

“Simply Being Present”

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation Insight Meditation (Vipassana)

An Eight-Week Course in Learning How to Meditate

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D r a f t C o p y

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**Dedicated to the many, many teachers who have
helped me navigate the path
from trying and struggling to meditate to actually meditating.
I will be forever grateful!**

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Introduction

If you are reading this, you have likely arrived at a place in your life where you are ready to explore meditation. You may have even already tried to meditate before and found that it was not easy to do on your own. Each of our journeys is unique in the way it unfolds, and each of us arrives at wanting to learn how to meditate in our own time driven by our own reasons.

Reading this book and/or taking this class will simply be a continuation of your journey. The key to this journey is mindfulness. Another word for mindfulness is awareness. Being mindful is about being “here” or “present” in the moment and knowing the reality of that moment. In a meditation session we are simply training our mind to be present in the here and now as compared to the mind being captured by what happened yesterday, last week or years ago or it being engrossed in what is going to happen tomorrow, next week or next year.

So, meditation is a training in presence. As a metaphor, it is like we have a presence muscle in our mind that is being fine tuned, and by sitting in meditation we are strengthening that muscle. It is much the same as if we were going to the gym to fine tune our core muscles or our biceps. And just as we would then use our fine-tuned core muscles or biceps as we navigate our day, we can mindfully use our fine-tuned presence muscle throughout our day as well. When we live more moments of our life in presence, we have a different level of agency or power in how we live our life. When difficult situations like disappointments, emotional struggles, and/or unhappy surprises occur in our lives we are more likely to experience insights that allow us to respond to those situations out of wisdom rather than to react to them out of habit or past conditioning. And, equally, when happy moments of good news and joy come our way, we will also hopefully be able to meet them and respond from a stance of wisdom. A strong presence muscle simply helps us be more intimate with our life experiences. Because of that, taking this journey takes courage to be present with what is real in the moment.

Strengthening our presence muscle also has the potential of helping us experience more peace and calm in our life. Interestingly, peace and calm is not something we create. It is more something that wells up from within. It is not so much something we do; it is more something that we allow. In meditation we create the conditions for peace and calm to arise—and those conditions are presence and a quiet mind. In meditation, we are not only aspiring for peace and calm when things are going well in our lives, we are aspiring to have peace and calm even in the midst of chaos.

My invitation to you as you start on this path is, as much as you are able, to approach all that you see with a beginner’s mind. Some of you may start out having learned ideas from other sources about what meditation is and how to do it. For example, you may have learned meditation techniques in yoga or relaxation techniques in a health care setting. There is no need to forget all of that. What I ask is that you work with what is here as if it were “fresh” and new. The type of meditation presented here is “insight meditation” or in Pali (the language at the time of the Buddha), “Vipassana.” It is a style of meditation designed to help the body and mind be quiet and peaceful so that wisdom can arise. When wisdom is present, we can then respond skillfully to our life situations rather than react mindlessly out of habit. So, I invite you to begin this journey by relaxing and reading with an open, playful and curious mind. And if you find it hard to relax, we will work on that too. Relaxing just makes meditating easier, and it helps you reap the benefits of meditation more quickly. We will start at the very beginning, so it is okay if you now have no idea of what meditation is. In fact, this book was written with you in mind. Many people have taken this journey before you, and many people have

benefited. I am confident you will too. The rewards are many and well worth the effort. Welcome on board!

In the spirit of sharing, this is my story of how I got started meditating now more than 35 years ago. Like you, my journey is unique to me, yet it has threads of the journey of many others I know. You may even relate to some of my first years of experience.

For years before I began meditating, I heard about the benefits of meditation. Mostly I heard that it was something to do that would quiet my mind and help in being peaceful and calm; things that have since been scientifically proven to be true. At the time, I intuitively knew this was probably the case and that meditating would likely be something good for me to do. But, I did not act on those thoughts for years. Part of the reason for that was I did not know how to do it on my own, and at the time, I was not aware of the resources available to help me learn. The most significant reason may have been, however, that I simply was not ready.

Then, as a few years passed, I was experiencing some emotional pain with some difficult life issues. Luckily I met people who helped me begin a very life-giving process; one that has turned out to be a rich spiritual journey. Struggling with the church I was born into, I began a self study of other spiritual traditions. The first one I explored was Native American culture and spirituality. It would take volumes to write of the many awakenings I had being with this tradition. It truly gave me an enhanced relationship to nature and the natural world. I didn't realize it at the time, but working with spirituality in nature introduced me to being awake in nature, and this required mindfulness.

One significant thing I was intuitively drawn to was taking part in a Native American-type vision quest offered through the Animas Valley Institute in Durango, Colorado. I was struggling with some personal issues and was searching for some answers and maybe some peace. To Native Americans the Vision Quest is an ancient rite of passage involving a dying, passing through, and rebirth. It is a personal journey "seeking a vision" done in the wilderness. Once a vision is received, the work begins to follow through on that vision. To this day, that experience is probably the most significant thing I've experienced in my life.

To prepare for the quest, I spent several months in reading and doing exercises to prepare for the journey. The quest process itself was ten days. The first days involved our guides explaining the process of what we were about to experience, eating to cleanse the body and prepare it for the three-day fast of the quest, a sweat lodge, and preparatory instructions getting us ready to travel to a canyon in Utah to actually do the quest seeking a vision. To make a long story short, one of the things I learned from this experience was that I was to now study Buddhism. At that moment I was a blank slate when it came to Buddhism, so I left Utah and Colorado wondering, "Now how do I do that?" The following Sunday after I returned home to Minneapolis, where I was living at the time, I went to the Unitarian Universalist Church I was then attending. When I looked at the Sunday bulletin, I saw an announcement that two Zen priests were offering a 100 Days of Mindfulness Class—which was basically an introductory class in meditation. That was the beginning of now more than 35 years of continuous study. I can truly say that that class was the beginning of a spiritual process that literally "saved my life."

I can remember the first day of the 100 Days class. There were about 30 or so people in class. One of the first class activities was for each of us to briefly state what our reasoning was for signing up for the class and what we hoped to get out of it. When my turn came, all I could say was that I knew I had to

be there, that I knew nothing about Buddhism and that I had no clue what meditation was, and that I had no clue what I was getting myself into. I was a blank slate.

That initial class was a struggle for me, as were a fair number of the years following. I did not find meditating easy nor did I find it particularly fun. If someone would have asked me then to define eternity, I might have said “eternity is five minutes of meditation.” And all the calm and peace that was promised did not present itself. I kept on because at some deep place inside I intuitively knew it was something important for me to do. Now that many years have passed, I have some insight into why those first years were so difficult for me. My teachers were skilled and their instruction was good. They would say things like, “Focus on your breath, and if your mind wanders, bring your attention back to your breath.” That might sound easy, but it was difficult for me to do. My mind never wanted to settle down, and I assumed that I was the slowest person in class in achieving any accomplishment of what I was “supposed” to be doing. I judged that everyone else was doing it “right” except me. So, I had a few frustrating years at the beginning. I “tried” so hard to do it “right” and to “accomplish” being peaceful and calm.

Now, if you can read between the lines in the last paragraph, here is what I now see was happening. First, on the surface, I claimed that I did not know anything about meditation; that I was a blank slate. Of what I was conscious of at the time, that is true. But, what I did not know then is that I subconsciously held many beliefs about what meditation was, and that those unconscious beliefs were driving how I was approaching meditation. As I look back, my struggle with meditating was not that meditating was so hard. My struggle mostly came from my unconscious misunderstandings of what meditation was. I realize now that I entered meditation believing that my job was to concentrate on only my breath and eliminate all thoughts. I believed that what I was to do was make my mind go blank. If I could just concentrate on my breath hard enough and if thoughts never arose and that if I experienced peace and calm that I would be successful and doing what I was supposed to be doing—a huge myth, and a bit perfectionistic. And because I believed that meditation was all about peace and calm, I constantly judged my sittings as being either good or bad depending on whether a sit was calming or not—another misconception!! I tried so hard!!! The thing is, trying to meditate is not the same thing as meditating. I did not realize that for me the “trying” energetically turned into “struggle” and “striving.” It felt agitated and restless, and that is the antithesis of what meditation is about.

It took me a while to unlearn some of my misconceptions and to realize that my main work in meditation was simply to relax and be present with what presents itself. I learned that there were many things I could focus my attention on other than the breath. I also learned that in meditation there was really nothing “to do” or “to accomplish”—all so simple for me to see now, but for which I was not ready to hear or see way back then.

If you are new to meditation, you might now have the question, “What does all of that really mean? What does it mean “to be present with what presents itself?” And because those few words may sound quite simple (but not necessarily easy), you might have the question, “How do I do that?” My intention in writing this book is to answer that question, to take the mystery out of what meditation is, to take the “struggle” out of learning how to meditate, to help you develop a meditation practice and to help that practice impact your life as much as my practice has helped mine. Writing this book is my way of giving back for all the help I have been given from so many teachers over the years.

I integrate into this book what I have learned. As I indicated before, meditation is a training to strengthen the mind to live in the present moment. Because our minds may not be used to being in the present, it is common that when people begin that they may experience trials like a mind that does not

want to settle down, a body that does not want to relax, or doubts as to whether they can do this. My hope is that with guidance and by sharing my experiences that, if such trials should arise, that it will help you navigate through them with some ease. Rather than begin by “trying to meditate,” we are going to begin by “meditating.”

To accomplish this, this book is divided into chapters. Each chapter addresses experiences you are bound to have during your meditation sessions—awareness of your (1) breath, (2) sounds and body sensations, (3) feelings/emotions, and (4) thoughts/thinking. Meditation includes them all; it leaves nothing out. A final section has been added to show you how to continue the practice after reading/working this book. Each new chapter builds on what was learned in the previous chapter, so it is important to read and work the chapters in the order presented.

One more thing before we begin. I learned how to meditate through the spiritual tradition of Buddhism, so what is presented here draws from that. Know that reading and working with the material in this book will benefit and enhance how anyone experiences their life regardless of their spiritual belief system; it is meant for all.

So, let’s start the journey. As Susuki Roshi, a Zen meditation teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center once told his students, “You are fine now, and you have work to do.”

Let’s begin.