

PART ONE

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# Unlearning Meditation

*The Basic Practice*

## Being Realistic about Meditation

Meditation is about a tension between allowing *your mind as it is* and *the meditation instructions you use*. The story of meditation, regardless of the tradition, is about the way our wandering mind and the meditation instructions work together, fight, or try to have nothing to do with each other. Most people think there should be perfect harmony between your mind and the meditation instruction you're following—this is *meditation*, after all! That's a romantic idea of meditation.

What we are concerned with here are realistic experiences of meditation, ones that feature conflicts, doubts, and desires as well as peaceful states, profound insights, and deep internal changes. Each person's meditation experience is a story with many dimensions to it—it is never an account of following an instruction perfectly and then someday achieving the promise of that practice. It just doesn't happen to real people that way. At least not to anyone I know.

The kinds of meditation stories I'm most familiar with are about unlearning meditation. While learning meditation involves adhering to particular instructions, unlearning meditation is a



way of meditating that acknowledges *your mind as it is* in meditation and explores the tension that exists between that and the instructions. It is a way both to unlearn an existing meditation practice and to begin a new one. The descriptions of meditation sittings in this book come from students who have embarked on a meditation practice that begins with allowing *your mind as it is* in meditation.

I will begin with my own story.

When I started meditating at age fourteen, I was first given the instruction to focus on a mantra, as was the common practice back then. I would sit for twenty to thirty minutes trying to stay with the single-syllable sound, repeating it over or lengthening the sound, attempting to fill all of my time in meditation with it, reminding myself to keep it alive whenever my mind wandered. I didn't stick with that practice for more than a few weeks, as it didn't seem to do anything. During that period of my life, I would also take time out during the day to lie on my back on a couch or sit in an armchair with my eyes closed. At those times I would let my mind wander and allow myself to go to sleep if I was so inclined. Often I just thought about things, usually about what I was reading, mostly Eastern religion and existentialism. But occasionally, I would flow into a state where I watched parades of inner images, and with that came a certain lightness and joy I wouldn't have called it meditation back then, because meditation meant sitting cross-legged with a straight back, with attention focused on my mantra.

I saw meditation in much the same way most beginning meditators see it: When I was doing the meditation instructions, even unsuccessfully, I was meditating. When I wasn't following a prescribed set of instructions—when I was letting my mind do as it pleased—I wasn't meditating. Since there was no one to give me the kind of guidance I now give students, I didn't know that what I was experiencing lying on my back could become the basis for a viable meditation practice. That wasn't meditation, and what was supposed to be meditation wasn't working for me, so I dropped it altogether for a number of years and for the most part forgot that

I could keep my body still for an hour or two and have my mind settle down and enter into a world of imagery.

In my early twenties, I tried other forms of meditation that came out of reading books on Tibetan Buddhism, but I soon realized that I needed to learn them from a teacher. I went to Nepal with the intention of pursuing a spiritual path but found myself teaching English instead. It was hard for me to connect with the Tibetan teachers, devotees, and teachings I encountered there, but I am glad I tried.

One day during our time in Nepal, my wife and I decided to go with a friend to a Tibetan nunnery in the foothills where a venerated lama was speaking. We hiked past a Vipassana meditation center on the way up to the temple, and *a few hundred yards* up the road I picked up a piece of paper lying on the ground. It was one of the center's brochures. I read it as we walked up the hill. All it contained was the daily schedule, which consisted of several hours a day of meditation, and the rules for a retreat, which were quite strict. I thought that if I went to that Vipassana center for ten days, I would surely get a serious meditation practice and would then be able to realize my spiritual aspirations for this life.

I called up the center, which taught the meditation method of the Indian Vipassana teacher S. N. Goenka, and enrolled in the next ten-day retreat, which was only a couple of weeks away. I recall trying to meditate on my own in preparation for the retreat, going back to using a mantra mostly, but without much success. I reckoned that when the retreat rolled around, I would really learn how to meditate.

The retreat began in the evening with meditation instructions. I sat in a full lotus position on a flat cushion. The meditation hall was a cement building. The floors were cold and hard, as there was no carpeting. I did as instructed. I brought my attention to the tip of my nostrils and noticed the sensations of my breath moving in and out. It was easier to feel the breath go in at first, but after a few minutes, I could detect the air brushing past my nostrils and upper lip, however faintly. My breathing started to speed up, making it easier to notice. I was surprised when the bell rang.

The next day we got up at around 4:00 A.M. and began sitting at 4:30. Once again I sat in full lotus, and as soon as I put my attention on my nostrils, my breathing quickened. I stayed focused on one breath following another for the next two hours. I remember seeing an image of a man in one of those heavy metal diving suits. He was floating deep underwater with barnacles all over the suit, as if he had been there for ages. I quickly interpreted that image as referring to an aspect of myself that was still unconscious, as I was fond of Jungian psychology at that time. But I was able to let go of such thoughts easily and keep my attention fastened on my breath.

A couple of days later, we were asked to switch from observing the breath to focusing on bodily sensations. On that day we were given instructions to scan our bodies from the top of our heads to the tips of our toes. This was done in a slow manner, taking about ninety minutes to do it completely. I found that I could also do that practice with good concentration, and after a few days I began to experience a free-flow of sensations up and down my body, which was what was supposed to happen when doing the practice consistently over the course of a retreat. I felt adept at that way of meditating as well. Here I had learned two new meditation techniques that I could do well.

I had found my meditation practice for life, or so I thought. After the retreat it was so easy to follow the meditation instruction to just notice the breath at the nostrils. There was hardly any thinking, my mind rarely wandered away from the breath, and my awareness of the air moving in and out of my nostrils was also soft and gentle. There was no force involved. There was harmony between my mind as it was and the instruction I used. I not only wished it would last forever but actually thought it would.

In the spring of the following year, my wife and I left Nepal, where we had lived for nearly six years, and went to Sri Lanka. As soon as we were off the plane and through immigration, we took a bus to Colombo and then another bus to a meditation center we had heard about. By nightfall we were receiving meditation instructions from one of the monks. Then we were separated. She



was assigned to a small room in the female compound, and I was given a room on the outskirts of the monastery.

We had both done several ten-day meditation retreats in Nepal and India at centers teaching Goenka's Vipassana method. This meditation center taught the Vipassana method of the famed Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw. We were asked to stop doing Goenka's Vipassana. We were instructed not to observe our breath at the nostrils but instead to observe the rise and fall of our abdomen. We were instructed to note each sense impression in terms of the sense door (such as "hearing, hearing" for when we heard the sound of a bird, and not "bird chirping"). Also, we were told that we should alternate our sittings with one-hour periods of walking meditation, and we were given instructions to keep our attention focused on the lifting, moving, and placing of our feet as we slowly paced up and down the wide corridors.

Rather than unlearning our previous meditation practice, we were asked to abandon it and take up a new one—as if that were humanly possible. What I did was practice Goenka's method for about half the sittings during the day and then tried out the new method in the remaining sittings. I really didn't want to give up my familiar practice, even though instead of making me calmer and clearer, the moving of sensations up and down my body, along with alternating between sitting in lotus and half-lotus postures, was creating muscle tightening and spasms. Much of each sitting was taken up by painful sensations shooting through my body and the desire to relieve all the physical tension. Only in the early morning or after the midday meal did I feel relaxed enough to make it through an entire sitting without moving. I stuck with sitting through my pain and soon was able to devote more meditation sittings to this new method, and I began to have experiences that are common when practicing that method seriously and exclusively.

By the end of three weeks, I had decided to become a monk, and my wife had decided to become a nun. I ordained at that very same meditation center, while she left soon thereafter for Bodh-gaya, India, since women weren't ordained at that center. I continued to meditate using the Mahasi method, trying to leave my

old meditation practice behind, though I would often find myself focusing on my breath at the nostrils and, occasionally, moving sensations up and down my body.

Eventually I discovered ways to transition more thoroughly to what I saw as a more grounded and sensible meditation practice, which integrated the instructions of both methods, and which also helped me tolerate my physical discomfort. Instead of moving sensations through my body intentionally, I began to allow my attention to go where sensations emerged naturally, as is taught in the Mahasi method. Without the intention to move sensations, I found that sensations just popped up in places, sometimes in the same place over and over again. Whereas before I would become involved in having a sensation that formed in my head move down into my chest and abdomen, I was now just allowing the sensation to form as it would naturally in my head, remaining open to seeing what would happen. Often what happened was that I would become focused on the particular sensation and I would start to break it down into smaller pieces, or I would try to find the center of the ache or pain and concentrate on it. I could easily have picked these instructions up from a teacher, as I have heard these instructions since, but none of my teachers or fellow monks ever mentioned going into physical sensations in these two ways. In the strict Mahasi method, you were supposed to note each sensation as it arose and passed away, which works fine for fleeting sensations but not so well when something sticks around for a long time, especially if it gets worse. So I had to learn other ways to be with what I was naturally experiencing.

Another thing I discovered was that by bringing my attention to the contact of my ankles and rear sitting on the hard, cold cement floor of my room, I could learn how *not* to focus on bodily sensations. This was completely opposed to concentrating on the sensations. By having my attention on the external contact of sitting on the cold, hard floor, I could then experience internal sensations with a certain distance. I no longer got involved in either moving sensations or focusing intensely on them. The world of internal sensations, which, for me, were mostly dull pains, feelings



of tightness, throbbing, vibrations, and tingling, seemed to become looser, freer, more dynamic and changing as I continued to sit in this way. Also, quite contrary to my expectations, I developed greater tolerance for painful sensations by not focusing on them.

During this period, a fair percentage of my sittings were dedicated to being aware of my breath, and I would often switch to awareness of breathing when there were periods of almost no physical pain. I wanted to switch my focus of attention on the breath from the nostrils to the abdomen, and that took some time and considerable patience. I just couldn't hold my attention on my belly for more than a few minutes. I would note "rising, rising" and "falling, falling" each time I felt my belly fully extend and contract, but it wasn't the same as noticing the touch of the breath at the nostrils, which came so easily for me. It had a forced quality to it. Most of the time, I was trying too hard to keep my attention on my abdomen. Something had to change.

What I did was apply the same principle I learned from sitting with sensations. Instead of trying to focus on my abdomen, I brought my attention to my whole body sitting still, and from that vantage point, I noticed what was moving. What was moving when I breathed naturally was not my abdomen but my diaphragm, chest, and collarbone. The movement was occurring higher up in my body. To make my abdomen move in and out required an intention to create that movement; in a sense, I had to change the way I breathed to become aware of the rise and fall of the abdomen. What I did instead was just breathe naturally, and having my attention on my whole body sitting still made that possible. I could follow my breath easily for most of the sitting if I wanted to.

But observing my whole body breathing was never as absorbing as observing my breath at my nostrils. Upon reading the Buddha's description in the Satipatthana Sutta (Discourse on Establishing Awareness) about bringing one's attention to the front of one's face and then noticing the breath go in and out, I tried that approach. It's basically the same principle as being aware of your diaphragm going up and down as you keep your attention



on the still posture of sitting. Having my attention on my whole face, which was essentially still for the whole sitting, provided a way to be with and notice the air that moved out of my nostrils and into them.

As I became more established in being aware of my body sitting still, other things that had previously been excluded from my meditation practice began to become more prominent. I began to have longer periods of thinking. Emotions emerged in my thoughts, and I would feel them less as bodily sensations and more as moods, attitudes, eruptions of feeling. My mind would drift off into some hazy, drowsy, and yet very tranquil states for long stretches of time, sometimes lasting a couple of hours. I had successfully unlearned the meditation instructions I was taught. I was moving in the direction of allowing my mind to be as it was in meditation.

I intuitively knew that this was a truly remarkable and beneficial development, but from the standpoint of the meditation instructions I had learned, it didn't look that way. But this is how unlearning meditation looks, at least initially, both as a practice for beginners and as a direction for those who have learned a meditation practice.