IMAGE: BROOKE CAGLE

Demystifying meditation

Perhaps the biggest barrier to meditation is the word itself. Here are five easy ways to find a fulfilling meditation practice that's right for you.

by Lauren J. Wilson

THE *'M'* WORD

We seem to instinctively recognise the benefits of meditation, yet something stops many of us from developing our own meaningful meditation practice. It is often something people start, but soon give up on, while others delay even trying meditation, because they just don't know how or where to begin.

Just mentioning the word meditation can elicit a range of reactions, including looks of bewilderment or even anxiety. Others simply cite the well-worn excuse, "I would love to meditate, but I just haven't got the time."

My personal feeling is that many people have a blockage around meditation, because they have fixed ideas surrounding the practice, making it seem daunting and largely unattainable. The media's circulation of grandiose images of meditation reinforces this notion.

Play a simple game of word association, and you'll soon see that meditation is still loaded with many lofty connotations, such as Zen masters, white robes, silent retreats, transcendental experiences, inter-dimensional realities, and sitting cross-legged for an interminable length of time.

Wow, to a meditation beginner, it doesn't get much more intimidating than that!

Chances are very few people are going to associate meditation with something an office worker, a young mother, or the guy next door can easily practise at home or at work.

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BREAKING DOWN MEDITATION BARRIERS FIVE HELPFUL TIPS

1 Redefine meditation

Essentially, meditation is a direct line to yourself. Redefine it to mean something that you can easily relate to or even look forward to, such as an opportunity for some much-needed time-out, a chance to connect with your body, a way to 'defrag' your mind, or an excuse to lock the kids out of your room for half an hour!

Look beyond the word and start connecting with what a regular meditation practice is actually going to help you achieve, so you can tangibly start to feel how meditation will benefit your life.

2 Take small steps

The key is to start simply, then delve deeper. Adopt a comfortable position – sitting upright or lying down – and just sit with your body. View meditation as an opportunity for your body to express whatever you've been suppressing or ignoring, physically, emotionally, and mentally. This is your body's chance to have a conversation with you, so let it talk, and be willing to listen.

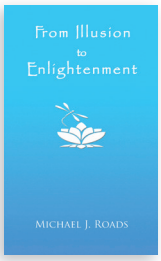
Whatever arises, observe with non-judgment. You may experience warmth flowing through your body (particularly in your hands and feet), you may feel sensations of pain or discomfort, waves of emotion or you may feel nothing obvious at all.

Don't get fixated on time or over-extend yourself. Initially, aim for five minutes per day (or even a couple of designated days a week), and gradually increase. Remember, like learning anything, meditation takes practise and perseverance.

3 Deploy your life rafts

Along your meditation journey, chances are you're going to need some easy go-to tools for when your mind starts acting like a puppy that's been let off a lead, zigzagging all over the place.

From Illusion to Enlightenment
BY MICHAEL J. ROADS



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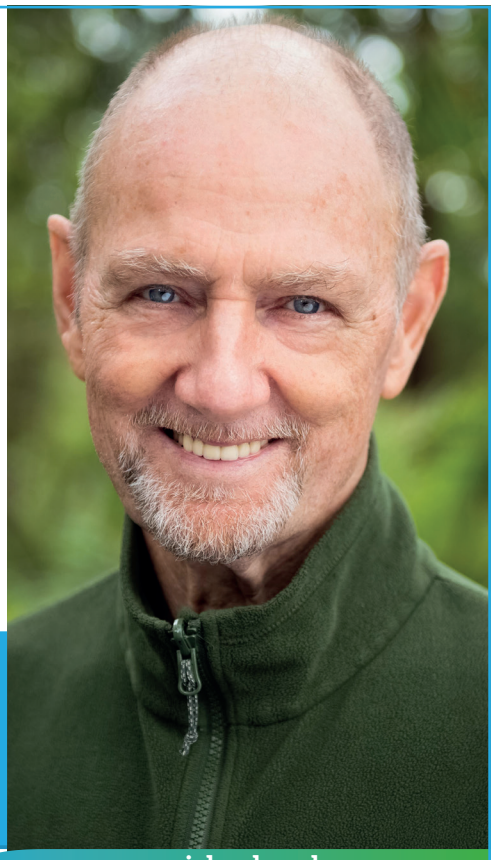

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Connect with your breath
Take three conscious breaths to begin. When you feel your mind begin to wander, bring your focus back to your breath. Feel the rise and fall of each breath; explore the subtle nuances of how the breath feels entering your nose, travelling down your throat, and throughout your body.

Another option is to place your hands on your lower belly and breathe into your hands for three breaths, repeat this process with your hands on your solar plexus, and then finish with your hands on your chest. (This gives your mind something additional to focus on, and you can repeat as often as you like.)

Return to your senses
This is a great meditative practice for when you're at the beach, park, or sitting in your backyard. Who said you needed to close your eyes to enter a meditative state?

When we fully engage our senses – sight, smell, sound, taste and touch – we ground ourselves in the here and now. So activate your senses. What can you smell? What subtle sounds of nature can you hear? What does the ground feel like under your feet?

Practise acceptance
Having a *really* hard time meditating? For emergency deployment, create your own meditation playlist of your most centring and calming music tracks or inspiring speakers. Listen with your full attention, breathing consciously as you do so.

And if nothing you try seems to be working, then accept that too. *It really is counter-productive to get stressed about your meditation practice.* So don't beat yourself up about it; instead, stick with it and acknowledge the fact that you're honouring a commitment you've made to yourself.

4 Experiment freely

We're now seeing many different approaches to meditation. So don't get hung-up on the rightness or wrongness of any one particular style or technique. Drop the seriousness and be playful; have some fun discovering the right meditation for you.

IMAGE: YOANN BOYER

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I like to practise what I call body-based meditation: meditating by focusing my attention and awareness on my body. The greatest benefit of this type of meditation is that it relies on nothing other than connecting with your own body, and you can practise it anywhere, anytime.

5 Meet your saboteur

We have so many things vying for our attention, from multiple forms of technology to the increasing demands of family and work. But the biggest distraction of all is much closer to home... Actually, it lives within us. Yes, I'm talking about our own mind.

The egoic mind is a tricky thing, and it's very likely to feign overwhelm at the very mention of meditation. The ego prefers to force us into the future or pull us into the past; it doesn't like change, and if there's one sure-fire way to create change in your life, then meditation is surely it.

Make friends with the pessimistic voice in your head that's probably going to try and sabotage you on a daily basis. Stay clear about why you're committing to meditation and reflect on how you feel *after* your meditation practice, using this as a tool to motivate you to continue.

BEYOND THE MEDITATION MAT

Meditation is essentially the art of being present. When you look at meditation in this context, it becomes a tool for life. It isn't just something to practise on a mat in a quiet room for a designated amount of time. Rather, it's a meditative awareness and presence that can permeate every aspect of your life.

The more we can remain connected to our body and grounded in the present moment, the more we can perceive – and receive – everything and everyone around us. Intense presence is like turning the television image from black and white to colour. So whatever you're doing, do it completely, and with your full attention.

Who knows, you may even start to feel like a Zen master in a modern guise! ●

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