



Yoga Teacher Training

Teaching and Practicing Meditation

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Introduction

Stress is a part of modern life. But fortunately, yoga provides us with the tools to use our breath and body to relax. Yoga in all its aspects – postures, breathing exercises, meditation and so on – can effectively prevent and reduce the signs of stress. However, there are certain benefits that meditation provides that can not be found in any of the other aspects of yoga.

The postures and breathing exercises of Hatha yoga are only the beginning. They are only two steps of the eight fold path of yoga. The real power of yoga is unlocked when you approach it as a lifestyle – meditation is the next step in doing that. Through meditation, you not only deepen your concentration and quiet your mind, you learn how to bring yoga into your everyday life, anywhere.

Meditation has the utmost value today, when the pace and stresses of living can make the ability to let go more difficult and when the number of stress related diseases are on the rise. Many people who take up yoga find the relaxation and focus developed through meditation to be its greatest benefit. Meditation helps you find the inner peace and stillness that is always within you, even when things around you seem out of control.

Relaxation and meditation each have a different emphasis. Relaxation means lying down, usually in Savasana, to quiet the mind and body, relaxing the entire body. Meditation takes a person more deeply into a focused state of mind, seated comfortably and focused on one point. In relaxation, relaxing the body is the primary focus. In meditation, stilling the mind is the primary focus. In this part of the yoga training course, we will be discussing specific meditation practices and the benefits of meditation. We will discuss traditional meditation, as well as look at guided and active meditations and visualization processes.

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Meditation

Meditation introduces you to yourself on all levels and finally leads you to the center of consciousness within yourself. Through meditation you learn to let go and no longer identify with the objects of the mind and of the world. You learn to let go of labels and actively experience the moments of your life.

Consciously or unconsciously we all seek the peace of mind that meditation brings. All of us have our own way of finding this peace, our own meditative habits, such as from fishing or knitting. During these meditative times, we're oblivious to the passing of time, our attention is fully engaged, and the chatter in our mind becomes silent. Meditative activities can be very simple. Personally, I find it rather meditative to spread peanut butter and jelly on bread while packing lunch for my kids.

However these meditative activities can only bring us peace as long as they absorb our interest. Once the mind is again distracted, it returns to its normal routine of incessant chatter, wasting our energy on thoughts of the past or future, and not being fully present for the task at hand. To find more lasting peace, meditation training is helpful.

The word meditation is used in a variety of ways and people are often unclear about what meditation is in yoga practice. Some people use the word "meditate" to mean thinking or contemplating, others use it to mean day dreaming or fantasizing. However, in yoga, meditation is not any of these, but a different and distinct process.

Meditation is a specific technique for resting the mind and attaining a state of consciousness that is different from the normal waking state. Meditation is the practice by which there is constant observation of the mind. It means focusing the mind on one point, so you can begin to still your mind. Focusing on the breath or on a silent word or phrase (a mantra) or on an object in front of you, you repeatedly bring your attention back to your object of focus whenever your mind begins to wander, reducing the movement of your mind to a small circle. At first your thoughts insist on wandering, but with steady practice the time that the mind is focused begins to extend. In meditation, you are fully awake and alert, but your mind is not focused on the external world or the events taking place around you. You are also not dreaming. Instead, it is a clear, relaxed and inwardly focused state. Meditation is simply a quiet, effortless, one-pointed focus of attention and awareness. By giving ourselves one internal focus of attention, we help the mind stop other stressful mental processes, such as worrying, planning, thinking and reasoning. There are many different meditation techniques, yet they all have the same goal – achieving a state of inner concentration, calmness and peace.

Meditation is a discipline by which you attempt to get beyond the conditioned, "thinking" mind into a deeper state of relaxation or awareness. It often involves

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turning attention to a single point of reference. Meditation is recognized as a component of almost all religions, and has been practiced for over 5,000 years. It is also practiced outside religious traditions. Different meditative disciplines encompass a wide range of spiritual and/or psychophysical practices which may emphasize different goals -- from achievement of a higher state of consciousness, to greater focus, creativity or self-awareness, or simply a more relaxed and peaceful frame of mind.

Meditation has been defined as: "self regulation of attention, in the service of self-inquiry, in the here and now." The various techniques of meditation can be classified according to their focus. Some focus on the field or background perception and experience, also called "mindfulness"; others focus on a preselected specific object, and are called "concentrative" meditation. There are also techniques that shift between the field and the object.

Using the focus as an 'anchor' brings the subject constantly back to the present, avoiding cognitive analysis or fantasy regarding the contents of awareness, and increasing tolerance and relaxation of secondary thought processes. In mindfulness meditation, the meditator sits comfortably and silently, centering attention by focusing awareness on an object or process (either the breath, a sound: a mantra or phrase; a visualization, or an exercise). The meditator is usually encouraged to maintain an open focus.

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Meditation as Part of Yoga

Patanjali, in his Yoga Sutras, described five different states of mind: Ksipta, Mudha, Viksipta, Ekagra and Nirodha. Ksipta defines a very agitated mind, unable to think, listen or remain quiet. It is jumping from one thought to another. In Mudha no information seems to reach the brain; the person is absentminded. Viksipta is a higher state where the mind receives information but is not able to process it. It moves from one thought to another, in a confused inner speech. Ekagra is the state of a calm mind but not asleep. The person is focused and can pay attention. Lastly Nirodha, when the mind is not disturbed by erratic thoughts, it is completely focused, as when you are meditating or totally centered in what you are doing. The ultimate end of meditation according to Patanjali is the destruction of primal ignorance (avidya) and the realization of and establishment in the essential nature of the Self.

Swami Vivekananda describes meditation as follows: "Meditation has been laid stress upon by all religions. The meditative state of mind is declared by the Yogis to be the highest state in which the mind exists. When the mind is studying the external object, it gets identified with it, loses itself. To use the simile of the old Indian philosopher: the soul of man is like a piece of crystal, but it takes the colour of whatever is near it. Whatever the soul touches ... it has to take its colour. That is the difficulty. That constitutes the bondage. The colour is so strong, the crystal forgets itself and identifies itself with the colour. Suppose a red flower is near the crystal and the crystal takes the colour and forgets itself, thinks it is red. We have taken the colour of the body and have forgotten what we are. All the difficulties that follow come from that one dead body. All our fears, all worries, anxieties, troubles, mistakes, weakness, evil, are from that one great blunder — that we are bodies. This is the ordinary person. It is the person taking the colour of the flower near to it. We are no more bodies than the crystal is the red flower. The practice of meditation is pursued. The crystal knows what it is, takes its own colour. It is meditation that brings us nearer to truth than anything else. ..."

Some people, especially in the West, have a misconception that equates meditation with Buddhism. However, Buddhism, like Judaism and Christianity is a system of beliefs, while meditation is a nonsectarian process of awareness. If you have any students, who are concerned about meditation being associated with a specific religion, assure them that this is not the case, and that meditation can be a useful tool that complements any religion.

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Guiding Others in Meditation

At first, many students may see meditation as pointless and a waste of time. But after a few times of guided meditation, most students are pleasantly surprised at the effects it has, not only immediately after, but on their ability to regain their sense of peace throughout the day. Recognize and respect the universality of meditation and give your students different options from which to choose. With your guidance, your students will find a meditation technique that works best for them.

Remind your students that it is difficult to break the mental identification with thoughts, forms, and labeling experiences in the outside world. The mind is often bound by these mental constructs. Meditation can help break these chains by allowing what is. Meditation opens people to a fresh and rewarding relationship with the world, by focusing on embracing everything and rejecting nothing.

The task of a yoga teacher is to help their students bring their mind out of old thought pattern habits by giving them a new focus. The breath or internal mantras can be this new focus – anything that does not have a corresponding outer object (i.e. name of a friend or enjoyable activity) will work. Vocal mantras are sounds with no corresponding outer object. These vibrations create a form, but the form is not external to you.

Exercise 1

How well can you focus your mind now?

Try the following exercise to determine how busy your mind is now. Think of a white swan as it slowly and gracefully glides across the surface of a pond. It barely causes a ripple in the water. Just keep thinking of the swan. Try to form a clear image and then hold it as steadily as possible in your mind, while slowly counting 100, 99, 98, 97, 96. As you count, you can picture the numbers appearing on the swan.

How far did you manage to count before your mental image of the swan faded and another thought took its place?

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Benefits of Meditation

There are many physical and psychological benefits to meditating. Some of those benefits include:

- Slower pulse rate, increased calmness
- Better sleep
- Lowered blood pressure
- Decrease in the secretion of stress hormones and levels of stress
- Increased acceptance of self and others
- Increased self awareness
- Decrease in destructive behaviors
- Improved ability to focus and concentrate
- Improved positive outlook
- Decrease of phobias, fears or destructive habits
- Ability to let go of limiting beliefs

Think about which of these benefits is important to you. This will help guide your practice. And, the more consistently meditation is practiced, the more fully you will experience the benefits you desire.

For all the activity of modern society, we still have a fundamental need for silence and inner peace. Meditation is an opportunity to spend time by ourselves, without responding to everything around us. Spending just a few minutes quieting the mind and focusing on the present moment, makes us more relaxed and effective decision makers throughout the rest of the day.

Many people are still prisoners of their own minds and through meditation we learn how we can control and use our own minds for our best interests, rather than becoming the victims of our own thoughts and worries. Meditation teaches you not only how to control your thoughts, but how to stop them completely. This creates peace of mind that helps us live the life we want.

Meditation also teaches you how to develop a sense of detachment to irritating situations. Instead of getting irritated by an event, through meditation you learn how to watch those thoughts of irritation and let them go, bringing yourself back to peace. Rather than avoiding stressful or irritating situations, you learn how to deal with them head on and calmly find solutions to life's challenges. As our outer circumstance change and fluctuate, meditation shows us how our happiness is not dependent on outside situations, but on our inner state of mind.

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Preparing for Meditation

Personally, I teach meditation at the end of class. I find this works best for my students because their muscles are relaxed and energized, so they do not have the added distractions brought on by body aches and tension.

To help you and your students prepare for meditation and to encourage your practice, follow these guidelines:

- 1) Set aside a special place for meditation – the atmosphere you create can help still the mind.
- 2) Choose a time when your mind is free of everyday concerns – in the morning before others are up, in the evening or at the end of yoga practice may all be good times
- 3) Briefly warm-up your body before meditating. This will help you sit longer without feeling stiff.
- 4) Using the same time and place each day can help the mind slow down more quickly
- 5) Keep your back and neck straight (not rounded)
- 6) Instruct your mind to remain quiet for the duration of the meditation session
- 7) Regulate your breathing. Take time to practice some deep breathing (if you have not been practicing yoga prior to your meditation) then slow it down
- 8) Establish a rhythmic breathing pattern – inhaling and exhaling for about three seconds each
- 9) At first let your mind wander – it will only grow more restless if you force it to concentrate
- 10) Now bring your mind to rest on the focal point of your choice – your mantra or an object
- 11) Hold your object of concentration at this focal point throughout your session

Exercise 2

For your own meditation practice, answer the following questions:

What time of day do you currently (or will you) set aside to meditate?

Where do you (or will you) meditate?

What is (or will be) your focal point?

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To meditate, it's important to:

- Gently stretch or warm up the body, so you can sit for longer periods of time without getting stiff
- Sit in a comfortable and steady position
- Relax the body
- Make your breathing smooth and serene
- Calmly witness the objects traveling in the train of your mind
- Inspect the quality of your thoughts and learn to promote those which are positive and helpful to your growth
- Remain centered and undisturbed whether you judge your thoughts or situation to be good or bad

Sitting for meditation

Many meditative traditions teach that the spine should be kept "straight" (i.e. that the meditator should not slouch). Often this is explained as a way of encouraging the circulation of what some call "spiritual energy," the "vital breath", the "life force" or in Sanskrit "prana". In some traditions the meditator may sit on a chair, flat-footed, sit on a stool, or walk in mindfulness.

Other traditions, such as those related to kundalini yoga, take a less formal approach. While the basic practice in these traditions is also to sit still quietly in a traditional posture, they emphasize the possibility of spontaneous yogic postures, changes in breathing patterns or emotional states, or perhaps repetitive physical movements such as swaying, etc., which may naturally arise as the practitioner sits in meditation, and which should not be resisted but rather allowed to express themselves in order to enhance the natural flow of energy through the body. This is said to help purify the nadis and ultimately deepen one's meditative practice.

In most meditative traditions, the eyes are closed. In some sects such as Zen, the eyes are half-closed, half open and looking slightly downward. In others such as Brahma Kumaris, the eyes are kept fully open.

There are a number of ways to sit for meditation. The main thing is to find a position that is comfortable and to keep the spine erect. Here are a few examples of common sitting postures for meditation practice:

- 1) Easy seated posture. The right leg is folded, bringing the right heel next to the perineum. The left heel is brought in next to the right foot. The knees are taken down as far as possible. It's important to keep the head, neck and spine held in a straight, vertical line. The position of the feet should be reversed during the next meditation, so each foot has a turn at being on the inside.

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- 2) Egyptian posture (sitting on a chair). This is simply sitting straight on the front part of a chair. This posture can be used if someone finds the easy seated posture to be too uncomfortable.
- 3) Sage posture. The right leg is folded, bringing the right heel next to the perineum. The left heel is placed between the calf and thigh of the right leg, with the sole of the left foot turned up. The thighs and knees are kept flat on the floor. The position of the feet should be reversed during the next meditation, so each foot has a turn being placed on top.
- 4) Preparation for lotus posture. The right foot rests, sole upturned on the left thigh as high up as possible. The palms of the hands are placed flat on the floor next to the hips.
- 5) Lotus posture. Each foot is upturned on the opposite thigh and both knees are on the ground. This posture provides increased stability for more advanced practice.
- 6) Yoga posture. From lotus, exhale and fold forward, lowering the forehead to the floor. The hands are clasped behind the back.
- 7) Thunderbolt posture. Kneel on the floor with the knees together and sit back on the heels with the soles of the feet facing up. The hands are placed on the knees or just above the knees on the lower thighs. You can also sit in this posture using a yoga bench or placing a bolster between the legs to lessen the strain on the knees.

However you or your students want to sit for meditation is fine – on a chair, cross legged, kneeling, lotus, or your own creation – as long as you follow a few guidelines which help lessen distractions or strain:

- The head, neck and shoulders should be centered, so the neck is not twisted or turned to the side and the head is not dropped forward or back.
- The spine should be straight
- Face forward with eyes gently closed, don't squeeze them shut
- Let the facial muscles and jaw relax
- Breathe through the nose
- Relax arms and shoulders
- Sit up tall to lengthen the spine (hunching or slumping will lead to physical discomfort and make breathing more difficult)

Some people like to practice what is called a finger lock (jnana mudra) by bringing the thumb and first finger together. This creates a circle, which can be thought of as a small circuit through which energy flows. You and your students can try it and see if you like it or not.

Exercise 3

For the next few days, try different meditation postures. Which one is best for you?

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Time to Practice Meditation

For thousands of years, yoga practitioners have meditated at sunrise, a time that is considered to be auspicious and especially potent for meditation and tapping into your higher potential. In Sanskrit, this time of day is called, “brahma-muhurta” (hour of brahman – with brahman being the ultimate reality).

Of course, sunrise may not work for you and you may want to meditate more than one time per day. Any time can be a good time to meditate. Just try to meditate at a similar time each day, so your body gets used to a specific meditation time and can be more prepared.

What time of day is best for you to meditate at this time?

Help for General Meditation Issues

A number of issues are common when people begin meditation. Below are some of the common challenges people face and how to help your students work through these issues.

Issue: I couldn't stop thinking.

Response: When you meditate, your thinking doesn't stop. Meditation isn't about suppressing thoughts, but about surpassing them. Instead of resisting thoughts, allow the thoughts to be there, notice them without judging them, release them, and bring your focus back your focal point.

Issue: I feel so restless just sitting here.

Response: As you develop your meditation practice, your mind and body will gradually acclimate to being still. With time, your body will become more comfortable in the alert yet peaceful state of meditation.

Issue: Sometimes I feel scary thoughts or feelings when I meditate.

Response: The practice of meditation can free your mind in a whole new way, and sometimes propel thoughts and feelings up from deep within to your awareness. Instead of resisting or suppressing these thoughts, deal with them by allowing them to arise, notice them, then release them and return your concentration to your focal point.

Issue: I find meditation really boring. Nothing is happening.

Response: A lot happens when you meditate, but just in a different way. When you let go of everything and just sit quietly for a few minutes a day, you create space in your life in which positive changes can occur.

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Meditation Practices

There are many types of meditation. We will discuss five basic meditation practices here. You and your students do not need to do meditation “well.” The important thing about meditation is how consistently you do it, not how well you do it. We will then discuss guided meditations, or “visualizations.”

1) Meditation of Contemplation (Also called one pointed meditation)

This meditation is about learning to simply look at or contemplate an object without evaluating or judging it, and to bring your whole self fully into the process of simply observing.

Steps:

- Pick an object (natural objects usually work well – a rock or a sea shell, but not something that can wilt, like a flower)
- Sit in your selected sitting posture
- Take a few slow long breaths, focusing on your breath
- Allow your breathing to become natural again
- Feel your selected object for a minute
- Place the object a foot or two away from you and look at it, really look at it
- Notice everything about the object, simply taking in every detail, without judging any detail as something you like or not
- Continue watching and noticing the details of the object for a few minutes
- The task is to keep trying to bring more and more of yourself to doing just one thing – looking. You are aiming at being totally involved from your head to your toes in this one activity.

It can be difficult to simply look at an object without judging or evaluating it. Give permission to yourself and your students to make slips from the directions. Remind yourself and your students to simply notice if your mind begins to wander to other thoughts or if you begin to judge the object and complement yourself for recognizing this slip and bring yourself back gently, yet firmly, to simply looking at the object.

If possible, stay with the same object for a least a few weeks.

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2) Breath Counting Meditation

The object in this meditation is once again to be doing just one thing as completely and fully as possible. In this case, the one thing is counting your breath.

Steps:

- Start in your selected sitting posture
- Take a few slow long breaths, focusing on your breath
- Allow your breathing to become natural again
- On your next inhale, count to three or four
- As you exhale, count to three or four
- Continue counting with each inhale and each exhale
- Let your breath remain natural and modify your counting if necessary rather than modifying your breath
- Strive to be aware of just your counting and to be as fully aware of it as possible. The goal is to have your whole being involved in the counting, releasing any other thoughts

It's best to count to four or five on inhale and exhale, rather than counting sequentially (continuously) for the entire meditation. This is because sequential counting can lead to competition within you. For example, today I counted to 523, maybe I can count higher tomorrow.

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3) Bubble Meditation

In this meditation, you observe your own consciousness in a special way while interfering with it as little as possible. You meditate on the stream of your own consciousness.

Steps:

- Start in your sitting position for meditation
- Take a few slow long breaths, focusing on your breath
- Allow your breathing to become natural again
- Picture yourself sitting in field and imagine one large bubble at a time slowly moving from your head up towards the clouds
- Each thought or feeling is pictured as a bubble rising into space, until it is no longer visible in your mind's eye
- It should only take about 5 to 8 seconds for you to place a bubble around your thought and have it rise into space until it is out of view.
- Wait for the next thought and observe it for the same amount of time and so on.
- Do not explore, follow up or associate to a bubble, just observe it with the background of "that's what I'm thinking right now – interesting."
- As one thought (bubble) passes out of visual space, you calmly wait for the next bubble
- Try this meditation for 4-5 minutes a day for a couple of weeks

The purpose of picturing your thoughts in a bubble and watching that bubble rise is to help you with two things: 1) Keep your timing. You learn to simply contemplate each thought or perception for a short period of time and then to let it go. 2) The structure helps you look at each thought individually and not constantly feel you must find connections between them.

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4) Body Rhythm Meditation

In this meditation, you observe your own body, noticing its rhythms without interfering with those rhythms.

Steps:

- Start in your sitting position for meditation
- Take a few slow long breaths, focusing on your breath
- Allow your breathing to become natural again
- Place your hands on your belly with your fingers slightly spread apart (so your hands and fingers are not touching one another)
- Feel what is going on immediately under your fingers
- Observe actively, but if you find yourself translating into words what you are feeling, then bring yourself back to simply observing

Contemplate with your fingers instead of with your eyes, on the rhythm of movement rather than on the look of an object. Other self-generated rhythms can also be used in this meditation, such as observing what is happening at the entrance of the nose where the air enters and leaves the body.

In this meditation, you can also focus on one part of the body at a time. For example, as you breathe, focus on your first finger. Imagine energy going to that finger with each breath. Feel it becoming warmer. Then bring your focus to the next finger. Do this with each finger.

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5) Mantra Meditation

This is one of the most widely used forms of meditation. It consists of a word or phrase that is either chanted or mentally (silently) repeated over and over. A vocal mantra often is more concerned with the actual sounds and vibrations of the words more so than any meaning of the words. A mental mantra is one you choose for yourself that you associate with good feelings (i.e. love, peace, calm, home, good). Since you may be meditating in a group, we will discuss silent mantra meditation here (too many people chanting too many different phrases would be more than a little distracting). The basic goal is to be doing one thing at a time, in this case silently repeating a mantra, and being aware only of this phrase.

Steps:

- Start in your sitting position for meditation
- Take a few slow long breaths, focusing on your breath
- Allow your breathing to become natural again
- Choose one or two center words (mantras). Choose something positive such as peace, joy, calm, let go, hope, love, etc.
- As you inhale, mentally say your first word
- As you exhale, mentally say your second word (if you have one)
- Focus completely on the word, mentally seeing it spelled out, noticing each letter and the spaces between each letter
- Continue focusing on your word or words, mentally observing the words with each breath without thinking about the meaning of the words or how these words apply to you. Simply mentally observe the words themselves
- Practice this for about 5 minutes, using the same words for a week.
- At the end of the week, make a note if you want to continue using these words or try something different.

Special Note on OM (AUM)

Chanting the sound AUM (om) is often a good way to end a meditation or yoga practice. However, many times students don't know the reasons for chanting aum (om). The purpose of this sound is to increase the vibrations in the body, thereby increasing the energy, as well as to provide a focal point. As you chant this sound, your mouth and throat should move from fully open to fully closed.

To get the full effects of this sound, have your students say the sound by starting with "ahhh" in which the mouth is wide open, then moving to "uhh" in which the mouth and throat are half open, and finishing with "mmmm" in which the mouth and throat are closed. Following this pattern creates a longer and stronger vibration. Note that in Sanskrit, the term "aum"



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represents the beginning (first letter A), middle (middle letter u in the roman version of the sanskrit alphabet) and end (last letter m). Some say that the sound “om” was the first sound of the universe and that it represents all that exists. I don’t know if that is true or not (I don’t know what happened at the start of the universe), so for me I find it most beneficial to simply focus on the vibration created by the sound of “aum” (om). When I chant that sound, the vibration helps me to release any anxiety and feel completely at peace. I find that by focusing on the effects of aum (om), rather than any particular meaning behind it, students tend to feel more open to the experience, as they can discover the effects for themselves, and develop their own form of chanting aum (om) that is most effective for them.

Activity:

Discuss which of the previous meditations you found most beneficial. Pick one of the meditations and teach it to someone else in the group.

Guided Meditation

Besides practicing traditional meditation, you may also want to bring your students through a guided meditation, or visualization. A good time to do this is just before Savasana.

Guided meditation is a form of visualization. In guided meditation, you use your mind to visualize images that help you relax and assist you in retraining your mind. Mental imagery is incredibly powerful and you can easily learn to harness it. Whatever you consistently focus your attention on, you will get more of the same. Many people do this habitually in a negative way – they visualize how things could go wrong and create worry and stress in their minds and body. But you can use visualization to create peace of mind and positive changes in your life situation.

Guided meditations are very easy, but the mind can make it very complicated sometimes. Remind your students that all they need to do is relax, breathe fully and play along with the game of “let’s pretend.” Also remind students that it’s not important that the image in their minds be perfectly clear or just right. It’s more important that they tune into the feelings created by the ideas or situations in the visualizations. Believing that the visualization is actually happening and feeling the feelings associated with that situation can bring about many positive changes in our emotions and our lives. Visualization is something you do all the time whether consciously or not. When you consciously create positive visualizations, you can create positive emotions and use them to change your life – making life easier and happier.

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1) Emotion Shifting

This guided meditation shows you how to play with your emotions and literally change how you are feeling at will, simply by changing the focus of your thoughts. Just like you shift gears in a car, you can shift your emotional gears simply by changing your thoughts.

Steps:

- Think about something that brings you a feeling of joy (i.e. a beautiful sunset, a cute puppy, or someone you love).
- Breathe in that feeling of joy
- Focus on how it feels in your body and where you feel the joy – does your heart feel open, belly relaxed, face relaxed?
- Now think of something that you find upsetting – being stuck in traffic or getting in an argument with someone.
- Focus on how the upset feeling feels in your body – does your stomach feel tense, heart feel closed, mouth tense?
- Again, think about the thing that brings you joy
- Focus on where you feel the joy. Take a few long deep breaths and expand those feelings of joy.
- Then, go back to the thing that makes you feel upset. Notice again where you feel the feelings.
- Go back and forth a few more times between the two.
- Notice how your thoughts change your emotions and the feelings within your body.
- Continue doing this until you can easily shift between the two and feel the change in your emotions.

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2) Stairway to Peace

This is a great way to gradually relax your mind and body and will help you more deeply fully relax and find peace of mind.

Steps:

- Imagine yourself at the top of a long staircase – they can be indoors or outdoors and can be as grand or as plain as you like.
- The stairs are beautiful and as you begin to walk down, you feel a sense of peace, calm and happiness.
- You find yourself becoming more relaxed with each step you take.
- As you go down the stairs, they begin to get softer and you sink into each one and relax more deeply with each step down.
- Continue to relax with each step until you reach the bottom
- Once you reach the bottom, imagine the soft stairs turning into a giant cushion on which you can completely relax.

3) Ten, Nine, Eight...

Counting backwards is a great way to relax or to help your students relax. You can also use this visualization if you are having trouble falling asleep.

Steps:

- Imagine the number 10. See it coming towards you, getting bigger and brighter, like a huge billboard.
- Then imagine it floating effortlessly away, and as it floats away it is taking all your cares and concerns with it.
- Then see the number 9. See it getting bigger and bigger.
- Then imagine the number 9 floating away, and as it floats away feeling yourself becoming more relaxed and at ease.
- Continue with the number 8, all the way down to the number 1, seeing each number first get bigger coming towards you, and then seeing the number float away and taking any tension with it, leaving you relaxed.
- When you get to the number one, take a deep breath, and see the number 1 float away as you exhale and completely let go.
- Stay in this stillness for a few moments, relaxing more deeply with each exhalation.

Teaching and Practicing Meditation

4) Let It Be Easy

People often talk about how difficult life is. You can make life hard or easy – you can learn to enjoy the struggles. This visualization helps you practice allowing things to be easy.

Steps:

- Think about the word “easy.” What does it feel like? Breathe in the feeling of easy and breathe out easy.
- Relax your body – especially your neck and shoulders. Allow your entire body to be filled with the feeling of easy.
- Imagine the feeling of easy filling you from head to toe.
- Imagine the feeling of easy pouring into the top of your head – it fills your feet, legs, torso, chest, arms, neck and head.
- After it fills your head, it flows down over the outside of your body until you are completely surrounded by the feeling of being easy.
- For the next few minutes, imagine yourself swimming in a sea of easy.

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5) Say Yes to What You Want

This visualization helps you to focus on what you want, rather than fight against what you don't want. Focusing on what you want can help you come from a place of empowerment and vision, rather than from a place of fear or weakness.

Steps:

- Imagine you are standing on a very high platform. Far below is a large inflated pillow, placed to break your fall.
- The platform is beginning to crack and the only way down is to jump.
- Imagine you feel incredibly nervous as you stand at the edge of the platform looking down. Really feel the sensations of being nervous – your heart is racing, knots in your stomach.
- You are terrified of jumping, but you know it is the only way down, and you know you will feel free once you are back on the ground.
- You put your toes on the edge of the platform and look down.
- The people on the ground look like ants and the cars are tiny.
- Your friends and other people on the ground are encouraging you to jump and you can feel their excitement for you.
- You are aware of the fact that you don't want to jump, but also aware that you want to somehow get down.
- You realize you can focus on the fear of what you don't want (getting hurt), or you can focus on what you do want (getting to the ground safely and the freedom of being on the ground)
- Take a deep breath and imagine what it would feel like to surrender and just fall off the platform.
- Suddenly you feel a warm loving presence up on the platform with you. The warm feeling wraps around you, protecting you.
- You feel incredibly safe and secure. You realize you could fly if you wanted to.
- You step to the edge of the platform, turn around, put your arms out and fall effortlessly backwards into space.
- As you fall, you feel exhilarated, absolutely free.
- You are flying and the fall seems to last forever.
- Then you feel the pillow, as it embraces you and wraps around you to cushion your fall.
- You are so relieved. Your friends and a whole crowd of people race over to congratulate you.
- You are so proud of yourself. You created exactly what you wanted and more.
- Feel the gratitude and happiness within you as you realize that you surrendered to life and allowed yourself to fly.

Teaching and Practicing Meditation

6) Light in Your Heart

This visualization helps you to relax and feel more calm and joyful. It creates more loving thoughts and feelings in your mind, which you can then share with those around you.

Steps:

- Lying on your back, begin breathing deeply, feeling each part of your body relax as you exhale. Do this for about a minute or two.
- Imagine there is a very bright warm light filling your heart
- You can see it as sparkles or as a golden light, whatever you choose.
- Imagine the warmth of this light bringing you a feeling of peace and happiness.
- Allow this light that is glowing from your heart to become brighter and larger.
- Use your imagination to increase the size of this light and bring it out beyond your body, so you are becoming a small sun that is radiating this light out.
- Feel yourself being filled with this warm light and becoming more bright and radiant.
- Notice how every cell of your body is absorbing this bright, warm, relaxing light.
- Notice how your hands and feet are radiating with this warm, peaceful light.
- You are glowing with this light.
- As you breathe in, you can feel your lungs filling with light, with energy.
- Continue to feel this radiant light throughout your body as much as possible.
- See how radiant you have become and how everything you touch receives this loving light.
- Feel the joy that is bubbling up inside you.
- As you become more radiant, imagine that you are drawing more light to you.
- As you draw more light to you, you notice you are also drawing more happiness and joy to yourself.
- Stay here for a few minutes, as you continue to bring more light and joy to you.

Activity:

Choose one of the previous visualizations or create one of your own to teach to the rest of the group.

Teaching and Practicing Meditation

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Active Meditations

You can use mindfulness techniques throughout your busy day. Using the following active meditations, you can learn to bring more mindfulness into your everyday life. When you notice other thoughts creeping in during your active meditations, simply make note of those thoughts and bring your focus back to the present moment and the sensations around you.

In the Driver's Seat

- When you get in your car, take a few minutes to really take in your surroundings.
- Place your hands on the steering wheel and notice how it feels on your fingers.
- Take a deep breath and notice how your back feels as it presses against the seat as you inhale.
- Touch the floor with your feet and move your feet across the floor of the car. Feel the vibrations of the floor as you move your feet back and forth.
- Take a few minutes to do this whenever possible when you first get into your car.

Walking Meditation

- When walking somewhere (even just to the mailbox), bring your attention to the movement of your body.
- Focus on the feeling of the ground with each step you take.
- Notice how your hips and legs move.
- Relax your neck and shoulders and feel the muscles in your face relax.
- Then bring your awareness back to the feeling of the ground with each step.
- If thoughts begin to enter your mind, simply bring your attention back to the feeling of each step, back to the present moment.
- Take a few minutes to do this whenever you are walking somewhere – to the mailbox, at the shopping center, in a park, etc.

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No Waiting, Just Meditating

- When waiting in line (at the grocery store, at the post office, etc), bring your attention to your breath and to your posture.
- Focus on your posture by first lifting up through the top of your head – notice how it feels as your spine lengthens.
- Bring your feet parallel, noticing how the muscles in your thighs contract slightly
- Draw your shoulders back and down, noticing the space created between your neck and shoulders
- Drop your tailbone down, noticing the shift in your pelvis to a neutral position.
- Breathe into your belly, bringing your focus to your belly as you inhale and exhale

Making Your Yoga Practice a Meditation

- When practicing yoga, really pay attention to each subtle movement
- It's easy to let your mind wander or to begin thinking about the next posture before finishing the one you are currently doing, but when that happens, bring your focus back to what you are doing in the moment
- Really stretch through your body and notice each movement of your body
- Focus on your breath, then when you're in a posture, scan your body, focusing internally on each part of your body, going deeper into the posture.
- Your practice becomes a whole new experience when you bring your focus to each moment and internally observe each movement without judgment.

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Conclusion:

Practicing meditation takes patience and consistency. However, the rewards of meditation and relaxation are profound. The careful paying attention to our whole selves, including those parts we have judged as good or bad, allows us to begin to accept all parts of ourselves. Meditation gives us an anchor to harness our minds, instead of allowing our thoughts to control us.

It's helpful to sit for meditation for at least a few minutes everyday to better understand yourself and find that stillness from within. It's also important to incorporate "active" meditation time throughout your everyday activities. This keeps you grounded in the internal stillness and helps keep you from identifying too fully with any outside chaos. Always keep a little bit of your attention on your breath or focused inward, so no matter what is happening outside, you can find a little bit of peace inside.

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Self-Study Meditation Exercises

Exercise 1 (p. 6) Think of a white swan as it slowly and gracefully glides across the surface of a pond. It barely causes a ripple in the water. Just keep thinking of the swan. Try to form a clear image and then hold it as steadily as possible in your mind, while slowly counting 100, 99, 98, 97, 96. How far did you manage to count before your mental image of the swan faded and another thought took its place? Complete this exercise for 5 days and record how far you could count.

Day	Number Counted To
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Exercise 2 (p. 8)

For your own meditation practice, answer the following questions:

What time of day do you currently (or will you) set aside to meditate?

Where do you (or will you) meditate?

What is (or will be) your focal point?

Exercise 3 (p. 10)

For the next few days, try different meditation postures. Which one is best for you?

Exercise 4

Pick one of the five basic meditation practices listed. Meditate for about 10 minutes each day using your chosen practice for five days in a row. Answer the following questions.

Meditation practice selected: _____.

Explain how you felt during your meditation on Day 1 compared to Day 5.

Did you find this meditation practice helpful? Why or why not?

Teaching and Practicing Meditation

Review Questions

These questions are for your own review.

1. What are the differences between relaxation and meditation?
2. Define the term “meditation” as practiced in yoga.
3. List at least 6 benefits of meditation
4. List at least 5 of the steps/general practices that can help you prepare for meditation.
5. How could someone with knee problems sit for meditation? Name two sitting positions they could use.
6. List 5 different sitting postures that can be used for meditation practice.
7. List five of the guidelines for reducing strain during meditation.
8. Explain all the steps in one of the meditation practices described in the training manual.
9. How is a guided meditation different from regular meditation practice in yoga.
10. Explain the purpose of one of the guided meditations in the training manual.
11. Create your own “guided meditation.”
12. Create your own “active meditation.”