

Sticking with It

How to sustain your meditation practice

By [Sharon Salzberg](#)

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A friend invited me out to lunch one day and in the course of the meal offered the following confession: “I’ve been meditating for about three years now,” he said, “and I’d have to say honestly that my experience when I’m sitting isn’t what I thought it would be or should be. I still have ups and down; my mind wanders and I start over; I still have bouts of sleepiness or restlessness.

“But I’m like a completely different person now. I’m kinder and more patient with my family and friends, and with myself. I’m more involved with my community. I think more about the consequences of my actions, and about what habitual responses I bring to a situation. Is that enough?”

“Yeah,” I replied, beaming at him. “I think that’s enough.”



This is why we practice meditation—so that we can treat ourselves more compassionately; improve our relationships with friends, family, and community; live lives of greater connection; and, even in the face of challenges, stay in touch with what we really care about so we can act in ways that are consistent with our values.

One of the things I’ve always found so interesting about meditation practice is that the arena can seem so small—just you in a room—but the life lessons, the realizations and understandings that arise from it, can be pretty big.

The process is one of continually trying to greet our experience, whatever it is, with mindfulness, lovingkindness, and compassion; it helps us to realize that everything changes constantly and to be okay with that. The effort we make in meditation is a willingness to be open, to come close to what we have avoided, to be patient with ourselves and others, and to let go of our preconceptions, our projections, and our tendency not to live fully.

Meditation practice helps us relinquish old, painful habits; it challenges our assumptions about whether or not we deserve happiness. (We do, it tells us emphatically.) It also ignites a very potent energy in us. With a strong foundation in how to practice meditation, we can begin to live in a way that enables us to respect ourselves, to be calm rather than anxious, and to offer caring attention to others instead of being held back by notions of separation.

But even when you know that these benefits make meditation well worth the effort, it can be hard to keep up a new meditation practice. On the following pages you’ll find some suggestions for strengthening your commitment.

I used to feel, very early in my practice, that mindfulness was awaiting me somewhere out there; that it was going to take a lot of effort and determination, but somehow, someday, after a great deal of struggle, I was going to claim my moment of mindfulness— sort of like planting a flag at the top of a mountain.

My view of the matter was enlarged and my understanding transformed when I realized that mindfulness wasn't inaccessible or remote; it was always right there with me. The moment I remembered it—the moment I noticed that I was forgetting to practice it—there it was! My mindfulness didn't need to get better, or be as good as somebody else's. It was already perfect. So is yours. But that truth is easily forgotten in the midst of our busy lives and complicated relationships. One reason we practice is to recall that truth, so that we can remember to be mindful more and more often throughout the day, and remember more naturally. Regular practice makes mindfulness a part of us.

Meditation is never one thing; you'll experience moments of peace, moments of sadness, moments of joy, moments of anger, moments of sleepiness. The terrain changes constantly, but we tend to solidify it around the negative: "This painful experience is going to last the rest of my life." The tendency to fixate on the negative is something we can approach mindfully; we can notice it, name it, observe it, test it, and dispel it, using the skills we learn in practice.

As you continue with your meditation practice, each session may be very different from the one that preceded it. Some sittings feel great, and some are painful, with an onslaught of all of the hindrances magnified. But these varied experiences are all part of our process. A difficult session is just as valuable as a pleasant one—maybe more so, because it holds more potential lessons. We can look mindfully at joy, sorrow, or anguish. It doesn't matter what's going on; transformation comes from changing our relationship to what's going on.

I was recently teaching with the psychiatrist and author [Mark Epstein](#). He told the class that since beginning his meditation practice in 1974, he'd tried to attend a retreat each year. And from the start he has kept a notebook in which he jots the most compelling insight of the retreat, along with the teacher's single most illuminating, profound, or provocative statement. A few years ago, he told us, he decided to reread his notebook. He was startled to find that year after year, he'd recorded some variation of the same thing: "What arises in our experience is much less important than how we relate to what arises in our experience."

Mark's central discovery can be restated in several ways: "No matter what comes up, we can learn new ways of being with it." "We have a capacity to meet any thought or emotion with mindfulness and balance." "Whatever disagreeable emotion is coursing through us, we can let it go." Rereading those words may keep you going when sitting down to practice is the last thing you want to do.

Breaking away from our habitual ways of looking at things, thinking at a new level, and responding differently take a good deal of courage. Here are some ways to help you rally when your courage flags—when you feel too scared (or tired or bored or [stiff in the knees](#)) to continue your practice:

Start Over

If your self-discipline or dedication seems to weaken, remember first of all, that this is natural and you don't need to berate yourself for it. Seek inspiration in the form that works best for you—reading poetry or prose that inspires you, communicating with like-minded friends, finding a community of meditators, maybe a group to practice with. Or form your own meditation group. If you haven't been keeping a meditation journal, start one. And keep in mind that no matter how badly you feel



things are going, no matter how long it's been since you last meditated, you can always begin again. Nothing is lost; nothing is ruined. We have this very moment in front of us. We can start now.

[Guided meditations](#) are meant to be read and listened to again and again. Don't dismiss them, saying to yourself, *I heard that already, and I get it*. They repay revisiting; they are opportunities to practice, and they deepen over time. Each time you use one of the meditations again, it's different. Work with these meditations daily, and watch how you feel connected one day and drift off the next. The hard day and the easy day each teach you a lot. And the next day holds the promise of a fresh, new experience.

“Just Put Your Body There”

I once complained to my teacher [Munindraji](#) about being unable to maintain a regular practice. “When I sit at home and meditate and it feels good, I'm exhilarated, and I have faith and I know that it's the most important thing in my life,” I said. “But as soon as it feels bad, I stop. I'm disheartened and discouraged, so I just give up.” He gave me quite a wonderful piece of advice. “Just put your body there,” he said. “That's what you have to do. Just put your body there. Your mind will do different things all of the time, but you just put your body there. Because that's the expression of commitment, and the rest will follow from that.”

Certainly there's a time to evaluate our practice, to see if it's useful to us and worth continuing. But the evaluation shouldn't happen every five minutes, or we'll be continually pulling ourselves out of the process. And when we do assess our progress, we need to focus on the right criteria: Is my life different? Am I more balanced, more able to go with the flow? Am I kinder? Those are the crucial questions. The rest of the time, just put your body there.

You may think, *I'm too undisciplined to maintain a practice*. But you really can manage to put your body there, day in and day out. We're often very disciplined when it comes to external things like earning a living, getting the kids off to school, doing the laundry—we do it whether we like it or not. Why can't we direct that same discipline (for just a few minutes each day) toward our inner wellbeing? If you can muster the energy for the laundry, you can muster the energy to “put your body there” for a happier life.

Color-carbon print by Doug and Mike Starn

Remember that Change Takes Time

Meditation is sometimes described this way: Imagine you're trying to split a huge piece of wood with a small axe. You hit that piece of wood ninety-nine times and nothing happens.

Then you hit it the hundredth time, and it splits open. You might wonder, after that hundredth whack, *What did I do differently that time? Did I hold the axe differently; did I stand differently? Why did it work the hundredth time and not the other ninety-nine?*

But, of course, we needed all those earlier attempts to weaken the fiber of the wood. It doesn't feel very good when we're only on hit number thirty-four or thirty-five; it seems as if we aren't making any progress at all. But we are, and not only because of the mechanical act of banging on the wood and weakening its fiber. What's really transformative is our willingness to keep going, our openness to possibility, our patience, our effort, our humor, our growing self-knowledge, and the strength that we gain as we keep going. These intangible factors are the most vital to our success. In meditation practice, these elements are growing and deepening even when we're sleepy, restless, bored, or anxious. They're the qualities that move us toward transformation over time. They're what splits open the wood, and the world.



Use Ordinary Moments

You can access the forces of mindfulness and lovingkindness at any moment, without anyone knowing you're doing it. You don't have to walk excruciatingly slowly down the streets of a major metropolis, alarming everyone around you (in fact, please don't); you can be aware in less obvious ways.

Rest your attention on your breath, or feel your feet against the ground—in a meeting, during a telephone conversation, walking the dog; doing so will help you be more aware of and sensitive to all that is happening around you. Throughout the day, take a moment to stop your headlong rush and torrent of doing to simply be—mindfully eating a meal, feeding a baby, or listening to the flow of sounds around you. Even in difficult situations, this pause can bring a sense of connection or of relief from obsessing about what you don't have now or about what event or person might make you happy someday in the future.

Once when I was teaching a retreat, I had to go up and down a flight of stairs many times a day. I decided to make walking on that staircase part of my practice. Every time I went up or down, I paused first to remind myself to pay attention. It was useful, and it was fun. I've also resolved to do lovingkindness practice whenever I find myself waiting. Waiting on line in the grocery store. Sitting and waiting in a doctor's office. Waiting for my turn to speak at a conference. And I count all forms of transportation as waiting (as in waiting to get to the next place or event), so on airplanes, subways, buses, in cars, and when walking down the street, I begin: *May I be peaceful; may I be safe; may I be happy*. Why not, in those "in-between" times, generate the force of lovingkindness? You're likely to find that this weaving of meditation into everyday experience is a good way of bringing your meditation practice to life.

Make Sure Your Life Reflects Your Practice

Many years ago my colleagues at the [Insight Meditation Society](#) and I hosted a teacher from India and accompanied him around the country, introducing him to various communities where interest in meditation was growing. At the end of the tour we asked him what he thought of America. "It is wonderful, of course," he said, "but sometimes students here remind me of people sitting in a rowboat and rowing with great earnestness, but they don't want to untie the boat from the dock.

"It seems to me," he went on, "that some people here want to meditate in order to have great transcendent experiences or amazing alternate states of consciousness. They may not be too interested in how they speak to their children or treat their neighbor."

The way we do anything can reflect the way we do everything. It's useful to see whether our lives outside of meditation practice are congruent with our lives as we sit. Are we living according to our deepest values, seeking the sources of real happiness, applying the skills of mindfulness, concentration, and lovingkindness throughout all areas of our lives? As we practice, that begins to happen naturally over time, but in the meantime we can look at our lives to see if there's any disharmony we want to address. Are there disconnections between our values in meditation and our values in the world—our habits of consumption, for example, or how we treat a particular person, or how well we take care of ourselves? If we find something off-kilter, we have the tools to work for balance.

We all have cherished hopes about what our meditation practice should look like. However, the point is not to achieve some model or ideal but to be aware of all the different states that we experience. That's a difficult message to believe, and somehow we need to hear it again and again.



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