

Meditation Practices and Resources in Complementary Medicine

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Joan Borysenko, Ph.D., *Practical paths to wholeness in the real world*

Meditation is like mental martial arts. You notice that the mind is making an assault, and with minimal effort, you step out of the way by returning to whatever the object of your concentration is. Little by little, you build up the mental muscles of awareness and letting go. This is a slow, gentle process. Just as a two year old wanders off and you bring him back with tenderness and patience, so it is with the mind. A meditation during which there are many thoughts and many attempts to bring the mind back to focus is a great training session. During the rest of the day you will gradually find that you have better concentration and are less prone to rumination. You are on your way to cultivating a peaceful heart and a powerful mind.

We are all wired differently from a physiological perspective and each of us has different beliefs and experiences. Therefore, an excellent centering practice for one person may not suit another at all. Some people prefer a moving form of meditation such as mindful walking, qi gong, hatha yoga or stretching exercises. Others prefer closed eyed sitting exercises such as concentration, mindfulness meditation, centering prayer or other forms of imaginal centering. Whatever form you feel drawn to practice, make a commitment for the full twenty-eight days and put it into your schedule every day at the same time. This is the basis of forming a healthy habit. Most people find that getting up fifteen or twenty minutes earlier and doing the practice first thing in the morning not only works well in terms of getting it done, but also sets the tone for a more peaceful, energized, loving and productive day. Physiological research shows that at least three 20 minute periods of meditation weekly are necessary to experience long-term reduction in heart-rate, blood pressure, anxiety and other stress-related problems.

Diaphragmatic (belly or abdominal) Breathing

Belly breathing is associated with lower heart-rate, reduced blood pressure, increased energy and feelings of peacefulness, clarity, relaxation and creativity.

- Put one hand on your abdomen and close your eyes. Take a deep breath in through your nose and expel it slowly and completely through your mouth. You will feel your belly flatten. Let the next breath (and all subsequent breaths) come in through your nose. Can you feel your abdomen expand? If you can't, just imagine that a balloon is inflating in your belly when you breathe in and deflating when you breathe out. The outbreath is longer than the inbreath, like a gentle sigh of relief. For a fast mini-relaxation break any time during the day, take a deep breath and release it slowly- a letting go breath. Try breathing back from ten to one, one number on each outbreath. By the time you get to one, you will notice that your breath is much slower and more regular and that your bodymind system is relaxing. With a little practice, you will form the habit of breathing from your diaphragm most of the time.

Concentration Meditation

Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson, M.D. first found that concentration meditation elicits what he calls the "relaxation response." All forms of meditation, in which the mind becomes quiet and focused, also elicit this innate physiological response, which is the opposite of the body's stress or fight-or-flight response. Belly breathing is an important cornerstone of the relaxation response. Benson first researched the clinically standardized "relaxation one method" of meditation in which the word one is repeated in time to each outgoing breath. Any word will produce the same results. An ancient Sanskrit mantra, or meditation focus, is Ham Sah. This is supposed to remind the meditator of the sound of the incoming and outgoing breath. Ham as you breathe in, Sah as you breathe out. Ham means I am. Sah means the inner Self, the Divine Spark. Any short phrase will do as a meditation focus, either secular or religious. "Hail Mary" on the inbreath, "full of grace" on the outbreath is an excellent focus for those used to repeating the rosary, which is also a kind of concentration meditation. *Jewish Meditation* by Rabbi Ari Kaplan, is an excellent primer for Jews. Benson's classic *The Relaxation Response* is a fine review of both secular and religious meditation traditions and techniques. Sitting with eyes closed, focus on belly breathing. Repeat your focus phrase, prayer or mantra in time to either the outbreath, or both the incoming and outgoing breath if it is a longer phrase. When thoughts come, passively disregard them and just return to the repetition.

The Egg of Light Healing Exercise

One of the most ancient forms of healing and concentration consists of imagining yourself in the center of an egg of Divine Light. Sit quietly with eyes closed and imagine a great star of loving, living light above you. Feel streams of light washing over you and invite it to enter the top of your head and wash down through your body like a river washes through the sand on its bottom, carrying away any fatigue, fear, disease or negativity. As all the darkness washes out of the bottoms of your feet imagine that it is taken in by Mother Earth and turned to compost. Spend a little extra time washing any part of the body where there is tension, pain or disease.

Let the light wash clean the boundaries of your heart, revealing the inner light which is your own true essence. Let that heartlight shine more and more brightly, filling your cells and tissues and then extending beyond your body- three feet above and below you and on all sides until you feel as if you are sitting in an egg of healing, protective light. Affirm that all positive thoughts and prayers from others will penetrate the egg and reach you, but all negative influences will bounce back off the egg and a blessing be returned to their sender. Affirm that all your own positive thoughts will reach through to others, and all negative thoughts will bounce back off the inner shell of the egg and a blessing of compassion will return to awaken your heart to love.

Lovingkindness Meditation

Meditate any way you choose for a few minutes, or enter the egg of light. Then repeat these blessings first for yourself, then for your loved ones, then for those you are in conflict with, and then for the world. I like to imagine the star of light from the exercise above expanding into a circle of light into which I call those to be blessed by name, imagining them as fully as possible. Here are the blessings:

May I be at peace, May my heart remain open,

May I awaken to the light of my own true nature,

May I be healed, May I be a source of healing for all beings.

See a circle of Divine Light. Invite your loved ones into it, calling them by name. See them in as much detail as possible, imagining the loving light shining down on them and washing through them, revealing the light within their own hearts. Then bless them:

May you be at peace, May your heart remain open, May you awaken to the light of your own true nature, May you be healed, May you be a source of healing for all beings.

Next, think of those people who you hold in judgment, and to whom you are ready to begin extending forgiveness. Place them in a circle of light, and see the light washing away all their negativity, just as it did for you and your loved ones. Bless them:

May you be at peace, May your heart remain open, May you awaken to the light of your own true nature, May you be healed, May you be a source of healing for all beings.

See our beautiful planet as it appears from outer space, a delicate jewel hanging in the starry vastness. Imagine the earth surrounded by light- the green continents, the blue waters, the white polar caps. The two-leggeds and four-leggeds, the fish that swim, the birds that fly, those that creep and crawl. Earth is a place of opposites. Day and night, good and evil, up and down, male and female. Be spacious enough to hold it all as you offer these blessings:

May there be peace on earth, May the hearts of all people be open to themselves and to each other, May all people awaken to the light of their own true nature, May all creation be blessed and be a blessing to All That Is.