

# LIVING YOUR YOGA

## A GUIDE TO MEDITATION



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### WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Adapted from the book *Luminous Mind* by Joel and Michelle Levey

At the heart of each great religious tradition is a wisdom school of transformational contemplative teachings. While the exoteric religious teachings provide many guidelines and examples for conducting one's daily life, the more psychological and meditative teachings of the esoteric schools have provided practitioners throughout the ages with practical and systematic guidelines for transforming ourselves and fully developing our human potential. Meditation techniques are best understood as methods of mental and spiritual training.

Today, meditation techniques are undergoing a secular revival as our state oracle of science discovers and proclaims the benefits of meditation as a remedy to the epidemic stress of modern life. In the last ten years, it has become increasingly common to find the practice of meditation encouraged in high-level corporate creativity sessions, in locker rooms, during coffee breaks, before and after work, prior to academic tests, before athletic competition, and even in military maneuvers.

With the use of relaxation, imagery, attention training, or meditation, many people are being introduced to powerful and highly effective mental technologies of personal transformation that have been the cherished and often secret practices of many ancient traditions.

This trend has sometimes been attributed as a shift from left-brain to right-brain thinking, or as the meeting of Eastern and Western values in life. For our purposes here, let's consider meditation as a skillful means for moving from the pain of our personal and planetary fragmentation toward the direct intuitive understanding of our wholeness and potential as human beings.

Contemporary psychology and medicine regard the contemplative traditions as a rich source of skills for mastering attention, promoting health and stress resilience, reducing pain, awakening creativity, and building the power of positive emotions such as empathy, patience, joy, and loving-kindness.

Thousands of research studies have documented the benefits of these methods, and many centers for medicine and peak performance have integrated them. Acknowledging that most people have little control over their attention and have few effective skills for developing their mental health and emotional intelligence, the contributions of meditation training are receiving more and more attention.

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### MEDITATION BENEFITS: THE PATH OF AWAKENING

Adapted from the book *The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration and Meditation*

By Joel and Michelle Levey

Quality relationships are both the foundation and the primary benefit of meditation practice: by reducing the turbulence in our outer lives, we reduce the turbulence and stress in our minds and bodies. When our body is relaxed and our mind is calm and clear, we are better able to live mindfully, think and listen deeply, and awaken greater wisdom and compassion through our meditations, which in turn improve the quality of relationships.

Throughout the ages, countless men and women have awakened to their true nature. Depending on their culture, language and traditions, they have been regarded as a buddha, an avatar, the Christ, a saint, a bodhi-sattva, a wisdom keeper, or a shaman. Each of these individuals had a profound sensitivity to the circumstances and needs of their communities, and to the skillful means most suited for awakening the individuals to whom they ministered. The teachings of such people reflect both universal truths and the societal realities, traditions, world views, science, and mythologies of their times.

The greatest of our teachers have repeatedly reminded us to regard all the world's great spiritual teachers and teachings as expressions of a universal compassion that will find its way into the world wherever the human heart-mind is open. The teachings of all the world's great religions and great teachers speak universal truths in the particular way most suited for the people of their place and time.

In the case of Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha ~ or the “Awakened One” ~ for forty-five years, he traveled and introduced countless men and women to the inner sciences of awakening. Teaching from a place of profound intuitive wisdom, he, like other great teachers, was able to speak to each person in a way that was intimately attuned to their conditions and help them to awaken more fully. According to some accounts, the Buddha taught 84,000 methods of awakening, while the more mystical traditions say that he taught 84 million methods of awakening. But what is it, you may ask, that the Buddha awakened to? What did he teach others to be awakened to?

**First**, he taught people to be awake to the far-reaching impacts of their intentions and actions in the world and to bring meditation into action, to be more present and mindful, and to live in a kind and ethical manner.

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**Second**, he taught people how to tame mental and physical energies to develop greater mindfulness and to reduce the mental dullness and agitation that lead to mindless living.

**Third**, he taught myriad ways to apply mindfulness to the investigation of the nature of reality ~ through analysis and deep intuition ~ in order to discover the true nature of all phenomena and the true nature of oneself. There are many levels of awakening to this true nature of reality, and of our selves.

At the first level, we awaken more fully to the frustrations and sufferings of our lives, which have been caused by living in mindless and ignorant ways. This ripens within us a fierce determination to be free of our suffering and evokes a commitment to seeking out methods, teachers, and communities that will support us in our search for true spiritual freedom and happiness.

As our meditations deepen, we start to realize a wide variety of benefits. We awaken to the discovery that everything and everyone is profoundly interrelated, and as our mindfulness of the *inter-being* (to borrow a word from Thich Nhat Hanh) of all beings deepens still more, we awaken to an even greater wisdom and compassion.

As our meditative insights continue to deepen, we continue to realize even deeper benefits. We awaken to myriad dimensions of our being that are multidimensional and universal. This may happen gradually over time, or suddenly. As we awaken in this way, we come to live in a way that honors the divinity and sacredness that is present as our deepest identity.

### THE FIVE TYPES OF MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

Adapted from the book *Luminous Mind* by Joel and Michelle Levey

There are thousands of meditation techniques from many different traditions, but all could be classified as belonging to either one or a combination of five types:

1. Concentration Meditation
2. Mindfulness Meditation
3. Reflective Meditation
4. Creative Meditation
5. Heart-Centered Meditation

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A person well versed in inner science traditions has access to a veritable apothecary of meditative antidotes to disturbing mind states, as well as to potent methods for enhancing and developing wholesome and helpful states of mind. Mastering our mind in these ways, we will inevitably develop mastery over our physical and verbal expressions and our relationship with the world.

### Type 1 ~ Concentration Meditation Techniques

Concentration meditation techniques are the foundation for all other kinds of meditation. Through the power of concentration we build our capacity to overcome distraction and to sustain mental focus. The power of a scattered mind is very limited. But like a stream of water that can be channeled to make it more forceful and produce hydroelectric power, we can make the mind a more powerful instrument by developing a small seed of one-pointed mindfulness into “concentration power.”

In classical meditation texts, this one-pointedness of mind developed through the energy of concentration is called samadhi, which literally means to establish, to make firm.

The power of a concentrated mind can be focused effectively to enhance and deepen insight into other meditative themes or goals. To understand how this works, compare the illuminating capacity of the diffuse and scattered beam of a ten-watt incandescent light bulb to the penetrating, diamond-like precision of a ten-watt laser beam. Such is the difference in illuminating power of the concentrated mind to the ordinary, scattered, and fragmentary flow of attention that most of us bring to everyday living.

By learning how to bring the stream of our attention into a laser-like beam of one-pointed concentration, we can train the mind to become a highly useful instrument for penetrating into and investigating the nature of reality. A concentrated mind is also the precursor of great bliss and the prerequisite for the development of psychic abilities.

Whatever technique of meditation you are practicing, it is necessary to have the ability to place your attention on the object of meditation and hold it there without distraction. With patience and practice, your mind will become calmer, more powerful, and able to apply itself to any task with precision and understanding. Any object or activity can be used for the specific development of concentration.

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The same basic principle, however, always applies, no matter which form of meditation you are practicing: whenever your mind wanders, simply return it ~ again and again ~ to the object of your meditation.

### Type 2 ~ Mindfulness Meditation Techniques

Mindfulness meditation techniques emphasize the cultivation of a receptive, choiceless quality of mindful attention toward whatever arises in the sphere of our experience. At those times in our lives when we were wrapped in wonder gazing into the depths of the night sky, listening intently, marveling at the beauty of nature, or wholeheartedly listening for the answer to our heart's prayer, we have naturally experienced this type of meditation.

Traditionally, the practices of insight or vipassana meditation, zazen, dzogchen, Mahamudra, choiceless awareness, self-remembering, and prayer of the heart are associated with this category of meditation. Mindfulness meditation strengthens our sense of wonder and appreciation, enabling us to effortlessly, precisely, and carefully attend to the totality of our experience unfolding moment to moment.

The interplay of concentration and mindfulness meditation allows us to develop the capacity to examine and intuitively understand the deep forces within our ordinary experience. The penetrating insight that develops can then be systematically applied to investigating the very subtle interplay between the phenomena we perceive and the nature of our own mind as the perceiver.

As we investigate our participation in the pervasive and dynamic interrelatedness of everything, we will come to sense ourselves as intimately related to and co-creative with the world of our experience.

### Type 3 ~ Reflective Meditation Techniques

The practice of reflective or analytical meditation is like disciplined thinking: choosing a theme, question or topic of contemplation we focus our reflection, or analysis, upon it. When our attention wanders to other thoughts, we return to our chosen topic.

Traditionally, reflective meditation is employed to gain insight into the meaning of life, death, interrelationships, and social conscience, or to come to a conclusive insight regarding some key idea in science, philosophy, or scripture. Following our analysis through, we arrive at a conclusion. This, in turn, gives rise to a strong sense of faith or conviction.

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In our day-to-day life and work, reflective meditation techniques provide us with a powerful and effective tool for focusing our attention upon personal or professional questions in order to discover a creative solution or breakthrough insight. Reflective meditation also helps us to understand the issues or inner conflicts that may arise during the practice of other meditations.

### **Type 4 ~ Creative Meditation Techniques**

Creative meditation techniques enable us to consciously cultivate and strengthen specific qualities of mind. Patience, appreciation, sympathetic joy, gratitude, love, compassion, fearlessness, humility, tenderness, and other qualities associated with aspects of nature, Divinity, or the natural world are among the attributes that are most commonly cultivated.

Creative meditations invite us to actively nurture these strengths of character by thinking, speaking, and acting as though these qualities are more fully alive within us.

### **Type 5 ~ Heart-Centered Meditation Techniques**

Heart-centered meditation techniques help us to awaken the radiance of our loving-kindness and compassion. They deepen our empathy and forgiveness, and teach us to live in kinder ways.

They begin first with ourselves, and then open the circle of our compassion to embrace all living beings. They draw inspiration from each of the other meditations: focus and the power of peace from concentration; deep listening and presence from mindfulness meditation; insight into the nature of suffering and a sense of interrelatedness from reflective meditation; imaginative resourcefulness and skill from creative meditation.

Properly understood, all of these types of meditation are interrelated and mutually enhancing. Many practices draw inspiration from a variety of meditation types and could be included in several categories. It should be clear to you that the contemplative traditions offer us the inner technology necessary to fulfill virtually any developmental aspiration we may have.

Meditation allows us to go beyond words and mental concepts in order to know the true nature and reality of ourselves and our world directly.

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### GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING YOUR MEDITATION PRACTICE

Adapted from the book *Luminous Mind* by Joel and Michelle Levey

#### Clean and Clear Space

Create a special place for yourself, either a room or a corner, and use it only for your meditation and heartfelt study or contemplation. Put in this space only those things that help your meditation. Find a comfortable seat for yourself. Arrange in a pleasing way the pictures and objects that energize the qualities of heart and mind you are trying to nurture. Keep the space clean and clear, as though you were always expecting a special guest. Enter it with respect, and be uplifted and refreshed by its peace, beauty, and healing qualities.

#### Minding the Body

In general, you will find it helpful to precede your quiet sitting meditation with at least a brief period of mindful stretching, yoga or gentle exercise. This will help you to build energy and focus your attention. At times you may find that your mind is simply too agitated to begin with quiet sitting meditation and you will gain much greater benefit from a session of walking or moving meditation.

For sitting meditation, whether you sit cross-legged, in a chair, or kneel with a meditation bench is largely a matter of style and preference. Experiment and see what works best for you. It is especially important to sit comfortably, with your spine straight and your body upright and relaxed. Sitting in this way, it will be much easier to remain alert. Sit naturally and at ease, and avoid forcing your body into uncomfortable postures.

Your eyes can either be gently closed or softly open ~ though practicing with them softly open will reduce the tendency to doze off and can help you to carry a meditative presence over into other activities. With practice you will learn to bring a meditative mind to every activity, whether sitting, standing, walking, or lying down.

#### Release Phenomena

In meditation, as you begin to relax, it is quite common to experience what are called release phenomena. These may include jerking or quivering of the body as you are falling asleep, gurgling of the stomach, tingling feelings or numbness, memories, mental images, inner sounds, or other perceptual changes.

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Release phenomena are common indicators that your practice of relaxation or meditation is becoming effective in dissolving deeply imbedded mental, emotional, and physical holding patterns. The best way to deal with these experiences is to simply allow them to arise, unfold and dissolve without distracting your attention.

With practice, you will become aware of the subtle physical, emotional and mental states that are the indicators of progressively deeper levels of relaxation and meditation. Eventually, your reservoirs of accumulated stress will be drained, allowing you to feel lighter, clearer and better able to handle the challenges of daily life more effectively and with greater patience and understanding.

### Relaxed Yet Alert

For most of us, our experience of deep relaxation lacks awareness and is at best dull and dreamlike. And at the very height of alertness we are the complete opposite of relaxed, experiencing physical tension and mental agitation. Both of these extremes are far from the relaxed, yet alert, calm delight of meditative equipoise. A classical analogy talks of tuning a stringed musical instrument: If the strings are too tight or too loose the sound is not very pleasant.

Similarly, to find the sweet notes in meditation, it is necessary to find a dynamic balance between being overly alert and overly relaxed. The first extreme creates physical and mental tightness and eventually leads to distraction. The other end of the continuum creates dullness and heaviness that usually leads to sleep.

Especially in the beginning, much of your session might be spent finding this balance, bringing the mind back from dazed distraction or dullness to a state of relaxed alertness. Eventually, you will become familiar with this state of being. During your meditation sessions you will be able to be deeply relaxed as well as extremely lucid, and in daily life you will find that your view of the way things are will be less conditioned and obstructed. With this deepening understanding, you will be better able to optimize your response to the challenges and opportunities of each moment with more creative and compassionate attitudes, words and actions.

### Thoughts to Energize Your Meditation

Consider the precious opportunity that this human existence gives us. By practicing meditation we can realize and express our enormous potential. This is a great gift. Then consider



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impermanence. Whatever is born will die, whatever appears will disappear. Recognizing this, we understand that we really don't know how much time we have to realize our true nature and potential and to love and help those we care for.

Contemplating the laws of cause and effect, we understand that we have choice in our lives. What we experience today is largely the result of the choices we made previously, and what we choose to do, think, and say now will shape and determine our future.

Finally, consider why we should work with our minds. The long-term result, the experience of enlightenment, is more joyful, intense and complete than anything we have yet known, and once found can never be lost. Secondly, there is so much suffering in the world, and our ability to benefit others is very limited if we ourselves are confused. So, for ourselves and others, we want to place our trust in those who can inspire and guide us in this inner work and in the traditions, teachings and methods that help us to master our minds and to awaken genuine wisdom and compassion in our lives.

### **Faith, Support and Inspiration**

For all these reasons, then, we seek a refuge from the chaos and confusion within and around us. Like a child taking refuge in its mother, or hikers seeking shelter from a storm, we seek an oasis of sanity in a chaotic world. Outwardly, we place our trust in the teachers who remind us through their example, their kindness, and their teachings that it is possible to become free from mental and emotional confusion and to become wise and kind as well.

We find strength and guidance in the teachings that show us how to master our minds and find freedom and understanding in our lives. Likewise, we find refuge in the community of friends and companions who share our study, practice, and investigation of how meditation can be practically applied to meet the challenges and opportunities of daily life.

Inwardly, the teacher reflects the seed of our own potential for deep understanding and genuine kindness. Oral and written teachings point our minds toward the ineffable wisdom that shines like the sun and moves within our hearts, the real mystery that precedes life and endures beyond death. Our companions along the way remind us of the community of people who, from the beginning of time, strove to find the same understanding and who preserved and passed on the teachings.

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Meditation, whether you are sitting alone in a cave, or in an office, or meditating in a group, does not happen in a vacuum devoid of relationship and sharing with others. Affirming, trusting, and drawing strength and inspiration from your relationships with others and your connectedness with the universe will offer you protection and peace of mind, and will inspire your meditation practice.

### Proper Motivation

As you begin each session, remind yourself of why you are sitting down to meditate. Why are you giving yourself this gift of time for centering, harmonizing and fine-tuning? To avoid pain? To be happy? To find peace? To rest or energize?

Remember, as you grow in clarity and peace of mind you directly contribute to bringing peace and understanding to others. And as you develop patience toward the people and situations that previously triggered frustration, you will be filling the universe with compassion instead of anger, understanding instead of confusion. Our intentions reflect back to us an echo of the same energy. How often have you seen actions motivated by fear emphasize the paranoia of a situation? And how often have your love and care touched and opened the heart of another?

Remember, it is not what you do but how and why you do it that really matters. You always have a choice, so use it wisely, compassionately and creatively.

### Monitor Your Meditation

Your meditation session is likely to go through several phases. Once you have settled down you should stabilize your attention by practicing a concentration technique for a few moments. Then you can apply your mind to whatever meditation ~ mindfulness, reflective, creative, or heart-centered ~ you choose. Throughout the session, use your vigilance or introspective alertness to monitor the quality of the focus of your attention. In this way you can recognize when your attention has wandered off or faded away. If you find it difficult to stay with the meditation because of too much distraction or dullness, you will find it useful to balance your mind again with a few minutes of concentration meditation, especially by watching the breath. Then, once again, return to your main meditation.

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### Dedication and Sharing

Take a few moments at the end of each session to consciously extend and share the positive energies you have accumulated. From your heart radiate out into space warmth, light, and love, and imagine it touching others as a vibration that calms, energizes, heals, comforts, and nourishes.

Be creative! Imagine you are playing a mental video game. Beam all your positive feelings to your friends, family, people you feel neutral toward, even to your enemies. Realize that they all, just like you, want to be happy, want to escape suffering and pain, and desire to make the most of their lives. Imagine radiating all the positive energy you have generated through your meditation out to all beings, and that each receives from you whatever they most need at that moment to carry them from fragmentation toward wholeness. In this way, realize that this inner work on yourself is also an offering to the world.

### Carry-Over Practice

Through your practice of meditation, it is possible to develop many previously latent positive qualities. Having used the brief period of your quiet meditation to touch and develop the peace, clarity, understanding, kindness, and vitality within, you now face the challenge of carrying these qualities into dynamic action as you move through the world. Throughout the day, consciously recall and reenergize these feelings. Particularly when you start to rush and tumble, internally pause, center, and move toward the sense of harmony you experienced earlier in meditation. Periods of quiet, undisturbed meditation are precious opportunities to get in touch with qualities that will gradually grow and pervade even your busiest activities.

You will find that any activity can become an opportunity to train your mind, develop concentration, refine your awareness, deepen your insight, practice patience or loving-kindness. Live in a creative and meditative way, as though your life were a dream and you are busy waking up.

### Remember the Inner Smile

Lest you get too serious, it's important to approach your meditations with a sense of curiosity and playful inquisitiveness. For many people, holding a gentle inner smile during meditation helps to prevent them from trying too hard, getting tense or being too self-critical. Enjoy your practice! Smile! Be playful!

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### MEDITATION FOR BEGINNERS: FIVE STEPS FOR A DAILY PRACTICE

Adapted from the book *Luminous Mind* by Joel and Michelle Levey

As a beginner in establishing a daily meditation practice, the following guidelines can help add variety and richness. Your confidence in weaving these pieces together will grow with practice, and this simple flow will become quite natural. There are five parts to this sequence:

- 1. Inspiration and Intention:** As you begin, take a short time to clarify your intention and offer a prayer of gratitude or a call for inspiration. Remember that meditation is the practice of deep relationships, and that you never practice “alone.” Call upon the sources of inspiration in your life, that they may inspire your meditation. Remembering all those who share your life and world, practice in order to in some way be a force of healing and wholeness in the world.
- 2. Concentration:** Next, shift to some type of focusing, concentration meditation, such as mindfulness of breathing, or the three-part breath.
- 3. Meditation:** Now shift to a longer period of quiet meditation using whatever technique you are drawn to.
- 4. Dedication:** Finally, end the session with a brief dedication, gathering the potency generated through this time of meditation into your heart and radiating it to share the blessings with all beings.
- 5. Application:** As you conclude your formal meditation practice, make a smooth transition and hold the intention to carry the quality of mindful presence into whatever activities will follow. Throughout the day, pause from time to time for a mini-meditation to renew your connection to these qualities, and then continue to infuse your life with the mindful presence, insight, creativity, and compassion that flow from your meditation practice. Though these five stages build upon each other, if time or inclination do not permit, you will still benefit from doing only steps 1, 2, and 4, steps 1 and 2, or even just step 1. Give yourself credit for any sincere steps that you make in the right direction!

Keep your formal practice short and simple as you begin so that you can begin to establish this new life-habit and feel some success in maintaining it. Then, as you see the benefits, gradually develop, deepen or expand your practice.