

The Road to Meditation: Guiding Students to Personal Practice

By Robert Butera and Kristen Butera

Meditation is a process of stilling the mind. Paradoxically, the formal definition of meditation can be simplified to this: *focusing with one-pointed attention for an extended duration of time.* This definition means that most people strive to meditate but may only experience a state of meditation for a minute or so during a particular session.

The lifestyle modifications and practices of the eight-fold path that lead up to meditation are designed to stabilize the mind in a systematic fashion. Once these steps are mastered and higher levels of mental stability are experienced, a seated meditation practice has the potential to further a student's self-realization process. Many yoga therapists know from field experience that guiding new students to create a consistent meditation practice can be a challenging prospect. Most of them come willing to learn, usually aware of the scientific evidence that meditation will be good for their stress reduction, perhaps even with a belief that meditation will have a positive impact on their overall life experience. Yet more often than not, they come back saying something like "I tried, and I just can't" or "I don't have the time to fit meditation into my life."

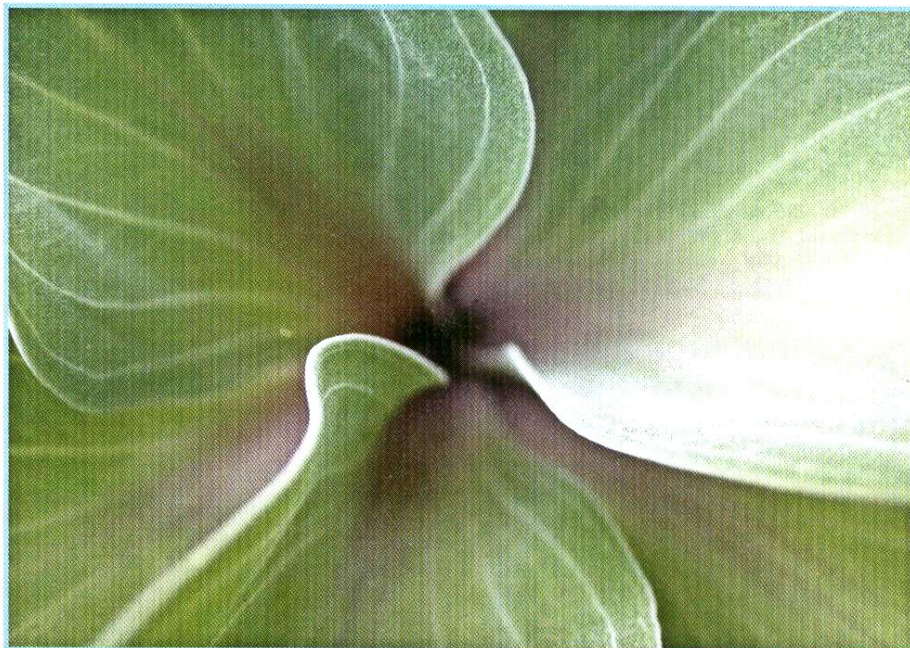
Preparing the Student for Meditation

In this modern milieu of continual stimulation that has the average person in a constant state of mental activity, you can create a roadmap that starts the student on a journey toward meditation via a variety of mind-quieting activities. Rather than trying to take a student from 60 miles an hour to zero, which may perpetuate any existing feelings of inadequacy or failure, you can recognize and meet the student at his or her own unique starting point.

Many yoga therapists are already doing some type of mind-quieting work with their students through yoga poses, breathing, and relaxation exercises. These types of practices can be used as meditation primers. Going slower in an asana practice, holding poses for a longer duration, or going beyond physical tension in relaxation helps students work with their mental chatter and negative thought loops. Pranayama practices that focus on the connection between the breath and

mind create space for introspection and personal awareness.

Over the last 25 years, I have spent many a yoga therapy session helping students to sort out the stories they tell themselves around what is "wrong" with them and why they "can't" meditate. Often, I've found that once the self-sabotaging notions have been worked out, we discover that the practices the students were doing simply had not directly addressed their personal needs or lifestyle realities, and we can start afresh from there.



Lifestyle Modifications as the Path to Meditation

One of the basic principles of the traditional guru-disciple model of one-on-one learning is that practices were tailored to meet individual dispositions. If we follow that line of thinking when using meditative practices in yoga therapy sessions, it can be useful to realize that there will always be an element of trial and error in order to discover what types of meditation work best for a particular client. The ability to assess a student's needs is a skill and an art form that the yoga therapist can develop with intentional practice.

This sometimes means going back to the drawing board and eliminating sitting meditation practices altogether for a period

of time, if these have proved too difficult for the client. In many cases, it requires revisiting the essential tenets of classical yoga philosophy and working on the lifestyle aspects of the first two steps of the eight-fold path, the *yamas* and *niyamas*, with an eye toward removing obstacles to meditation. The belief systems that cause stress can be understood and begun to be managed in this way. From this foundation of understanding and modification, specific meditation practices can be explored in order to discover the ones that best suited the student's individual needs.

Rather than picking the student's weakest area to improve with meditation, try emphasizing their strengths first. It may not always be formal seated meditation, especially in the beginning. If that is the case, centering, chanting, guided relaxation, pranayama, and *pratyahara* exercises such as yoga nidra can all act as a prelude to a seated meditation practice. Following the traditional teacher-student model of yogic learning empowers the student to slowly find accessible ways of moving toward a more meditative state of being.

Let Go of Personal Meditation Bias

Let's preface this section by saying that there is no one "best" way of meditating. There is only what works best for the indi-

vidual. In this day and age there are hundreds of different meditation groups to choose from. Each one of them exists because people benefit tremendously from the particular style of practice. If we intend to use meditation as a facet of yoga therapy work, we are honor-bound to recognize a student's unique journey and to offer them individualized meditative assistance rather than a prescription based on our own preferences or personal experience with meditation. We can be committed to cultivating a personal meditation practice and be transparent about our preferences with our students, while knowing that what works for us may not work for our students. Going beyond personal preference allows us to work with students in an adaptive and client-focused way.

Discover a Personal Meditation Type

As part of my yoga therapy PhD dissertation, I researched hundreds of books on meditation with a goal of personalizing practices for the students that I was seeing during that time. I was able to experience a great many types of meditation via many discriminating teachers. As I studied the variety of traditions, I started to analyze techniques and see similar universal trends of practice. Through this process six distinctive groups emerged. All six types are summarized in this article. The summaries are simplified for the sake of introducing them in this format. Each tradition has a variety of perspectives, and additional information that offers an extended amount of detail as to why and how they work is widely available.

Because of the complexity of the individual mind and body, I haven't yet been able to create a quick psychological survey that helps people identify their personal meditation type. You will need a combination of intuition and communication to help your students find which of the six types works for them. I typically recommend that students try each style for at least a few days to see how their mind responds. Eventually, they will find one or more practices that meet their needs at any given time.

Breath Meditation focuses on the simple act of breathing. Within this approach there are a variety of focal points available. Some focus on a specific place in the body (e.g., the tip of the nose or the solar plexus) while others choose to focus on the interchange between the inhalation and exhalation (the pause between breaths). Other factions focus on the entire process of breathing as a connec-

tion to the mysterious universal life force. This method is especially popular in Buddhist and yoga circles, and has roots in a variety of religious traditions throughout the world.

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Mantra Meditation focuses on repeating a word, syllable, or phrase that has personal meaning for the meditator. The chosen sound/phrase is repeated over and over. Initially, it may be spoken out loud and eventually repeated silently in the meditator's mind. Some people use the same mantra for years, while others change out the mantra when needed. This method was popularized by the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement but also has roots in a variety of religious traditions. It is often used in tandem with a physical object like a mala or a rosary.

Visualization brings internal focus to a specific image, stilling the mind. Rooted in ancient prayer and healing traditions, it has been used in modern times by the human potential movement and in the training of professional athletes.

Intentionality offers a variety of approaches. Under this category fall practices like prayer, being in nature and connecting to Universal/God consciousness. The world's many shamanistic and religious traditions have influenced prayer and nature-based meditations.

Contemplative Inquiry offers a more intellectual approach. The meditator chooses an unanswerable question and reflects on it. When the active mind's theories are exhausted, only the question remains. A common form of this practice is meditation on the question, "Who am I?" that was popularized by the seminal work of Ramana Maharishi. This tradition also has roots in the Zen Buddhist koan practice.

Mindfulness comes in many forms. In its simplest form, the meditator observes thoughts and feelings, as well as their reactions to them. Buddhist *vipassana* (insight) meditation is the source of many present-day mindfulness courses. This particular method has been popular with

scientific studies that have offered solid evidence-based research about its efficacy, which has in turn helped the meditation community as a whole gain popularity and legitimacy.

In Summary

The personalized approach to meditation asks the yoga therapist to offer a variety of practices that honor students' individual dispositions and allow them to explore their meditative potential. It is a slow and steady type of method, intended to create a sense of recognizable progress as students become more able to experience extended meditative states. It also gives new meditators time to adjust their lifestyle habits and create structures around having a sustainable meditation practice on their own. As students become more adept and consistent, the yoga therapist can offer adaptations to their existing practices or offer up new practices for them to explore as they become ready.

Meditation can be deemed effective and useful when the student has immediate positive benefits. A key indicator that a meditation practice is working is when the student feels more inspired, uplifted, and/or centered after meditating. If the student feels a strong negative reaction, then the meditation exercise may not have been appropriate or preparatory exercises may need to be further explored before trying a different meditation technique.

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