



Section One

Meditation Practices

MEDITATION MAY SEEM LIKE SOMETHING you learn, or an activity to do on a regular basis. There are many styles of meditation available today that you can learn from a teacher, on a retreat, or even from a book or a CD. Practicing one style of meditation on a daily basis is without doubt a good idea: it will cultivate presence, watching, inner calm, and peace in the midst of chaos.

But meditation is not only a technique that you learn; it is also a disposition, a way of being with yourself and with life, which you can return to at any time. The Sanskrit word for meditation, “dhyana” (the root of the Japanese word “zen”) refers less to a kind of activity than to a state of awareness. It may start with a calming of the usual activities of thought, but it also goes deeper. As the clutch of conceptual thinking loosens, we are able to see things as they are with greater clarity. We can meet reality nakedly, and recognize what is real and what is only imagination. Finally, both experience and experiencer merge into Oneness.

Awakening is sometimes referred to as single moment out of time, and sometimes as a gradual process. The six practices in this

section will allow you to know awakening to be both. Any moment in your day can become the diving board into an ocean of living presence that was always there, just beneath the surface of the waves of your life. And, at the same time, the more we return to seeing that ocean, the more it reveals its infinity, in a process that is endless.

These practices can build upon whatever daily practice you may already have, or they may also act as fresh catalysts. Remember that meditation can happen any time; it is a dropping into yourself, and into reality as it is.

1

Expand Peripheral Vision

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY *

In the midst of your busy day, stop.

Sit quietly with your eyes open.

Look at any object before you.

Now take an in-breath and expand your vision

To include what is immediately to the left and to the right of that object.

With the out-breath, relax and settle into yourself.

Take another in-breath and expand your vision even more

To include everything that's before you, in an arc of about ninety degrees.

Breathe out and settle further into yourself.

Take another in-breath and include your entire field of vision.

Your attention is equally distributed between what is in front of you

And all of your peripheral vision.

Expand it even more to include things not just to the left and the right,

But even things over your shoulders.

Expand beyond what your eyes can see.

With the out-breath, relax completely into being that which sees all.

Remain like this, breathing softly, for several minutes.

Feel the mystery of your own essence.

.....

Attention can take many states. It can be focused, alert, and single-pointed. Often we need to be like that, like a cat watching a mouse or a bird, ready to pounce. If you drive in traffic, juggle a busy schedule, perhaps while raising children or just working in today's commercial world, you are probably constantly attending to beeping machines, deadlines, and needs from a variety of directions, which sometimes seem impossible to fulfill at the same time. You need to stay focused to get it all done, and there's no time to space out.

This is our habitual state, ready for action, muscles and sinews taught, anticipating the need to make a move. When your attention is focused in this way, you become more defined, a human-doing instrument more than a human-being presence.

Attention can also be more diffused, spread equally over the range of our sensory perception. Then, everything can relax—body, thoughts, and feelings—and we become more of a presence. Now you can feel the forest rather than just busily counting the trees as you hurry through them on your way toward the future.

Because our habits of focus are so familiar, we may think that a more diffused state of consciousness is out of reach. We ascribe it to other people, a teacher, the author of a spiritual book, or even a historical figure, but never to ourselves. We may also project more expansive consciousness into our own future, saying to ourselves, “When I am enlightened, then it will all be different.”

But there is no need to make this choice. You can shift to a more expansive view at any time, for a few minutes, and then return to the habits of daily life. Try using this practice often throughout the day.

2

Stop

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY *

In the midst of your busy day, when there seem to be so many things to do,

Stop.

Stop moving, stop talking,

Stop what you are doing, and feel.

Hold your body in the same position.

Feel this moment just as it is. Hear the sounds.

Notice the sensations in the body.

Notice the speed and texture of your thoughts.

Remain like this for sixty seconds.

See? The world around you continues, even without your involvement.

Who are you now, outside of the game?

Now continue with your day.

.....

It is easy to make a big deal out of awakened states of consciousness. They must be the fruit of long years of practice, or the domain of a few spiritual masters. In fact, if you are really interested in living an awakened life, then what you are longing for is already here, just one flight down from the usual routine of daily tasks. There is no need to become anything, or change anything, or heal anything. Just stop and notice the screen on which the flickering images are being projected, notice the luminosity that is projecting them. That is who you truly are.

The mind is constantly rushing backward and forward in time: it is busy with desires, fears, and deadlines. Like a computer that can never be switched off, the mind endlessly tries to make reality bow to its agenda. When the mind machine is behind the wheel of our day-to-day life, then everything is about getting somewhere else, somewhere other than where we already are. There is no way out of the machine from within its own activity. The mind can never bring us to presence: it simply makes being in the present moment into a concept about the future. “Later, when I am enlightened, then I will be fully here.”

The doorway to sanity is always in this very moment, right here, right now. If you stop what you are doing and become present, the whole energy changes. The momentum of the thought machine is suddenly broken, and you are just here, with things as they are. This simple practice disrupts the patterns of the mind just long enough to remember the sweetness of things as they already are. Use this practice several times a day until it becomes habitual.

3

Pure Waiting

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY **

Whenever you can, sit and wait.

There is no need to distract yourself by filling the gap with random activity.

At the gate at the airport,

In the few minutes before it's time to leave the house, while waiting for the bus,

Rather than picking up a book,

Or flipping the pages of a magazine,

Or checking e-mail or switching on the TV,

Just sit and wait,

Present . . . ready . . . available,

Waiting for the next thing to happen.

No need to meditate or get spiritual.

Just wait, like a cat, or a bird in a tree.

Become the waiting itself.

Wait for the kiss of the divine.

Wait for the kiss that kisses your lips

From the inside.

.....

Pure waiting is the supremely meditative state. Usually, we don't choose it consciously, and we resent it. If we embrace waiting completely—if we relax into it completely without resistance—the body can become fully relaxed, while at the same time the senses

become sharp and present. Then, we are available to life, to the divine source.

I have a friend who is a monk. He told me that during his training, the novices were divided into three groups. Those in the first group, like him, were told to go to another area, where each would be given a meditation hut, and to wait there for further instructions. The first day passed, and no one came. Then another day, and another. Food was brought, but no instructions and no instructor. After about a week, from his solitary hut he heard the sounds of someone sweeping the nearby hut that was set aside for the teacher. Surely this meant someone was finally coming! He waited all day, alert, ready, anticipating. But still no one came. After another week, they cleaned the hut again, yet again no one came. By the next week, he realized that the cleaning was simply done on a weekly basis and meant nothing. He and the other novices stayed in their huts like this for three months. During this time, he sometimes felt angry, sometimes bored, sometimes depressed. But through it all, he always remembered that they had told him to sit and wait for further instructions. He told me that his three-month period of waiting was the most important part of his training. In that time, he learned the art of pure waiting. It trained him to listen totally, to be receptive, to be aware without interpretation.

Practice waiting as often as you can, in the simple trust that if you do nothing, sooner or later the perfect thing will happen on its own.

4

Enter the Space Between the Breaths

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY ***

Become aware of the movement of the breath.
Without trying to change it in any way,
Watch the breath come in.
Just before the in-breath turns into the out-breath, notice the
small gap.
Then watch the breath go all the way out.
Just before the in-breath,
There is another small gap between the breaths.
Pay attention to these gaps.
Be present in the gap,
And present as the gap.
In this way, you will discover the true nature of silence;
You will know infinity;
You will become the source of all life.

.....

The mystery is first mentioned in the *Vigyan Bhairava Tantra*, an ancient text from India, in which Shiva gives to his consort Parvati 108 portals to the infinite. This is the first of the portals he delivers.

Our life begins with the first breath, and we return to infinity with the last. Between these two, we incarnate as sentient beings.

The breath comes in and goes out almost a billion times in an average lifetime. The breath is a movement of energy; it is our relationship to the environment. The in-breath is a nourishing,

a taking in, an absorbing; it charges the body. We receive; we are reborn. In that receiving, we are in relationship to the outer world; we are in twoness: a me and a not-me.

On the out-breath, there is expulsion; there is expression. Speech always occurs on the out-breath. Again, we are in relationship to what is outside us, but now we are giving to the world, we are letting go. With each out-breath there is a small death. Once again, in that relationship there is a separation, a me and a not-me.

We receive, we give, we absorb, we expel, and in each of these waves we are created again.

In the tiny gap between these two lies a portal to the mysterious dimension where you cease to exist as a fixed entity. Neither giving nor receiving, there is no more relationship, no more outer and inner, no more me and no more not-me. You have become Oneness.

Try this practice each day for a few minutes at a time. It is the key to true meditation.

5

Remember Spaciousness

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY ***

At any time of the day,
When going about your daily routine,
Stop what you are doing.
If you need to, close your eyes.
Remember a time when you felt most spacious,
Most silent, most expansive.
Consciously remember the feeling in the body;
Notice the way the breath is, just now.
Remember the place where you were,
The people you were with, the sounds, the smells.
With all of you, return to the memory of infinite space.
Now let go of the circumstances of the memory,
And be that space itself.

.....

Whether you habitually define yourself as awake or asleep, whether you think of yourself as a spiritual adept or a novice, you have had moments of expansive consciousness. Everyone has. At the peak of lovemaking, perhaps when meeting a great teacher, in meditation, or in sport, we have all had glimpses of reality without the fixation of the mind. Thoughts stop, and the boundaries between the me and the not-me fade and dissolve.

Whenever you allow yourself to remember a moment like this, the brain functioning shifts in order to recapture the memory. The

activity of the parietal lobes decreases, and the frontal lobes become more dominant, particularly on the left side. Some research suggests that these changes are immediate when we access a memory of this kind. In order to experience anything, or remember anything, there has to be a change in the brain. Researchers like Dr. Andrew Newberg at the University of Pennsylvania and Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin have started to establish links between certain patterns in brain functioning and the subjective state that Newberg labels as “absolute unitary being.”

You can explore this practice alone, by remembering an opening into spaciousness, or you can practice with a friend, by describing such a memory aloud.

After a few minutes of recollection, stop and notice how you are experiencing this moment.

6

Enter the Darkness

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY ****

Create a room that is perfectly dark.
You might need to tape black plastic over the windows,
And lay a towel at the bottom of the door.
Make it so dark that you can sit with your eyes open
And see not a single chink of light.
Now sit in that darkness, with your eyes open,
And drink in the blackness.
Make friends with darkness,
Reach out into it, and let it soak into you.
Stare with open eyes into the blackness.
Start with an hour.
You can build up to sitting in darkness for many hours,
or even days.

.....

It is said that this meditation was taught by the Essenes, who some say were the teachers of Jesus. The great Russian mystic Georges Gurdjieff also used this with his students, and it is also found in Tibetan Buddhism. Darkness is the abode of mystery; it is from where we arise, and it is where we return every night. Every child starts his or her life in the womb, in nine months of darkness. Every seed germinates in the darkness of the soil. Every new dawn, every new meeting with the busyness of the world emerges out of the darkness of the night.

Most meditation places much more emphasis on light: we associate it with the upper chakras, and see it as our goal. Most people fear the dark. Hence, we have created an artificially illuminated world: in a city like New York or Los Angeles, it is never dark; it just shifts from natural light to artificial light.

When you become friendly and comfortable with darkness, something very deep in you can relax, and fear dissolves. Darkness initiates you into the world of the night, into the world of dreams and the unknown. In the beginning, all kinds of fears and freaky images will visit you. You may see snakes or monsters, or remember the most terrifying scenes from murder movies. But this will pass. It only comes because we have pushed darkness away so completely. Then another phase will come, where you will feel the darkness to be your mother, to be safe and nurturing and all around you.

I lived for more than a year in Bali. They have no psychiatrists or psychologists in their culture, and a much lower incidence of mental illness than the rest of the world. If someone begins to show signs of mental imbalance, they are lovingly taken to a dark room for two or three days, and when they emerge they are completely healed. Darkness has a tremendous power to nourish us, to settle us, to rejuvenate us. When you can allow outer darkness to enter you, it has the power to heal almost anything.

Try this for a few days or weeks, and see how your life changes.