



## Meditation & Contemplation Practice ~ An Introduction ~

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*“When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”*  
(Yogi Berra)

### Mission Joy

We are expert worriers. We are built to be on guard for threats. Our brains are ‘wired’ to be pulled in by negative news. When it comes to our physical health and safety, all these things are essential. But we mostly obsess about things that aren’t important in the long run, or about matters mostly or entirely out of our control. Too many worries are rooted in convoluted internal movies about what other people might think about us. In the meantime, life passes us by, and we squander the miracle of being alive.

We walk around largely oblivious to what is right in front of us: the wonder of a child, the beauty of the moon, a stranger smiling at us. We run around distracted by distraction – our lives blurred by mental noise. We can’t flip a switch and reset the patterns that shape our inner lives. Patterns of thought and emotional response are habituated over a lifetime. But we can learn to alter the speed, depth, and quality of our responses, shifting the patterns that underly negative thoughts, painful behaviors, and what we get wound up about.

The proof of that statement is all around us. We all know people who are particularly unflappable, peaceful and joyful, despite living lives filled with hardship and struggle. We’re also aware of well-known people – living and no longer with us – whose lives are characterized by the same qualities. The film “[Mission Joy](#)” about Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama (two leaders whose people were brutally persecuted by governments bent on policies of power and subjugation) vividly drives home the idea that there are people who live joyfully in the midst of prolonged, deep sorrow. That may seem paradoxical, but it’s not.

Over thousands of years, wise people have left behind ideas and techniques about contemplation and meditation practices that are worth your consideration. Filtered by

(**Note:** Click on highlighted text, and the links will automatically open on your default browser)

personal experience and perspective, these pages will provide you with some ideas about how to dip your toes into these waters. What you'll read here skims the surface of an abundant and profound body of wisdom. The intent here is crack open some doors and hope you decide to peek at what lies behind. Over time, embracing these practices leads to a deeper understanding of the human condition, makes us feel much better, and rejuvenates a sense of commitment to families, communities, and the earth.

## Ideas to Consider

- A very simple metaphor to adopt is this: the practice of contemplation and meditation is like 'going to the gym for your brain.' Like any analogy, this one is imperfect, but it works very well in many ways.
- Like a physical exercise program, contemplation and meditation is about finding practices that work for you – tuned to your psychological strengths and challenges.
- Driven by advances in medical technology, scientists are increasingly able to peer into our bodies and brains. That work is slowly revealing that contemplation and meditation create physiological, psychological, and neurological changes that persist – underlining the fact that, over the centuries, there have been people who had an astonishingly deep understanding of what makes us tick.
- The notion that meditation and contemplation is some esoteric thing shrouded in mystery is wrong. Instead, if you remain open-minded as you go, you will begin to see a paradoxical mix of the utterly obvious and the utterly mysterious.
- Along the way, you may encounter people who will declare certain ideas, philosophies, or practices as “the one” or “the best” way. Dogmatic statements are a bright red flag, even when delivered with the best of intentions. Abundant humility and uncertainty are signs of hard-won wisdom.
- ‘Mindfulness’ has become a ‘thing.’ There is no lack of quick-fix, superficial, quick-buck content out there. Anyone selling the notion that you can make deep, sustained changes without sustained commitment (aka ‘work’) has no idea what they are talking about. A bit of common sense is very helpful on this front.
- A meditation and contemplation practice is not a replacement for psychotherapy.

To get a deeper perspective on these points and more, watch [this talk by Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) and [this talk by Thich Nhat Hanh](#).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn is a key figure in bringing mindfulness to the West and is the founder of the [Center for Mindfulness](#). Thich Nhat Hahn, the Founder of [Plum Village](#), was nominated in 1967 for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr.

## The Science

Starting with the physiological and clinical studies in the 1950's, the scientific understanding of how meditation affects the body and the brain leapt forward in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the pivotal events was a 1992 meeting that the Dalai Lama held with a wide range of people who think about thinking. After seeing how the latest brain imaging equipment was being applied to studies of negative emotions, he suggested that neuroscientists examine whether meditation created significant measurable changes. He wanted to know if Buddhist conclusions about human psychology and thinking were right: *“If scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims.”*<sup>2</sup>

With respect to his primary question, “yes” – meditation and contemplation has powerful sustained effects on the brain, with the degree and persistence of the changes depending on how long a person had been practicing. (Here again, the physical exercise metaphor holds up well.) For more on this, read Robert Wright’s book [‘Why Buddhism is True’](#). Wright does his homework and writes with curmudgeonly good humor. To go really deep, polymath and author Iain McGilchrist’s 2-volume [‘The Matter With Things’](#) is an amazing and brilliant multi-dimensional book about our brains and minds.

## Emotional Landscape

We walk thru the world with our smiles and frowns - reflections of our interior lives. Our ability to understand and commit to changing our emotional lives depends, first and foremost, on understanding ourselves – the emotional styles we carry. Do you tend to be optimistic or pessimistic? Do we tend to avoid conflict, or do we go in full throttle? When disaster strikes, do we tend to recover quickly, or do we tend to need a good bit of time to rebalance? Are we good at reading the signals other people give us? Not just their words, but messages delivered though body language and tone of voice. Starting about 60 years ago, the phrase **“emotional intelligence (EI)”** emerged as a summary many facets of our interior lives, and how we interact with others. There is an important adjacent set of questions around how and when our minds wander. When are we good at holding our concentration? When are we easily distracted?

There are many ways get a measure of your emotional landscape. If that’s not something you have done before, you should. It’s going to help you here. Since we point (in the Appendix) at meditation tools from the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Madison-Wisconsin, try out their [“Emotional Style” questionnaire](#). The results may surprise you.

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<sup>2</sup> Dalai Lama XIV, [The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality](#).

## Take a Deep Breath

Remember when you were a kid and you were a complete wreck about some stupid thing you did, or the overdue report you ignored for two months? Once the dam broke and you hysterically owned up to it, your mom or dad would lead with: “*Take a deep breath and slow down for a minute.*” That simple advice works because when we shift to a slow, deep, breathing pattern, the longest nerve bundle in our bodies (the ‘vagus’ nerve) down regulates our hearts, lungs, and digestive back into a resting state – in the same way your body responds after a “fight or flight” situation ends. Another fact: when going about our daily routines, we Westerners breathe at a rate that is much, much faster than is physiologically ideal. That is why controlled breathing is a foundational element of all meditation practices. (James Nestor’s book “[Breath](#)” is a highly recommended book here.)

Here and there, as you go about your day, try to get in the practice of slowing down and taking deep breaths for a few minutes. Doing that is going to set you up very nicely for what’s next.

## Meditation & Contemplation: Getting Started

If you’ve been down the path of putting together an exercise regimen, the process here will be familiar. That is, given an infinite number of possibilities, you need to jump in somewhere, try things out, and build a routine up over time. Two essential ideas: your practice needs to: become a daily habit, and last at least 20-30 minutes. (2 or 3 times per day is better).

Presented below is a description of a recommended progression to experiment with, built around three core ideas. Another way to start is to go to one of the websites listed in the Appendix and follow the progression they describe. (Those typically include a free app you can download.)

### Step 1: Focused Breathing

Simple breathing exercises is the way to start. The instructions are straightforward, and, for most people, there is an immediate recognition of benefits – in body and mind.

1. If you’re able, sit in an upright position, feet flat on the floor, hands on your legs or in your lap. If sitting up is not possible, that’s fine. Focus on slowing your breath down. Work your way to 5-6 seconds for each in-breath, and the same for each out-breath. If that pace isn’t doable, no worries. Slow down to what is comfortable. See if you can go a bit slower over a series of sessions.
2. Focus on one aspect of physical sensation. Focus on the air flowing in and out of your nose (mouth closed, if possible), or the movement of your chest or belly. Over a series of sessions, alternate the focus on different days.

3. Another practice to play with here is replacing the focus on sensation with a focus on simply counting out each in-breath and each out-breath (from “1” to “6”).

If it helps to follow someone guiding you, you can find many breathing exercises on-line. Here are two suggested places to start:

- [Guided Meditation with Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) (20 min)
- [Breathing Exercises with James Nestor](#) (14 min)

A common misunderstanding is that the point of meditation is to stop thinking. That’s impossible. Let that idea go. When your mind inevitably and continuously wanders, that’s normal. What does matter is that you notice you are distracted and then go back to focusing on your breath. In that moment, two things happen: (1) you became aware of the distraction, and (2) you switch your attention back to sensation (or counting). That instant is when the magic happens. With intention, you broke away from the distraction and got back on track. Remember this point. It is pivotal to the whole thing.

## **Step 2: Focused Attention/Reframing**

Step 2 is about starting down a path that will slowly, little by little, provide respite and resilience with respect to the things you worry about – big and small. (As a side benefit, it will also help you with the irritations in life that shoot your blood pressure through the roof in a nanosecond). Once again, the core idea is simple. It’s about elevating positive perspectives and emotions – placing you in a mental stance that opens you up.

Think of it this way: In Step1, you focused on your breath, constantly bringing your attention back to it, slowly improving your ability to keep distracted thoughts from running the show. In Step 2 you stay with the idea of a simple, uncomplicated focus, but now the focus is a positive perspective/behavior/message: gratitude, kindness, wonder, appreciation – whatever you pick. In doing a Step 2 practice daily, you will start to observe moments when your negative habituated responses have less of a hold on you. You won’t get triggered as easily. And when you do get triggered, the perspective/behavior/message you have been working with will rise up. You have established a new stance that reframes the situation and pushes down your negative responses. This intervention mindset will begin to become automatic. That is, (a) you notice that you are triggered, (b) you slow down long enough to “intercept” your habituated reaction, (c) you think about what is going on, and (d) react in a more controlled and positive way. Your habituated responses are defanged.

At this stage of things, pick a behavior or word to focus on that is intellectually simple and evokes a strong positive emotion. An easy example to work with is the idea of gratitude. In all our day-to-day running around, most of us rarely think about being grateful. In action, that could be as small as thanking someone for holding a door, or as big as noticing the daily miracle of the dawn arriving every single day.

Look for “guided” meditations, phrases, short poems, or images that speak to you in this way. Spend 20-30 minutes every day sitting with that content – while remembering the foundation of slow, deep breathing as you do go. Here are two examples of guided meditations:

- [David Steindl-Rast: Gratitude](#) (5 min)
- [Sharon Salzberg: Loving Kindness Meditation](#) (10 min)

### **Step 3: Going Deeper**

If you’ve gotten this far and are feeling some sustained benefits from the first 2 steps, congratulations! The recommendation is to work with first two steps for at least a few months before you go further. Remember – the overall goal is to unwind and rewire a lifetime of habituated thinking and responses to the world. Whether you’re a teenager or were born long ago, it will take time to shift mental habits and have the changes stick. You need persistence tempered with patience.

The guiding notions for the third step are: experimentation and adaptation. Go with what speaks to you. Don’t overthink things. Go with your heart (and intuition) more than your head. Between the [Emotional Style](#) questionnaire and the work you’ve done with Steps 1 and 2, you’ll start to develop a better understanding of what works for you, and what you need.

For ideas for things to try, start by wandering around the Appendix. Find a poem, a prayer, a short reading, or perhaps a few sentences from a podcast. Read the piece once or twice slowly. Sit with it for a few minutes and hold your attention on one phrase or idea. Repeat that process over and over for a full 20-30 minutes.

In addition to your longer daily session, during each day find a few minutes here and there to go back to the practice. Little 2-3 minutes respites. Perhaps during lunch or while commuting. With the same mindset, if you wake up at night and can’t get back to sleep, that is a perfect time to practice (and will very likely help you get back to sleep.)

When a particular practice no longer works for you, be patient with yourself and the process. Experiment. Be curious. As you go, you’ll gain valuable information about what clicks for you. Little by little by little, you will move forward.

### **Conclusion**

If you slow down and invest the time in a daily practice, you’ll notice changes in your outlook and your response to life’s challenges - big and small. The philosopher Bayo Akamolafe says: *To ‘slow down’ ... seems like the wrong thing to do when there’s fire on the mountain. But here’s the point: in ‘hurrying up’ all the time, we often lose sight of the abundance of resources that might help us meet today’s most challenging crises. We rush*

*through the same patterns we are used to. Of course, there isn't a single way to respond to a crisis; there is no universally correct way. However, the call to slow down works to bring us face to face with the invisible, the hidden, the unremarked, the yet-to-be-resolved.*<sup>3</sup>

If you continue down this path with an open mind, you will find surprising people, thoughts, perspectives, practices, and more. You will find that every major religious tradition has a path that aligns with what has been introduced here. And across that landscape, there exists a beautiful diversity of expression, philosophy, and practice. Seeing, welcoming, and appreciating the commonality amidst that diversity is another sign of wisdom.

When approached with an open mind, this journey will change your life. Like all aspects of becoming wise, progress comes little by little by little. If you stick with it, you will see accumulating shifts in your internal dialog and in how you interact with others. Along the way, you'll experience an increased ability to gracefully bend and snap back. As you stay with it, these patterns will grow stronger. Be patient. Congratulate yourself on your 'wins'. When you inevitably revert back to negative ways of thinking and reacting, be grateful for those moments as helpful reminders of what you're trying to change.

And, then keep going. You have the rest of your life to become ever more resilient, ever more joyful and wise. If we can remain gentle and patient with ourselves in this pursuit, we heal not just ourselves but also others. As writer/ philosopher (and trauma therapist) Jim Finley says: *'I hope you will continue to discover, in all sorts of unexpected ways, that you are becoming a healing presence in an all-too-often traumatized and traumatizing world.'*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bayo Akomolafe, "[A Slower Urgency](#)", *Báyò Akómóláfé* (blog).

<sup>4</sup> James Finley, [The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation](#), Orbis Books, 2023, pg. xxi

## Appendix: Resources

(Note: Click on highlighted text, and the links will automatically open on your default browser.  
More resources can be found on our [“Hope and Joy” website.](#))

### Guided Meditation Examples

- [Introductory Breathing Meditation](#) (Jon Kabatt-Zinn)
- [Inner Smile Meditation](#) (Insight Timer)
- [Tonglen Meditation](#) (Pema Chödrön)
- [Loving Kindness Meditation](#) (Sharon Salzberg)

### Meditation Websites

- [Healthy Minds Innovation App](#)
- [JKZ Mediations App](#)
- [Meditation Chapel](#)

### Single Videos

- [Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation](#) (John Lewis's final op-ed read by Morgan Freeman)
- [A Grateful Day](#) (David Steindl-Rast)
- [How to Find Joy in Climate Activism](#) (Ayana Elizabeth Johnson)
- [The Healing Power of Mindfulness](#) (Jon Kabat-Zinn)
- [Meditation is Easier Than You Think](#) (Mungyur Rinpoche)
- [Taking Care of Anger](#) (Thich Nhat Hahn)
- [Islands of Sanity](#) (Margaret Wheatley)

### Collections

- [Reflections of Life](#) (videos, Justine Du Toit and Michael Raimondo)
- [A Piece of My Mind](#) (videos, John Noltner)
- [The Contemplative Dimensions of the Twelve Steps](#) (video series, Thomas Keating)
- [The Matter With Things](#) (video series, Iain McGilchrist)
- [The Impossible will Take a Little While: A Citizen’s Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear](#) (book, edited by Paul Rogat Loeb)
- [To Bless the Space Between Us](#) (book, John O’Donohue)
- [Just This](#) (book, Richard Rohr)

### Podcasts

- [Learning to See](#) (Brian McLaren, Center for Action & Contemplation)
- [Hidden Brain](#) (Shankar Vedantam, NPR)
- [On Being](#) (Krista Tippett, NPR)
- [Happiness as Human Flourishing](#) (Mathieu Ricard, On Being)
- [We the Beloved Community](#) (John Lewis, On Being)
- [Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness](#) (Ellen Langer On Being)
- [Turning to the Mystics](#) (Jim Finley, Center for Action & Contemplation)



- [Mental Health Series](#) (Sharon Salzberg)

### **Books**

- [The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World](#) (Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Doug Abrams)
- [The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times](#) (Jane Goodall, Douglas Abrams, Gail Hudson)
- [Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet](#) (Thich Nhat Hahn)
- [Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art](#) (James Nestor)
- [Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment](#) (Robert Wright)
- [Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart](#) (Brian McLaren)
- [The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again](#) (Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett)
- [Hope in the Dark: The Untold Story of People Power](#) (Rebecca Solnit)
- [The Quiet Before: On the Unexpected Origins of Radical Ideas](#) (Gal Beckerman)
- [The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation](#) (James Finley)
- [Crisis Contemplation](#) (Barbara Holmes)
- [Braiding Sweetgrass](#) (Robin Wall Kimmerer)
- [Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy](#) (Joanna Macy, Chris Johnstone)