

Westside Notes



A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

Featured Article: *Meditation—It's Not What You Think It Is*

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By now you might have heard about the many benefits of practicing meditation. I don't know about you, but my mind begins to snap shut as soon as someone tells me that something is good for me (especially when it comes to lima beans). So I won't tell you why meditation is good for you – instead I will share some of my own experience with meditation and some tips for starting your own meditation practice. I hope to dispel some of the myths that I had to overcome when I began practicing.

In the late 80s I was living in Boston, attending graduate school and waitressing in Kenmore square. I was pretty anxious during that time – I had trouble sleeping and most of the time my shoulders were tense and inching closer to my ears. A friend introduced me to George Mumford, a meditation teacher and sports therapist. George spent 5 seasons with Phil Jackson, (legendary coach of the Los Angeles Lakers and Chicago Bulls) helping professional basketball players practice mindfulness on the court.

George suggested that meditation might help reduce my anxiety. When I first began meditating I really did not like it. In fact, I hated it. I would sit down to meditate and the thoughts in my head would get really loud. It seemed that meditation was making things worse not better; I called George often, sometimes late at night. I would complain that I did not have a blank mind.

Myth # 1 – Nowhere is written that successful meditators have blank minds; I am not sure where this rumor started, but it is just not true. As I continued to struggle, George would say kind, practical things like “Just direct your attention to your breath.” I would go back to my practice, determined to get it right this time. Sometimes I found it helpful to count my breath, other times I would silently repeat “breathe in love, breathe out fear.” Sometimes I could not sit still and I would choose to practice walking meditation.

Myth #2 – Meditation must be practiced in a seated cross-legged position, even if you are a runner with tight hamstrings. George taught me how to practice walking mindfully; paying attention to the sensations in my body, especially my feet as they touched the ground. I practiced moving slowly with focus, (luckily there were no cell phones in those days) breathing and noticing sensations in my body as I walked.

Eventually I developed a daily 20 minute practice. I like to practice in the morning, sometimes I practice in the middle of the day if I am running late. If I have had a stressful day, I might practice again for a few minutes before bed.

Myth 3 – Meditation must be practiced in the morning and **Myth 4** – Meditation must be practiced for at least an hour for it to be effective. I have experimented with longer and shorter time periods throughout the years and have found that 20 minutes feels right for me. Some people prefer a longer period of time. One of my friends who is the mother of a small child, likes to practice at night while she sits in a rocking chair near her daughter’s bed watching her fall asleep.

I would describe my practice as Insight-Based meditation, focusing on the sensations in my body and thoughts in my mind. When I find myself getting attached to any particular sensation (for example-itchy nose) I simply come back to my breath. If I am sitting and I start thinking “What’s for dinner” I simply come back to my breath. There is a funny meditation teacher in Venice, California who asks his thoughts to have seat on the couch and says “I’ll get to you later.” When I worked in technology I would often think about my coworkers and how they irritated me, I would acknowledge the irritation and then direct them to have a seat on the couch. Sometimes my couch would be packed with so many people that some of them had to sit on the floor.

My meditation practice extends throughout my day into mindfulness. The way I differentiate between the two terms is that meditation happens at a specific time that I set aside each day for practice. Mindfulness means carrying my meditation practice into my daily affairs; it is about my commitment to slowing down and being aware, trying to respond mindfully as opposed to reacting.

Each day is different. Sometimes I meditate, start my car and ease into my day. Other times it is clear that everyone in Los Angeles needs to take driving lessons and that I am the only person who knows how to operate a car. Those are the days I try and practice Thich Nhat Hanh’s red light meditation. Red light meditation consists of stopping at the red traffic light and relaxing your tight grip on the wheel. The next step is to take a breath and softly smile. It does not have to be a huge grin, just a gentle smile and a few relaxing breaths.

Myth #5 – Meditation is no fun. Meditation is an “individual adventure” (these are Bill Wilson’s words, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous). I encourage you to make it work for you. Some days I practice sitting meditation, other days washing dishes meditation, making soup meditation, the list goes on. Whatever you choose to do just have fun with it, just don’t forget to breathe. I incorporate meditation and mindfulness into my work with my clients; helping them to develop their own unique ways of being present in the world and using that presence to enhance their experience in therapy.