

PART 2



Spirituality, Therapy, and Stories

CHAPTER 1

Spirituality, Meditation, and Inner Listening

In many memoirs I've read over the years, the author shares recollections of early spiritual experiences in the wildness of nature, among trees, with pets, or looking at the stars, mountains, bubbling streams, or the silence of snow on a winter day. Children seem to be more psychologically open than adults to receiving the world with a sense of wonder, but adults can tune in to moments of reflection that connect us with that state of being when we're relaxed or in a meditative state.

In my work with writers and clients, I've seen that meditation and relaxation exercises help open the mind to remembering more details and stories that they otherwise might not have been able to recall. Meditation invites the right brain and creative flow. You can read the following meditation into a voice recorder and play it when you want to relax and deepen your connection with moments that linger at the edges of your conscious mind. Tune in to your deeper self, and the parts of you that go beyond words.

These meditations are a way to get in touch with layers of memory and to come to writing with a relaxed attitude. However, if you are concerned about encountering unpleasant memories, or don't feel comfortable in a deeply relaxed state, the exercises may not be best for you. They are suggestions for relaxation only, with

no promises of specific results. Ask your therapist or doctor about the advisability of meditation.

Meditation for Self-Reflection

Writing and meditation have much in common: inner listening, silence, and openness to the unknown. Sometimes we resist writing and meditation by staying busy and not taking time to escape from the demands of a noisy, outward-directed life. The Buddhists call a mind filled with mental distractions a “monkey mind.” It chatters away, distracting us from our true self, a deeper part of who we are.

Meditation is a way to contact a more profound awareness without attachment to a particular idea or thought. We allow thoughts to pass across the mind like clouds. Critical thoughts can get in the way of our creativity and the stories we want to write, and we need to let them go. Part of our healing practice is to accept our inner creative voices, to hear the deeper truth of who we are. We need to write with openness to glimmers of memory, insight, and feeling.

Beginning the Process

To encourage your inner listening process, put aside the stresses of regular life and find a special place where you can relax. Let go of your busy thoughts and make room for something new.

To enhance your inner listening, you need to learn how to focus on your breath. Breathing well and deeply is the basis for letting go of stress. When we focus on our breath and our relaxed muscles, we feel ourselves getting pleasantly heavier and warmer. When we relax the tension in our muscles, our tense mind lets go as well and invites us into the flow of creativity.

When you’re ready to do this relaxation meditation, find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. Set a timer for twenty or thirty minutes. After you learn how to relax, you can obtain the same benefit in five or ten minutes.

Settle in a comfortable place and take some deep breaths. Feel yourself becoming present and aware of your body. This will enhance listening to your inner voice, the positive one, the one that nurtures you, the one that supports all your efforts to write and to speak.

Bring to mind an image of a living being that makes you happy. Some people think of a loved one—a mother, father, aunt, uncle, friend, or favorite pet. Feel the feelings you have when you are being hugged or touched lovingly by this person or being. As you think of this, imagine golden light flowing down from the top of your head into your shoulders, and let it spill down your body, breathing deeply without forcing, just gentle breaths. Allow yourself to feel the warmth that this visualization brings, filling your body with well-being.

Feel the warmth in your wrists and hands, your fingers, your arms. Let your muscles relax, the muscles of your body and mind that sometimes keep you tight. Ask them to allow you to write, to express yourself. Think of being encouraged by your pet or favorite person. Have fun with this; don't be too serious. Imagine being gently massaged or comforted. Breathe these feelings into your body. If you have a favorite, safe place, either in real life or in your imagination, bring it to mind now.

When you are relaxed, when the mind and body are in harmony and your thoughts are flowing freely like a stream, rest in the peace of this state for a few minutes, then write for five minutes or longer.

Meditation on Your Past

Now you'll be guided into remembering earlier parts of your life. Follow the exercise as far as you like. If you become uncomfortable, stop and return to the present.

See yourself at the age you are now. Picture how you look, what you're wearing, the shape of your current life. See yourself in your mind's eye: your body, your clothes in your favorite colors, your hair, face, and skin. See the people you spend time with, the things you are most proud of.

Now imagine the calendar flying back to five, then ten years ago. What did you look like then? What style of clothes were you wearing?

Where were your favorite restaurants or clubs? What did you do in your leisure time? See if you can remember who you spent time with and what you did. What were your hopes and dreams?

Go back another ten years and ask yourself these same questions. Decade by decade, revisit who you were, what you were doing, what you were feeling, wanting, and dreaming.

Notice—but don't dwell on—any issues and problems that you faced during each decade. What were you trying to heal or avoid? How did that work for you? Think about your hopes and dreams. What was the best part about your life? How did you feel about yourself during each period of your life? What was your favorite color, food, vacation? Who were your friends, pets? What books influenced your life?

See yourself all the way back into your adolescence and then into childhood. See your body, feel how it felt to be twenty, fifteen, ten, five. See yourself in your clothes, inside your room, in your house. Who were the people in your family back then? What did they look like, sound like? Notice the memories that have formed you and are a part of you.

Pick up your pen and write about one of the scenes you just pictured. Sketch or freewrite whatever images or memories come to you. These memory exercises can help you to bring the past into focus and to picture important scenes in your life that may have receded into your unconscious mind.

Writing Affirmations

Affirmations are positive thoughts and feelings that counter the doubts and negative voices in our heads. Affirmations are a healing and comforting way of bringing balance into our lives by training our minds to think in a positive way. Cognitive therapy recognizes the importance of creating new thought patterns, which in turn help us feel more positive and give us renewed energy.

The following affirmations are designed to counteract the negative voices of the inner critic. I encourage you to create

your own affirmations that correspond to how your inner critic speaks to you. If you have already done the exercises for the inner critic, you have a list of some of those voices.

Bring yourself back to the safe place in your earlier meditation, knowing that your goal is to counteract the power of your inner critic. As you enter into this space with your intention, notice how the burden of the inner critic inhabits your body, perhaps your shoulders, neck, or stomach, or any other places in your body where you are tense.

Deepen your breathing, letting go of the negative, breathing in golden light deep into your body. Stay in this state of mind for several minutes, consciously relaxing as you rest. Allow each inner critic voice to come to your consciousness, holding it while repeating these affirmations: “I have a right to write my story. My voice matters. What I think and feel is important.”

Each self-affirming comment helps balance the negative voices.

Repeat each affirmation three times while you continue to bring the golden light into your body. Keep asking your muscles to relax to let go of the critic’s power. Repeat, “My muscles are warm and heavy, and I am letting go of the critic voice. I will create new affirmations each time I write.”

Below is a list of affirmations that you might want to consider adding into your affirmation meditation. Make up your own to fit your critic.

- My life is unique and I want to share my wisdom.
- My stories are important to me, affirming who I am.
- I will not share my writing self with anyone who might criticize me.
- Publishing is not the goal of my first draft, so I will write just as I wish.
- I can’t prove my memories so I will write what I remember and not worry about it.

- I give myself permission to write.
- If memories I don't like arise, I can write something else.
- I breathe into self-love and acceptance as I write.
- Each time I write is a stepping stone to freedom.
- When I write the truth, I balance my world.
- My family is not reading this while I write.
- I will not let my critic stop me.
- My life is important, and my thoughts and experiences matter.

Take a cleansing breath, allowing your affirmations to create a sense of strength and confidence in your body. Make up new ones as they occur to you, and keep a list on your refrigerator and on your computer desk. We need all the reminders we can get.

Allow your mind to venture into other questions, images, and memories that you feel are important to your spirituality. Give yourself time to explore these thoughts and memories, and notice your emotions. If you are ready, then begin to write.

Writing from Your Inner Self

Writing in a stream-of-consciousness manner about what you notice, see, feel, hear, or sense from your spiritual reflections allows you to get in touch with long-forgotten moments in your life. Let the words flow from your pen without censoring, and remain open to receive what comes.

- What was your first spiritual experience? Where were you?
How old were you?
- How did you feel about:
God
Heaven, hell, and the afterlife

Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, saints, prophets, and other
spiritual figures

The leaders of your church, temple, synagogue, or mosque—
priests, rabbis, and other clergymen—or your Sunday
School teachers

The Bible, Koran, Torah, or other spiritual teachings

Reincarnation

- What spiritual thoughts and images would comfort you when you were a child?
- Did you have positive and negative feelings about spirituality?
- Did you have a sense of awe, fear, peace, or comfort as you considered your spiritual questions?
- How and when did you have these feelings?
- How did your spiritual feelings affect your life?
- What life decisions did you make based on your spiritual experiences and feelings?
- How did your spirituality change over your life? Think about each decade of your life and what new events, experiences, and knowledge affected these changes.
- What spiritual texts guided you through your life?

There are many definitions of spirituality. Write your own definition. Write about what your spiritual experiences were from the earliest age you remember. Think about the direction and path your life has taken.

- There might be more spiritually oriented questions that arise. Many spiritual teachers talk about “dark nights of the soul,” when everything seems hopeless and hurtful. Yet such moments may whisper about new beginnings or possibilities that are revealed in the crisis.
- When were your darker moments, and what did you learn from them?

- How did the paths you didn't take shape where you are now?
- What techniques or support helped you with the darker moments in your life?
- What spiritual teachers and mentors have guided you in your life?
- What is your spiritual philosophy now?

Suggestions for Completing Your Meditations and Affirmations

If the dark past is demanding your attention, write for only a few minutes, then do something positive and light for yourself as a balance. It's more emotionally draining to write in present tense. If you want to put the past further from you, use third person (he or she) and past tense.

Finish your writing sessions with a golden light meditation. The more you work with the inner critic and keep writing, the more freedom you will find. Your self-esteem will increase, and you will feel emotionally stronger.

You may want to work with just one critic voice, paired with one affirmation. Try to keep your time with these meditations simple and welcoming. Repetition and receptivity to new habits and thoughts are valuable in creating a new writing consciousness. Be open to stories and parts of yourself that you have kept silent or secret.

If you're in therapy, you might bring your goals and meditation experiences to the attention of your therapist. If you continue to feel tight and stiff places in your body, you might consider holistic approaches to healing, such as massage, acupuncture, and chiropractic work. There are many healing approaches that integrate mind and body.

It's important to create new habits and mind-sets that help you on your writing path. Each day you can choose to write a new affirmation to counteract your critic. Each day you are invited to

pick up your pen or sit at your computer, and write your deepest truths. As you keep working to make this special place in your body-mind for your writing, you'll find a freedom and a lightness that will inspire you to write again. And the next day, you will begin from a new place. In this way, your writing becomes a regular part of your life, welcoming you to tell your stories. Be brave—begin your healing story today.