

The Not So Big Life

Chapter Eight: Creating a Place and a Time of Your Own

Your Turn: Mindfulness versus Labeling

Look around you right now. Wherever you are sitting as you read this—whether it's a subway car, a park bench, or your own armchair at home—lift your eyes up and look at your surroundings. But look without naming things for a moment. Just take in the colors, the textures, and the quality of in your environment. Listen to the sounds, not with their conventional associations, but just as they are. If there are scents in the air, smell them as if for the first time. After doing this for a few minutes, change the way you are engaging what surrounds you by labeling everything you see—door, window, plant, yellow leaf, Kleenex box, etc.

Afterwards, record in your notebook the difference between the two experiences. What were your observations of the period of simply experiencing versus the period of labeling? What can you learn about yourself and your engagement in your everyday activities from this difference? Did you have difficulty with either process? When you use labels, are you really experiencing what's there?

You may want to repeat this process a few times in the days and weeks to come. The more you develop a relaxed awareness, the more difference you'll experience between the two.

Exercise: Making a Time and Place for Solitude

When you are first starting to meditate, or taking time to sit quietly by yourself, it helps enormously to set the conditions for uninterrupted focus. You don't have to have "the perfect place." You don't need to put off meditation because you can't find a place that's soundproof, decorated in your favorite color, and filled with your favorite things. If you are lucky enough to be able to create such a place, by all means do so, but as any experienced meditator will tell you, the place is secondary. Your entire life, over time, becomes the meditation, so the right place is wherever you happen to be.

It's worth noting that when you start out, you are creating a pattern for yourself that will make it easier to meditate regularly. If the place is desirable, you are more likely to want to go there. If the peace and calm you enjoy there puts you at ease, you are more likely to want to keep that time of day sacrosanct. In many ways, you are conditioning yourself to a new behavior, much as if you were training a child to learn to eat properly. There's a regular ritual to eating, and that ritual brings with it important nutrition beyond what you introduce to the digestive system.

The process of learning to meditate is just the same. You first accustom yourself to meditating at a regular time each day, and then you are introduced to various different experiences of meditation as you sit. You don't have to do anything. They just happen. Sometimes a leg will go to sleep while you sit, and you'll feel its pins and needles spreading upward. All you need to do is observe it. Sometimes you'll feel light as a feather. A thought may go through your mind that you are going to float away. But it's all simply illusion, simply thought. You just let it go, like every other thought. Sometimes you might see stars, hear or feel vibrations, or perceive a large expansive space. Everyone is different, as is every sitting, and there are no right or wrong experiences. I even went through a period of shaking all over as I sat. It lasted for a month or two, and then it stopped.

If I'd read meaning into this, it might have either scared me or perhaps made me think I was special in some way. But it's all simply part of the process of waking up, and when you avoid attributing meanings to the things that happen to you, you simply allow the natural flow of your own unfolding. Every time you attach a belief to an experience or event in your life—and this is as true of your everyday life as it is of meditation—you will experience a restriction to that flow. You never know what “food” you'll be introduced to, but just like the child, your job is simply to taste, and to avoid judging the new flavors as either good or bad.

Meditation ABCs

The process I'm recommending that you start with is the same one that I was taught. It's simple and it gives you very little to worry about—a real asset for dealing with the hyperactive minds that most of us are endowed with. In the following sections I'll give you more tips about the amount of time to spend, and where to sit, etc., but first, let's just review what you are going to do.

Simply sit, either on a cushion with legs crossed if you can, or kneeling on the floor, or sitting on a chair if you prefer. It is important to keep your spine straight, so whatever you are sitting on, make sure that it provides the support you need to keep it so. Then rest your hands in your lap, or on your knees if you like, and close your eyes. You are going to stay in this position for the duration of the meditation, so make sure you are reasonably comfortable, without slouching or slumping.

As you sit, you'll become aware of all the thoughts bubbling up in your mind. Typically, when we're *not* meditating, we'll follow one thought with another and another in a linear way, associating ideas to each one, and then listen to the stories they

create. But here in this still time, you'll now just let each thought go as it arises. For purposes of understanding the process, if you bring to mind a cartoon character with a thought bubble over his head, you can envision that thought being released and the bubble floating away in its balloon. That's very much what you'll be doing with your thoughts. So, for example, the thought might arise, "I wonder if I locked the door." Instead of associating that thought with another in which you try to determine whether or not you did, and another where you remember the last time you thought you hadn't locked the door, simply let the thought pass as though it were spoken by someone you don't know and have no involvement with. Remember, it's not your thought. It's "the" thought, floating around in the ethers, but entirely without meaning in this calm interior space you are making. Thought after thought will come; let each one go in just the same way.

Because of all the letting go you are doing, along with sometimes getting hooked into a thought sequence and then suddenly becoming aware of that train of thought and the need to let it go, the first few times you sit may not seem calm. In fact thoughts arise in meditation all the time, even for people who've been meditating for years, but the more practiced you become, the less you pay attention to them; gradually they won't even enter your awareness anymore. What frustrates a lot of new meditators is that they can't stop thinking. It's important to recognize that that's not the point. The point is instead to stop *attaching* to the thoughts and buying into what they are telling you. Let those balloons just float on by.

For some people, this approach is all they need. But if you find you need something to focus on as you sit, let your mind pay attention to the passage of your breath in and out. You aren't trying to do anything at all here other than keep your mind occupied with something harmless. If it wanders, which it will, just let the thought go and bring your attention back to the breath. That's it. No words to repeat or sounds to make, no special way of breathing, and no special positioning for hands, lips, tongue, or eyeballs. Keep it as simple and unencumbered as possible for now. If you want to practice some other variant of meditation later that's fine, but start the process with an absolute minimum of things to get hung up on. Just sit and let those thoughts go. There's nowhere to get to, and there's no one, NO ONE, who can't do this. If you follow these simple instructions, you'll be meditating.

Duration

By setting a length of time to sit—I recommend twenty minutes to start with—you are conditioning yourself to remain in meditation, even when something inside you thinks it might be more enjoyable to get up now. Just as with the child, you can parent yourself to stay put until the period of meditation is over. Although you may not appreciate the

value of this to start with, over time you'll come to see that the part of you that wants to get up now is the part that cannot recognize the nutrition that comes from meditation. But through the discipline of simply sitting, that part too will be transformed, in just the same way that the child finally finishes dinner so that it can be allowed to go and play.

If you have already written off the idea of meditating because you can't imagine sitting still for that long, start with five minutes a day for the first week, ten minutes a day for the second, fifteen minutes a day for the third, and twenty thereafter. Regularity is more important than length initially as you are accustoming yourself to the habit of sitting quietly. By increasing the period gradually you'll find that it's not really as difficult as you'd imagined, and after a while you'll look forward to the time each day that you sit because you'll feel so replenished by it.

Place

The basic conditions for a place in which to practice being still are as follows:

- The place is relatively quiet, and as free from interruptions as possible. If there's a phone close by, unplug it. If there's an inescapable noise from an adjacent space, get yourself a pair of earplugs. Use whatever tools you need in order to create a sense of peaceful sanctuary.
- The place is always available at the time of day you've selected to meditate. I've known people who've been exceptionally creative in finding a place for themselves, even when the house or apartment they live in is very small. One man set up a spot for himself on the floor of his walk-in closet. Another actually used the whirlpool tub—without water in it of course. It was just the right size for him to sit in cross-legged. He could lock the door, so there were no surprise visitors, and the whole bathroom provided a pleasant, light-filled ambiance that was quite conducive to sitting quietly. Other good options are a corner of the master bedroom, or a secluded or seldom-used room. Guest bedrooms are often a good option. You can even use the bed itself as the sitting surface, if you need to, by putting a couple of firm cushions underneath you for support.
- The place gives you a sense of privacy. One of the very common obstacles to sticking to a regular practice schedule is the fear of being seen while meditating. Beginning meditators often feel awkward, or embarrassed. This is simply because they aren't yet used to the idea of meditation, and assume they'll be considered odd for adopting this new practice. The fear is really their own, but until this is fully understood, it's best to select a place where there's guaranteed privacy. A lockable door is a great help in this respect, but if this isn't a

possibility, something as simple as a tri-fold screen set across the corner of a room can give at least visual privacy.

Time of Day

As for the time during which to meditate, this will depend a lot on your particular schedule. Meditating during a period when you have more physical chi, more energy, is definitely preferable. If you have small children who are with you most of the day, you may want to wake up early and meditate then, or you may want to wait until after they are soundly asleep. If you work at a job that tends to exhaust you, it will be much more useful to meditate before you go to work rather than after you return. If you are very tired physically and mentally, meditation can be a lot more difficult because your body would much rather just go to sleep than sit and remain alert. And if you have the luxury of working at home, or have the option of picking a time to meditate during the day, you might want to select a time when you feel most vital and alive.

For those who believe there is simply no time available, there may be a part of your personality that wants to keep you from ever being still. It is invested in keeping you doing, doing, doing, so that you never have a chance to be, and never have a chance to stop and look at *how* you do what you do. In these situations, it's important to refute the belief. There are a number of ways to do this.

- Check to see if there are ever any times during the day when you are waiting for someone or something to be completed:
 - Do you sit in the car and wait for your child to get out of school each day?
 - Do you ride the train to and from work every day?
 - Do you have a cup of coffee while you are waiting for the laundry cycle to end?

All these times are opportunities for still time.

- Check to see if there is someone you could delegate to do something that you currently do, in order to free up a few minutes.
 - Do you have an older child who could watch the younger ones for a while?
 - Could you ask your spouse to make breakfast, or the kid's lunches every other day?
 - Could you make an arrangement with your neighbor to take each other's kids for a walk together every other day?

These kinds of time-sharing arrangements can open up some time slots that are currently unavailable.

- Check to see if there are times that you are currently using in other ways that could be “repurposed.”
 - Do you have a designated lunch hour that you typically use for eating out with friends and colleagues?
 - Do you work through your lunch breaks because everyone else does, or because you believe you get more done during the day that way?
 - Do you have a habit of vacuuming the house each day, whether it needs it or not, because that’s what you learned from your mother?
 - Do you watch TV for an hour or so each evening before going to bed?

The time spent in each of these activities could be abbreviated or redirected to include twenty minutes for sitting alone quietly.

Once you give yourself permission to consider your schedule creatively, you’ll find periods that can be opened up and designated for solitude. It is the belief that these times don’t exist that is the problem.

If you find yourself slipping from regular practice because the time of day you’ve selected gets impinged upon by other apparently pressing issues, it may be an indication that this isn’t the ideal time for you, or it may be that your personality is looking for a way to avoid meditating altogether. If it’s not obvious which is the case, try a different time and see if this works better. If it doesn’t, it’s almost certainly a personality issue. Take this as a cue that what’s required is a stronger inner parenting style. I’ve certainly been through periods when I had to fight the urge to do the hundred-and-one other things I could think of to do right then. Recognizing the similarity between myself and the wriggling child at the dinner table helps keep me on task.

Timers

As far as timing devices are concerned, you can use a regular alarm clock, of course, to signal that the time you’ve set aside for meditation has come to an end, but if you do so, make sure the buzzer isn’t too startling or it will instantly shatter the calm state you’ll be in. There are also meditation chimes available, and ambient sound generators that will serenade you with everything from breaking ocean waves to tropical rain forests. The choices are endless. I like the sound of a chime because it brings me back from

meditation more peacefully, and allows the calm of the meditative state to continue, even as I start to move around and re-engage in my daily routine. You'll find some links for various products that are available on the Not So Big Life website Product Recommendations page.

Seat

Finally, but also most importantly, the cushion or chair you sit on is a really important feature of your meditation practice. Everyone's body is different, so it's worth trying out various shapes and sizes of cushion before you settle on one in particular. The Zen monastery I went to when I first started meditating had round zafus, which are the most archetypal of meditation cushions. Many people love them, but for me, they are quite uncomfortable. My legs go to sleep very quickly when sitting on a zafu.

I was lucky enough to stumble into a type of cushion that's shaped a bit like a large, overstuffed boomerang, which is designed to place some of the weight of your body on your knees, while keeping the back very straight. For me, this style of cushion allows me to sit comfortably for hours at a time. There are also low wooden stools, for those who have a hard time sitting cross-legged. And finally, if all else fails, there's the common garden chair; but if you do use a chair, remember to keep your spine upright and straight. It is almost impossible to meditate effectively when you are slumped over, or lying down. There's something very important about having the spine at a right angle to the floor. As I did with timers, I've included some suggestions for sources of cushions on the Not So Big Life website Product Recommendations page.

Coping with Distractions

Wherever and whenever you decide to meditate, you will face distractions. But remember that even when there are fire trucks passing your window, and the cat is trying to climb into your lap, it is entirely possible to remain in meditation. These are just sounds and movements, available to be observed as phenomena, but not requiring your attention. Just like thoughts, let them go. It's really a very natural thing to do. It's our mind that wants to make it complicated.

Now give it a try, and see how easy it really is to set the conditions for widening the aperture of your awareness.