



Point of Stillness

The most important thing about meditation is to do it

By **Bill Giebler**

Entering the dark room, I took in the smell of incense and sat next to the single candle. Over the next 20 minutes, my guru spoke of meditation's benefits and bestowed upon me my secret mantra. For my meditations, I was to repeat this foreign word silently as I →

TRY IT Basic Mindfulness Meditation

1. Set a timer for a few minutes so you don't need to watch the clock. Find an amount of time that allows you to quiet the busyness of your mind—but not so long that you're miserable. If you are new to meditation, start with five minutes and work your way up. Much of the research is based on intervals of 20 minutes or greater.
2. Find a comfortable seated position with a straight spine. Close your eyes and bring your awareness to your breath, without changing or controlling it.
3. As thoughts or sensations come up, recognize them and label them "thinking" or "itching," and return

your attention to the breath without judging the thought (or the thinker) as "good" or "bad." Work to cultivate your attention to follow just one breath—and then another—from the beginning of the inhale to the end of the exhale without distraction.

Be gentle with yourself: Distraction will come, and the moment you notice it, Salzberg teaches, "is the magic moment, because that's the moment we have the chance to be really different." Simply let go and begin again, she says. "If you have to let go and begin again a thousand times, that's the practice." [Note: This is from Salzberg's "Breathing Meditations" on the "Insight Meditation" app. The content is a product of *soundstrue.com*.]



sat in stillness. The mantra was exotic and interesting. The sitting still was torture. It was 1974 and I was six years old. My psychology professor father had taken interest in Transcendental Meditation: the mantra-repeating meditation-mania imported by the Beatles.

But the practice didn't stick for either of us. And it would be decades before meditation would return to my life, and before it would shed its robe and beads at the fringes of our culture and make its way into the main-

stream. Today, about 19 million Americans practice meditation (according to a National Institutes of Health study released in 2015). And they do it for a variety of reasons.

Health science tells us that meditation has diverse benefits, from weight loss and radiant skin to reducing activity in the brain's fear and anxiety center, the amygdala, and protecting the brain's cortex from the effects of aging. Recently, genetic research has come into play (see sidebar).

When Sharon Salzberg, a meditation

pioneer in the West, started meditating in 1971, there was little data on the physical or medical benefits. She began, she says, “on the instinct that meditation would help me feel less fragmented and distressed.” Yet Salzberg welcomes the science, “because it is the form of validation many people trust.”

Salzberg—along with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein—founded the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, MA, in 1974. Now the author of nine books, including her seminal *Lovingkindness* and *New York Times* best-selling *Real Happiness at Work*, she has witnessed the broad adoption of meditation in the U.S.

Despite the flurry of activity, the purpose of meditation has not changed for Salzberg, who still sees it as a means for cultivating concentration, mindfulness and compassion. What has changed in her 44-year practice, she says, is “the degree of my self judgment, fear and isolation, and the corresponding rise in my ease of heart and kindness toward myself and others.”

Navigating the different types of meditation can be confusing. Unnecessarily so, because the similarities substantially outweigh the differences. Still, finding a style of meditation that resonates for you is the best way for the practice to stick. Most fall into two broad categories. Concentration-based practices focus attention on a single point: a mantra in Transcendental Meditation, or the breath, an image, the flicker of a candle flame or a set of intentions. A mindfulness practice, like Insight Meditation and Vipassana, brings a broad awareness to thoughts and sensations, eventually extending to walking, eating, driving and other actions. “The cultivation of mindfulness leads to insight,” says Salzberg, “because that’s how we see more deeply into our experience.”

Whatever the type, she says, “The hardest and most important thing about meditation is actually doing it, thinking about it doesn’t count.” Make a realistic commitment, “Maybe 10 minutes a day for a month?” And then do it, she says. “If you miss a day don’t beat yourself up, but pick it up the next day.”



THE SCIENCE OF MEDITATIVE DNA

Knowing that mind-body practice can have direct effects on heart rate, blood pressure and psychological distress—thereby having implications for depression, cardiovascular disease and cancer—Dr. Fahri Saatcioglu, a molecular and cell biologist at the University of Oslo, Norway, and visiting scientist at the Harvard School of Public Health, was intrigued. “I wanted to study the immediate effect,” he says. For Saatcioglu, that meant investigating all the way down to a genetic level, the very building blocks of our bodies: RNA and DNA.

“For every biological response induced by the physical, psychological, social and cultural environment, there is a gene expression that would correlate,” Saatcioglu explains. His 2013 University of Oslo study looked at these immediate genetic effects. “We realized these changes might be happening fast,” he says, so they took blood samples before and after an integrated yoga and meditation practice. “And for the control we compared it to a nature walk or having the subject sit still listening to relaxing jazz or classical music.”

They found two things. First, there was indeed significant change in gene expression; and second, the results were quite different with the mind-body practice than with the control—with four times as many genes responding. “Prior studies suggest an effect similar to exercise,” Saatcioglu says. “Our study suggests it’s quite different.” Moreover, he adds, “This was the first time we could show meditative activity has a rapid effect on our physiology.”