Establishing a Meditation Practice

*I am not afraid of storms,*

*For I am learning to sail my ship.*

~Louisa May Alcott
How should I start my (each) daily practice?

Sit quietly for a moment and let yourself become calm. Remind yourself of your intentions and hopes in establishing a practice: for example, to become kind, to be more fully aware, to sustain inner peace, to manage pain, to practice lovingkindness in the world, to lead a balanced life.

How long should I meditate each day?

It will support your practice if you decide ahead of time how long you are going to sit. An average length of meditation sit time is between 15 and 45 minutes. As you sit daily, you will gradually start to notice changes in yourself (i.e., feel more rested during the day, less irritable, periods of calmness, better control of appetite).

If you are new to meditation, experiment with length of time initially. Start with 5 minutes and gradually increase to the amount of time appropriate for you.

When you commit to a length of time and sit for it, your confidence to meditate increases. As the saying goes: you get out of it what you put into it.

That being said, life happens. If you do not sit as planned, use that as incentive and do so with self-compassion.

When should I sit?

What is most important is to sit or to practice every day. It is usually best to commit to the same time every day; that will help to create a habit. It will become a time that you look forward to. A time for yourself, for quieting, for clearing.
Tara Brach PhD, a well-known teacher of Mindfulness Meditation and the author of several books on the subject, shared her strategy for establishing her practice early in her meditation experience. It was a very busy time in her life—completing graduate school, raising a family, working. She called her strategy: “creating a non-negotiable practice”. What she meant was that, no matter what, she would do some form of meditation (i.e., breath, body sensation, walking meditation, practice of compassion), every day, even if it was only one minute. This is an attainable goal and works well for many; it certainly has helped me.

Morning is the time when people usually choose to meditate. It sets the tone for the day; the mind is less cluttered. It is more important to choose a time that you can commit to on an ongoing basis. Some people meditate twice during the day—dividing their time between a morning and evening meditation.

Taking a “mindful pause” during the day to gather yourself, establish contact with the breath and body, is helpful in being present, feeling alive.

Where should I meditate?

While you do not need a “special” place to go to in order to meditate, it is helpful to meditate in the same place every day. You habituate to that space, allowing you to enter your practice with greater ease.

The space you choose—your living room couch, a chair with good back support by a window, your study—should be a clean, quiet area, free from distractions. You may wish to make your area “special” by decorating it with meaningful objects—stones, pictures, flowers, art. Whatever you sit in should encourage good spinal alignment. If you are not going to sit upright, i.e., without support/without leaning
back against the chair, you may need lumbar/cervical cushions.

However, any space can be a space for meditation—the commuter train, a park bench, a meadow. Allow yourself to experiment.

**What posture should I use to meditate?**

In this course, we will primarily be using the chair sitting posture. (Other postures are standing, walking, lying down.) One posture is not more important than another; what is important is achieving a balance between alertness and calmness while you are in a pose.

**Specific tips:**

1. Sit with dignity and kindness.
2. Elongate the spine, following its natural curve, remaining relaxed.
3. You may wish to fold a blanket and place it under your sitting bones; this elevates the buttocks slightly and can help with sitting upright.
4. Let the shoulders move down and away from the ears, and the neck and trapezius areas soften.
5. Hand placement:
   a. put your hands in your lap, one on top of the other or
   b. put your hands on your thighs, palms up or palms down (whatever is more comfortable)
6. Be aware of the back of the neck, lengthening the cervical spine. Adjust the plane of the face, so that it is perpendicular to the floor. Let the lips part, so that the teeth do not touch. Move the tongue away from the roof of the mouth. Gently and consciously close the eyes.

**Do I need special equipment to meditate?**
No, no equipment is needed.

You may find it helpful to have the following:

1. Water bottle
2. Shawl or covering
3. Kleenex
4. Journal plus writing implement
5. Lumbar/cervical pillow/s
6. If you are at a retreat or taking a class, a tote bag to carry the above.

What do I do when I am done meditating?

Spend some minutes writing spontaneously in your journal. Do not censor what you are writing, edit, reread, correct grammar—just write freeform. If what you are writing seems “illogical”, just say “oh, that’s fine” and continue writing.

Thank yourself for the care you have just given yourself.

Do you make regular visits to yourself?

~Rumi