

Mindfulness Guide



Regional Interdisciplinary Collaborative
Working to Disrupt Human Trafficking

OUR STATES: DELAWARE, MARYLAND, PENNSYLVANIA, VIRGINIA, WEST VIRGINIA and DC



Prepared by Monti Narayan Datta, PhD

Finding Wellbeing in Challenging Times

By nearly every metric, finding wellbeing can be a challenge in these stressful times. [The American Psychological Association](#) observes, “We are facing a national mental health crisis that could yield serious health and social consequences for years to come.” [Johns Hopkins University reports](#):

- “An estimated 26% of Americans ages 18 and older – about 1 in 4 adults – suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.”
- “Many people suffer from more than one mental disorder at a given time. In particular, depressive illnesses tend to co-occur with substance abuse and anxiety disorders.”

The [PBS News Hour](#) reports that 1 in 4 college-aged youth in the United States had thought seriously about suicide in the past month.

These concerns are not just limited to the United States. Earlier during the pandemic, United Nations Secretary General [António Guterres](#) opined, “The COVID-19 virus is not only attacking our physical health; it is also increasing

psychological suffering. ...I urge governments, civil society, health authorities and others to come together urgently to address the severe mental health consequences of this pandemic.” It would appear that we are on the verge of a second pandemic—a mental health pandemic.

If all of this weren't hard enough, here in the United States, many of us are also struggling with the challenges of race relations and our national political climate. Political life in the United States has become fractured. According to the Pew Research Center, “Public trust in government [remains low](#). Only about one-quarter of Americans say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about always’ (2%) or ‘most of the time’ (22%).”

And although the insurrection on the US Capitol in January 6th 2021 was traumatic, we have yet to find public spaces where we can begin to reflect and process and look back on what happened. Some of us are still grieving and processing the rise in xenophobic and racist attacks across our nation, from the murder of George Floyd in the Summer of 2020, to the mass shootings of Asian women in Atlanta, Georgia in Spring 2021, to the most recent [anti-Semitic attack in Texas](#). One might argue that there is a great deal of stress and mental anguish in the American experience.

For all of these reasons, meditation and mindfulness can be helpful tools. Meditation is not the answer to all of life's problems—far from it. But it is a tool that can help shave off some of the stress in our daily lives, calm down, and look within. As one author put it, meditation might take off enough of the daily stress so that we might feel “[10-percent happier](#).” Or, as the late [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), reflected:

“When your mindfulness becomes powerful, your concentration becomes powerful, and when you are fully concentrated, you have a chance to make a breakthrough, to achieve insight. If you meditate on a cloud, you can get insight into the nature of the cloud. Or you can meditate on a pebble, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can see into the nature of the pebble. You can meditate on a person, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can make a breakthrough and understand the nature of that person. You can meditate on yourself, or your anger, or your fear, or your joy, or your peace.”

In this guide, we talk more about how to cultivate and use some basic tools for relaxation, stress reduction, and critical inquiry into the nature of our minds. This guide covers the following areas:

1. Understanding what meditation and mindfulness are
2. Exploring different types of meditation, including breath awareness, a guided body scan, and loving kindness meditation
3. Developing a daily meditation practice, in which you will be able sit for a few minutes a day, practicing basic breath awareness
4. Developing your ability to switch back and forth between meditation for concentration and meditation for insight/self-analysis

This guide is meant to be a roadmap toward learning more about meditation and mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques. To learn meditation techniques more fully and in greater depth, however, it is important to work closely with a teacher, ideally someone in person, or at least someone with whom you could meet virtually. Some recommended resources are listed at the end of this document.

Meditation & Mindfulness: Exploring the Difference

Meditation and mindfulness are household words and have become a multi-million-dollar industry. Look around you and everyone is talking about ways to meditate and practice mindfulness. There are cell-phone apps like [Calm](#), [Headspace](#), [Liberate](#), and [Insight Timer](#)—all of which are good to use. There are seminars to attend as well as online retreats. And then there are celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Deepak Chopra praising the benefits of meditation and mindfulness. But what are these benefits? What does it mean to meditate and what does it mean to practice mindfulness? How are they similar and how are they different?

Meditation

Meditation is a way to practice concentration, focusing on an object. Objects of meditation can vary. You can use your breath as your object of meditation. You could practice yoga and your yoga posture could be your object of meditation. You could be play golf, and your back swing could be your object of meditation. Or, you could dance and those movements could be your object of meditation. In short, anything could be your object of meditation if it allows you to focus and concentrate your energy.

One of my favorite meditation teachers, the late Thich Nhat Hanh, even says listening to another human being could be your object of meditation. You could be

listening to a friend or family member over the phone, or even by email, absorbing their words, tone, body language and intent with your complete focus, in which case the art of listening in itself could be a form of meditation.

Importantly, meditation is not about turning off your mind or tuning out. It might look that way when you see a person sitting serenely in meditation, as if they haven't a care in the world, but that's not meditation. If you are tuning out your thoughts, or "blissing out," that's not meditation. Meditation, in addition to calming down your mind and body, is the art of looking deeply within. This means meditation is also about gently reflecting on your thoughts and looking at them with greater awareness, compassion, and—ultimately—understanding who you are a deeper level. In a sense, by looking within and investigating who you are, you are practicing a form of self-analysis, almost like a form of self-therapy.

When you practice meditation and start by focusing on an object, like your breath or your body, the first thing you will notice is that thoughts will arise. Some thoughts might be bright and pleasant. Other thoughts might be dark and unpleasant. Still other thoughts might be neutral and indifferent. The more you meditate, the more you will see your thoughts and be able to look at them deeply.

Little by little, as you practice meditation, you'll be able to stop and look at a thought and explore its nature and origins. Doing this form of self-analysis, or self-research, becomes a skill, going back and forth between practicing meditation for concentration and meditation for self-awareness, or insight.

Mindfulness

Meditation and mindfulness are like siblings. If meditation is the art of practicing concentration and self-reflection, then mindfulness is a way of living with moment-to-moment awareness, keeping your focus on the present, in the here and now with a balanced, compassionate, and open mind.

[Dr. Shauna Shapiro](#) defines mindfulness as "intentionally paying attention with kindness." Here, from Dr. Shapiro's definition, there are three parts of mindfulness. The first part is having an object of focus. The second part is about staying focused in the moment. The last part means staying focused with kindness and gentleness for yourself and others.

With mindfulness, we have a choice, in every moment of every day. It's about being in the moment—in the here and now—but also with kindness and curiosity for

ourselves and others. It's not only about being attentive to what we are doing, but also about doing so with compassion for ourselves and one another.

How Do You Meditate?

You can meditate without too much effort. The only thing you need is a little bit of time, preferably in the morning, when you have the whole day before you. Just like we take some time each morning to have a healthy breakfast, engage in a little bit of exercise to stay in shape, and groom ourselves to look our best, it's important to get into a daily habit of practicing some meditation.

There are many styles of meditation available, and in this guide, I'll introduce you to three of the oldest and most common practices—breath awareness, a guided body scan, and loving kindness. But to get started right away, you can simply follow these five steps:

Step 1. Find a Spot to Meditate

For this first step, it's helpful if you can find a regular spot to practice meditation. This could be a comfortable chair, or a cushion on the floor, or even just the edge of your bed—some place where you can sit down for a few minutes in a position that is comfortable for your body.

Step 2. Sit up Straight, Rest Your Eyes, and Enjoy the Moment

For this second step, it's helpful to have your back upright. Some meditators say to imagine your spine upright, "like a stack of golden coins." The main purpose here is to have a clear pathway from the base of your spine to the top of your head. This allows the airways in your lungs to reach full capacity, and puts you in a somewhat alert position.

Step 3. Take Some Depth Breaths

For this third part, it's helpful to take some deep breaths, as this allows your body to fully oxygenate. Deep breathing also engages [your parasympathetic nervous system](#), which invites your body to calm down. This deactivates the flight-fright-freeze part of your brain. You are allowing your body to rest and enjoy the moment.

Step 4. Focus on a Meditation Object

For this fourth part, you can focus on any meditation object that feels comfortable for you. This could include any of the following objects:

- Your breath—noticing the sensations of breathing in and breathing out
- Your body—paying attention to the different sensations inside and around your body
- A mantra—reciting a prayer or a word or a phrase soothing to your spirit

- An external object—focusing on something like a candle or an image of a loved one/spiritual figure

The main thing is to use this object to hold your focus as you continue to calm your mind and body.

Step 5. Observe Your Thoughts

For this last, and perhaps most important part, as you continue to focus on your object of meditation, thoughts will invariably arise. Some meditators call this “[monkey mind](#),” as the mind grasps onto one thought, and then another, and then another, like a monkey swinging from branch to branch in a forest. Here, the point is not to shut off your thoughts and turn off your mind, but simply to observe your thoughts. At first, this might seem to be a bit disconcerting, but with some practice you can start to watch yourself as thoughts arise. The trick is to keep a sense of balance as you notice your thoughts. As soon as a thought arises you can either take a moment to look at that thought and study it. Or, you can simply let that thought go and return to your object of meditation. What you come to find in this experience is that the mind wanders—that is the nature of mind.

How Do You Develop a Meditation Practice?

The best way to develop a meditation practice is to start off your day with a few minutes of meditation and see how it goes. If you can sit for about 5 minutes and do that once or twice a week, then you can consider yourself a regular meditator. There’s no need to sit down every day. Just once or twice a week is enough to start your practice. Going slow and easy is the key.

As you grow in your meditation practice, you might start to find that during other parts of your day you also find yourself in a moment of practice. You might be on the subway, for instance, or you might be waiting in line some place and then suddenly you find yourself practicing a bit of meditation. You might find yourself taking a deep breath, calming down the body and mind a bit more. Or, you might find yourself watching your thoughts for a moment, before you return to your business at hand. All of this is evidence that your meditation practice is growing.

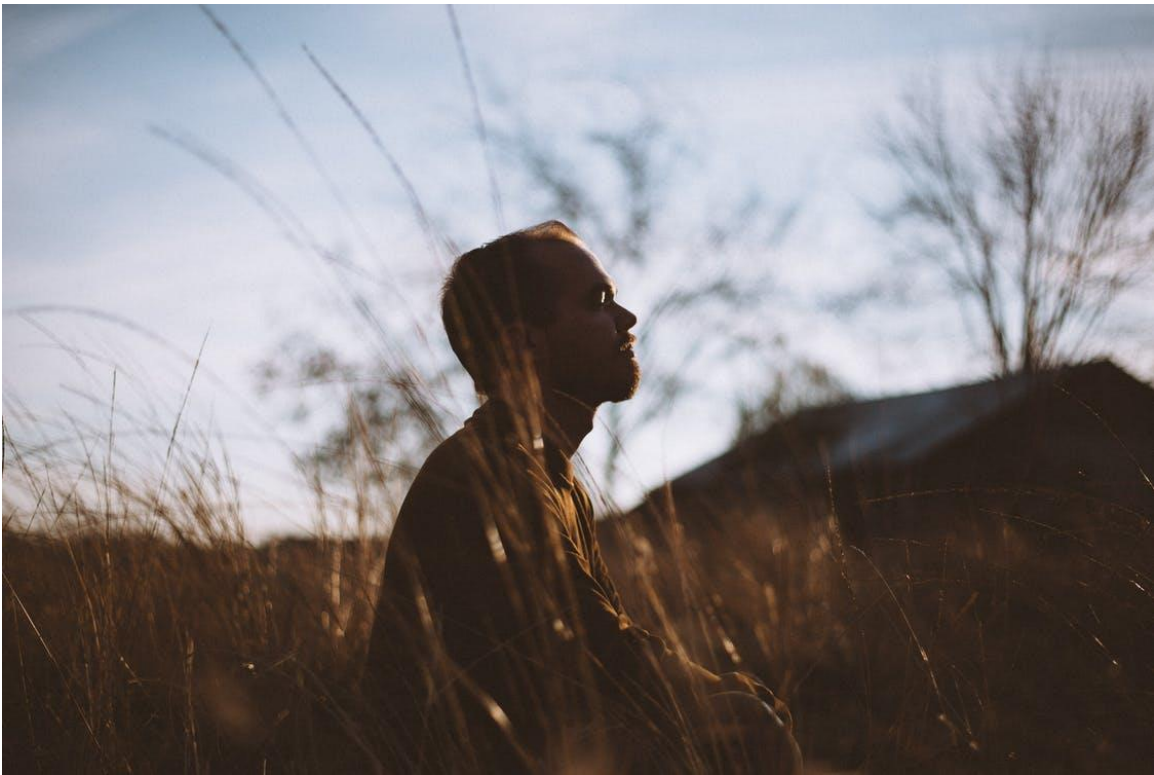
Dr. Shauna Shapiro suggests, “what you practice grows stronger.” So, if you practice gentle breath awareness, you will grow stronger. The key is to always be kind and gentle with yourself. Please never force yourself to meditate in a way or manner that feels uncomfortable to you or your body. Sometimes, in our society, we follow a catch phrase, like “no pain, no gain.” Some might interpret this as needing to literally sit through a painful meditation or yoga posture. Or others might

interpret this as meaning that you should immerse yourself in painful thoughts if they arise in your meditation. No. **The key is to be kind and gentle with yourself above all else, and develop that attitude as you grow your meditation practice.**

Getting There

We've already started our journey together on meditation. In the meantime, if you are up for it, for homework, consider practicing five minutes of meditation once or twice this coming week, following the above guidelines.

Breath Awareness



The Power of the Breath

Although there many ways to meditate, you really can't go wrong by working with the breath. As my colleagues at [the Holistic Life Foundation](#) explain, [we breathe about 20,000 times per day](#), and yet, most of the time, we are not aware that we are breathing. Instead, we tend to be thinking about something else. We might be occupied with thoughts of what we did yesterday, or what we have to do tomorrow. Or, we may be occupied with worries, such as worries over something that someone said to us—perhaps worries over something unkind that was said. Or, we might be upset with thoughts about something we said or did that we now regret. Our thoughts can sometimes get the better of us, so it's helpful to find a way to pause our thoughts, if but for a moment, and pause and reset. We can do that with the breath, by using it as our object of meditation.

There are a number of benefits of using the breath as your object of meditation.

The Breath is Always with Us & Portable

The breath is always with us. Unlike other objects of meditation (e.g., an external source such as a candle or something you might hold onto, such as prayer beads,

or an image you might look at, such as a picture of a spiritual figure), you always have the breath with you. It's a portable object of meditation. Your breath is with you wherever you go.

The breath also provides a large canvas for you to work with as your object of meditation. For example, if you practice breathing with your nose, you soon find that you have a rich palette to work with. You can focus your breath on a number of factors around your nose, including:

- (1) the **speed** of the breath—how fast or slow are you taking in the breath?
- (2) the **temperature** of the breath—how much cooler or warmer is the in-breath compared to the out-breath?
- (3) the **geography** of the breath—which nostril are you using to breathe-in and breathe-out? Is it the left nostril, the right nostril, or both nostrils? Do you notice any changes over the course of your meditation session, or if you meditate again later that day?

The Breath is a Barometer of Our Mind-Body State

The breath is more than just a portable object of meditation—it's a barometer of our mind-body state. Typically, when we're in a hurry, our breathing is fast and shallow. This can sometimes actually give rise to a panic-attack. But when we're feeling like we're not in a hurry, our breathing is slower and deeper. There's a phrase I appreciate, "the body doesn't lie," meaning that our bodies are always communicating with us. These days, however, we tend not to listen so much to our bodies. If we're feeling any pain or discomfort with our bodies, we might actually tell ourselves to ignore such pain or discomfort, and "power through" those moments. By using the breath as a tool to measure our mind-body states, we can become a little more connected to who we are at an emotional, mental, and physical level. We can begin to use the breath to ascertain what our bodies need. Using the breath allows us to tune more into the mind-body connection.

You Can Use the Breath to Regulate Yourself

By using the breath to be more in tune with the mind-body connection, we can also take advantage of the breath to calm ourselves down. We can use the breath to regulate our bodies. By intentionally taking a deep breath, we can tell our bodies to relax. This, in turn triggers a flood of feel-good hormones in the body, which then helps kick in [the body's parasympathetic nervous system](#), which allows the body to take it easy. This in turn can help us lower our blood pressure and [lower stress hormones like cortisol](#). We can use the breath to induce relaxation—all at a moment's notice.

Breathing is Inherently in the Present Moment

If we can use the breath to tune-in more into our minds and bodies, we can also use the breath to remind us about the power and importance of being in the present moment. This is due to the fact that when we are breathing in, we are always breathing in during the present moment. And likewise, when we are breathing out, we always breathing out in the present moment. By focusing on the breath, we are allowing ourselves to ease into the present moment. We are allowing ourselves to slip away from thoughts and worries of the past and the future and instead touch more of the present. We can also use the breath to allow us to be more aware of our very own thought processes—to look at our thoughts with kindness, curiosity, and clarity.

Many meditation teachers, like Jon Kabat-Zinn, say that our mind—our true mind—is like a vast ocean of truth, deep and infinite and boundless. Some say that our minds are the ultimate destination for self-discovery. If, as Socrates put it, “the unexamined life is not worth living,” then meditation is a tool not only for relaxation and stress-reduction, but also for exploration. We can use our breath not just to settle down and calm our minds and bodies, but also to look at the very nature of our thoughts themselves, moment-by-moment. In that sense, some might say that meditation is a process to know and understand your true self.

The Breath Unites Us

In addition to the emotional, physical, and physiological benefits of the breath, perhaps the greatest benefit is that the breath is a symbol of our shared humanity. In these deeply divided political times, in which racism and xenophobia are rampant, we can use the breath as a reminder that we are all human beings together in this world. We might have many apparent differences—by race, sex, ethnicity, social status, or religion—but ultimately, we are all people who need to breathe to survive.

In the wake of George Floyd, whose breath was deliberately extinguished over some 9 minutes, we can use the breath to honor one another. We can spiritually even honor those who are no longer with us, like George Floyd, or other friends and family members who may have lost their lives during the pandemic. The breath can be a reminder that we are all far more similar to one another than different. The breath can also be a reminder that we all want to breathe fully and deeply and live a happy life. That’s what makes us human.

How to Practice Breath Awareness Meditation

Practicing breath awareness meditation starts, of course, with the breath, and can be performed any time of day when you have a few minutes to take and settle into a short round of meditation. In getting started with breath awareness, I recommend you take 3 to 5 minutes in the morning, not too long after you've woken up. By starting your day with a few minutes of meditation, you're telling your body that it's okay to relax and ease into the day rather than race and get things started.

By focusing on the breath, you're opening yourself up to a vast ocean of possibilities and experiences. There are literally so many ways to breathe as you practice breath awareness. Below are a few styles you might use to start off your practice.

Mindful Belly Breathing

With mindful belly breathing, you can start by gently placing one hand over your belly, and begin to notice the rising and falling of your belly on the in-breath and on the out-breath. You can even look down at your belly and see it inflate and deflate, as you take in nutrient-rich oxygen. As you settle into the flow of belly breathing, you might next gently close your eyes, keeping one hand on your belly, and falling into the moment. If you notice your mind wandering during belly breathing, you can simply say to yourself silently, "breathing in," as you take an in-breath, and "breathing out," as you take an out-breath.

There a lot of benefits of mindful belly breathing. The biggest benefit is that by breathing with the belly you are activating the body's parasympathetic nervous system, which tells your body to slow down and relax, and releases a flood of feel-good hormones which can lower your heart-rate, your blood pressure, and your body's stress levels.

Another benefit of mindful belly breathing is that can you take this practice with you throughout the day. Any time you have a couple of minutes to yourself, even in a public setting, such as riding the subway or an elevator, you can gently take a moment for some deep belly breathing. Because the breath is a portable tool and you can take the breath with you wherever you go, you can always have the power of deep breathing on your side. As you develop your daily practice, you can activate deep belly breathing whenever you need it, wherever you need it, at a moment's notice.

Breathing with the Nose

Another way you can practicing meditation using your breath as your object of awareness is to focus on your breath using your nose. This type of meditation actually goes back thousands of years, from ancient Hindu [and Buddhist techniques](#), but can be applied and practiced by anyone. The breath is a secular tool—we all must breathe, regardless of faith or creed.



Breathing with the nose involves shifting your focus to the area below the nostrils and above the upper lip, and using this area of your body as your canvas to look more closely at the nature and textures of the breath. As you begin to breathe in and breathe out, you can be mindful of the following sensations associated with the breath:

- **Direction** of the breath -- when you breath in, be mindful of the in-breath; when you breath out, be mindful of the out-breath
- **Geography** of the breath -- be mindful of the sensations of the breath as the in-breath enters your nostrils and as the out-breath exits your nostrils. Also, be mindful of the nostrils, as sometimes the left nostril may be stuffy or the right nostril might be stuffy. You might also notice that the in-breath enters one nostril and the out-breath exists the other nostril. Or sometimes, both nostrils.
- **Temperature** of the breath -- be mindful of the temperature of the in-breath compared to the temperature of the out-breath
- **Speed** of the breath -- be mindful of how fast or how slow your breathing is. Very often, fast breathing reflects a different mind-state than slow breathing. Your breath is an indicator of your emotional state.

- **Rhythm** of the breath -- as you breathe in and breathe out, you might notice different lulls, or pauses, between the in-breath and out-breath. Notice, for instance, the space between breaths, almost as if your breaths are like waves in a vast ocean.

Sample Guided Breath Awareness Script

Here is a sample script for a guided breath awareness. You might record this script and play it back to yourself later, or invite a friend or family member to read aloud when you have a 10 to 15 minutes to practice.

I'd like to invite you to join me for a few minutes of guided breath awareness. Feel free to practice this anytime of day. Suggested times are early in the morning, before you have started your day, as well as later in the afternoon, when you are beginning to unwind and reflect on the day's events. You can also practice this guided breath awareness whenever you need a moment to relax, let go, and take some time for yourself.

Please take a moment to find a comfortable space where you can sit quietly for the next few minutes. This could be a chair, a couch, a yoga mat, or even just the edge of your bed. Any place you can find that's a safe, quiet, and comfortable space for you.

As you settle into your meditation position, I encourage you to be sure you find a posture that is kind and comfortable for your body. No need to hold an uncomfortable or rigorous posture. That's not what meditation is about. Meditation is about relaxation and well-being.

As you settle into your body, I invite you to gently close your eyes, if that feels comfortable. Or, you might have your eyes half-way open, like a sleepy cat.

As you begin to settle into your body now, I invite you to take a nice, big, deep, long breath. Just breathing in on your own, and breathing out. Once again, just breathing in, and breathing out. Continue to breath in and out on your own, finding your own comfortable pace, your own comfortable rhythm.

For today's guided breath awareness, I'd like to invite you now to start to focus on your belly, just noticing the rising of your belly on the inhale and the falling of your belly on the exhale. If you want, you can even put one hand over your belly, just to feel the rising and falling of your belly with each breath. Take a few moments now to continue to follow your breath, on your own, in this manner.

Now that we're getting more settled with the breath, I'd like to invite you to shift your awareness to a different part of your body. Let's move our awareness now away from the belly to the nose. Let's begin to explore breathing with the nose.

As you breathe in, see if you can notice the temperature of the breath, and any changes in the temperature as you breath in and breath out. Do you notice, for instance, that that temperature of the in-breath tends to be cooler than the temperature of the out-breath? Good. That's because we are now exploring the physical sensations of the breath. We can sense now that the breath has heat. It has coolness. It has substance to it. It has form and definition and power. But it is also as subtle as the wind.

As you continue to breath in and breath out, let's see if we can notice other textures and sensations with the breath. See if you can notice the direction of the breath. For example, as you breath in, are you breathing in more with the left nostril, the right nostril, or with both nostrils? As you breath out, are you breathing out in the same way, or has the balance between the left and right nostrils shifted?

Also see if can notice the rhythm of the breath. Are you breathing in with the same amount of time for the in-breath as with the out-breath? How fast or slow are you breathing? And as you breath out, notice the pause, or the space between the in-breath and the out-breath. How long is that pause?

Continue to explore the breath now, in this way, on your own, for the next couple of minutes. Look at your breath with curiosity, exploring its inner secrets and wonders.

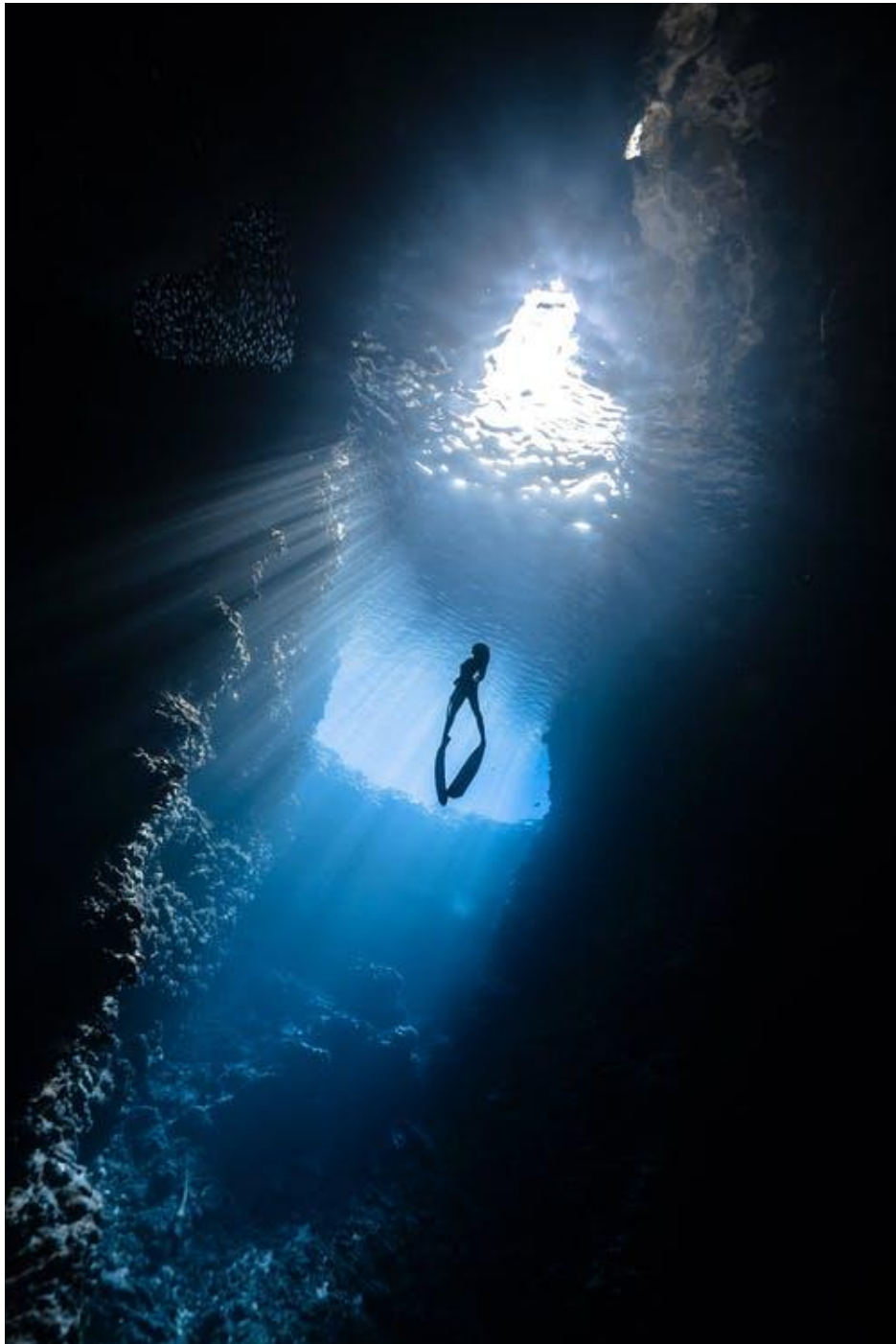
Now, as we come to the end of this guided breath awareness meditation, just take a moment to mentally scan your body and see how you feel. How did it feel to take these several minutes to sit still, and gently begin to follow the breath and investigate the nature of the breath?

As we conclude with this breath awareness meditation, I invite you to know that you can always pause and take a moment by using the breath. By using the breath, you can calm yourself and still yourself, simply by breathing in and breathing out.

When you are ready, you can begin to gently wiggle your toes and fingers, and gently open your eyes.

Thank you.

Body Scan Meditation



The Power of Bodily Awareness

Although guided breath awareness is one of the oldest and best-known forms of meditation, there are other powerful techniques, one of which is the body scan.

What I love the most about the body scan is that you can use your body as your object of meditation. And, in some ways, the body scan can be superior to breath awareness...you literally have your whole body to work with, from top to bottom, from head to toe, to explore as your object of meditation. In addition, there are at least three major benefits to the body scan:

The Body Keeps Score

As Bessel van der Kolk explains, "[the body keeps score.](#)" If we feel stress, it affects the body. If stress accumulates over so many days, weeks, months and years, then it can be etched even more deeply into the body. Stress may appear in the form of high blood pressure, or migraine headaches. It may manifest in the form of tension in our necks or shoulders, or upper backs. It may manifest in the form of jaw-clinching, or TMJ disorder. Stress can take a toll on our bodies.

If our life experiences are situated with trauma, that trauma can affect not only our bodies, but also how we perceive the world around us. We may carry the wounds of a hurt or a traumatic experience with us for years and we may not be fully aware of how much we have been hurt. The body, in a sense, is an archive of our pain, growth, and humanity. By tuning into the needs of the body via a body-scan meditation, we can begin to listen more to what we need, starting at a physical level. We can begin to give the body what it craves and allow more emotional healing to happen.

The Body Never Lies

At the same time, the body never lies. Although we all have different experiences, to the point that three people witnessing the same event may recount three separate narratives that are widely different—the body feels what it feels. If we feel stress, or joy, or pain, or regret, there is a corresponding place in our bodies where such feelings manifest. The body not only keeps score, it also keeps a faithful tally of everything we go through in life. We might be in a political age in which “alternative facts” are commonplace, and in which we might be gaslighted by someone telling us that our reality is not true—but our bodies will always be honest with us. If we feel sad, we know it because we can feel it in our hearts. If we feel cheated, we know it because we can feel it in our guts. If we feel joy, we know it because of the shift in our breathing. Our bodies will always be honest with us.

Your Body Is Your Best Friend

Because the body keeps score and never lies, your body is your best friend. If we learn to listen more to our bodies, and feed our bodies what they really need, then we can rely more on our bodies to get through difficult times that may be ahead. The challenge, however, is that our society is one in which we are not always

taught to listen to our bodies and take care of our bodies. Instead, phrases like “no pain, no gain” or “power through” are commonplace. If anything, we are taught not to listen to our bodies. And we might be encouraged to ignore the needs of our bodies. We live in a society in which getting 8-9 hours of sleep is looked down upon and even considered “weak” or “soft.” We live in a society in which we get fast food in a hurry. Sitting down to a slow cooked home meal may seem unrealistic to our daily routine.

How to Practice Bodily Awareness

Practicing bodily awareness is a skill, just as with any meditation technique. But once you get into the hang of bodily awareness, it can become second-nature. To start, as you develop your other meditation skills, like breath awareness, you can ask yourself some basic questions about your body throughout the day. Some questions might include:

- How am I feeling this morning? What does my body need?
- What food does my body need to feel healthy?
- How much sleep does my body need to feel fully rested?

When you are at work, check in with your body throughout the day. If your co-worker or boss/supervisor says something that makes you feel uncomfortable, take a moment to check in with your body. See if you notice, physically, where the discomfort might be. This isn't meant to reinforce how you are feeling, but simply to create a space in which you can learn more of what your body is feeling and how your body might be communicating. If, for example, a co-worker says something that makes you sick to your stomach, check in for a moment with your body and see if you can feel where that discomfort is within your digestive system. Or, if a co-worker says something that has you bursting in laughter, see where that affects your body, just noting the connection between the experience you have and the way that experience affects your physical body.

Sample Guided Body Awareness Script

There are many ways to practice bodily awareness, in addition to simply noting how the body feels throughout the day. You can also practice a guided body scan. Here is a sample script that you may record in your own voice and play back later, or that you may want a friend or family member to read aloud to you as you settle into your meditation.

Thank you for joining me in this guided body scan meditation. Please feel free to listen to this guided body scan whenever you need to take a moment, pause, reset, and tune in more to the power and awareness of your own body.

To begin, I'd like to invite you to find a comfortable position to sit down or lay back for the next 10 to 15 minutes. Ideally, this should be some time during the day when you can take some time just for yourself. Try to practice this guided body scan

in a place where you can be uninterrupted. If your cell phone isn't turned off, and if you feel comfortable doing so, please turn it off now. If you need to put a "do not disturb sign" outside your door, please do so now, and come back to the guided body scan when you are ready.

Now that you've found a space where you can be uninterrupted, I'd like to invite you to join me now for some time just for the most important person in your life—yourself. This is a moment when you can sit back or lay back and begin to check in and tune more to the needs of your body.

To start, I'd like to invite you to take a few deep breaths on your own, breathing in and out, following the natural rhythm of your breath. If you want, you can gently close your eyes, or have them half-way open, like a sleepy cat.

As you continue to follow your breath, I'd like to invite you to gently settle into your body. Feel your body getting heavier and heavier, more and more rested. As you take every in-breath, I invite your body to feel more rested. As you take every out-breath, I invite your body to feel more calm.

For today's guided body scan, we'll work from the top of the head to the bottom of the feet, gently relaxing each part of your body, and tuning in to the needs of your body, getting to know your body a little better.

I'd like to invite you to start at the very top of your head, at the very crown. This is where some people say we are connected to our higher selves. See if you can gently notice any sensations at the very top of your head, taking a moment. Breathing in relaxation for the top of the head, breathing out any stress or discomfort you may feel, sending out that breath to the universe.

Now, I'd like to invite you to gently scan the whole top of your head, noticing any sensations there. Even the sensation of an itch, or some itchiness, is perfectly acceptable. If you notice any unpleasant sensations, allow yourself to breath in some peaceful energy to that part of your head.

Next, I'd like to invite you to begin scanning the rest of you head, moving down to your forehead, and then your eyebrows, and then your eyes, and your ears, and your nose, and your cheeks, gently becoming more aware of the sensations around your face. All the muscles in your face. All of the emotions we carry on our face. Just breathing in and breathing out some peace and relaxation. Letting go of all of those muscles in our face that do so much work for us.

Take a moment to breath in now and to relax your jaw muscles—sometimes we carry so much tension in our jaw. If you feel any tension in your jaw, I'd like to invite you to gently move around your jaw, gently opening your mouth and letting that

tension go. Just taking a moment to relax this lower part of the face. Breathing in and breathing out.

Now, I'd like to invite you to gently move your awareness down your neck--the left side and the right side. If there's any tension in the neck, I'd like to invite you give yourself permission to let that tension go. Let it slide away, all the way down to the center of the earth. Just breathing in joy and relaxation and letting go of any negative or blocked energy.

Let's move our awareness down to the shoulders. The shoulders can carry a lot of stress in our bodies. I'd like to invite you to be aware of any tension or stress in your shoulders and just let it go. Let it fall away. Breathing in joy and relaxation and breathing out any tension, just letting it go.

Let's move our awareness down to the upper back, the middle back, and the lower back. Breathing in joy and relaxation and breathing out any tension or stress, just letting it go.

Let's move our awareness down to our upper arms, lower arms, and hands. Breathing in joy and relaxation and breathing out any tension or stress, just letting it go.

And now, let's direct our attention to the fronts of our bodies, and all of the vital organs that nourish us and keep us alive—our heart, lungs, liver, digestive system. Breathing in joy and relaxation and breathing out any tension or stress, just letting it go.

And now, let's move to the lower parts of our bodies, to our reproductive system and all of that creative energy. Breathing in joy and relaxation and breathing out any tension or stress, just letting it go.

And now moving down to our hips, our thighs, and all of the powerful muscles in our legs, our knees, down to our calves, our shins, and then moving down all the way to bottom of our feet, to the tips of our toes. Breathing in joy and relaxation and breathing out any tension or stress, just letting it go.

And now that we've scanned the whole body, I'd like to invite you now to continue to breathe in and breathe out on your own, just feeling the entire body, breathing in joy and relaxing, and breathing out any tension or stress, just letting it go.

And when you are ready, I'd like to invite you to gentle wiggle your fingers and toes, and gently open your eyes, as we settle back into this moment, thanking our bodies for all of the work they do, and how magnificent our bodies are.

Thank you.

Loving Kindness Meditation



What is Loving Kindness?

Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) is a type of meditation meant to engender feelings and thoughts of love, wellness, and compassion for yourself and others. Its roots go back thousands of years to many faith traditions, although you can practice loving kindness without having any particular spiritual or faith background. Loving Kindness Meditation is a secular practice with its core a focus on the power of human kindness and forgiveness.

When I first discovered and practiced Loving Kindness Meditation, I felt an immediate effect for the better. By focusing on wishing thoughts of wellbeing and kindness for yourself, you're telling your mind to give yourself a break and to be gentle on yourself. Most of us are our own worst critics, and we spend the day

bombarding ourselves with negative thoughts. We might put ourselves down if we're not meeting our goals or expectations. We might say an unkind word to ourselves under our breath, like, "I'm not good enough," or "I suck," or "I'm such a loser."

Although it's natural to have negative thoughts, there is something about our society today where we are not typically encouraged or invited to think thoughts of love or well-being for ourselves or one another. And yet the research shows us there can be many benefits of practicing Long Kindness Meditation. A study out of [Stanford University](#) reports, "Ten minutes of LKM showed increased explicit as well as implicit levels of well-being and feelings of social connection to others and decreased focus on the self." This tells us that Loving Kindness Meditation can help us get outside of our own heads and egos and find a way to develop stronger and more meaningful relationships with those around us.

And the magazine [Psychology Today](#) reports there are a litany of benefits backed by science when we practice Loving Kindness Meditation. Some of these benefits suggest LKM can help decrease chronic pain, decrease Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and even bias toward others. At the same time, LKM can help increase one's sense of empathy and compassion. There is even evidence that LKM can help slow down the biological aging process, as it can influence the length of telomeres, which are critical toward the preservation of our cells. Suddenly, it might actually seem that the famous Beatle's song is true—all you need is love.

Personally, I enjoy practicing Loving Kindness Meditation because it helps me feel more connected to others. In all of my years of teaching and practicing Loving Kindness Meditation, I've not had a bad experience. There is something about the human condition that appears to thrive upon an environment in which thoughts and words of love and compassion are allowed to be expressed.

Although elements of Loving Kindness Meditation can be found in secular and faith traditions going back thousands of years, one of my favorite forms of loving kindness comes from Buddhism and the text the [Metta Sutta](#). "Metta" means loving kindness and "Sutta" means teaching. Some phrases from the Metta Sutta that I cherish are the following words:

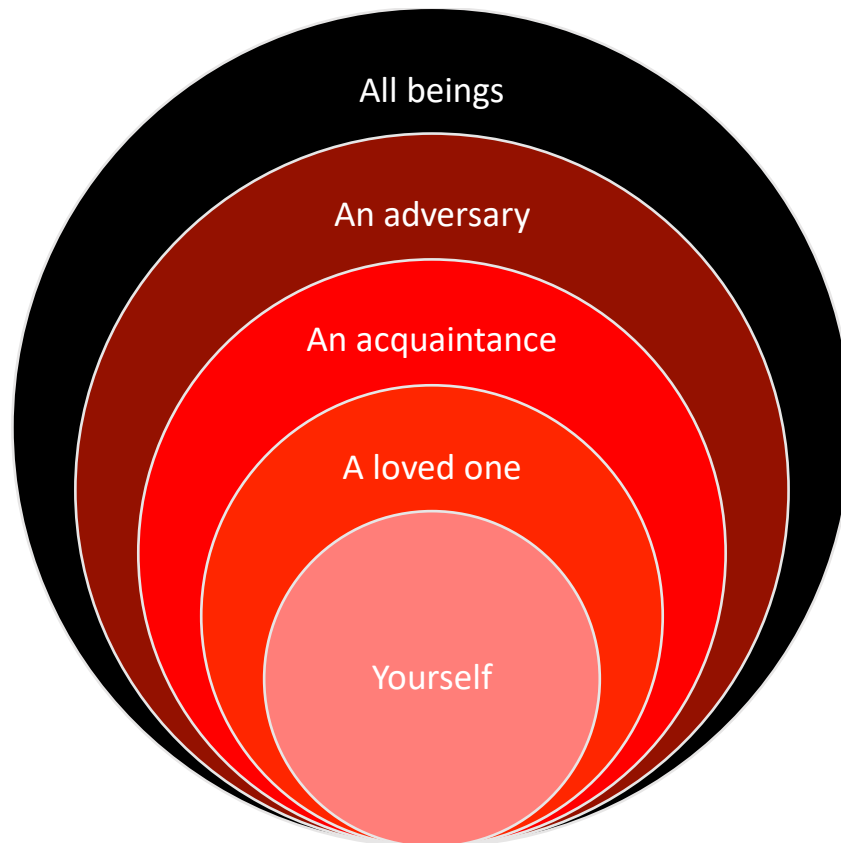
*Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any state,
Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings,
Radiating kindness over the entire world,
Spreading upwards to the skies, and downwards to the depths,
Outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will.*

The phrase of looking at one another with eyes of compassion, "just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child," instills me a sense that we all have

an inborn ability to conjure and act on great amounts of love and compassion for one another. Loving Kindness Meditation sanctions compassion and helps us develop a different paradigm in how we engage with ourselves and one another, not only on a personal level, but also on a societal and professional level.

The Structure of Loving Kindness

All loving kindness meditations have a similar structure, as the illustration below suggests.



First Round - Sending loving kindness to yourself

The first round of Loving Kindness Meditation is about sending thoughts of love and well-being to the most important person in your life—yourself. As modern psychologists and ancient philosophers have opined, you cannot love another until you love yourself. You cannot be at your best until you love yourself. You cannot really achieve your full potential in life until you love yourself.

There are many similar scripts for loving kindness, but for this first level, or first round, the focus should be on sending yourself sincere well-wishes. The key is to use words or phrases that resonate deeply with you and what appeals to you. A sample series of phrases might include:

May I be well.
May I be happy.

*May I be peaceful.
May my mind be at peace and at ease with myself and the world around.
May I find joy in this moment, in the here and now.*

You don't have to repeat these exact words. Instead, see what feels right with your mind, heart and spirit and begin to riff-on, or improvise on, these words.

Second Round - Sending loving kindness to a loved one

The second round of Loving Kindness Meditation continues with sending out thoughts of love and compassion to a loved one. This loved one could be a family member, a friend, a dear colleague, or even someone no longer with us. The main thing is to bring to mind someone about whom you care. Then, once you have this person in mind, take a moment and see how it feels to be connected to this person in your mind. You might even take a moment to notice how you are feeling in your body. Do you notice any changes in your respiration or heartbeat, for example? The mind-body connection is very real, and just having thoughts of love for someone about whom you care a great deal can begin to shift the mind-body calculus.

Some sample phrases you might say silently or aloud to yourself include:

*May (they) be well.
May (they) be happy.
May (they) be peaceful.
May (their) minds be at peace and at ease with the world around.
May (they) find joy in this moment, in the here and now.*

As you say these words, or words like them, you might notice an immediate effect of feeling calmer and at peace. Or, if feelings of sadness or tenderness arise, that's fine, too. In such a case, however, go back to the first round of loving kindness and make sure to fold-in some thoughts of wellness and love for yourself. The key, as with all meditation practices, is to be gentle and loving with yourself.

Depending on how fast or slow you wish to proceed with this round of loving kindness, you might take a minute or several minutes to extend these thoughts of love and wellness to another.

Third Round - Sending loving kindness to an acquaintance

The third round of Loving Kindness Meditation is like the first two rounds, but for this third round, the object of your focus is an acquaintance—someone whom you do not know very well, but who is casually connected to your life. For me, this is the pharmacist at my local drugstore, or the person who drops off packages in my office mail room. The key is to extend these thoughts of well-being to someone whom you don't know so well so that you can begin to fold-in the typical stranger into your daily mindset of loving kindness. Very often we are surrounded by people

whom we don't know very well, and life goes by. These might be people we see on our daily commute on the subway or on the train or in traffic. These might be people we see in line at the grocery store or at the local mall. These might be people we see crossing the street on a Sunday afternoon. The point is that we are surrounded by strangers almost all the time. By learning to generate thoughts of loving kindness to the typical person around us, we are starting to take a step forward in building a community of love and compassion around us 24/7. That's of course a bit idealistic, but Loving Kindness Meditation is a tool—a technology—to engender such mind states.

Some words or phrases you might consider using for this round of Loving Kindness Meditation include:

May (they) be well.

May (they) be happy.

May (they) be peaceful.

May (their) minds be at peace and at ease with and the world around.

May (they) find joy in this moment, in the here and now.

As with previous rounds of Loving Kindness Meditation, you can adjust the words/phrases to suit your particular interests/tastes.

Fourth Round - Sending loving kindness to an adversary

The fourth round of Loving Kindness Meditation is perhaps the most ambitious. For this round, the invitation is to focus on someone with whom you do not get along. This means inviting you to focus on an adversary, or even a potential enemy. Although this can be one of the most challenging rounds for Loving Kindness Meditation, it can be one of the most transformative. This round of loving kindness typically involves reflecting on feelings of compassion and forgiveness for whoever has done you wrong. Of course, if this round of loving kindness does not feel comfortable, then there's no obligation to do it. As always, the focus should be on self-love above all.

The goal of opening up our hearts to those who have done us wrong is to cultivate different mind states toward our adversaries and enemies. On a practical level, this can be helpful in the workplace environment or in personal situations. For example, if at the office, a colleague is a bully and does rude and unkind things, there are many ways to react. One way, of course, might be to approach human resources at your job or take things up with your boss or supervisor. But in the meantime—and it may take weeks or months or longer to resolve an issue—we can practice Loving Kindness Meditation to those around us who are in a bad space. This is no way is about giving in to the oppressor or laying down in front of bullying, but rather a proactive mindset one can use to explore in terms of how we feel and relate to those around us who might be in an unkind mindset. Put another way, by practicing Loving Kindness Meditation for those around you who might wish you harm, you

are not just taking the High Road, you're creating a mental space in which there is more love in the room.

On a personal level, it's my belief and experience that the more we practice Loving Kindness Meditation for our adversaries and enemies, the less material they have to work with to act in an unkind or hateful way. By radiating thoughts of love, peace, compassion, and even forgiveness for those around us who are ensnared by hate, the more we can adjust the tone in the room.

If this fourth round of Loving Kindness Meditation seems appropriate, then this round continues with words and phrases very similar to prior rounds:

*May (they) be well.
May (they) be happy.
May (they) be peaceful.
May (their) minds be at peace and at ease with the world around.
May (they) have joy in this moment, in the here and now.*

Of course, you can choose to use different words. The main thing is to use those words and phrases that honor your intent to connect with others, even those who may have done us harm.

Fifth Round - Sending loving kindness to all beings

The fifth round of Loving Kindness Meditation expands thoughts of love and compassion to all beings everywhere—near or far, rich or poor, weak or strong, black or white, straight or gay, foreign or domestic. It's a way to expand the energy of the human heart to its full potential. Some words or phrases you might use include:

*May all beings be well.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings be peaceful.
May all beings' minds be at peace and at ease with the world around.
May all beings have joy in this moment, in the here and now.*

Once this fifth and final round of loving kindness is over, you can also conclude with returning all of that love and energy to yourself—bringing it home. As many sages have observed, “what you give you receive.” So, it's good and helpful to take a few moments to observe how it feels to have sent out that much loving kindness—to have radiated it outward, starting from yourself, and then moving on to a loved one, an acquaintance, an adversary, and then all living beings.

As you can tell, I'm quite enamored with the idea of Loving Kindness Meditation. I use it in my life when I feel angry or hurt toward someone, or because of someone. At the very least, I like to think even if it's all in my imagination—the hurts, the

slights, the wounds—if conjuring words of loving kindness make me feel better, then it serves some purpose. And this isn't even considering the research behind loving kindness. As with so many other forms of meditation, Loving Kindness Meditation helps reduce stress, promote greater relaxation, and peace of mind.

Questions & Answers on Meditation

As you develop a meditation practice, you are bound to come across many questions. Here are some responses to potential questions that may arise.

Q. How do I begin a daily meditation practice? Do I need to practice every day?

A. The best way to start a daily practice is to take it slow. At first, I might recommend meditating once or twice a week for 3 to 5 minutes at a time. The best time of day to practice meditation is early in the morning, just when your day is getting started. If you want, you can just close your eyes for a moment upon waking, and silently observe and follow your breath for a few moments. That's enough to get started.

Q. How should I sit when I meditate? Do I need to fold my legs into a lotus position?

A. Just sit comfortably, whether it's in a chair, on a cushion, or at the edge of your bed. The key is to be gentle with your body and never force any position that makes your body uncomfortable.

Q. My mind wanders when I meditate. What am I doing wrong?

A. A wandering mind is a good thing! It's a sign that you are becoming more aware of your thought processes, which is actually one of the major goals of meditation. Meditation is not about turning off your thoughts or your brain—far from it. Meditation is about becoming more aware of what's happening in the moment, in the here and now. If your mind wanders when you meditate, let it wander. As soon as you catch yourself looking at your wandering mind, then bring it back to your object of meditation—your breath. Simply repeat this process and you can consider yourself an experienced meditator. The mind will never stop wandering, but by watching the mind we can therefore become more mindful. We can look at our thoughts and reflect and know more of ourselves at a deeper level.

Q. My back and legs hurt when I meditate. What should I do?

A. Try to be gentle with your body. Never force an uncomfortable position. If your legs hurt, you can gently move your legs to a more relaxed position.

Q. My mind won't stop racing when I meditate. This isn't feeling good.

A. If your mind has negative thoughts that are racing, be kind and gentle to yourself. This may not be the best moment to meditate. Instead, it might be more helpful to talk to a friend, family member, health care provider, or other trusted person. The meditation cushion can always wait.

Q. Is meditation connected to a religion? Can I practice meditation if I'm a Christian or Jew or Muslim? Or, can I practice meditation if I'm an atheist?

A. Meditation has roots in ancient Buddhist philosophy, but these days, especially in the United States, the meditation movement has become secular. By focusing

on neutral, universal, secular objects—like the breath—you don't have to have any particular religion to meditate. One well-known meditation teacher, [Noah Rasheta](#), likes to say meditation can help you be a better anything—a better Christian, a better Jew, a better Muslim, a better atheist.

Q. Should I practice meditation if I have thoughts of self-harm?

A. If you have thoughts of self-harm, please contact a health care provider or contact help immediately at 1-800-273-TALK.

Q. Loving Kindness Meditation seems too good to be true. Does it really work?

A. Give it a try and see what happens

Q. Is meditation about loving yourself and your enemies? That's hippie nonsense.

A. Well, meditation is about love and compassion in addition to practicing self-awareness and knowing yourself. So, in time, it could lead to having more love for your enemies, but not necessarily right away.

Q. I'm too busy to begin a meditation practice.

A. No problem. Meditation may not be right for you.

Q. But I really want to start a meditation practice!!!!

A. Excellent. Then, all I ask is for 3-5 minutes a day twice a week. Then after a few weeks, spend 3-5 minutes a day four times a week. Take it nice and slow.

Q. I've heard about meditation apps like Calm and Headspace. Are they any good?

A. They're okay but not perfect. You can try them out, although you have to pay a fee. I use a free app called Insight Timer. That works pretty well for me.

Some Meditation Resources

There are a number of wonderful meditation schools available these days, many online. Some of my favorite include:

[Plum Village](#) – a global Buddhist community in the tradition of the late Thich Nhat Hanh, offering classes in-person and online

[Spirit Rock](#)—one of the oldest meditation communities in the United States, based in the San Francisco Bay Area, with online classes

[The Garrison Institute](#)—a New York-based meditation community offering a number of online workshops from some of the most well-known meditation

[Insight Meditation Community](#) of Washington, DC – this community offers a range of mindfulness classes online and in person in the DC/MD/VA region

Some good books on learning how to meditate include:

[*10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing My Edge, and Found a Self-Help That Actually Works*](#), by Dan Harris

[*The Art of Happiness*](#), by the Dali Lama

[*How to Meditate: A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind*](#), by Pema Chodron

[*You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*](#), by Thich Nhat Hanh

About Monti

Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, [Monti Narayan Datta](#) has been interested in meditation and mindfulness for a number of years. He began to explore different meditation practices as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley in the 1990s, and then later as a tourist in Northern India. He has explored different meditation techniques and retreats, including vipassana as taught by [S.N. Goenka](#), as well as different variations of Theravada Buddhism as taught in the Thai Forest Tradition. He has taken courses in mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques, including a course offered by the University of Virginia, as well a workshop on how to teach mindfulness to at-risk youth offered by [the Holistic Life Foundation](#). He is a trained [KORU instructor](#) on offering meditation classes to college-aged students. He is currently a student of [Hartanto Gunawan](#), a former monk-turned social justice activist based in Thailand.

Monti has a PhD in political science from UC Davis. His current research, with Kevin Bales, examines the intersection of [contemporary slavery in armed conflicts](#). He is a full-time Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Richmond. In his spare time, he loves to play chess, look around the neighborhood for stray cats to befriend, watch Netflix, and study the Korean language.

Contact: mdatta@richmond.edu

Photo credits

Breath Awareness

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/silhouette-of-man-sitting-on-grass-field-at-daytime-775417/>

Body Scan

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/scuba-diver-under-water-4666754/>