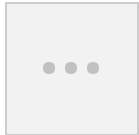


Establishing Peace, Cultivating Wakefulness- Posted July 4, 2009 on "The Meditative Life," a blog for *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-meditative-life/200907/establishing-peace-cultivating-wakefulness>

Meditation came of age on August 4, 2003, when *Time* magazine's cover showed an attractive young woman meditating and obviously enjoying the experience. The affective neuroscientist Richard Davidson (University of Wisconsin) had just reported the results of his [landmark study](#)(link is external) of eight expert meditators (each with over 10,000 hours of practice), which showed the stunning changes in brain activity possible in meditative states. That same year Anne Harrington (Harvard) and I moderated a Mind and Life MIT meeting of the Dalai Lama with psychologists, neuroscientists, and Buddhist scholar/practitioners to jointly "Investigate the Mind." From the extraordinary response of the audience of 1000 scientists and scholars one could consider it a watershed meeting. (See the book [The Dalai Lama at MIT](#)(link is external)).



In a few decades meditation had gone from an obscure set of mental exercises practiced by Buddhist monks in the Himalayas, and by their Christian counterparts in isolated and austere monasteries, to a widely accessible set of exercises as easy as breathing or eating a raisin.

Not long ago I was listening to Jon Kabat Zinn at the 30th anniversary conference of his pioneering work at the University of Massachusetts [Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society](#)(link is external). Few have done as much as Kabat Zinn to make meditation accessible to the general public and applicable to the real needs of individuals. He and his colleagues around the world have also done a great deal of research on the effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in helping those with psychological and/or physical health challenges. During the days of the MBSR celebration, and in the same hotel, I was working with the leadership of the [Mind and Life Institute](#)(link is external) which is now focusing its attention on the possible benefits of contemplative exercises in education. For the last fifteen years of so, I have been working with hundreds of other professors and administrators on exactly this theme in higher education through the academic program of the [Center for Contemplative Mind in Society](#)(link is external) and the newly formed [Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education](#)(link is external). Indeed,

meditation has come of age, and is now widely recognized as serving many needs, both personal and societal.

In recognition of this, it is fitting that there be a blog on meditation in *Psychology Today* and I am pleased to be asked to offer one. My contributions will range widely, including discussions of scientific studies and as well as concrete practices that may be of use to readers. I will give my personal views as to the transformative potential of meditation, as well as the appropriateness of various practices to different situations or difficulties. I do this based on my forty years of personal practice and study, and my nearly twenty years of teaching meditation in many contexts. It will, of course, represent only my view on this enormous and emerging field. I welcome other view points.

Let me close with a simple practice. It can be an entry point for our consideration of the wealth of practices that comprise the meditative life. In future entries I will explore and chart the several regions and stages of meditative practice and experience. Taken together I hope that they contribute to an enhancement of your well-being as well as to a deepening of your insight into life.

Settling the Body, Settling the Mind

Sit comfortably; the particulars of the posture are not important at this point. Close your eyes, or soften your gaze ahead. Allow your daily thoughts and feelings to slip away. In this exercise we are seeking to settle the body and the mind. Rest your attention lightly on the breath, feeling its inhale and exhale, the rise and fall of your belly, a gently stirring at your nostrils. Follow its natural rhythm. Distracting thoughts and emotion are repeatedly set aside, returning one's attention gently to the breath. As an aid you may chose to count each exhale 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3... Or label each triplet with the associations: sky, ocean, and Earth. If distracted, release the thought, settle back to breath: 1, 2, 3, sky, ocean, Earth... Repeat for five or so minutes, allowing the mind and body to settle, to become more still, to be more peaceful. With each disruption, inner or outer, release yourself from it and settle again gently on the breath, becoming quiet and still: 1, 2, 3, sky, ocean, Earth... When you sense the practice is at its end, close with the cultivation of gratitude, a practice all its own, and with which we can end every practice session.

Twin gestures form this practice. The first is the establishment of a deep and abiding peace that with time can come to radiate through our lives. The second is a gentle wakefulness that enhances our attention,

brushes away the sleep that clouds our mind, and brings a subtle clarity to our lives. I think that Rumi had something of this in mind when he wrote:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.

Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill

where the two worlds touch.

The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep.