big difference between guided and unguided meditation is accessibility. Guided meditation requires electronics, whereas unguided meditation requires only that you not be sleeping. You can make yourself still, many times per day if you like, without technical assistance. So for access alone, it makes sense to have a form of meditation in your tool belt that you can do without electricity.

Another difference is that with unguided meditation, you are totally alone with your thoughts, which, again, is not better or worse than guided meditation, but it *is* a different experience, with its own perks and problems.

People

When people get in the way, when they come between you and your practice, try to not see them as obstacles. Keep reminding yourself that they are why you are doing this in the first place. To make everything better for all of you.

That goes for children too, and pets. The invaders. When they interrupt you while you are meditating, it's an opportunity to smile at them.

My friends and family think I'm weird.

That's because you *are* weird, and brave, for even considering to do this in the face of your fears about what others will say and think about your weirdness. Welcome to the threat of ridicule. Welcome to the weirdo club.

What about my spouse?

Obviously it would be best to have support from your spouse on this project. But maybe you don't. Either way, the worst thing you can do, with your spouse, or anyone you live with, is to try to talk them into meditating. If you wish that a housemate would join you on your path, your best bet is to meditate every day, absorb the teachings on harmlessness, and make yourself into a kinder person. As you change, they will too.

Slowly.

But what do I tell my friends and family who I care about, and who care about me? How can I update them on this exciting new part of my life without sounding preachy?

That might not be possible, since you cannot control other people's thoughts. Just be honest when you talk to them, and try not to ramble on, and make sure the topic is *your* path, not theirs.

Or you could just give them a copy of this book.

Which Way to Sit?

*How should you sit when you meditate?
As painlessly as possible.*

Unless you can sit cross-legged for a long time without leg pain or back pain, the best sitting posture for you is either on a chair, or on a meditation bench.

Most people are shocked when they first sit on a meditation bench – by the comfort. The body falls naturally into a posture that is well-suited for sitting straight for a long time.

And it's portable. Yay! My bench is only 18 inches long, with collapsing legs. It fits easily into my backpack and my small suitcase.

Also sanctioned by the authorities is *chair sitting*. It takes a while to get the hang of it, but when you do, not only will you have found a comfortable meditation posture, you'll also learn a better way to sit, for wherever chairs are found.



It's all about the spine. Make it straight, and when you get slouchy, even just a little bit, raise yourself back up during an inhale. During sitting meditation, the posture is not incidental to the practice. According to Suzuki, it *is* the practice:

These forms are not the means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture is itself to have the right state of mind. There is no need to obtain some special state of mind. — From Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

That's why it's important to research and experiment until you find at least one way to sit that allows your back to be erect and relaxed without causing strain anywhere.

How to Avoid Injury

If you are new to sitting, or you are trying a new sitting posture, there will be some toughing it out, some physical discomfort, at the beginning. It could be your knees or hips that get sore if you sit cross-legged. If you use a bench, the tops of your feet and ankles might hurt. And chair sitting can cause an achy back. It's a rite of passage, to move past the soreness. It's similar to building up calluses on your fingertips before you can play the guitar painlessly.

You can accelerate the process by sitting in your meditation posture to watch TV. You don't need to do any medding. No mindful breathing required, or mental work. And you don't need to do it for long. A minute here, five minutes there. This is just a way to build up physical endurance faster.

And now for some advice that has been given many times: If you experience physical pain and it feels like you might be harming your body... stop! This applies to stretchy bendy stuff, and to sitting. If you can only sit for three minutes before it's too painful, then sit for two and a half minutes. And when doing yoga, the best way to avoid injury from overstretching or tipping over is to pay attention to what you're doing. A wandering mind can be hazardous! One more reason to stay focused.

On the Road

Portability

Ask yourself when and where. If you are staying with a friend tonight, when and where will you meditate tomorrow? If you are going on vacation, when and where will you meditate? For each setting, you have to put some planning into your practice, or else you won't have a practice.

What if I'm sleeping over at my sister's house? On her sofa? She's got four kids, two dogs, and no space.

Not a problem, if you design your stretching and your sitting so that you can do it anywhere. When you are practicing at home, imagine you are on the top floor of a parking garage, or out in the woods, with no mat, no cushion, no phone app, no nothing.

With those restrictions, which stretching poses would you do? Would you wish you knew more standing poses? Then learn them.

When you make your practice portable, not only do you get to meditate more, you also can't use non-portability as an excuse to skip a day. It's a double win!

Training While Traveling

There is one word that defines what meditation is, and also states its purpose, and that word is *training*. Meditation is mindfulness training.

Pretend you are an Olympic athlete and the Olympics are only a month away. You've been working out intensely every day. You receive word that a family member died, and soon you are traveling hundreds of miles to a funeral.

Would you stop exercising during the trip? Heck no! You would scout your new terrain, and you would make plans to wake up early and work out somehow, maybe go for a run. And during the day, if you had a half-hour to kill, you would find a way to squeeze in some training, even if it meant doing pushups in a stairwell.

You would not expect to train as well on the road as you do at home, but you would definitely put out some kind of daily effort. And it wouldn't even be hard, because you would want to do it.

What You Need on the Road

Chair sitters need only a room somewhere, plus a chair. And all you bench sitters will bring your benches, right? And you cross-legged sitters can either bring a zafu with you, or improvise one.

To replicate a zabuton, just fold up a blanket or some towels.

What if I have no chair, no cushions, and no bench?

No problem. Seek out some stairs, or a stump, or anything you can park your sit bones on to generate the straight-spine posture.

When you can do that, your practice is portable. No supplies needed. A log can work just fine. Which takes us to...

Outdoor Meditation on the Road

You wake up in a small hotel room, un-alone, and you would like to do some stretchy bendy followed by sitting meditation, but you're worried about waking up the other person in the room.

So here's what you do.

As soon as you wake up, the first thing you do is stay in bed. Arrange yourself symmetrically, on your back, with your hands on your abdomen, and your eyes open. Feel your belly going up and down until you are alert, but motionless, like a wide-eyed cat.

When you exit the bed, move in a hush, so as not to disturb the silence. Get dressed in the bathroom, in the clothes you set out last night, and slip out the door, careful not to let it slam. Then down the hallway and through the hotel lobby and swiftly you are outside. Loving the morning air. Wondering why you don't do this at home. And off you go, exploring.

When you come across a private place to sit, you sit. When you find a good spot for standing, you stand. The rest of the time, you walk attentively.

When you return to the hotel room, you might have some private time while your companion showers, and you can do some indoor sitting meditation then.

A Note About Concentration

Concentration, in the context of meditation, is paradoxical. It's a burden that must be carried if one is to ascend their spiritual mountain. And it's a healer that provides relief and refreshment during the climb.

A Mindful Walk

When you are forced outside to meditate and you can't find a location that allows you to be still, then do your morning meditation while walking. Your objective is to practice awareness. Awareness of sounds and sights and breathing.

Your walk might feel exhilarating, but that's not why you're doing it. You are here to work. When you notice that you have strayed from mindfulness, come back to your breathing. Hear the cars, the birds, the wind. If you notice the sounds coming from you – the rhythm of your footfalls – the rustling of your clothes – that's like, hyper mindful.

Concentration exercises are a great way to put your walking to work. For example, you might fix your gaze on something up ahead – a tree, or a sign – and commit to holding that gaze until you reach the chosen object. If you break focus, note that your mind went elsewhere, and then start a new fixed gaze.

Another way to strengthen your single-mindedness muscle while walking is to count your steps per breath and play around with that.

And if you want a guaranteed way to force yourself to focus on the present, close your eyes while you are walking, and alternate between, say, eight steps eyes open, eight steps eyes closed.

That's what I mean by *work* and *concentration*. Walking is another arena you can use for toggling training. It's just like toggling between mindful and mindless during your sitting meditation, except you're walking.

In a pinch, a well-executed 30-minute walk of mindfulness soon after you wake up will serve both of your needs. You'll be tuned up and ready to greet the day. And even though you didn't sit, your dailyness coal bed

will stay red hot, by sheer force of the effort you put out to make time for and concentrate during your walk.

What to Say

*What if someone sleeps over? Or what if I am an overnight guest?
What should I say to people about my peculiar mornings?*

Be politely shameless about your practice, for the purpose of getting what you want, which is to be up and at 'em an hour before everyone else without attracting any fuss. When I am a guest, I will set expectations by saying things like, "I'm an early riser," and "I might slip out for an early walk in the morning."

Watch Out for Feeling Good

I felt like shit. So I took up meditation. Then I felt great. So I stopped.

It's a peculiar dynamic. Practicing can make you feel good. And feeling good can put your practice at risk. When your practice keeps you buoyant every day for a month, it's all too easy to think, *I don't need to do it today.*

We under-remember pain, especially mental pain. We forget how bad it can be. That's why it's best not to evaluate the results of your medding, and just commit to doing it, no matter how great you feel.

When Your Practice Lapses

When your practice lapses, that's not a problem, it's a pause. You're still on the path. You just happen to not be meditating right now. If you hope to eventually have a phase of life when you are meditating every day and your chance of lapsing is effectively zero, that's what matters. Maybe it'll take ten stops and starts before you start for the last time. (So you might as well get started.) The main thing is to not beat yourself up over gaps in your practice, as you figure out how to close them.

Plateaus and Kickstarts

Once you get to where all the pieces of your practice are in place and you know you won't lapse, it's okay to plateau and just do the stuff you're already good at, indefinitely. You don't need to be advancing in your practice for it to continue to have transformative effects.

That said, more is more.

If stasis ain't your thing, or you feel stalled and stagnant and you want to mix things up, then that's what you do. And that's all you need to do. To rejuvenate your practice. Mix things up. Read a new book. Add or revive some yoga poses. Stretch further. Hold longer. Take on a new breathing meditation. Eat slower. It's all good. These are big dry logs you are throwing onto your meditation fire and the result is predictable.

Morning Meditations

It's All About Intent

The intention is to be aware of every breath you take and every move you make. That will never happen, which is why it's a good target to aim at. It's like throwing rocks at a tree. You usually miss, and it's no big deal. You just throw another rock.

Goals and Targets

Setting goals is a good way to go for many people. For example, "I'm going to meditate 30 days in a row."

Self-improvement goals are not easy to achieve, because that's how we invent them. We devise appropriate challenges for ourselves, typically with a time span of at least a few days. Then you either hit the goal, or you don't. And then maybe you set another goal.

Targets are tiny, short-range goals. When you are sitting, that's target practice.

I am going to count to five breaths.

I am not going to touch my nose even though it itches.

If you only get to three breaths before you lose count, or if you scratch your nose, there's no consequence. You threw a rock at a tree and you missed. Are you done for the day, with target practice? Because if you're not, just pick up another rock and take aim. No biggie.

Upon Awakening

- Lie still, in bed, and breathe mindfully.

- Go to a sink and splash water on your face and towel off.
- Pour a glass of water and drink it using both hands.
- Prepare your coffee or tea if that's a morning beverage for you.
- Do ten minutes or more of stretchy bendy stuff.
- Extra Credit (easy): Stand still.
- Extra Credit (hard): Walk very slowly.

Why to Stretch Before Sitting

The reason to do mindful stretching before you sit is to prepare yourself – physically *and* mentally – to sit still in meditation. It's the same as an athlete warming up before a contest. Ten minutes goes a very long way, especially compared to zero minutes.

The stretching wakes you up. And by following your breathing, it also calms you down, mentally, so that when you sit, you are vibrant, and also able to relax, right from the start.

How to Do Pre-Sitting Stretching

Research the easiest yoga poses, and do those, alone, with no assistance from electronics. Videos and apps are excellent learning tools, but during your practice, you want to be removed from your usual distractions. And people – even strangers on a screen – are the most distracting thing there is.

Use teachers to learn poses. And then the real progress begins, when you turn off the device, and practice what you learned.

The reason to keep your poses simple is because you are not exercising, you are meditating. You are intending to put and keep your attention on your breathing and posture. Mellow poses allow for slower breathing, slower stretching. You stay fixed on each of your big long fat outbreaths as you, ahhhhh, ride the waves. This is good stuff. If you want to do

high-energy, challenging yoga while someone is talking to you, that's great too! For later in the day.

How Fast? How Slow? How Long?

Music has dynamic ranges: fast to slow, loud to soft, cluttered to spacious. So too does yoga. When alone, you are responsible for choosing your pace, and your intensity. And they are both always changing. When you create your yoga music, there can be no wrong notes because all you're doing is practicing, and no one is listening.

During your pre-sit warm-up, hold each pose for some number of breaths that you decide on, and then count the breaths in your mind. I think six is a good number.

Self-Administered Physical Therapy

In 2015 I had this thing called *frozen shoulder*. It's just what it sounds like. I could barely move my left arm. Routine movements like putting on a shirt were a painful chore.

When I learned how to attempt to fix this problem without surgery – by doing certain stretches and exercises mindfully every day for a year – I was like, no problem. I got this. I learned the stretches and exercises and I dedicated ten minutes to my shoulder every morning. After a year of steady improvement, I was as good as new, with full range of motion in my arm, and no pain.

I have a couple other stories like that one, when my body needed some kind of daily attention to heal itself, and got it, but only because I was already in the habit of dedicating time every day to quiet physical maintenance. Otherwise they'd have had to thaw my shoulder with a scalpel.

About Yoga Mats

A mat gives you traction, and padding, and it creates a space to call your own. And it prevents you from snorting up whatever is in the carpet. Some hotels supply mats now. Procure one when you arrive so that you're good to go in the morning. If it's an overnight driving trip, take your own.

Mats are good, but unnecessary. Standing poses are doable without a mat, as are qi gong movements and tai chi. Likewise for poses done lying on your back, or on-all-fours. Without a mat, you can still do any pose or motion that doesn't require traction. And to protect your mouth and nose from the floor or ground if that's an issue, use a towel or whatever you have. Think mobile, be mobile.

Lying on the Floor on Your Back

This meditation practice earned its own heading by being amazing.

Lie on the floor, on your back, and make yourself dead. Dead to the world. Pretend it's a thousand years from now. Does anyone know you? Or need you? Nope. You have no work, no family, no friends, no plans, and yes, no internet. As far as the world is concerned, you do not exist and never did. Which means that for one single breath, you *do* have the time. And you *can* afford to fixate only on your breathing, because right now you're dead. Dead to the world. You're in corpse pose.

Sitting Meditation

Asia is really big and really old. Thousands of Buddhist monasteries and thousands of teachers have spread over that very big place for thousands of years. So there's lots of variety, and specificity, in the Buddhist teachings from so many disconnected lands. But through all the cultural diversity, and mountain ranges, and generations, there's one teaching that has remained the same everywhere. When you meditate, you sit straight and still and attend to your breathing.

Breaks in concentration are routine. The training is to go back and forth from mindless – our typical state – to mindful, meaning you keep track of your breathing and posture, and observe your thoughts. This allows you to detach temporarily from the usual spirals of untamed thinking. Then mindlessness returns, as always, in the form of mindless posture, mindless breathing, and mindless thinking, which is good because now you are presented with a fresh opportunity to straighten up, draw a mindful breath, and smile at your busy little brain. And so the training goes until you die. Meanwhile, you feel a heck of a lot better during the ride.

Mental Formations

What I referred to as “the usual spirals of untamed thinking” has other names...

It's the voice in our head. Actually it's more like a chorus of voices – the worry voice, the grateful voice, the fix-it voice, the me-first voice...

It's also a story. Then another story. Then another story. Whatever is going on in our head, it's a story we are telling ourselves. The I-need-money story, the my-body-sucks story, the I'm-too-busy story...

The racing mind, the monkey mind, the fault-finding mind, the nattering mind...

It's all the same thing.

My favorite label is one I learned from Buddhism – *mental formations*. It's gentle, and accurate.

Is nirvana a thing? What's it feel like?

I don't think I've experienced nirvana or any word that refers to a state of total non-self, non-separateness, non-aversion, non-desire. So I don't have anything to say about that except I think the concept is awesome, even if it's impossible.

I will describe the highest state of meditative calm that I attain. I get there most mornings, sometimes for a minute, sometimes for five, some mornings not at all. Occasionally I start there and stay there a while. Those days are rare. Let's call it gliding...

I am aware of every breath without effort, aware of each in and out during its entire duration. No counting. No altering. No posture adjustments. Consciously choosing to continue to glide, without choosing, or thinking about it. Just knowing what's happening. When a thought arises, it is greeted like a passerby with a polite nod of hello and goodbye (because I have no taste for small talk at this time). All the while, the rising, and falling, of my belly, holds my attention, because there's nothing else going on. I'm gliding. It's easy.

Eyes Open / Eyes Closed

Both ways are taught by Buddhist masters, and they have their own benefits, so I do both, and I recommend the same.

The eyes-open technique is to gaze downward at a 45-degree angle. You will either gaze at nothing, or at something. That's a choice you make. Gazing at nothing means sitting in front of a blank wall, or sitting in total darkness. I do those now and then, but my default is to gaze at something because it feels easier and better.

Anything works here. During my morning meditation, I gaze at a candle flame, using a stick candle, or a small, simple yantra (look it up) that I printed out and taped to the wall. For standing meditation, I position a yantra at the right height and gaze at that, or I draw a dot on a wall. When meditating outside, you can use a leaf, a tree, a cloud, a pole.

During a sit, I mix it up, between eyes open and eyes closed. I can't help it. Sometimes my eyes close mindlessly, and sometimes they open mindlessly. Most of the time though, I am choosing one option or the other.

Hand Holding

Hand postures are called *mudras*. Mudras are best examined like a student at some point, to see what's out there, on the way toward finding and modifying what works best for you.

I used the *cosmic mudra* for years, until the day I went to an antiquities exhibit at a museum, where I saw statues of people meditating with their hands clasped gently in their laps, both palms up, with one hand flat on the other. It resembled the cosmic mudra, with a twist. Instead of the hands forming an oval shape with the tips of the thumbs lightly touching to form the top arch, the thumbs were collapsed, forming one of three parallel shelves of flesh when viewed edge on. It was beautiful to me, and graceful, so I did that for a while and added it to my mudra menu.

One day I was watching a monk give a talk on YouTube, and I was drawn to the stillness of his hands, lightly cupped together in his lap, while he was talking. My hands are wired to my tongue. I'm not certain I could talk without moving them. It was so odd that he was talking, with zero bodily movement, especially the hands.

His hand posture didn't look in any way contrived. It was just two hands together.

Impressions from that moment caused my morning mudras to shift again, this time into arrangements that would look perfectly normal on, say, a bus. And that led to a big and permanent enhancement to my practice: holding hands with myself in public. For example, when I'm in line at the grocery store, the top of my shopping cart is at the perfect height for bringing my hands together at rest. And when I bring my hands together, they stop moving, like during meditation. They relax, and so do I. Significantly. Quickly.

I have found hand holding to be particularly fruitful in over-the-counter situations that are potentially confrontational. If I bring my feet together, and stand straight, and place one hand lightly on top of the other, on the counter, it's pretty much impossible for me to come unhinged.

What about meditation mudras where the hands are separated?

My experience with that is limited. What I do know is that all mudras are mindful and that's what matters.

Breathing

The Stillest Moment

The heart is made of muscle. It can propel itself. Whereas lungs cannot move on their own. They must rely on others, namely, the rib muscles, and the star of the show: the diaphragm.

Picture your rib cage. It's open at the bottom. Below that is your stomach and intestines. What keeps your stomach from touching your lungs? There's a sheet of muscle and tendon that closes off the entire bottom of the rib cage. It's the floor of the cage. It doesn't show up in skeletons because it's made of muscle, not bone. It's your lung pump. It's your diaphragm. When the sheet extends itself, your rib cage expands at the base, and air rushes in, like a bellows. When the diaphragm relaxes, everything contracts, and the gas in your lungs goes out.

And that is the stillest moment – at the tip of the exhale – when your diaphragm is completely relaxed.

Counting and Following

Breath Counting is counting your breaths. *Breath Following* is narrating the ins and outs of your breathing to yourself, without counting. This is not a progression. You don't learn counting, and then stop using counting when you learn following. Practice them both from the outset, and plan to use them both forever.

I think of my breathing as a train that's always chugging along next to me. Sometimes I know it's there, but usually not. When I become aware of the train, I can hop on. *In, out. In, out.* But not for long. Soon I am

thrown off, and that's okay, because the train is always there, and I can hop back on later.

Breath Counting

When you decide to count some number of breaths, you have set a course for the future. Whereas breath following, in the purest sense, has no future intention. This puts counting in a different class than following. Breath counting is a concentration exercise, and because of its constant availability, is unsurpassed.

Counting to ten breaths in your mind is an often-taught baseline practice. When you reach ten, you start over at one. When you lose count, you also start over at one. Here's a paragraph I saved from the web fifteen years ago, about what to do with your mind when counting breaths:

When your mind wanders, do not regard this as a mistake. Some days you may not be able to count past "one," and that would be only at the beginning of your meditation. You might be worried, or excited – busy thinking about things. When this happens, just notice that today your mind is busy. This is the way of the mind – thinking! This is the way you are, the way we all are. So just notice the thoughts, and the feelings that come with them, and come gently back to your breath counting. Start again. "One!" Coming back, starting again, noticing you've wandered off – this is the practice." – Source and author unknown

Most common is to count once per breath cycle, for example, on the outbreath. Or, to make it easier, you can count on each half-breath. It's easier because there is half as much time between counts, which means half as much time for your mind to stray. "One" on the first inbreath, "two" on the first outbreath, "three" on the second inbreath, and so on.

Breath Following

The practice of narrating your breathing is ubiquitous among Buddhist meditation teachers because according to The Sutra On the Awareness of

Breathing (*sutra* means *scripture*), this is the first lesson Buddha gave on the topic:

Buddha was asked: **“What is the way to develop and practice continuously the method of Full Awareness of Breathing so that the practice will be rewarding and offer great benefit?”**

Buddha replied: *“It is like this: the practitioner goes into the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to any deserted place, sits stably in the lotus position, holding his or her body quite straight, and practices like this: ‘Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.’”*

That’s what you say to yourself. Over and over and over. You say the words in your mind as you track your ins and outs. On the bench. In the car. Walking down a hallway. It’s a silent chant. The words give you something of length to focus on. And you can revise them to fit the circumstances.

Here’s another line from the Thich Nhat Hanh translation of the breathing sutra that you can mix into your breath-following narratives:

In this way, I train myself.

Because that’s what you’re doing, whenever you follow a breath. You are flexing your spunk muscle, and by doing so, it grows even stronger. Mindfulness begets mindfulness.

*Breathing in, I am aware I am breathing in.
Breathing out, I am aware I am breathing out.
In this way
I train myself.*

I saved the best breath-following narration for last:

In, out. In, out. In, out.

That’s the leanest version.

In . . . out

Train your brain to default to this:

In . . . out

Breathing Pace

Our normal frequency is 15-18 breaths per minute. That's the pace of mindless breathing. With mindful breathing, you have the option to breathe faster, or slower, or breathe at your natural speed on purpose.

Which sounds easy enough, but it's not. It's like looking at a painting of a mountain, and seeing only paint on a canvas, without seeing the mountain, while at the same time, knowing that the mountain is there. Or something like that.

Here's what Buddha had to say about pacing. These are the next two narrations from Buddha's list of breath narrations from the breathing sutra:

*Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breath.
Breathing out a long breath, I know I am breathing out a long breath.*

*Breathing in a short breath, I know I am breathing in a short breath.
Breathing out a short breath, I know I am breathing out a short breath.*

My takeaway from this is that it's not about how fast or how slow, but only that we know.

Meditation Songs

*How many songs are in a piano?
That's how many ways there are to meditate.*

Every meditation that's ever been taught or practiced began as someone's idea. In other words, they're all made up. Like songs that

somebody wrote. As with musical songs, it can be satisfying to play meditation music that other people wrote, and to make up your own.

When I want to add an actual song to my musical repertoire, first I practice it until I can play it. Then I play it over and over every day for a couple months and from then on, I can always play that song, even if I haven't played it for years. I take the same approach to learning new meditations.

When you want to add to your meditation playlist, you can browse this list for ideas. Each of these is meant to be done multiple times in a row.

- When thoughts arise and you notice them, label them as “thinking.”
- Breathe with your mouth open, on purpose, as silently as you can.
- Think of your thoughts as leaves floating past. *Here comes another one! And there it goes.*
- On each inbreath, put attention on your posture.
- Here are two more lines from the breathing sutra to say to yourself multiple times each:

Breathing in, I am aware of my entire body. Breathing out, I smile to my entire body.

Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations. Breathing out, I smile to my mental formations.

For the rest, you will need to look them up:

- Belly Breath
- Ujjiah Breath
- Shikantaza
- Tonglen
- Chanting

- Nostril Breathing
- Om
- Chakra Meditation
- Candle Gazing
- The Half-Smile – Look up “half-smile meditation.”
- Body Scan – See below, then look it up.

The Body Scan is a perennial chart-topping meditation song. You lie on your back and think about a body part for some number of breaths. Your right knee. Your left hand. Picture the skin and ligaments and nerves and muscles and blood vessels, chilling out, because you are consciously exhaling while holding that body part in your mind. Then move to another body part, and scan your whole body like that. It’s usually done in corpse pose, and also popular as a sitting or standing meditation. I used to do three breaths per body part. These days I usually do one slow breath per body part and a scan takes about three minutes.

The body scan conditions you to notice your physical sensations dispassionately. It’s a great tool for pain reduction and healing. If you stub your toe, or pull a muscle, or twist your ankle, your body scan training will enable you to stop, right away, and give your injured parts what they need most – stillness – when they most need it – at the moment of injury. The result is less panic, less shame, and faster recovery, both physical and mental.

The point I set out to make was not about the benefits of the body scan (though I’m glad that came up). It’s about singing your meditation songs. You practice them in the morning, and sing them all day long.

How Long Should I Sit?

The sweet spot is twenty to thirty minutes. Many have had success with starting slow, and sitting for five minutes or less, and then building up to 20 minutes by lengthening their meditations gradually over time.

Why 20 minutes minimum? Why not 15?

Because twenty minutes is more than five minutes better than fifteen minutes. With twenty minutes, not only do you gain the benefits of five more minutes of meditation, you also have to experience better concentration and stillness during those final five minutes. Put another way, the extra minutes not only help you to train harder, but also better.

It took dedication and planning on your part to set the stage for your 15-minute sit, and kudos to you for that. But are you getting good value from your scheduling effort? It seems wasteful, to me anyway, to go through all that work to seat yourself, and then stand up after only 15 minutes. It'd be like flying to Florence to go on vacation, and then staying for only three days when you could have stayed for four.

Why stop at 30 minutes?

I sat for 30 minutes a day for my first few years and then one day – to see if I could, and to see what would happen – I decided to add one minute per day for 30 days, and work my way up to doing a one-hour sit.

During the final week, when I was doing 50+ minutes per sit, I learned two things: 1) My legs get sore at 40 minutes. 2) I'm never doing this again.

But I'm glad I did it. It was an experiment that had to happen. I learned that 30 minutes is a good number for me, from both directions. It's long enough, and short enough. If 30 minutes sounds like too long for you, or too short, well, it probably is. Only one way to find out!

How still should I be? What if I need to move?

Then move. The adjustments are necessary to clear the way for stillness. Sakyong Mipham put it like this: "The basic feeling is one of comfort, dignity, and confidence. If you feel you need to move, you should just move. Just change your posture a little bit."

Using Timers

There are advantages to using a timer, and there are advantages to not using a timer. So I think it's good to do both.

Starting out, I think everyone should use a timer. It's like training wheels on a bicycle. They aren't necessary. But it sure makes sense to use them.

If you have a smart phone, your clock app will have a timer. Even better is to use a meditation-timer app because you can set intervals, and the chimes are lovely. Otherwise, use whatever you have. Ovens and microwaves have timers. Or just look at a clock.

For my morning sit, I set my timer app for 30 minutes, with 10-minute intervals, meaning it chimes twice during the 30 minutes. Sometimes the 10-minute chime will...

... *ding* ...

...wake me up. From a spell of mindless thinking. That's its main purpose. Then I straighten up and go back to my breathing.

If I had to always use a timer or never use a timer, I would choose always, because I know I sit longer with a timer than without.

That said, there's a lot to like about untimed sitting. It's a different mental state when, according to your own rules, you can stand up anytime. It allows you to spontaneously push yourself. Then push a little more. That's when the fastest muscle growth happens. You're about to stand up, and you decide no, I'll stay here, for *One more set of ten breaths!*

Or three more.

Or just one.

And then maybe you decide to follow one more breath, beginning to end.

And what is there to prevent you from doing one more after that?

It's the same as doing extra reps when lifting weights, or extra laps when running or swimming. You decide to add on, to keep going, maybe routinely, maybe creatively. You could try to count your breaths *after* you stand up, on your way to the fridge. Or maybe you're like me and you'll invent combination exercises: *I wonder if I can count my breaths, while I alternate between breathing through my nose and mouth, while I brush my teeth!*

Anything like that is the same as using heavier weights at the gym. It's another way to extend yourself.

Another feature of untimed sitting is that it's relaxing in a way that's more intrinsically serene than timed sitting. You're not waiting for a sound to tell you when you move. You're just sitting. Your future is undetermined.

Here's a neat thing. At the end of a timed sit, when the final chime chimes, if you don't move, then at that moment you have begun an untimed sit, with all the benefits and options mentioned so far, and whatever else you discover.

My advice is to start out using a timer every day, and after you have established solid routines and decent skills, then try your morning meditation without a timer, a few times at least, to experiment. You can expect a fresh batch of insights.

From Sitting to Standing

There are two ways to end your sitting meditation:

1. Mindfully
2. Mindlessly

A mindless ending is when you are not aware of your breathing or your body when you move out of your sitting posture, and a mindful ending

is when you are. I've had many sessions after which I looked back and realized I was lost in thought when I stood up. After acknowledging the perniciousness of mindlessness, I would commit to attempting a mindful finish tomorrow.

Now my endings are mostly mindful, and they take one of two forms:

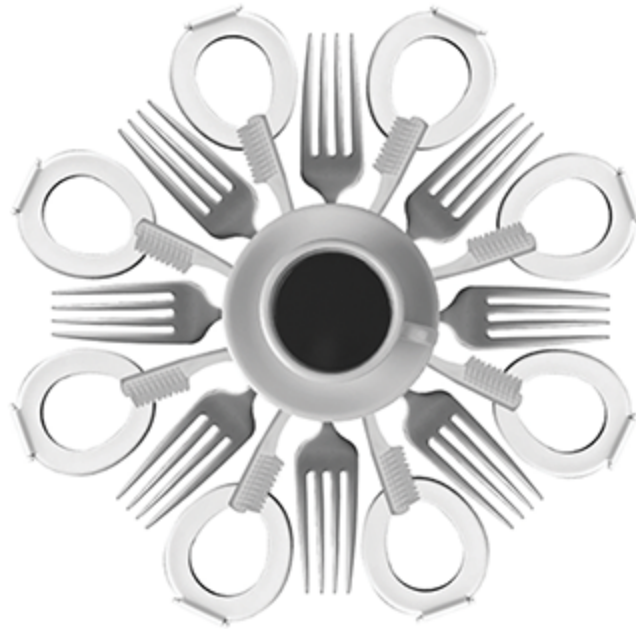
1. Before the last breath begins, I have already decided that this will be the last breath before I crawl three feet to the yoga mat.
2. At the end of an exhale that was mindful the whole way, I decide at that moment to move to the mat.

If your plan is to stand up and walk away at the end of your sitting session (rather than stretch before walking), the same two options apply. You either decide which breath will be the last one before it starts, or you spontaneously stop your meditation with full awareness that you are stopping. Both ways are mindful.

About crawling to the mat:

Your body did what you asked. It sat there, the whole time. Not an easy thing for a body to do. And now it needs a few minutes more, to recover. Give your legs and the rest of you a chance to stretch out a little before leaping up and walking around. Here again, it only takes a few minutes to have a big effect. And, you are adding more practice to your practice.

Mindfulness Throughout the Day



Momentum

Mindfulness throughout the day means toggling between mindless and mindful. Mindlessness will still rule your days. All you're trying to do is wedge some awareness in there – because mindfulness in any dose is restorative.

Each mindful moment makes more mindful moments more likely. If you lie on the floor at 11am and notice the rise and fall of your belly, you're more likely to be mindful while standing in line at noon. And momentum builds.

Conversely, the more time that goes by between your moments of mindfulness, the more at risk you are of losing momentum. I think of it as fast-acting atrophy.

In campfire terms, mindfulness throughout the day stokes the flames and keeps the fire going so that tomorrow morning it's easy to restart the fire because the coals are still hot. Just add dry logs, which is today's sitting meditation.

The Cost of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is free. It costs no money. And it takes no time.

How can doing something take no time?

Lots of ways...

Do you ever exercise with headphones on? Or while watching TV? Or reading? If you were to dedicate five minutes of your media-consumption time to mindfulness-practice time, while you exercise, that's a big helping of mindfulness, enough to cause a significant mood boost.

Then there's walking. Anytime you are walking – be it across a parking lot or across a room – you can use that time to observe the ins and outs of your breathing.

Another thing you can do whenever you have a moment alone is notice whether you are breathing through your nose or mouth. And then choose – nose or mouth – for your next breath. And there you have it. Free mindfulness.

Anytime you slow yourself down, that's big. It doesn't matter what you are doing, or how much slower you do it. Every intentional tempo reduction is mindful.

Also freely available on the mindfulness menu is any conscious posture adjustment.

As is any moment of stillness. Stillness is not posture-dependent. You can be lying on your side on your couch, for example, and still yourself.

Counting breaths is a mindful act. Even if you only count to one, that counts.

And of course, breath following...

In... out...

There are few times when there isn't time for that.

Mindful Eating

The Raisin Meditation is just what it sounds like – the deliberate mastication of a solitary raisin. Of course I had to try it, and that led me to the study of mindful eating, where many words have been written and many lessons given. It's easy to know what mindful eating is. Doing it is another matter.

Have you ever wolfed down your food and then regretfully wondered what it tasted like? Try this. Set your utensil down, between bites, more often than you do now, then more often than that, etc.

If relinquishing your fork in mid-feeding is not something you are accustomed to, this will not be easy. I had to remind myself, between meals: *Next time you're eating, try to remember to be mindful of at least one breath during the meal. And then stop. And enjoy one totally mindful bite of food from start to finish.*

And I did remember, occasionally, to consciously chew and swallow a bite or two. But it wasn't until I adopted the practice of "utensil down" that most of my meals became mostly mindful.

Every morning during your meditation, you empty your hands, and you hold them still. Now is when you take that training to the field. Right smack in the middle of feverishly transporting food from plate to mouth, you stop. And give your hands a rest, by placing them on the table, or plopping them in your lap. They might even do a modest mudra down

there as you chew your food and you notice things that were there all along but are now front and center in your awareness, such as your teeth.

::: chewing, swallowing, chewing, swallowing :::

After you have emptied your mouth, you give your hands the go-ahead to retrieve the next bite.

Smaller bites become a possibility with mindfulness. And gratitude shows up. It's the stopping. It creates mental space, a chance to choose exactly what you want to do next, and what you want to think about. You might cut a mouthful of meat in half and make two trips to your mouth with it instead of one. And with that extra time, you might choose to feel gratitude for not being a person who worries about going hungry.

How to make this happen? No surprise here: Mindful breathing. Awareness of in and out, right there at the table, when alone, and even with other people there. Also, sitting up straight, not all the time, just now and then. The resulting wedges of awareness will sometimes remind you to set your utensil down, and take smaller bites, and appreciate the whole affair.

What if I'm eating something sloppy that I eat with my hands? Like a burrito or a pizza?

When you are afraid to set your food down because you might not be able to pick it back up intact, that's not conducive to mindful anything, and it leads to wolfing. But it's not hopeless. You can set the food down and use a fork and knife to control your bite sizes and consumption rates.

Is there a simple way to earn bonus points on my mindful eating scorecard?

As it happens, there is! It's a classic combo exercise: count your chews per breath.

Mindful Hearing

I think of *mindful hearing* as an ongoing observation of the entire soundscape. Mechanical sounds, natural sounds, none of it goes unnoticed. In that condition, the sound from any particular source – even humans talking – in person or recorded – doesn't stimulate a rating reaction in your mind because the sounds are met only with observation, not interpretation.

The easiest way to initiate mindful hearing is to close your eyes and ride a breath.

Mindful Listening

Person A shares a thought, and Person B listens to the thought. That's the customary exchange. But sometimes, no matter what Person A is talking about, Person B's thoughts keep returning to Person B's favorite topic: the life and times of Person B.

If Person B wants to become someone who pays attention to what people are saying as they say it, one who caringly interprets ideas and feelings before replying, those are skills that can be practiced, when alone.

When we sit in meditation, we attempt to watch our thoughts come and go, and by doing so we gain a perspective that allows us to witness our own discursive thinking. And when that happens, we can, in a very real sense, listen to our minds talk.

Day after day we sit still and listen to the recycling of our thoughts, and by doing so we gain clarity, and insight, and understanding, and wisdom. We listen to our worries, and we learn to not fear the future. We listen to our boasting, and we learn to be humble. We listen to our vanity, and we learn to be shameless. We listen to our greed, and we learn to be generous. We listen to our complaints, and we learn non-resistance. We listen as we berate ourselves for what we've done and what we haven't, and we learn self-kindness.

And while all that inner listening is going on, we are also learning to listen to others with a touch of gentleness, and then a touch more than that.

How to Activate Mindful Listening

Mindful listening is like mindful eating in that to improve at it, you have to think about it between events, and critique yourself without criticizing yourself, and make plans for upping your game next time. And then, when the moment of truth comes, and you are in a conversation, and you remember that your ambition is to listen well, you turn to old faithful: mindful breathing. That's your window to awareness – during a conversation – while the other person is talking. It doesn't take much. One mindful breath (...*in*...*out*...) when you are not talking is enough to clear your thoughts and make room for theirs.

Mindfully Listening to Time Capsules

Emails are time capsules. Once sent, the words are frozen in cyber-time until the email is opened. Same with text messages and voice messages and the rest.

If hours or days pass between expression and reception, that gap is instantly closed when the message is read. When you open an email, it's as if a real-time conversation commenced. At that moment, someone is talking to you, and now it's up to you to decide how much of your attention they will get.

Because we only read emails and messages on computers and devices, and because the distractions there are plenty, the act of mindfully listening to someone's thoughts on a screen can require conscious concentration. Which is not a problem, because you practice conscious concentration every morning. And then you use that skill when you read the words from your people. You stop everything else, to give them the gift of listening.

Mindfulness in a Workspace

Nick is one of my poker clients. Here's something he came up with. (The word *tilt* means *insanity*.)

I had a miserable poker session that awoke a tilt in me that I didn't know existed anymore. That's when I realized my meditation practice had taken a backseat in my life. So I used the ass kicking from the poker session to kick myself in the ass, and I restarted my practice.

I had been using solely guided meditation, but I decided now was the time to graduate to unguided meditation. Now I spend seven to ten minutes each day in an unguided meditation at the start of my workday, sitting at my desk. My theory was that if I could start my practice at my workspace with an unguided meditation, it would set the tone for the session, and allow me to reset easier during the day by having meditated in the very space where I need it the most.

Thank you, Nick. And here are some more ideas, for bringing mindfulness to your workspace.

The two reasons to begin your day with a mindfully ingested glass of water are 1) It feels good 2) To train for remembering to take a mindful drink later in the day when you are, say, working at your computer. It's super simple to generate mindfulness when you are sitting at a computer. *See hands. See lap. Place hands in lap. Close eyes.*

That's how you can stop everything, right now. If you use a standing desk, clasp your hands at your waist to get the same effect.

Now look at your water glass, and watch yourself as you pick it up, and here it comes, directly to your mouth, and your spine comes up with no coaxing, and the water goes in, and you feel it, and... *ahhh*.

And back to work you go.

Speaking of spines, you can buy a tiny gizmo that clips onto your clothes invisibly at your collarbone, and it tells you when you are

slouching. You set the device to remember your desired posture, and if you stray from that posture for 30 seconds, or 10 seconds, or however long you set it for, you get buzzed.

I love it that such a thing exists. It means there is much awareness about non-awareness.

If sitting up straight is in itself meditation, and if a little bit goes a long way, then where better to cultivate sitting awareness than at our computers, where short delays are part of every hour?

You're waiting for tech support, or you're waiting on a download, or you arrived early to a webinar. The universe has given you space, to do with what you will. You can check twitter. Or take a breather. An actual sit-up-and-breathe breather that starts when you stop. All it takes is the desire and will to place your hands in your lap when you have a free moment.

Or on top of your head, with your fingers laced. Or stretch your arms straight up. And retreat from what you are doing by closing your eyes and following one breath. Then instruct your eyes to open. And let your attention drift back to the computer.

If only there was some way to remind ourselves to stop and take stock. But there is! With customized reminder notes. You can make as many as you like. Handwritten, or, as I prefer, printed out, fairly small.

Here are four reminder signs from my collection:

Feet Flat
Stand Up
Don't Take Yourself So Seriously
Utensil Down

Mindful Device Usage

Every slouch is an opportunity for a quick blast of mindfulness. That goes for slouching while sitting, and slouching while standing. When you are using your phone, how do you stand? Try standing straighter than that, and that's mindfulness. To make yourself all the way straight, try holding your phone at eye level. You can do that while sitting too. You'll look quite a bit different than the other phone users around you, which could make you self-conscious, except they won't see you because they are looking down at their phones.

Mindful typing is a challenge, but it can be done, if you know the words you are going to type next. For example, just now, at the moment when I knew I was going to type the words "For example," I decided to make it into a mindful moment, and I slowed way down and watched my fingers push on each of these keys: f o r e x a m p l e.

Another thing to try is to say "I am typing" to yourself while you are typing.

I can't do either of those things while my mind is in the act of composing words. But if I know what I'm going to do next, whether it's finishing a sentence or adding bullet points to a list or whatever, then I am able to occasionally break the spell, and watch myself type.

Remind me again what the benefit of doing this is?

I'd rather not. And everyone's practice is unique so there's no point in making predictions. The thrust of this chapter is not about *why* to be mindful. I am assuming you need no convincing. Here we are looking at how to make it happen. Doing stuff like thinking "I am typing" while you are typing is what mindfulness is, included here as an actionable suggestion, and also as an example of the spontaneous and ever-available nature of mindfulness.

Mind and Body

If you are lost in a swirl of thought and you are all tensed up, and you break the thought chain and calm your thoughts down, your body will

follow. It will release some tension. Or you might notice you are clenched up – maybe in your back, or face – so you breathe mindfully to relax a body part, and your mind follows along, and takes a breather too.

Calming the body calms the mind. And calming the mind calms the body. So it doesn't matter which one you attend to first. The result is the same. Less unrest. And your fire is fueled.

Contemplation

Contemplation resembles thinking in that both are a succession of thoughts. The difference is that thinking causes suffering, and contemplation causes wisdom. Contemplation requires a contented mind. Only then can you think about everything harmlessly.

Mindful Sitting Everywhere

My meditation bench came with a strap-on cushion, but I never used it because I wanted to learn how to sit on bare wood or stone without the usual complaints from my back. That's also why I incorporated chair sitting into my morning practice. It's joyous now, to recall and appreciate the resulting transformation: Sitting on hard surfaces used to cause pain and panic. Now it's comfortable and invigorating. May you enjoy the same.

And then there's car seats, and airplane seats, and bus seats. They shape your back into an arch at the base that constricts breathing. But with a little effort and adjustment, you *can* attain the straight spine posture in those chairs. But be careful. This is powerful medicine. Random acts of sitting can cause ripples of rapture.

Gamify It

Half the fun of mining for mindfulness is figuring out how to pull it off. For example, clandestine yoga.

I was waiting to board an airplane, standing in a line that was not going to move for ten minutes. So many people, crowded around me, unsuspecting. To them, it looked like I had merely turned my head to look out the window, when actually I had carefully stretched and relaxed my sternocleidomastoids.

Another sneaky pose is to put your hands on your head and give yourself one really good inhale-exhale-shoulder-stretch. People don't even see you doing it. But you have to do the breathing – because that's what alters your thought path – or it doesn't count.

What if mindfulness was a game? It'd be an easy game to win. All you have to do is play.

I have an idea, for how to keep score...

We of the technologically endowed have all sorts of bodily monitors available to us. We can track our steps, our heart rate, and other metabolics, even the tilt of our spine. I want somebody to make a device that keeps track of how many mindful breaths I take, and where I take them. Then, as a gamester, I could do what comes naturally and track my score, establish baselines, analyze deviations, and so forth.

(Reminder: I am defining a mindful breath as a breath during which you are aware of when you are breathing in and when you are breathing out.)

I wonder...

What is my percentage of mindful breaths, on average, while I'm meditating? 50%? More? Less?

What about when I'm listening to someone talk? I'd estimate my score at 5% tops. That's one breath every minute or so.

What about airports? Is my breathing score at airports still going up as the years going by? I hope it is. And I think it is. But it'd be neat to know for sure.

In the meantime, I will continue to ponder my percentages in various situations, and raise them just by wanting to, and so can you, if you are one for goalless gamification.

Rosary Fingers

As a rock musician, I only need to count to four. Conveniently, I have four fingers per thumb. I have used my digits a zillion times to count to four, while learning and writing songs, by touching the tip of my thumb to my fingers, one at a time. I don't need to count on my fingers to conceptualize music. It's just a mental assist that makes the job easier.

So, when I was introduced to the idea of using my thumbs and fingers to assist in breath counting, I was like, "Hey! I know that song!"

And it does make the job *easier*, which in the case of following your breaths equates to *makes you more likely to do it*, and also *more likely to sustain it*.

When you synchronize your hands and your breathing, it's a triple shot of mindfulness: breath, mind, and body.

While You Exercise

During your workouts, close your eyes sometimes, and follow your breathing, and nothing else. If you are in the habit of using electronics to pass time or put time to use, then put that habit on hold for at least a few minutes during every workout. Bring it down to just you, and concentrate on your body. Try to not succumb to tempting distractions. And when you do lose track of yourself, just keep coming back to your medding. Think of it as mental gymnastics.

Replicating the Soup Bowl

I read a description of mindfulness that said to imagine you are carrying a bowl of hot soup that's full to the top. You have to carry it from the

kitchen to the table, and sit it on the table, without spilling a drop... or else!

When the bowl touches the table, will you be worrying about money? Or relationships? Or news stories? Of course not. Because the task at hand demands your full attention.

If you close your eyes while walking, it replicates the soup bowl sensation. You create a situation that demands mindfulness. There are other, less dangerous ways to achieve the same forced focus, such as using your non-dominant hand to do stuff.

The next level after that, and it's quite a hop, is to replicate the soup bowl feeling of absorption on your own, with no assist from closed eyes or clumsy hands or anything else. Raptness.

Driving Games

Sometimes I'll sit up as tall as I can while I'm driving, and *then* adjust the mirrors. Inevitably I shrink back down to my normal driving posture, and when that happens, I see blue sky in one mirror and car ceiling in the other. If I want to know what's happening on the road behind me, I must either sit up, or adjust the mirrors. If I choose to sit up, I score that as a win in this game.

The stress of being stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic can be alleviated by medding. Incredibly, traffic jams can become an ex-nuisance. Same goes for stop lights, and careless drivers.

When you're annoyed and frustrated behind the wheel, here are some things you can do that will reduce unhappiness and grow your practice at the same time. But you don't have to wait until you're grumpy. You can do these when you already feel good!

- When you roll to a stop at a stoplight, gamify the wait. One way is to gaze unwaveringly at the red light until it turns green. Sound easy? Good luck. First, it's hard to remember to do it. And then it

can be surprisingly hard to do, depending on how long the light is, and on how heavy your mind is.

- Watch the other vehicles on the road. Not all the time. That's not realistic. Just some of the time, like any other medding. This means no music or podcasts or conversation. Do this not because actively surveying the traffic reduces the likelihood of collision (even though it does). Do it because traffic-awareness is like the breathing train. You can hop onto the traffic-awareness train, and for however long you stay on the train, that is, for however long you are concentrating on the act of driving, you are doing the work of meditation. And as a reward for your diligence, you'll sometimes feel a little better afterwards. (Reminder: Points are scored for intention and effort. Results are irrelevant.)
- Ask yourself these questions:

Why do I feel like I'm in a hurry even when I'm not? What's up with that?

Did I just yell at a total stranger who can't hear me? In what world does that make sense?

You and your fellow drivers are joined together in an activity that is probably the most dangerous thing any of you will do all day. And you share the same objective: to get where you are going without bumping into each other. Or smashing into each other.

What's the best way to avoid collisions? To think of your fellow drivers as opponents? Or as teammates? Which is safer? Competition? Or cooperation?

What about all those drivers out there who are discourteous, and distracted, and dangerous? How do I co-operate with that?

I believe the optimal strategy for obtaining the objective is to watch the road at all times, and to instantly and calmly defer to other drivers when that is the safest thing to do. No panic. No fuss. When you come upon

selfish drivers who do not see themselves as part of the team, then you do the best thing you can do for them and yourself which is to demonstrate impeccable driving, and to hold no ill-will toward them because like it or not, they are on your team.

All of this will be obsolete of course, when cars and trucks pilot themselves. That will be a great thing for society, in my opinion. Commutes in big cities keep getting slower and longer. Millions of people spending millions of hours on tense and tiring highways, trying not to bump into each other. Self-driving cars will remove much unease from the earth, and the associated dread of driving. People will instead look *forward* to their commutes, because of their media, and communications, and meditations.

Mindfulness When Out and About

What does it mean to *have a moment alone*?

You're in an elevator, by yourself. This is an opportunity to do some standing meditation, because you have a moment alone. The elevator stops, the door opens, a person walks in, and the door closes. You greet briefly, then look away, and that's the end of that relationship.

While the two of you ride the elevator together in silence, are you still experiencing a *moment alone*? I say yes.

You don't need to hide in stairwells and bathroom stalls to engage your practice. You don't have to be by yourself to be alone. At a theater, on a sidewalk, or at a store, unless you are with someone you know, you are alone, as far as your practice is concerned. Surrounded by people, you can still choose to walk, stand, and sit in mindfulness.

Which is not to say you can't walk mindfully down a sidewalk with someone you know. You most certainly can. It's just a lot harder. My point is that there's plenty of time for a prevalent practice, and the only reason someone would say, "I don't have time to practice" is because they don't know what it means to practice.

My last suggestion for initiating mindfulness on the move comes from Thich Nhat Hahn. And I have seen similar breath-narrations elsewhere. What you do is combine the basic breath narration with whatever is happening, spiced with smiles and gratitude, like so:

Breathing in, I am aware that I stubbed my toe
Breathing out, I smile to my toe
Breathing in, I appreciate the functionality of my toe
Breathing out, I know I am breathing out

For routine tasks, the mindfulness song goes like this:

Breathing in, I am aware that I am scrubbing a pan
Breathing out, I am glad to have dishes, and food

But you don't want to lie to yourself about how you feel, or hide from what's true. Maybe this is the real story:

Breathing in, I am aware that I am stuck with doing the dishes and
I'm mad as hell about it
Breathing out, I'm really upset
Breathing in, We should have just ordered pizza
Breathing out, I am upset and I know that I am upset

That last line is the masterstroke that dissolves anxiety, maybe slightly, maybe entirely. Repeat as needed.

And let's close with this classic:

Breathing in, I am aware that my mom is unjustly mad at me and that
she is being infuriatingly unreasonable yet again.

Breathing out, I smile to my mother.

You Have to Want It

Why meditate?

To make things better.

Why daily?

To make sure.

It's not *what* you do. It's *that* you do. You plant seeds, in your meditation garden. Seeds of patience. Seeds of self-acceptance. Seeds of putting others first. You tend to your garden every day. You water it with your awareness, and your commitment is the sun that each day always rises.

You have to want it.

Usually that phrase means: *You are going to have to try really hard.*

Another possible interpretation is: *Desire is required.*

And that, my friends, is the secret to dailyness. You have to *want* to garden. You have to *desire* to sit every day. In two distinct ways. You have to want to have a practice. And you need to look forward to the sitting itself.

To get there, you might have to stop and start a lot. And you might need to chisel away at massive roadblocks. But at least now you know what you're up against. And you know what you're after: the tipping point. You'll know you've reached it when you wake up feeling lousy, and there's no confusion about what you want to do first.

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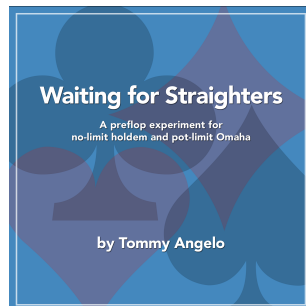
Thanks also to Ken Silbert for the artwork.

Books by Tommy Angelo



Elements of Poker

It's like Tommy looked at everything ever written about poker and said, "Okay, let me fill in all the stuff they left out." — Bill Rini



Waiting for Straighters

Waiting for Straighters is about folding before the flop at no-limit holdem and pot-limit Omaha. It merges deep geek strategy with the painless perspective.



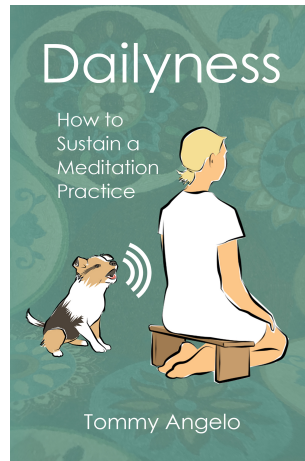
Painless Poker

Seven agitated poker players are beamed to the Painless Poker Clinic, where Tommy conducts a two-day seminar on how to play poker, and life, without all the stress and frustration.



A Rubber Band Story

A handy collection of Tommy's most popular poker articles, with new notes to the readers. Portable, humorous, and who doesn't want to know about The Worst Play Ever?



Dailyness

This book is about doing sitting meditation every morning of every day of your life until you die. It's about building a practice that cannot lapse. It's not about why to meditate. It's about how to pull it off.