

Chapter 1

What Meditation Is — and Isn't

In This Chapter

- ▶ Climbing the mountain of meditation
 - ▶ Finding picnic spots and lesser peaks along the way
 - ▶ Checking out the major meditation techniques
 - ▶ Knowing what you'll see when you get to the top
 - ▶ Developing concentration, receptive awareness, contemplation, and cultivation
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The great thing about meditation is that it's actually quite simple. Just sit down, be quiet, turn your attention inward, and focus your mind. That's all there is to it, really (see the sidebar "Meditation: It's easier than you think"). Then why, you may be wondering, do people write so many books and articles about meditation — including detailed books like this one? Why not just offer a few brief instructions and forget about all the verbiage?

Say that you're planning to take a long trip by car to some picturesque location. You could just jot down the directions and follow them one by one. After a few days, you'd probably get where you want to go. But you'll enjoy the trip more if you have a travel guide to point out the sights along the way — and you may feel more secure if you carry a troubleshooting manual to tell you what to do when you have problems with your car. Perhaps you'd like to take some side trips to scenic spots or even change your itinerary entirely and get there by a different route — or a different vehicle!

In the same way, you can consider the practice of meditation to be a journey of sorts — and the book you hold in your hands to be a travel guide. This chapter provides an overview of your trip, offers some alternative routes to your destination, explains the basic skills you need to know to get you there — and points to some detours that may advertise the same benefits but that don't really deliver.



Meditation: It's easier than you think

Meditation is simply the practice of focusing your attention on a particular object — generally something simple, like a word or phrase, a candle flame or geometrical figure, or the coming and going of your breath. In everyday life, your mind is constantly processing a barrage of sensations, visual impressions, emotions, and thoughts. When you meditate, you narrow your focus, limit the stimuli bombarding your nervous system — and calm your mind in the process.

To get a quick taste of meditation, follow these instructions. (For detailed audio instructions, listen to Track 2 on the CD. Or, for more complete meditation instructions, see Chapter 6.)

1. Find a quiet place and sit comfortably with your back relatively straight.

If you tend to disappear into your favorite chair, find something a bit more supportive.

2. Take a few deep breaths, close your eyes, and relax your body as much as you can.

If you don't know how to relax, you may want to check out Chapter 6.

3. Choose a word or phrase that has special personal or spiritual meaning for you.

Here are some examples: "There's only love," "Don't worry, be happy," "Trust in God."

4. Begin to breathe through your nose (if you can), and as you breathe, repeat the word or phrase quietly to yourself.

You can whisper the word or phrase, *sub-vocalize* it (that is, move your tongue as though saying it, but not aloud), or just repeat it in your mind. If you get distracted, come back to the repetition of the word or phrase.

As an alternative, you can follow your breath as it comes and goes through your nostrils, returning to your breathing when you get distracted.

5. Keep the meditation going for five minutes or more; then slowly get up and go about your day.

How did you feel? Did it seem weird to say the same thing or follow your breath over and over? Did you find it difficult to stay focused? Did you keep changing the phrase? If so, don't worry. With regular practice and the guidance of this book, you'll gradually get the knack.

Of course, you could easily spend many fruitful and enjoyable years mastering the subtleties and complexities of meditation. But the good news is, the basic practice is actually quite simple, and you don't have to be an expert to do it — or to enjoy its extraordinary benefits.

Embarking on the Journey of Meditation

No doubt you picked up this book because you're searching for something more in life — more peace of mind, more energy, more well-being, more meaning, more happiness, more joy. You've heard about meditation, and you wonder what it has to offer. To continue the journey metaphor, you could say

that the practice of meditation begins where you are and ends up taking you where you want to be.

Being an adventurous sort, I like to think of it as a climb up a mountain. You've seen snapshots of the summit, and from the bottom you can barely glimpse the summit through the clouds. But the only way to get there is up — one step at a time.

Different paths up the same mountain

Imagine that you're getting ready to climb this mountain. (If you live in the Netherlands or the midwestern United States, get out your *National Geographic* for this one!) How are you going to get to the top? You could take some climbing lessons, buy the right gear, and inch your way up one of the rocky faces. Or you could choose one of the many trails that meander up the mountain and take a leisurely hike to the summit. (Of course, you could always cheat and drive your car, but that would ruin my metaphor!)

Although they all end up at the same place, every trail has its unique characteristics. One may take you on a gradual ascent through forests and meadows, whereas another may head steeply uphill over dry, rocky terrain. From one, you may have vistas of lush valleys filled with flowers; from another, you may see farmland or desert.

Depending on your energy and your motivation, you may choose to stop at a picnic spot en route and while away a few hours (or a few days) enjoying the peace and quiet. Hey, you might enjoy it so much that you decide not to climb any farther. Perhaps you'd rather climb one of the smaller peaks along the way instead of going the distance to the top. Or you may prefer to charge to the summit as quickly as you can without bothering to linger anywhere.



Well, the journey of meditation has a great deal in common with climbing a mountain. You can aim for the top, or you can just set your sights on some grassy knoll or lesser peak halfway up the slope. Whatever your destination, you can have fun and reap the benefits of just breathing deeply and exercising muscles you didn't even know you had.

People have been climbing the mountain of meditation for thousands of years in different parts of the world. (For more on the history of meditation, see Chapter 3.) As a result, topographic maps and guidebooks abound, each with its own unique version of how to make your way up the mountain — and its own recommendations for how to hike and what to carry. (To get a sense of the range of meditation materials available these days, just check out the shelves of your local bookstore or the Web pages of your favorite online book source.)

Traditionally, the guidebooks describe a spiritual path involving a set of beliefs and practices, often secret, that have been passed down from one generation to the next (see the sidebar “Meditation’s spiritual roots”). In recent decades, however, Western researchers and teachers have distilled meditation from its spiritual origins and now offer it as a remedy for a variety of 21st-century ills. (For more on the benefits of meditation, see Chapter 2. For more on meditation research, see Chapter 19.)

Although the maps and books may describe the summit differently — some emphasize the vast open spaces, others pay more attention to the peace or exhilaration you feel when you get there, and some even claim that there’s more than one peak — I happen to agree with the ancient sage who said: “Meditation techniques are just different paths up the same mountain.”

Here are a few of the many techniques that have been developed over the centuries:

- ✓ Repetition of a meaningful word or phrase, known as a *mantra* (see Chapters 3 and 13)
- ✓ Mindful awareness of the present moment (for more on *mindfulness*, see Chapters 6 and 15)
- ✓ Following or counting your breath (see Chapter 6)
- ✓ Paying attention to the flow of sensations in your body (see Chapter 6)
- ✓ Cultivation of lovingkindness, compassion, forgiveness, and other healing emotions (see Chapter 10)
- ✓ Concentration on a geometric shape or other simple visual object
- ✓ Visualization of a peaceful place or a healing energy or entity (see Chapter 16)
- ✓ Reading and reflecting upon inspirational or sacred writings (see Chapter 13)
- ✓ Gazing at a picture of a holy being or saint
- ✓ Contemplation of nature
- ✓ Chanting praises to the Divine

Throughout this book, you find opportunities to experiment with many of these techniques, as well as detailed guidance in the practice of one in particular — *mindfulness* — beginning with your breath and then extending your meditation to every moment of your life.

The view from the summit — and from other peaks along the way



When you reach the summit of the meditation mountain, what do you see? If we can trust the reports of the meditators and mystics who have climbed the mountain before us, we can declare with some confidence that the top of the mountain harbors the source of all love, wisdom, happiness, and joy. Some people call it spirit or soul, true nature or true self, the ultimate truth or the ground of *being* (or just *being* itself). Others call it God or the Divine or the Holy Mystery, or simply the One. There are nearly as many names for it as people who experience it. And some spiritual traditions consider it so sacred and powerful that they hesitate to give it a name.

As for the *experience* of reaching the summit, seasoned meditators use words like *enlightenment* (from ignorance), *awakening* (from a dream), *liberation* (from bondage), *freedom* (from limitation), and *union* (with God or *being*).



An old saying likens all these words and names to fingers pointing at the moon. If you pay too much attention to the finger, you risk missing the beautiful moon, which is the reason for pointing the finger in the first place. Ultimately, you need to experience the moon — or in this case the summit — for yourself.

Of course, you may have no interest in lofty states and experiences like enlightenment or union. Perhaps you bought this book simply because you want to reduce your stress or enhance your healing process or deal with your emotions. Forget about the Holy Mystery — a little more clarity and peace of mind would suit you just fine, thank you very much!

Well, the truth is, you're going to follow the same path no matter how high up the mountain you want to go. The basic instructions remain the same — but you get to choose your destination. Among the most popular stopping places and promontories en route to the summit are the following:

- ✓ Stronger focus and concentration
- ✓ Reduced tension, anxiety, and stress
- ✓ Clearer thinking and less emotional turmoil
- ✓ Lower blood pressure and cholesterol
- ✓ Support in kicking addictions and other self-defeating behaviors
- ✓ Greater creativity and enhanced performance in work and play
- ✓ Increased self-understanding and self-acceptance

- ✓ More joy, love, and spontaneity
- ✓ Greater intimacy with friends and family members
- ✓ Deeper sense of meaning and purpose
- ✓ Glimpses of a spiritual dimension of being



As you can see, these way stations are actually major destinations in their own right, and all of them are well worth reaching. (For more on the benefits of meditation, see Chapter 2.) You may be quite content to stop halfway up the mountain, after you've reduced your stress, improved your health, and experienced greater overall well-being. Or you may feel inspired to push on for the higher altitudes that the great meditators describe.

The taste of pure mountain water

To elaborate on this mountain metaphor a bit, imagine that there's a spring at the summit that gushes forth the pure *water of being* and never runs dry. (Depending on your orientation, you may prefer to call it the *water of grace* or *spirit* or *unconditional love*.) Those who make it to the top get to dive into the pool that surrounds the spring and immerse themselves completely in the

Meditation's spiritual roots

Although many ordinary folks are meditating these days (including, quite possibly, people you know), the practice wasn't always so readily available. For centuries, monks, nuns, mystics, and wandering ascetics preserved it in secret, using it to enter higher states of consciousness and ultimately to achieve the pinnacle of their particular paths.

Highly motivated laypeople with time on their hands could always learn a few techniques. But the rigorous practice of meditation remained a sacred pursuit limited to an elite few who were willing to renounce the world and devote their lives to it. (See Chapter 3 for more on the history of meditation.)

How times have changed! From Beat Zen in the '50s and the influx of Indian yogis and swamis in

the '60s to the current fascination with Buddhism, meditation has definitely become mainstream, and its practical benefits are applauded in every medium, both actual and virtual. (Have you ever checked out the Web sites devoted to meditation?)

Meditation has been studied extensively in psychology labs and reduced to formulas like the Relaxation Response (a simple technique for diminishing stress). Yet it has never entirely lost its spiritual roots. In fact, the reason meditation works so effectively is that it connects you with a spiritual dimension, which different commentators give different names, but I like to call simply *being*.

Discovering the treasure in your own house

In the Jewish tradition, they tell a story that has its counterparts in all the world's great meditative teachings. Simon, a simple tailor, fantasizes night and day about the great treasure he will one day find when he leaves his little village and his family home and ventures forth into the world. Late one night, with a few belongings on his back, he sets off on his travels.

For years, Simon wanders from one great city to another, making his living mending clothes, searching for the treasure he knows belongs to him. But all the people he asks about the treasure have problems of their own and are unable to help him.

One day he comes upon a psychic known far and wide for her extraordinary abilities. "Yes," she says, "there is indeed a vast treasure that belongs to you and you alone." Hearing this, Simon's eyes light up with excitement. "I will tell you how to find it," she continues, giving

Simon complex directions that he meticulously records.

When she comes to the end of her instructions and describes the very street and house where this treasure is allegedly buried, Simon can't believe his ears. For this is the very home he had left years before when setting out on his quest.

Quickly he thanks the psychic, stuffs the directions in his pocket, and hurries back in the direction from which he came. And lo and behold, much to his surprise, he does indeed find a vast and unfathomable treasure buried beneath the hearth in his own house.

The point of this story is obvious: Though we may wander in search of inner peace and experiment with all kinds of meditative practices, the peace and love and wisdom we seek are inevitably here all along, hidden within our own hearts.

water. In fact, some even merge with the water and become identical with *being* itself. (Don't worry, you won't merge if you don't want to!)

But you don't have to climb all the way to the top to enjoy the pure *taste of being*. The water flows down the mountain in streams and rivulets and nourishes the fields and towns below. In other words, you can taste *being* everywhere, in everything, because *being* is the essence that keeps life going at every level. Until you start meditating, though, you may not know what *being* tastes like.



When you meditate, you get closer to the source of the water and learn how to recognize its taste. (Depending on their personalities and where they are on the mountain, people use different terms to describe the water's taste, such as *calm*, *peace*, *well-being*, *wholeness*, *clarity*, and *compassion*.) It doesn't matter where you're headed or where you stop on your way up the mountain; you still get to dip your hands in the water of *being* and taste it for yourself. Then you can begin to find the taste of *being* wherever you go!

There's no place like home — and you're already there!

Now that I've constructed the metaphor of the mountain, I'm going to knock it down with one sweep of my hand — like a wave washing away a castle in the sand. Yes, the journey of meditation requires steady effort and application like a climb up a mountain. (For more on effort and discipline, see Chapter 9.) But that metaphor hides some important paradoxes:

- ✓ **The summit doesn't exist in some faraway place outside you; it exists in the depths of your being — some traditions say in the heart — and awaits your discovery.** (See the sidebar “Discovering the treasure in your own house,” in this chapter.)
- ✓ **You can approach the summit in an instant; it doesn't necessarily take years of practice.** While meditating, for example, when your mind settles down and you experience a deep peace or tranquility, sense your interconnectedness with all beings, or feel an upsurge of peace or love, you're tasting the sweet water of *being* right from the source inside you. And these moments inform and nourish you in ways you can't possibly measure.
- ✓ **The mountain metaphor suggests a progressive, goal-oriented journey, whereas, in fact, the point of meditation is to set aside all goals and striving and just *be*.** As the title of the bestseller by stress-reduction expert Jon Kabat-Zinn puts it, “Wherever you go, there you are.” Or as Dorothy says in *The Wizard of Oz*, “There's no place like home” — and the truth is, like Dorothy, you're always already there!

Of course, you're not going to give up all your doing and striving instantaneously and just *be*, even when you meditate. That's something you work up to slowly by practicing your meditation and gradually focusing and simplifying until you're doing less and less while you meditate — and *being* more and more. The following are a few of the stages you may pass through on the path to just *being*:

- ✓ Getting used to sitting still
- ✓ Developing the ability to turn your attention inward
- ✓ Struggling to focus your attention
- ✓ Being distracted again and again
- ✓ Becoming more focused
- ✓ Feeling more relaxed as you meditate
- ✓ Noticing fleeting moments when your mind settles down
- ✓ Experiencing brief glimpses of stillness and peace



Becoming aware of your awareness

Most of the time, you probably don't pay much attention to your awareness. Yet the truth is, it's crucial to everything you do. When you watch TV, study for an exam, cook a meal, drive your car, listen to music, or talk with a friend, you're being aware, or paying attention. Before you begin to meditate in a formal way, you may find it helpful to explore your own awareness.

First, notice what it's like to be aware. Are there times in your life when you're not aware of anything? Now, complete this thought: "I am aware of. . . ." Do this again and again and notice where your awareness takes you.

Do you tend to be more aware of internal or external sensations? Do you pay more attention to thoughts and fantasies than to your moment-to-moment sensory experiences? Notice whether a preoccupation with mental activity diminishes your awareness of what's happening right here and now.

Next, pay attention to whether your awareness tends to focus on a particular object or sensation or tends to be more expansive and inclusive.

You may find that your awareness resembles a spotlight that flows from object to object. Notice how your awareness flows without trying to change it.

Does it shift quickly from one thing to another, or does it move more slowly, making contact with each object before moving on? Experiment with speeding up and slowing down the flow of awareness, and notice how that feels.

You may discover that your awareness is drawn again and again to certain kinds of objects and events, but not to others. Where does your awareness repeatedly wander? Which experience does it seem to selectively avoid?

Now, experiment with gently directing your awareness from one focus to another. When you pay attention to sounds, you may notice that you momentarily forget about your hands or the discomfort in your back or knees. Try to focus on one object of attention for as long as you can. How long can you remain undistracted before your mind skips to the next thing?

And here's perhaps the greatest paradox of all: If you practice meditation diligently, you may eventually come to realize that you've never left home, even for an instant.

Developing and Directing Awareness: The Key to Meditation



If, as the old saying goes, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, then the journey of meditation begins with the cultivation of *awareness*, or *attention*. In fact, awareness is the mental muscle that carries you along and sustains you on your journey, not only at the start but every step of the way. No matter which path or technique you choose, the secret of meditation

lies in developing, focusing, and directing your awareness. (Incidentally, attention is just slightly focused awareness, and I use the two terms more or less interchangeably throughout this book. See the sidebar “Becoming aware of your awareness.”)

To get a better sense of how awareness operates, consider another natural metaphor: light. You may take light for granted, but unless you’ve developed the special skills and heightened sensitivity of the blind, you can barely function without it. (Have you ever tried to find something in a pitch-dark room?) The same is true for awareness: You may not be aware that you’re aware, but you need awareness to perform even the simplest tasks.

You can use light in a number of ways. You can create ambient lighting that illuminates a room softly and diffusely. You can focus light into a flashlight beam to help you find things when the room is dark. Or you can take the very same light and concentrate it into a laser beam so powerful that it can cut through steel or send messages to the stars.



Likewise, in meditation, you can use awareness in different ways. To begin with, you can increase your powers of awareness by developing **concentration** on a particular object. (For a brief list of meditation objects, see the section “Different paths up the same mountain” earlier in this chapter.)

Then, when you’ve stabilized your concentration, you can, through the practice of **receptive awareness**, expand your awareness — like ambient light — to illuminate the full range of your experience.

Next, you can concentrate even further in order to **cultivate** positive emotions and mind-states. Or you can use awareness to investigate your inner experience and **contemplate** the nature of existence itself.

These four — *concentration*, *receptive awareness*, *cultivation*, and *contemplation* — constitute the major uses of awareness throughout the world’s great meditative traditions.

Building concentration

To do just about anything well, you need to focus your awareness. The most creative and productive people in every profession — for example, great athletes, performers, businessmen, scientists, artists, and writers — have the ability to block out distractions and completely immerse themselves in their work. If you’ve ever watched Tiger Woods hit a drive or Nicole Kidman transform herself into the character she’s portraying, you’ve witnessed the fruits of total *concentration*.



Some people have an innate ability to concentrate, but most of us need to practice to develop it. Buddhists like to compare the mind to a monkey — constantly chattering and hopping about from branch to branch, topic to topic. Did you ever notice that most of the time, you have scant control over the whims and vacillations of your monkey mind, which may space out one moment and obsess the next? When you meditate, you calm your monkey mind by making it *one-pointed* rather than scattered and distracted.



Many spiritual traditions teach their students concentration as the primary meditation practice. Just keep focusing your mind on the mantra or the symbol or the visualization, they advise, and eventually you will attain what is called *absorption*, or *samadhi*.

In absorption, the sense of being a separate “me” disappears, and only the object of your attention remains. Followed to its natural conclusion, the practice of concentration can lead to an experience of union with the object of your meditation. If you’re a sports enthusiast, this object could be your tennis racket or your golf club; if you’re an aspiring mystic, the object could be God or *being* or the absolute. (For more on the spiritual benefits of concentration, see Chapter 14. And if you want to use meditation to improve your performance, check out Chapter 16.)

Even though you may not yet know how to meditate, you’ve no doubt had moments of total absorption, when the sense of separation disappears: gazing at a sunset, listening to music, creating a work of art, looking into the eyes of your beloved. When you’re so completely involved in an activity, whether work or play, that time stops and self-consciousness drops away, you enter into what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow*. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi claims that activities that promote flow epitomize what most of us mean by *enjoyment*. Flow can be extraordinarily refreshing, enlivening, and even deeply meaningful — and it is the inevitable result of unbroken concentration.

Opening to receptive awareness



The great sages of China say that all things comprise the constant interplay of *yin* and *yang* — the feminine and masculine forces of the universe. Well, if concentration is the yang of meditation (focused, powerful, penetrating), then *receptive awareness* is the yin (open, expansive, welcoming).

Where concentration disciplines, stabilizes, and grounds the mind, receptive awareness loosens and extends the mind’s boundaries and creates more interior space, enabling you to familiarize yourself with the mind’s contents. Where concentration blocks extra stimuli as distractions to the focus at

hand, receptive awareness embraces and assimilates every experience that presents itself.

Most meditations involve the interplay of concentration and receptive awareness, although some more-advanced techniques teach the practice of receptive awareness alone. Just be open and aware and welcome to whatever arises, they teach, and ultimately you will be “taken by truth.” Followed to its conclusion, receptive awareness guides you in shifting your identity from your thoughts, emotions, and the stories your mind tells you to your true identity, which is *being* itself. (For more on thoughts, emotions, and stories, see Chapter 5.)

Of course, if you don’t know how to work with attention, these instructions are impossible to follow. That’s why most traditions prescribe practicing concentration first. Concentration, by quieting and grounding the mind (enough so that it can open without being swept away by a deluge of irrelevant feelings and thoughts), provides a solid foundation on which the practice of meditation can flourish.

Using contemplation for greater insight



Although concentration and receptive awareness provide enormous benefits, ultimately it’s insight and understanding — of how the mind works, how you perpetuate your own suffering, how attached you are to the outcome of events, and how uncontrollable and fleeting these events are — that offer freedom from suffering. And in your everyday life, it’s creative thinking — free from the usual limited, repetitive patterns of thought — that offers solutions to problems. That’s why *contemplation* is the third key component that transforms meditation from a calming, relaxing exercise to a vehicle for freedom and creative expression.

After you’ve developed your concentration and expanded your awareness, you eventually find that you have access to a more penetrating insight into the nature of your experience. You can use this faculty to explore your inner terrain and gradually understand and undermine your mind’s tendency to cause you suffering and stress (see Chapters 5 and 11). If you’re a spiritual seeker, you can use this faculty to inquire into the nature of the self or to reflect upon the mystery of God and creation. And if you’re a person with more practical concerns, you may ponder the next step in your career or relationship or contemplate some seemingly irresolvable problem in your life. (For more on the uses of meditation in ordinary life situations, check out Chapter 15.)

Cultivating positive, healing states of mind

Some meditations aim to open the heart and develop certain life-affirming qualities like compassion, lovingkindness, equanimity, joy, or forgiveness (see Chapter 10). On a more practical level, you can use meditation to cultivate a proactive, healthy immune system or to develop poise and precision in a particular sport. For example, you can visualize killer T cells attacking your cancer or imagine yourself executing a dive without a single mistake (see Chapter 16). These are the kinds of meditations I've chosen to call *cultivation*.

Where contemplation aims to investigate, inquire, and ultimately see deeply into the nature of things, cultivation can help you transform your inner life by directing the concentration you develop to strengthen positive, healthy mind-states and withdraw energy from those that are more reactive and self-defeating.

Making Meditation Your Own

Developing and directing your awareness may be the foundation of effective meditation — but like any good foundation, it's only the beginning. The next step is to build your house brick by brick, meditation session by meditation session, discovering what works for you and what doesn't, until your practice is grounded and stable. Or, to harken back to the journey metaphor, awareness is the muscle that propels you up the mountain. But you need to choose your route, find your pace, and navigate the obstacles that get in your way. In other words, you need to fashion and maintain your own practice and troubleshoot the difficulties that arise.

Designing your own practice

When you begin to develop and direct your awareness in meditation, you're faced with the challenge of putting all the pieces together into an integrated practice that's uniquely suited to your needs. (For more on designing your own practice, see Chapter 13.) For example, you may find yourself drawn to forms of meditation that emphasize focused concentration and have only minimal interest in the more open, allowing quality of receptive awareness. Or you may cherish the peace and relaxation you experience when you simply sit quietly without any effort or focus, not even the effort to be aware. Or you may have a specific purpose for meditating, such as healing an illness

or resolving a disturbing psychological issue, and only feel drawn to approaches that help you meet your goals.

The key is to experiment with different forms of meditation and trust your intuition to tell you which ones are best suited for you at this particular point on your journey up the mountain. Inevitably, yin and yang tend to balance each other out; that is, you may start out with intense concentration and end up with more relaxed, receptive awareness — or begin in a more receptive mode and gradually discover the virtues of focus. The journey of meditation has its own lessons to teach, and no matter what your intentions may be, you'll generally end up encountering those lessons that you were destined to learn.

Of course, if you intend to maintain your practice from week to week and month to month, which is the only way to reap the benefits of meditation, you'll probably need to draw on some of those time-honored qualities that every sustained enterprise requires: motivation, discipline, and commitment (see Chapters 4 and 9). Though they've gotten a bad rap in Western culture, where people generally expect to have their needs met right now, if not sooner, these qualities are actually not difficult to cultivate and in fact arise naturally when you're engaged in and — dare I say it — passionate about what you're doing.

Troubleshooting the challenges

As your meditation practice deepens and evolves, you may find yourself encountering unexpected challenges that you don't quite know how to handle. Here again, the mountain metaphor comes in handy. Say you're halfway up the trail and you hit a patch of icy terrain, or boulders block your path, or a thunderstorm sends you scurrying for cover. What do you do now? Do you pull out your special equipment and consult preestablished guidelines for dealing with the difficulties? Or do you just have to improvise as best you can?

The good news, as I mention earlier in this chapter, is that people have been climbing this mountain for thousands of years, and they've crafted tools and fashioned maps for traversing the terrain as smoothly and painlessly as possible. For example, if powerful emotions like anger, fear, sadness, or grief sweep through your meditation and make it difficult for you to stay present, you can draw on techniques for loosening their grip. (For guidelines on meditating with challenging emotions and habitual patterns, see Chapter 11.) Or if you encounter some of the common obstacles and roadside distractions on the path of meditation, such as sleepiness, restlessness, rapture, or doubt, you can count on time-honored methods for moving beyond them so you can continue on your way.



Mindfulness: Meditation as a way of life

Although I provide a variety of different techniques for your enjoyment and exploration, this book offers as its primary approach what the Buddhists call *mindfulness* — ongoing attention to whatever arises moment to moment.

Based on my years of experience and training, I've found that mindfulness, which blends concentration and receptive awareness, is one of the simplest techniques for beginners to learn and also one of the most readily adaptable to the busy schedules most of us face. After all, if you're like me, you're primarily concerned with living a more harmonious, loving, stress-free life, not lifting off into some disembodied spiritual realm divorced from the people and places you love.

In fact, the beauty, belonging, and love you seek are available right here and now — you only need to clear your mind and open your eyes, which is precisely what the practice of mindfulness is intended to teach! When you pay attention to your experience from moment to moment, you keep waking up from the daydreams and worries your mind fabricates and returning to the clarity, precision, and simplicity of the present, where life actually takes place.

The great thing about mindfulness is that you don't have to limit your practice to certain places and times — you can practice waking up and paying attention wherever you happen to be, at any time of the day or night.

Whatever you experience on your journey, you're likely to find expert guidance in the pages of this book, drawn not only from my own experience as a practitioner and teacher, but also from the accumulated wisdom of the world's meditative traditions. I cover all the basic approaches and potential issues — and refer you to other resources for further investigation and study, if you're so inclined.

Other Journeys That Masquerade as Meditation

Now that you have an overview of the meditative journey, take a look at some paths that superficially resemble meditation but lead you in an altogether different direction.

Of course, every activity can become a meditation if you do it with awareness or concentration. For example, you can wash the dishes or drive the car or talk on the phone meditatively. (For more on how to do this, see Chapter 15.)

But certain activities become confused with meditation in the popular imagination, whereas they may have a totally different intent. Some people claim that reading the newspaper or watching their favorite sitcom qualifies as meditation — well, who am I to judge?

Here are some ersatz meditations that certainly have their place in the repertory of leisure pursuits but don't generally offer the benefits of meditation:

- ✓ **Thinking:** In the West, the term *meditation* has frequently been used to refer to a kind of focused reflection on a particular theme, as when you say, “I’m going to meditate on this problem for a while.” Although higher-order contemplation or inquiry plays a part in some meditation techniques, it bears little resemblance to the often tortured, conflicted process that usually passes for thinking. Besides, thinking tires you out, whereas meditation refreshes you and perks you up.
- ✓ **Daydreaming:** Daydreaming and fantasy offer their own unique pleasures and rewards, including occasional problem-solving and a momentary escape from difficult or tedious circumstances. But rather than leaving you feeling more spacious and more connected with *being*, as meditation does, daydreaming often embroils you more actively in the drama of your life.
- ✓ **Spacing out:** Sometimes spacing out involves a momentary gap in the unbroken stream of thoughts and feelings that flood your awareness, a kind of empty space in which nothing seems to be happening except *being* itself. Such genuine “spacing out” lies at the heart of meditation and can be deliberately cultivated and extended. Alas, most spacing out is just another form of daydreaming!
- ✓ **Repeating affirmations:** This common new-age practice — a contemporary version of what used to be called *positive thinking* — purports to provide an antidote to your negative beliefs by replacing them with positive alternatives. Generally, however, the negativity is so deeply rooted that the affirmations merely skim the surface like froth on the ocean and never really penetrate to the depths, where your core beliefs reside.
- ✓ **Self-hypnosis:** By progressively relaxing your body and imagining a safe, protected place, you can lull yourself into an open, suggestible state known as a *light trance*. Here you can rehearse upcoming performances, rerun past events to get a more positive outcome, and reprogram your brain using affirmations. Although self-hypnosis differs from mindfulness meditation — the primary approach taught in this book, emphasizing ongoing attention to the present moment — it’s actually quite similar to the healing and performance enhancement techniques offered in Chapter 16.

Eating a piece of fruit

For this in-the-moment exercise, imagine that you've just arrived from another planet and have never experienced an orange before.

1. **Place an orange on a plate and close your eyes.**
2. **Set aside all thoughts and preconceptions, open your eyes, and see the fruit as though for the first time.**

Notice the shape, the size, the color, the texture.

3. **As you begin to peel the orange, notice how it feels in your fingers, the contrast between the flesh and the peel, the weight of the fruit in your hand.**

4. **Slowly raise a piece of the orange to your lips and pause a moment before eating.**

Notice how it smells before you begin.

5. **Open your mouth, bite down, and feel the texture of its soft flesh and the first rush of juice into your mouth.**

6. **Continue to bite and chew the orange, remaining aware of the play of sensations from moment to moment.**

Imagining that this may be the first and last orange you will ever eat, let each moment be fresh and new and complete in itself. Notice how this experience of eating an orange differs from your usual way of eating a piece of fruit.

✓ **Praying:** Ordinary or petitionary prayer, which calls on God for help or asks for something, can be performed meditatively but has little in common with meditation as I've been describing it. However, contemplative prayer, also known as *orison* (the yearning of the soul for union with the Divine) is actually a form of concentrated contemplation whose focus is God.

✓ **Sleeping:** Refreshing though it may be, sleep is not meditation — unless you happen to be an expert yogi who meditates in your sleep. Research shows that the brain waves generated during sleep are significantly different from those generated during meditation. Of course, meditators often find themselves falling asleep — and then, as one of my teachers used to say, sleep well! (For more on sleepiness in meditation, see Chapter 12.)

