

# illuminating articles

[Meditations]

## The Power of *presence*



A few months ago I was riding my bike around town. I am the type of person who *errs* on the side of caution. I go slow, I am aware of my surroundings, and I don't do tricks. That being said, I was on my bike, gaining more speed than I was comfortable, so I applied pressure to both of my brakes. The front brake catches, the back brake does not, launching me into the legendary experience of "endo-ing," flying over my handlebars and rapidly making contact with the asphalt below. In this moment, I was completely present. I was not worried about food, money, relationships, work, the world, or anything else. 100% of myself was flying through the air and meeting the earth beneath me.

Another moment: I am hiking with my dog on my favorite trail. I smell the earth, the pine trees, the leaves on the ground. I hear the stream running next to me, birds singing their songs over the soft humming wind. My dog runs ahead and then races

back to me, and I am absolutely full of love and gratitude. Again, I find myself 100% in this moment.

Everyone has had moments where they have felt completely present. Often these moments invite feelings of joy or gratitude. Sometimes, these moments allow for intense processing of physical or emotional pain. Often the act of creation brings presence. Those times when you are working on something and hours fly by. Artists can be present when they are making their art, musicians when they're making music. Occasionally there are spontaneous moments of presence that arise while doing the dishes. Intimacy is often a gateway to moments of absolute presence. Another way to cultivate these experiences is through a meditation practice.

A by-product of meditation is that it increases these moments and allows for easier access to them. I have often heard of meditation as being a still pond, and your mind or thoughts are pebbles that fall into the water creating ripples; disturbances that can cloud perception. A quiet mind sounds nice. But many enter meditation with the belief that you have to stop your thoughts, and therein there is a great struggle against the mind. I invite you to be present with your thoughts. To watch the pebbles fall, so to speak, the ripples and then calm that follows. If thoughts arise, part of the practice is to notice them, without getting pulled

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out of the moment. Meditation is a type of mental processing, and the thoughts that arise are valuable, you are paying attention to a part of the brain that is going all day long, to what goes on when you are “lost in thought,” when pebble drop and you dive beneath the surface to find, analyze or eradicate a pebble and the accompanying ripples, rather than this watchful, observing practice. The trick is to hear the thought without following the thought.

Eventually, throughout the course of a dedicated practice of meditation, you will have moments which Buddhism calls “the experiences of delight, which bring feelings of bliss, rapture, contentment, harmony, and expansiveness” (“Meditative Transformations,” by Mark Epstein). Every cell of your body, is awake and is feeling. Every sense is alive, often heightened. I find it powerful that in one of the most ancient texts, Pantanjali's “Yoga-Sutra” the first two lines read:

***Now the teachings of Yoga. Yoga is to still the patterning of consciousness.***

“Still the patterning of consciousness,” which can be seen as taking back some of the power that has been given to your mental chatter, to change your thoughts and your reactions to them. To bring your mind back from the past and out of the future, and fully engage yourself in the present moment. I mentioned that these experiences can be full of joy

in the moment, but they also increase your happiness in general, which can have profound impacts on your health, career, family and quality of life. Andy Puddicombe gave a TED talk saying that all it takes is 10 minutes of “doing nothing” everyday. This helped me establish my personal practice of meditation, as I definitely could carve out 10 minutes a day. I hope you will be inspired to try this, consistently for a few weeks, be open, and see what happens.

It may be helpful to note the truth that all who have meditated are working with the same materials. There is no technology that makes it easier. Every person that meditates is going on the same journey of those who have meditated since the beginning of time. You are joining a great history and community of disciples when you start a regular meditation practice. Meditation offers you the opportunity to know who you are. It allows you to become yourself more fully.

There is your challenge, or invitation, now I have some ideas that may help you be present and begin to establish your meditation (or “doing nothing”) practice. Take what you like, and leave what you don't like.

- Try and find a time to meditate, and meditate at that time everyday. Routine is essential.

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- Meditate how you are comfortable. You can sit on the floor, but if that is uncomfortable, then by all means sit in a chair!
- Turn off the music, the technology (yes... phone needs to go away for 10 minutes), I find it helpful to dim the lights and close the door. Set a timer (but not the one on your phone) for 10 minutes.
- There is a yoga mudra, a gesture with the hands that can affect the body and spirit, the Jnana or Chin mudra can help in cultivating presence. Your pointer finger represents the future. Your thumb the past. When you bring them together there is a gentle pressure, the present moment. You can have your palms facing up or down, whichever is more comfortable to you.
- Your 5 senses can support you in staying present. What are you feeling right now? Hearing? Seeing? Smelling? This includes aches, emotions, the air touching your skin, the kids or laundry machine in the background. What do you feel now? Now? Now? Distracted? Great! Now come back to your senses.
- Visualization: Visualize the color white. White is a color of potential, of life and death, beginnings, endings and transformations. It is the color of unity, peace and clarity. You can begin by looking at a physical object/image that is white (like a wall), and then do it more abstractly. Maintain openness and you will discover a great many things can arise through this visualization of white.
- Each breath offers you the opportunity to stay present. Focus on your breath, every inhale and exhale. You will get lost in thoughts, the mind naturally wanders. As soon as you become aware of this, reconnect with your breath, and voila! You are back in the present moment.
- Lastly, mantra can be helpful for some, and saying something verbally or mentally helps to focus the mind and invite presence. Find a saying, prayer or mantra that resonates with you, and spend 10 minutes focusing on that. Again, as distractions arise, without reaction or attachment, refocus your mind on your mantra and root yourself back in the present moment.

The joy of the present moment is addicting, and I wish you luck as you begin on a path toward a more present life.

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