

Tom Rozsas

Getting Started with Meditation

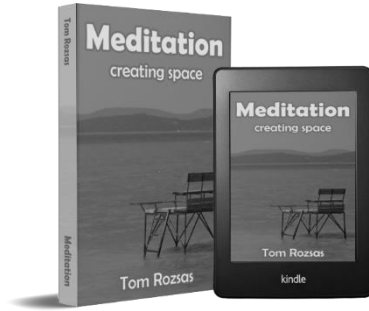
Tom Rozsas

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Go beyond the basics in meditation!

In *Meditation: Creating space*, I cover all important aspects of meditation. Read about the role of our emotions. Master your mind and mindfulness. Understand the mechanisms making meditation work for everyone. Immerse in the practice of meditation and get an outlook on where it can take us and how we can expand and enrich our practice. Start meditation today and read *Meditation: Creating space* to enhance your experience!

Tom Rozsas

Meditation: Creating space
is available on Amazon in all markets

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FOREWORD

What would we ask if our therapist told us about a treatment that could ease our insomnia, ease our anxiety, support our diet, and lower our blood pressure? Is it expensive? Does it take a lot of time and effort? Could we believe we can get this treatment free and it only takes fifteen minutes a day at home? Besides, we need not do anything and the treatment has lots of positive side effects.

We live in a hectic world that seems fast paced and speeding up, and we feel helpless. But our world is only full of distractions. We live longer than our ancestors with less effort. We have more spare time, not less, but because of distractions, we waste time and stress ourselves.

There are still real challenges and actual reasons to worry. But often, we deplete our reserves on meaningless nuisances before genuine crisis hits.

The best defense against distractions is to learn how to strip our mind of hasty judgments and unnecessary responses. We can learn this by observing our mind in its idle, tranquil state when it has nothing to respond to, and interpret our experiences as paintings on this empty canvas. The method to learn this skill is meditation.

Meditation becomes popular because we rediscovered its benefits and effectiveness against

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distractions. Its popularity brought about a plethora of meditation methods. Some ancient, some new. Distractions taught us to be superficial, so some meditation methods are also superficial. They tempt beginner meditators to take an easy way promising fast progress but cannot deliver because they miss the point. Often, they try to mask stimuli with other, more pleasant stimulation instead of guiding us through the rugged path of unwinding our mind. These methods only add to our distractions. Lured to the wrong path, we may get delayed and disappointed to the point of giving up without giving real meditation a chance.

This book aims at showing aspiring mediators a simple method they can rely on in building a solid meditation practice. It may not be easy and takes time to gain momentum, but will bring lasting results and real benefits.

This quick start guide is an introduction only. I do not explain mechanism making meditation work; I give little outlook to other methods or ways to expand our horizon. Readers interested in the foundations of meditation may benefit from my other book, *Meditation: Creating space*. In this book, I only give the basics so you can start meditation now.

I start my introduction with a brief review of benefits. Then I give some insight to what to look for when selecting a meditation method. I continue with describing the essentials of a solid mindfulness meditation practice. I write about preparation, the session itself, challenges faced by most meditators, the power of a humble but persistent practice, and mindfulness spilling over to our actual life.

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There is a lot more to learn about meditation, but I give all the basics we need to start. While learning benefits us in all fields of life, we need not understand meditation to reap its benefits. We need to do it.

The earlier we start, the sooner we get results. Besides, our practice supports learning as we can relate what we read to our experiences. So read this book and start meditation today.

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BENEFITS OF MEDITATION

We say we live in an accelerating world. Our jobs require processing lots of information. On our way home, we come across countless ads and bombarded by news from around every corner of the world. In our ever-shrinking free time, we face a daunting selection of entertainment opportunities. Yet, as we rediscovered meditation; it spreads and keeps getting more popular.

Why we sit idle if the world has sped up and we have so little time?

Meditation is contemporaneous with humanity. When our ancestors wandering in forests and savannas got caught in the rain, they had to seek cover and wait. With nothing else to do, they observed their environment and reflected on their thoughts and feelings. They meditated.

Conscious meditation is not much younger. Five to seven thousand year old wall arts from India already portrayed people meditating. But meditation is not exclusive to India. All cultures have their meditative practices. Prayers, ritual dances, chanting, contemplating on holy scriptures, or walking in the cloisters of monasteries are all forms of meditation. An example showing the importance of meditation in Christian monastic life is a book titled *Spiritual Exercises*. Written by Ignatius of Loyola between

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1522 and 1524, the book describes a program of meditation, contemplation, and prayers lasting about four weeks. An example of a meditative retreat in modern terms.

When we speak about meditation, the first spiritual figure coming to our mind is Buddha, the enlightened prince from Northern India. Meditation has a central role in Buddhism, which in return played a key role in rediscovering meditation in the West.

In fact, Buddha lived in a culture that had a long tradition of meditation already. But meditation has never been exclusive to Buddhism or other Eastern traditions. Before starting his ministry after his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in solitude in the wilderness. Prophet Muhammad also practiced meditation in cave Hira, near Mecca. But we can find meditative practices in all spiritual traditions from ancient Egypt to contemporary New Age movements.

Why meditation is so central to spirituality? When we go spiritual, we seek the meaning of life. We try to understand the ultimate source of our motivations. This is where our deepest emotions meet our rationality. No matter how well we understand our best interests, they cannot motivate us without emotions. But emotions can deceive us unless we learn to interpret them.

Meditation is non-judgmental observation. We meditate to observe and understand. We observe our own thoughts and feelings first. This helps us get rid of our biases and separate reality from our reactions to it. In meditation, we try not to react but let our internal stream of thoughts, judgments, and

feelings to fade. Once we experience emptiness and inner stillness, we can detect and separate our reactions from their external causes.

How Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, rishis, and sages meditate? What striking when we research them is that they all followed simple practices. Nothing complex, nothing fancy. Contemplation, or non-judgmental observation, and prayer are the most common elements.

Another striking fact: they wanted to silence their thoughts, not express them. They meditated to receive, not to tell. They also experienced emotional storms and challenges before they succeeded. Buddha turned to asceticism first after facing the harsh reality of human suffering. Jesus was tempted in various ways to give up while he was fasting in the wilderness. Muhammad received the revelations the Quran is based on over decades after the first spontaneous event.

Meditation takes time because it takes time to let the cascade of thoughts and emotions fade and quiet. We live in a fast paced world, time is a precious resource, and we can rely on advanced scientific methods for exploration. Why should we meditate today?

First, meditation gives us time. Yes, our world seems fast paced. We struggle to squeeze our tasks in a day. But we waste much of our time on distractions. When time matters most, we often procrastinate. Meditation and mindfulness, the skill we develop through meditation, helps us focus and avoid distractions.

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Second, meditation reduces stress giving us a chance for a longer, healthier life. The sources of stress are often obstacles hindering us from reaching our goals. But even if we never succeed at our first attempts, our life is a lot easier than we will admit.

Third, science gave us tools for exploration, but science still needs intuition. Scientist often recognize links and deeper meaning by intuition before they can prove them with meticulous rational methods. The fundamental benefit of meditation comes from making us able to tranquil our mind and silence our internal movie. Once we clear our mind, we see the nature and extent of distortion our reactions add to our perception of reality. We also experience the joy of pure existence, the basis we can return to in times of difficulty.

Tranquil moments achieved through meditation help to reduce stress. Mindfulness, the awareness of our internal stream of thoughts and emotions, creates space in our mind to think and find better solutions to our problems and challenges.

Meditation also helps us connect to ourselves and other through understanding our souls.

While we need nothing complex or extraordinary to reap the benefits of meditation, some forms work better than others. Certain popular forms of meditation may also have substantial limitations.

In my book *Meditation: creating space* I explain how meditation works and show how you can develop and tailor a solid meditation practice. In this book, I present a simple method that works for everyone and can be tailored later. My goal is to provide

beginning meditators with a quick start guide until they know how to avoid the pitfalls in developing a solid practice.

The benefit of following the simple method I describe is that readers may start meditation now and adjust their practice as they understand the underlying processes. A side benefit is that even if you decide not to study meditation, you can rely on this simple form and still reap the benefits.

Meditation is an ancient way of improving our life by attending to our soul. While various forms of meditation are present in every culture, the consistent exercise of a simple practice suffices to reap the benefits.

Meditation does not require complex rituals or a particular set of objects or environment to work. But certain methods work better than others, and some have significant limitations. In the next chapter, I show why the way we meditate matters and why we need to learn about proper practices before we begin.

HOW TO AVOID GETTING LOST?

Beginner meditators face a perplexing dilemma: among the plethora of meditation techniques and traditions, which way to go? Are techniques and rituals attributed to ancient sages work better than guided meditations from the latest smart phone app?

In this chapter I show why the method we follow matters and how can we avoid the pitfalls of choice. Whether the meditation technique we choose helps or hinders our progress depends on its alignment with how meditation works. The purpose of meditation is to calm and clear our mind, which is programmed to constantly looking for external and internal signals. Our constant vigilance serves our survival, but it leads to a wandering attention and a restless mind. When we face no danger, when our mind cannot detect important signals in its environment, it will amplify the unimportant ones. Like a monkey, our mind turns and catches after every distraction it finds in its surroundings, including thoughts, memories, emotions, and worries inside our mind.

Meditation aims at taming this monkey and quelling our stream of thoughts. But there is a catch: you cannot switch off a survival mechanism. In fact, if we try to force our mind to calm, we only give it another

stimulus, another trigger. We start another cascade of thoughts and feelings. Meditation can only fulfill its promise if it lets our mind unwind itself. Instead of trying to speed up the process, sound meditation practices make sure they do not stimulate our mind. How can meditation cut stimulation? First, it should not add any new trigger. Second, it helps with eliminating existing ones. When our mind responds to stimulation, new thoughts, and feelings emerge that also serve as new internal stimuli. We cannot switch the responding mechanism off, but we can downplay its responses. Whenever a thought or feeling emerges, we admit it, label it, and let it go. The key is we cannot force our thoughts to leave. When we want something, we introduce new triggers and stimulation. We admit and we do not build an attachment to our thoughts, try not to follow them. That is all we can do.

Methods of meditation differ both in effectiveness and in the effort needed, or rather the time we need to invest. We can experiment with various approaches to find what is best for us, but it takes time. In addition, most methods do not fulfill their potential in a few meditation sessions, so risk giving them up too early or spending too much time on the wrong method.

Another problem is that the trial-and-error approach may lead to dead ends. Easy paths bringing results fast may not always be the best. Unguided experimentation may lure us to a path which brings quick results but has a limited potential. We end up in a dead end without a chance ever to experience the benefits a sound meditation practice could give.

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The danger of such dead ends goes beyond wasting time. The delay will also feed our skepticism. Bad habits die hard, so we need more time to correct mistakes than to learn the method that works. The real danger therefore is giving up because of skepticism or ending up with a convenient practice offering some benefits but never experiencing the real thing.

The key benefit of starting with a practice that works is avoiding the above pitfalls. If we start with the right approach, we will not only reap all the benefits of sound meditation. We also reach this goal earlier.

Yes, it takes time to develop a solid meditation practice. We cannot urge the process. Again, forcing it introduces stimuli and distracts from our way. The key is not quick first results, not even sessions with linear progress but building a consistent practice. Consistency helps our mind to unwind. Consistency is the principle on which we can build a sound meditation practice.

How can we find the best approach? How can we start with a sound meditation practice? Instead of trial-and-error, start with learning and following a proven practice which you can customize to your needs and taste later.

We face one more obstacle. A profusion of methods promoted with passion claim to bring the best experience for beginner meditators. How can we recognize the best?

First, we should not fall for deceitful promises. If we want real benefits, we need patience and persistence. Meditation aims at clearing our mind. This

means the elimination of stimuli and calming our stream of thoughts, not masking them with something else. This is where most guided meditation techniques fall short. Diverting our mind from actual problems may bring relief and helps us relax. But we will not reach our inherent calmness, we will not develop mindfulness as a solid base.

How can we recognize methods that work? Focus on the essentials of meditation: letting our mind wind down at its own pace instead of faking the process with replacing stimuli instead of eliminating them.

Key characteristics are isolation in space and time, and consistency. Remember, forcing ourselves to stop thinking is another stimulus, triggering another cascade of thoughts and feelings. To succeed with meditation, we need to drop stimuli, not add them. Isolation helps with depriving our mind from stimuli and lets our internal movie run its course and fade. Find a calm place because isolation in space helps us avoid external stimuli. Give yourself time because isolation in time lets our internal stimuli fade.

Consistency helps by shaping our expectations. Developing a solid meditation process takes time, and our progress is not always linear. Sometimes we calm within minutes, sometimes our meditation session fails. Consistent practice helps us see our progress over time. As we accumulate positive experiences, we build confidence and anticipation of joy replaces the resistance against letting go in our mind.

Meditation improves the life of its practitioners, but unlike turning on a switch or taking the magic pill,

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it takes time to realize its benefits. Its long tradition and prevalence across cultures is a strong evidence for meditation but also poses a problem to beginner meditators. What path should we follow?

The wrong choice not only costs us time but feeds skepticism and can lure us into a dead end. While we need not find the ultimate best, we need to start with an approach that works. An approach that will not lure us on the wrong path.

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A PATH THROUGH THE JUNGLE

Once we understand how meditation works, selecting methods that work is simple. We can test whether the particular method aligns with the natural mechanisms making meditation work or contradict them. So if you want to start with your perfect method, read my book, *Meditation: creating space*¹ and judge meditation methods yourself.

But what if we want to start meditation now and learn about it later? The approach of starting with a simple, safe method and what we can customize later is a suitable solution. This book is about this simple method.

In the remaining chapters, I describe a simple meditation practice. An easy to follow practice that works for everyone, helps us avoid pitfalls and dead ends. A practice we can adjust later as we learn about the fundamentals of meditation.

This is not the only practice that works, and I cannot even promise that it is the best for you. I cannot set such ambitious goals in a brief introduction. I promise, however, that the practice I introduce will not lead to a dead end. So my goal is to give you a simple practice for a safe start, with the opportunity to tailor to your needs as you gain experience.

The practice I recommend is very simple. My intent with showing a simple method instead of some

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more sophisticated one is to provide a flexible framework that leaves room for adjustment. It focuses on bare essentials. With no frills, it leads beginners through the cycle of daily meditation sessions, providing plenty of room to tailor it for themselves.

As it is a framework, it provides some room for customization from the start, without the risk of getting lost in the jungle of meditation methods. As a framework, it also highlights the key fulcrums of a solid meditation practice.

My goal is to provide a fast track approach to start meditation. Therefore, I save the explanation. My focus on the basics helps beginners to start quickly. Beyond saving time, this approach may also help make more sense of what we learn about meditation in case we immerse deeper.

For those interested in why and how meditation works, I recommend one of three books for the start. Beginner meditators find great benefits in *Meditation for Dummies* from Stephan Bodian.² Stephan, an experienced meditator himself, writes meditation practices, cultural background, and the benefits of mindfulness in our life. His book is full of practical advice and also fun to read.

Experienced meditators interested in the psychological foundations and neuroscience behind meditation will like *Neurodharma*, a recent book from psychologist Rick Hanson.³ He distils decades of experience and research in his new book.

My book, *Meditation: Creating space*,⁴ tries to strike the middle way. I discuss meditation practice and some cultural background in more detail, but I also

write about our psychological processes and the mechanisms making meditation work for everyone. First, I show what emotions are, how they help us and how they can derail us sometimes. Then I explain how our mind works for us. What are the limitations of its operation? How meditation can help us hack our mind and create space to think when crisis hits?

Then I also show how we can evoke joy and shift our balance towards happiness through meditation. Practice and persistence are important in meditation, I show and tell you why. My book also tells about mindfulness in everyday life and work situations and includes a brief introduction to the broader meditation landscape.

With the warning to reach out for professional help, I show how meditation helps us carry the weight when life gets tough.

The three books I mentioned are great sources of learning. In contrast, I save time by leaving out the explanation from this short getting started guide. But meditation, following the proper methods, works without our understanding of its foundations.

Just like riding a bicycle does not require an understanding of physics and solving complex differential equations, the only prerequisite of successful meditation is persistent practice.

Practice also brings experience. By time, we can accumulate the experience we need to tailor our meditation approach to our taste even without immersing in learning. But leave enough time to accumulate the experience needed. Reading my book

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also speeds up the process and helps you stay on track.

What did I include in this short guide? I start the remaining five chapters with preparation. I show what we need before we start our meditation sessions. From time to environment, I touch upon the basics.

Then I describe the meditation session itself. What we do, what mindset we should assume, and what awaits us? To set the right expectations, I also talk about the challenges meditators face and the essential role of persistent practice.

Finally, touch upon mindfulness and its benefits in our life, including friends, family, and work.

The key purpose of a quick start guide to meditation is to show a fast and simple way through the jungle of meditation methods. Because meditation works regardless of our understanding its fundamentals, we can ignore the foundations and start with a simple practice.

When we begin meditation, our environment and mindset influences our experience to a great extent. For better experience and faster progress, let us start with preparation.

BEFORE THE SESSION

Our meditation journey starts with preparation. On the surface, meditation is only sit and do nothing. But we need isolation, calmness, and we need to eliminate distractions. So preparation is important. We also start a regular practice. A new habit we want to do every day. To give meditation a chance at all, let us start with finding a time slot for our sessions.

A solid meditation practice needs about twenty minutes to half an hour a day. Compared to time spent on smart phones and computers, this time need is moderate. But in contrast to time wasters, we need to squeeze meditation in our schedule.

A few factors are worth considering to find the best time for our sessions. First, meditating at the same time every day helps us build a lasting habit. Try to find a time slot when you can meditate every day. We can deviate from our schedule occasionally. We can even skip a session or two. But fixed time for our sessions helps a lot with developing a solid practice. Second, we need a time when we are not tired or in a hurry. If we are tired, we will fall asleep. If we are in a hurry, we cannot focus.

Third, we need a time when we are not disturbed. So the time our kids or spouse gets home from school or work is not the best for meditation.

We may experiment with different schedules at start. We may also move our meditation time when

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our circumstances change. But having a fixed time for meditation helps our progress a lot.

If you work in shifts or meditating at the same time cannot be squeezed in a tight weekly schedule, be cyclical. Develop a weekly cycle or a cycle fitting your work schedule.

We need no special place for meditation, but we need some isolation from external stimuli. Find a calm place in your home where you are not in the way. Eliminate noise and other disturbances.

The ideal place is not too hot or cold, but we can dress accordingly. If we have a garden or park nearby, we can meditate outside. But a simple place is better for our regular practice than a special corner of a botanical garden nearby because it helps our practice stay portable. If we meditate in a special environment, we may feel it hard to meditate when we travel or move to a new home.

Once we found our time and place, we should prepare our environment to eliminate interruptions. Unless we live alone, we should tell our family, roommates, or friends that we need a few minutes for ourselves. If we get interrupted to answer a question, we cannot complete our session.

Another source of interruption is our physical environment. Look around before you start your session. Close the tap, turn off the oven, close the door, close or open the window. Eliminate potential hazards and sources of interruption. Respond to any emergency that needs your attention, but try not to give interruptions a chance.

Checking and preparing our environment serves two purposes. First, we eliminate potential sources

of interruptions so we can complete our session. Second, preparing our environment also prepares our mind. When we check our environment, we buy peace of mind by eliminating questions like “Did I close the door?” emerge during meditation.

The second aspect of preparing our environment is arranging the place where we meditate. The purpose is the creation of a relaxing and pleasant environment which helps us to relax and focus.

First, we need something to sit on. We need not sit cross legged, a simple chair allowing us to sit with a straight back is sufficient. If we want to sit in some traditional position, we may need a footstool or a zafu.⁵ There are footstools designed to let us sit on our knees and zafus are just pillows stuffed tight to make sitting cross legged easier.

Keep in mind that sitting cross legged needs some getting used to so you may progress slower at start because of the strain you feel in your legs.

Second, building a simple altar helps provide a point to focus on. This may help to keep our attention on meditation when thoughts and feelings emerge. The altar has no other role, sacred or otherwise, so any object you find pleasant will do. We can use pretty stones, a flower, a candle or any simple object to arrange our altar. The only advice to keep in mind is that we want to let our thoughts and emotions go during meditation, not to evoke them. Therefore, objects evoking powerful feelings and emotions will not help our meditation. We can use a crucifix, an icon of a saint, a Buddha statue, or a photo of a loved one on the altar unless it evokes powerful emotions.

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We also need to prepare ourselves. The selection of our place and the setup of our altar are also steps of setting our mood. A further step is to tune our thoughts to meditation.

Meditation is about calming and clearing our mind. But we cannot force this process, we can only let it happen. So the most important aspect of mental preparation is getting rid of expectations. Our only goal with each session is to complete the session unless an emergency interrupts us. There is nothing we need to achieve, even getting interrupted is all right.

Meditation is like a Marathon. We should have no expectations for any single session. We can trust the process, persistence practice will bring the results by time. As we progress, we will develop a deeper awareness, we will have a more profound experience during our sessions. But progress is not linear, and we need practice before we can anticipate that deep experience in every session.

The last step of preparation is setting a timer and start the session. Why do we need a timer? Losing a sense of time in a session is a key sign of progress in meditation. Letting go of worrying about time is a prerequisite of quelling our stream of thoughts. By setting a timer, we eliminate the cascade of triggers coming from minding time.

We can use any timer we like. The countdown features on our smart phone or wrist watch may be best to start with. A kitchen timer or alarm clock may also be good but avoid the ones with harsh sound. We do not want to worry about getting startled at the end of our session.

A plethora of meditation apps also offer timer features. The advantage of these apps is that we can set multiple segments within a session. A helpful feature when we start with metta meditation⁶ or prayer, or when we want some feedback during a long session. The disadvantage of most application is that they also offer guided meditation, which is one way to get lured in a dead end. Guided meditations are nice supplements, but we must base our core practice on the elimination of our stimuli not masking them.

We have our sessions scheduled and found our place. Our altar is ready as a resting point to our mind. We let expectations go and set our timer. We are ready for our session. Our single responsibility is to complete the next session, but what is the proper way to meditate?

The next chapter introduces the core of the meditation practice, the meditation session.

THE MEDITATION SESSION

Sit and do nothing. This is how meditation looks like on the surface. Simple? Try for five minutes and it will surprise you.

The first lesson of meditation is the experience of how much is going on in our mind when we do nothing. This chapter introduces the meditation session, the building block of our practice.

Realistic expectations are important every time we start a long endeavor. So besides describing basic techniques, we also speak about what to expect.

Fifteen minutes does not seem long until we try to sit still. Meditation is about stripping the mind with all activity, so we need to sit motionless. So first we need to adopt the right posture.

Our posture should be comfortable enough to stay still, enable easy breathing, and prevent falling asleep. A posture of sitting with a straight back without leaning on anything meets all three criteria. Although the traditional stereotypic meditative position is sitting cross-legged on the floor or on a footstool or zafu, this is not essential. In fact, sitting cross-legged makes our progress with meditation slower but can be a good training in discipline if we chose so. Unless we decide to become ardent meditators, we better start with sitting on a chair and consider sitting cross-legged later.

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Our place provides isolation in space, but we also need isolation in time to tune in to meditation. The starting ritual serves this sole purpose. Our ritual should help us unwind, calm down, and provide some separation between our mundane tasks and thought and our meditation session. There are no other criteria.

If we are religious, we can pray, but chanting, lighting a candle, a short metta meditation, or just arranging objects on our altar are just as appropriate. A simple ritual that we can repeat anywhere and every time we meditate is powerful because it can create a cozy, familiar atmosphere.

Once we sit in comfort with a straight back and completed our ritual, the core of our meditation session begins. Our goal is to eliminate all thoughts and feelings and clear our mind. But we cannot just turn off our thoughts, so we slow down and let them fade.

We do not have a switch to slow our body and mind. But our physiological processes synchronize so we can use our breath to give them a rhythm. We use our breath because that is the only physiological process we can control at will.

Our goal is to give our body a slow, even pace to synchronize to. So we breathe at a slow, even pace. Deep breathing also fills our lungs and cells with oxygen. To slow our body, we breathe slower than usual and watch our breath observing the passing air under our nose.

This observation facilitates synchronization and also gives our attention a resting point. To eliminate thoughts, we need to tame our attention. We give

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our mind a simple task it can return from all the distractions it finds.

We may wonder what distractions our mind can find in a tranquil, isolated place? Our first attempt of meditation will clear our doubts.

Once we sit still, breathe slow and even, and eliminate all external stimuli, our mind amplifies all the little noise in our environment and turns inward. We hear the slightest noise. We feel strain and pain. Our nose, ears, or back itch. Our mind works hard to give us reasons to move, to react, to give up this idea of doing nothing.

Body sensations are the simple part. The harder we try not to think, the more thoughts emerge. One thought brings another. Eventually our internal movie gets to a touching or painful memory and we dive deep in an emotional whirlpool. When we try to resist, we trigger another cascade of feelings interrupted only by the strain in our back or our itching nose.

Our only weapon against this turmoil is our slow, even breath. Whenever we catch our mind drifting, we gently direct our attention back to the passing air under our nose. We repeat this cycle until our timer alarm goes off.

Not what you expected? The way our meditative journey begins is far from the blissful immersion in enjoying the present moment we would expect.

As we practice, our experience changes. But progress is not linear when we learn a skill. Periods of advancement, blockages, and fall backs alternate. When we look at several weeks or months, we see and recognize progress. But our next session can be

better or worse than the previous one. Besides, pondering the chances of experiencing extraordinary breakthrough in our next session only makes our mind busy. A busy mind, in return, needs more time to unwind.

Start each session without expectations! When we let our attachment to strive for results go, we trigger less resistance and get one step closer to success.

While our previous session does not predict the next, we can trust the results of persistent practice. By time, body sensations fade and our mind needs less time to unwind.

First, we experience occasional results. Moments of calmness we have not experienced before. Volatile episodes of joy coming from nowhere. Then these exceptions become more frequent and our confidence builds.

Confidence shortens the time we need to calm further and a positive feedback loop sets in. This is not a fast and even process. But we have nothing else to do than complete the next session each day with no compulsion to succeed.

What does completing a session means? How do we know whether we completed if it does not depend on the results?

Simple. Sit and breathe until our timer bell rings. Regardless of whether we struggle with emerging thoughts or find it easy to clear our mind, our session is complete and successful whenever we stay to the end.

In addition, responding to an emergency is not a failure. Skipping a day or two for being too tired or emotional is not a failure. Ending our session when

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we cannot withstand an emotional storm is not a failure. These are all parts of the process, parts of being human. Be patient to yourself. We should test progress by looking back to a few months, not to our last session.

In this chapter we introduced the anatomy of a meditation session. We parsed its stages and peeked into the experience waiting for us. We set realistic expectations about our initial experience. But I still owe you some tools to overcome the obstacles.

CHALLENGES

In the last chapter, I mentioned challenges meditators face. Body sensations, a wandering mind amplifying the smallest stimuli, distracting thoughts and disturbing emotions emerging from nowhere.

I also said these are natural at the start of our meditation journey and they fade as we practice. But I did not say how to cope with them. This chapter intends to give you some basic tools.

Meditation helps to calm and clear our mind. It helps us develop mindfulness by letting us experience our inherent tranquility when our mind is not distracted.

Our first experience contradicts this statement. We find our first sessions strenuous and disturbing. Our mind is programmed to be busy all the time. It responds to stimuli, analyzes information, and runs scenarios to prepare us for action. When we try to eliminate stimuli, our mind interprets silence as suspicious calm before a storm and winds up its signal amplifiers.

Our mind needs time to unwind. Practice and repeated experience of brief periods of calm shortens the time needed by building an anticipation of calmness. But to reap the benefits later, we should persist. To persist, we must endure and cope with initial difficulties.

Physical body sensations cause the least trouble. They have three sources: inconvenient posture,

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amplified signals not noticed before, and senses made up by our mind.

Our body gets used to sitting still by time. But we can ease strains by improving our posture. Experiment with tilting your pelvis forward to balance your spine, or sit forward or backward on your chair. If we sit cross-legged, using a higher zafu or footstool may help and we can return to a lower one once we got used to this posture.

Sensations amplified by our idle mind disappear by time. The best tactic to cope with them is observation. Admit what you feel and let it go. The same applies to sensations made up by our mind. They are often hard to differentiate from real but previously unnoticed sensations.

If you experience severe pain or any disturbing symptoms, end your session until you find the cause and treat it. Adjust your posture and environment if you have special needs. For example, we may meditate lying with a back injury. The only reason we sit in the first place is to avoid falling asleep.

Our vehicle to a clear mind and undisturbed soul stripped from judgment and biases is complete relaxation. When we are tired, relaxation may cause us to fall asleep.

Sleep is healthy, but sleep is not meditation. When we are drowsy because we work too much or stay awake too late, skipping a session for a good night's sleep that day may be our best solution. We may also experiment with a different time slot. Instead of meditating in the evening, we may meditate right after we get up in the morning, during our lunch break, or in the afternoon after work.

Better ventilation of our meditation place or straightening our back for unobstructed breathing may also help.

Sometimes, when we leave home or leave our car in a parking lot, we worry about having the door closed. Similar thought often arise when we start our sessions. Often, we can let these and other distracting thoughts go. But some of us are more cautious, worried, or forgetful than others. Writing a checklist and going through it as part of our preparation may be a good solution to buy peace of mind. Probably we would not need it more than for the first few sessions.

Our internal movies are harder to cope with. Internal movies are stories we roll in our mind. They can be memories we recite about past ailments or the happy times long gone. Or they can be about future events making us worry or get excited.

We cannot prevent these internal movies from starting. But we can avoid pondering over the past. We can avoid repeating these movies or letting them roll their course. We can get conscious, admit when we recognize an imaginary scenario rolling, and pull our attention back to our breathing.

We may fail in the sense that new thoughts would not emerge. Practice, however, makes them less frequent and evaporate faster.

Most thoughts and scenarios are easy to let go. Others can disturb and be powerful. Memories with emotional charge. Challenges with serious stakes. Important losses, injuries, life threatening or life changing illnesses.

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Anxiety or an emotional storm may take over meditators in these cases. The best solution is reaching out for help. Find someone who can guide your meditation or meditate with you. In tough cases, find a therapist until you can return to your regular sessions. In mild cases recorded guided meditation from a good meditation app such as Insight Timer⁷ may help.

But do not forget, guided meditation has limits. It does not let you reach the full depth of meditation as it masks rather than eliminates internal stimuli. My best advice, therefore, to meditate twice when times are tough. Guided meditation to ease your pain and mindfulness meditation to get through your minefield.

Powerful emotions may hinder our meditation another way. When we experience a loss, face a threat, or are in serious trouble, we are eager to mitigate our sorrow. We want to solve the problem. We want to take revenge, make up for a loss, seek forgiveness. Or we want to get a job or take our chances on something now. Many times there is nothing we can do. Sometimes we only escalate our problems with action. But we cannot stop because we cannot give up. We meditate to help ourselves calm down, but at the beginning, meditation brings long repressed unsolved issues to the surface. But meditation is not the time to solve them.

When we find ourself in this situation, we should remind ourselves that meditation creates space to think. When we meditate, we take a break to gain strength. Yes, we need to solve our problem, but we

only get exhausted pondering on it when it is not time for action.

Also, we often preserve and embrace our pain because we feel that is all we are left with after a loss. We cannot let go because we are afraid to forget. We see our painful memories as our last treasure and consider forgetting a mutilation of our identity.

Again, neither meditation nor letting go is about forgetting. They are about taking a break. They help us gather strength to live on and get stronger when the time for action comes.

Unless we have a physical injury, the toughest challenges in meditation all come from our mind and soul. Worries, excitement, unresolved issues, and emotional storms are harder to tackle than most physical challenges, including drowsiness.

The key insight of this chapter is that we cannot and should not force them to go. Be patient and persistent. We need to wait and repeat our sessions until they fade. We can ameliorate them so we can endure them, but we all must go through this phase to build solid foundations to our meditation practice.

THE POWER OF PRACTICE

Do not long time projects need long time plans? Do not we need to chart our path to traverse a dense emotional jungle?

We need a plan, but a simple one: complete the next meditation session almost every day. In this chapter, we look into the role and importance of persistent practice, the core of our plan.

We meditate to clear our mind. We want to experience pure existence and pure joy by getting rid of all reactions, judgment, and thoughts. To achieve this goal, we eliminate as much stimuli as we can so we can quell the cascades of reactions triggering each other.

First, we isolate our mind from external stimuli. Then we let our internal movies run their course, and our emerging thoughts drift and fade. Once we eliminate one source of stimulation, our mind amplifies the signals from the remaining sources. While these signals get weaker, their sources get harder to eliminate. External noise is easy to cancel. Emotional storm rages within our mind.

We cannot speed up the process by forcing it. Will-power cannot help. When we want something, we think about it. When we think, when we work on finding a clever way, we stimulate our mind and trigger a response. The response of our mind is

another thought, another feeling, effect on our body. In return, these trigger further responses and the process goes on.

So when we want something, when we try to force our mind to calm, we only send more stimuli. We achieve the exact opposite of our goal. Our only tool to quell internal stimuli is to sit, wait, and use simple techniques to help stimulation fade faster instead of masking it with another stimulus.

The process starts with isolation. We find a calm place for meditation where we can avoid external stimulation. Our mind, which was evolved to look for danger to protect us, amplifies the remaining stimuli. In addition, it tries to find meaning in the random background noise it picks up.

Thoughts emerge, demanding our attention. Do not react and do not suppress these thoughts. Admit and observe and direct your attention back to your breathing.

Once our mind gives up looking for signals outside, it turns inward. Now, our mind amplifies our internal stream of thoughts and feelings. It tries to find meaning in our internal background noise. Our mind amplifies and analyzes the slightest sensation or thought it finds. It searches our memory for interpretation and brings about past events and emotions to find reasons and meaning.

Again, do not react. Let these internal movies run their course. Observe them, but do not follow them. Do not want to solve problems or mysteries while you meditate.

When our internal movies fade, we experience the first calm moments. They come as pleasant

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surprises first. Glimpses of hope that our meditation effort may succeed. Most likely we will not experience them in our first session, but we will get there.

As we practice more, these calm moments become more frequent and more reliable and last a little longer. We start to trust the process, and this trust creates a positive feedback loop.

As the length and frequency of the calm moments grows, so grows our confidence. Another positive feedback loop sets in. Calmness becomes the norm and disturbance the exception. We develop a solid meditation practice.

The process takes time. But we need nothing else beyond repeating our simple sessions and let our mind get used to calming down.

Our persistence and consistency leads our mind to trust our daily breaks without stimulation and the need to respond. Once we practiced enough, our mind anticipates calmness and joy when we sit to meditate. This anticipation helps us unwind faster. At the end of the process, we can spend most of our sessions in a calm and joyful state.

Can we shorten the learning period? Can we, for example, sit until we calm down in all of our sessions, including the first?

Yes and no. The time we need to relax is unpredictable first. Chances are that if we are desperate, we also have worries that concern us. Once we give our mind a break, it will work on them and it takes time to get through this zone. Therefore we should meditate without expectations. If we sit with the intention that we will not end our session until we calm

down, we risk being disappointed. Then we give up and realize no benefit. We strengthen the camp of the skeptics without ever giving meditation a chance.

If we have time, we can practice more. We can meditate forty minutes or an hour a day, or twice a day for twenty minutes. Then we can experience results sooner. But we still need to time our sessions and expect nothing when we start the next one.

Why short daily sessions work better than meditation until we calm in each session? First, peace of mind helps us unwind. Setting high expectations adds excitement. Can we succeed?

Second, when we start meditation, we start something big. We make a long term commitment. Developing a solid meditation practice is like building a fortress. Our strength and stamina are limited. We may want to progress fast, but we still need to eat, work, sleep, and live. Brief sessions in meditation are like bricks in construction. They may look insignificant, but they are small enough to carry and easy to make in numbers. Use many of them, and you can build anything you want. Just put the next brick on others.

Humble daily sessions, persistence, and patience. This is our master plan to develop a solid meditation practice. This is all we need.

Discouraging? As we practice, we extend our boundaries by a small percentage each day. But each day we start from a higher level. Growth starts slowly, but it will gain momentum.

In addition, we develop the skill of mindfulness in meditation. A skill we can use in all realms of life.

EVERYDAY MINDFULNESS

Meditation helps us clear our mind, strip our reflections from biases and perceptual noise, and makes us aware of our emotional responses. This awareness is what we call mindfulness, and this is the skill we develop through meditation.

Mindfulness results from observation and experience. We observe our reactions to external stimulation and we observe how our internal movie alters our perception and interpretation of the world. In our sessions, we experience calmness, the lack of stimuli and the lack of response. This state serves as a new basis of comparison in interpreting our perceptions.

Mindfulness is a skill we develop through meditation. It is a state of awareness we learn to evoke and maintain. Once we experience existence with a calm mind relating to the world in a non-judgmental way, we become better equipped to identify and correct our biases and control our reactions.

As we develop our meditation practice, we learn to evoke mindfulness in a controlled environment. In this sense, meditation is like training on a running track. On the track, we can focus on strength and technique, and measure progress. But if we can run faster on a track, we can also run faster everywhere else.

The same applies to meditation and mindfulness. As we develop our skill to evoke mindfulness in a meditation session, we become more mindful in our actual life.

Yet, running on rough terrain differs from running on a track. We cannot transfer all the skills we developed on the track to the field. We may find calming our mind easy in our meditation sessions but feel upset in challenging real-life situations.

As with running, the technique to help us transfer our skills is following a gradual approach. While we keep our regular sessions to maintain and develop fundamental skills, we try other forms of meditation to pave us the way. Body scan meditation and other forms of visualization may connect mindfulness to sensory experiences. Walking meditation introduces motion. We can practice mindfulness while doing mundane household chores like washing the dishes or vacuum cleaning.

With mindfulness spilling over from our meditation practice to our life, we can reap additional benefits. Mindfulness makes us aware of our own reactions and also helps us understand others better. In critical moments, this helps us pause before we react and avoid fruitless arguments or unfounded worries. Mindfulness creates a buffer between our problems and us. It creates a space to think, make better appraisals of situations, and make better decisions.

Humans work the same, so awareness of our own reactions and biases also helps us understand others better. Therefore, mindfulness helps us develop empathy and compassion. When we understand

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that people all respond to the same fundamental motives, we get upset or hurt harder.

As a result, we can avoid unnecessary conflicts and find better solutions even when conflict is unavoidable. Empathy, understanding, and the extra space we have to find solutions acceptable to all parties improve our life and relations to others.

Better understanding and conflict management also helps us in our work environment. But mindfulness at work also has further benefits. When we can focus on the present moment and eliminate distraction, we perform better. Instead of worrying about competition and intrigues from our peers or criticism from our boss, we can focus on our task. As a result, we perform better and our chances for success improve.

Better understanding also helps us see the big picture and find meaning in our job. Meaningful work, better focus, and better results reduce stress creating a positive feedback loop.

Reduced stress at work and in our private life improves our quality of life to a great extent. Stress is our emergency response to dangerous or tough situations. Our body mobilizes reserves when we need it and shuts down processes we can do without in a crisis. We react faster, get stronger, endure more, but regenerative and maintenance jobs are postponed in our body.

Sustaining this state of emergency has its cost. Damage to our body keeps accumulating and makes us sick and vulnerable in the long run.

By reducing stress, meditation helps us preserve and improve our health. When we are healthy, we

can focus more on what matters in life and at work, solve problems quicker, and have a better life experience. Another positive feedback loop kicks in.

Reduced stress, better relations, improved performance, and health all contribute to happiness. But the benefits of meditation go beyond that. Once we have a solid meditation practice, we evoke joy in our sessions by activating the joy affect of our affect system. The affect system is our human operational system, and the joy affect is one of our basic modes of operation. It is one of our inherent features, so it works for everyone, and meditation is one of the most reliable means to trigger it.⁸

Joy, health, and a better life are the basics of happiness. Therefore, a regular meditation practice shifts our mood toward happiness and gives us a more positive outlook.

Meditation works regardless of whether we understand its ways of operation, so I end my introduction here. My goal was to give quick start guide for people who want to start meditation and reap its benefits without delay.

The simple practice I described is reliable. We need nothing more to succeed than completing one simple session a day. Further learning can help us customize our practice and have a more profound experience. Understanding the psychological and physiological mechanisms, and broadening our horizon on cultural background and meditation practices takes our experience further.

Following this quick start guide, we can start with a simple practice and learn from experience or speed up learning by reading a few more books. There is

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plenty of good literature on various aspects of meditation, I have already recommended three interesting books.

For a practical guide including cultural background and ways to expand our meditation practice, Stephan Bodian's *Meditation for Dummies* is still the best source. For the neuroscience behind meditation and its benefits, read *Neurodharma* from Rick Hanson.

My book, *Meditation: Creating space*, aims to strike the middle way. With a personal touch from my experience, it explains the mechanisms making meditation work for everyone, and gives clues to expand mindfulness beyond our daily sessions.

Let me repeat our master plan in the last paragraph of our introduction. Complete a short, simple session almost every day. Meditate to a timer with no expectations. Force nothing. Admit, observe, and direct your attention back to your slow, even breathing. Persist. It will worth it.

NOTES

¹ I provide reference to my book later with other recommended readings.

² Stephan Bodian, *Meditation for Dummies* (Portable edition, Chichester: Wiley, 2012).

³ Rick Hanson, *Neurodharma: 7 Steps to the Highest Happiness* (London: Rider, 2020).

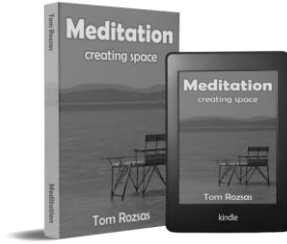
⁴ Tom Rozsas, *Meditation: Creating space* (Budapest: Phoenix Books, 2020).

⁵ Zafu is usually round pillow tightly stuffed with either some natural fiber, buckwheat hulls, spelled wheat or synthetic stuffing material and used for sitting in Zen meditation (traditionally) or in meditation in general.

⁶ Metta meditation is a traditional Buddhist practice to nurture compassion to others. We think of people with loving kindness and compassion starting with ourselves, our loved ones, then people who are neutral and people with whom we have issues.

⁷ Insight Timer is one of the best and most feature rich meditation application for smart phones and tablets. It can be downloaded from Google Play, Apple's App Store or through their website at www.insighttimer.com.

⁸ In my book *Meditation: Creating space*, I describe the affect system and also show how our human operational system makes meditation work for everyone.



Go beyond the basics in meditation!

In *Meditation: Creating space*, I cover all important aspects of meditation. Read about the role of our emotions. Master your mind and mindfulness. Understand the mechanisms making meditation work for everyone. Immerse in the practice of meditation and get an outlook on where it can take us and how we can expand and enrich our practice. Start meditation today and read *Meditation: Creating space* to enhance your experience!

Tom Rozsas

Meditation: Creating space

is available on Amazon in all markets

For further information on my work visit my website at
www.tomrozsas.com