

Peace of Mind

A Step-By-Step Guide To Meditation

by Siobhan C. Fitzpatrick

I was a meditation dropout.

Two years ago, I'd tried a short course, but the experience had left me intimidated. "Close your eyes," the teacher said, "and visualize nothing." "Yeah, right," I thought, as I squirmed uncomfortably in the "mandatory" cross-legged position, relying on my weak stomach muscles to hold me up.

I was convinced I could not meditate. Perhaps I was one of the unlucky few for whom spiritual peace was not an option.

Well, I was wrong. On my second time around, under the guidance of meditation teacher Sarah McClain (who studied with Deepak Chopra), I didn't worry about thinking about worrying about thinking about

nothing. I just tried to sit quietly for the 30 minutes, with no expectations. It seems so simple, but it made all the difference. I felt calmer, more focused, more peaceful — all the benefits I had thought were out of my grasp.

Here are 10 steps to start meditating, even if you are, like me, a nervous beginner. (Most of the following guidelines were recommended by Jodi Levy, meditator and owner of Healing Hands, a New York-based company which offers meditation seminars, massages, and other meditative tools). The recommended time is 20-30 minutes, spending a few minutes on each step — more on the ones you enjoy, and less on the ones you don't.

find a "sacred space."

This doesn't have to mean anything complicated — just a place where you feel comfortable, relaxed, private, and at ease. Levy suggests using tools like aroma candles to create a peaceful, healing mood, and making sure the temperature is pleasant and the lighting soft. Some people also find it easier to concentrate with some quiet music playing.

Living in a studio apartment in Manhattan, I don't have too many choices on where to meditate (the bathtub?!), so I created a sacred "corner" where I pile up pillows and decorate my "altar" with candles and fresh yellow roses — my favorites.

But trust your own judgment. Novice meditator Connie Walsh, who has her choice of rooms in a spacious house, chooses to meditate in her bedroom. "It's where I'm most comfortable," Walsh says. She simply leans a soft cushion against her bed and meditates there — no altar or music. "Music is too distracting for me," says Walsh.

sit comfortably

Find a position in which you'll be able to stay for approximately a half hour. Although sitting "Indian style" (cross-legged or in a lotus) with your back erect is something you'll often see an advanced meditator do, it's not necessary — particularly for the novice.

The most popular position people chose in Sarah McClain's class was to sit on a few cushions with their backs against the wall, with either legs crossed or extended straight ahead. I chose to simply sit on the couch — which would not have been allowed at the class I tried two years ago.

The one position which McClain advises against is lying on your back. "I've seen it before," she says. "You'll be waking up your co-meditator with your snoring!" (Not all experts agree with her, but I sure do.)

Levy encourages sitting in your chosen position for at least 20 minutes, but other experts, like McClain, simply urge the beginner to meditate for as long as possible. For some, like Walsh, this may mean only ten minutes. But I'll admit, I've noticed in the very short time I've been meditating that being still for 20-30 minutes *does* seem to automatically put you in a deeper state of consciousness.

listen to your breath

Become aware of your own rhythm as you inhale and exhale. Take your time with this, since breathing is the key to meditation. After a few minutes, you'll learn whether you take short breaths or long ones. "I was surprised how quickly I breathed," says Walsh. "I had never been so conscious of that before."

As you become familiar with your individual rhythm, take a deep breath and hold it for three counts, then let it out. Levy suggests inhaling through the nose and exhaling through your mouth, but stresses that there is no absolute right or wrong way. Do this three or four times, gently and without forcing it.

breathe in positive energy

Return to breathing "regularly" again. You may find that your pattern has slowed down compared to when you first started becoming conscious of your breathing at the beginning of step three. Don't worry if it hasn't — it will come

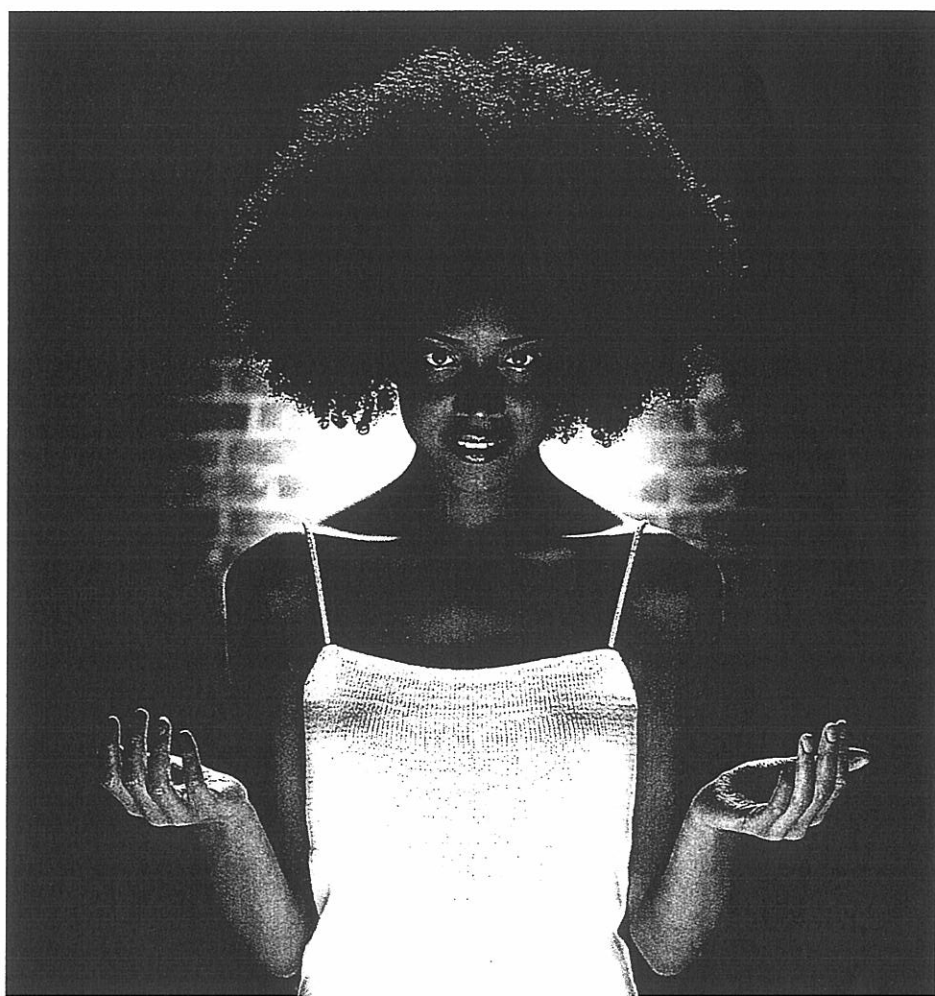
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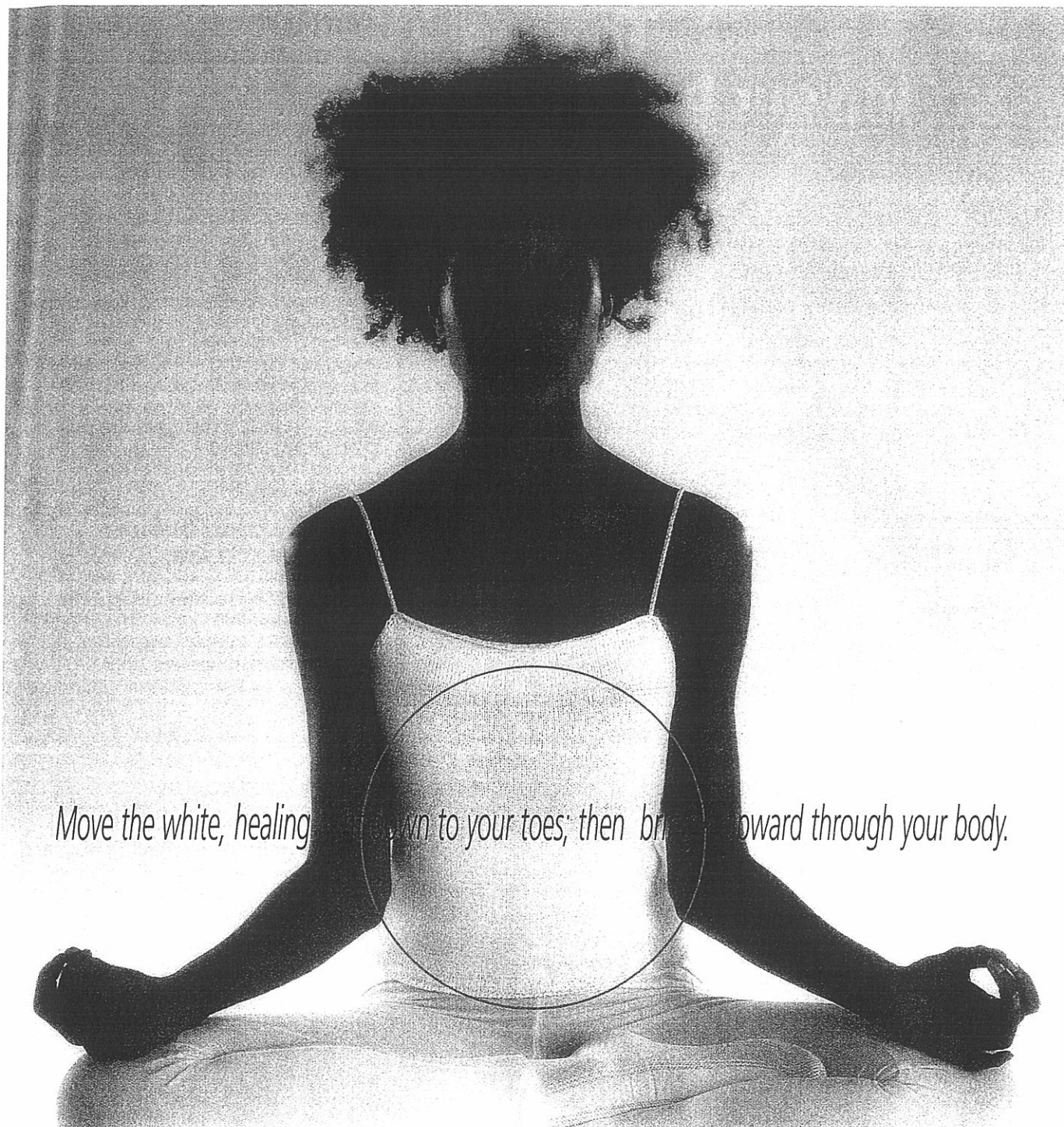
Now, as you inhale, focus on breathing in positive energy or positive thoughts — anything that makes you smile or relax. Walsh says she likes to envision the ocean on a clear blue day. As you exhale, let all the negative energy, including any dark, depressing thoughts and physical ailments, leave your body. To help you with this step, you may want to envision a river in front of you, as I do, where you can "throw" all of your worries, concerns, and fears, and let them float out of your life.

Don't worry if you become distracted while doing this. It's normal for your mind to wander, so just gently bring it back to the task at hand.

visualize

Now is the time to let your imagination loose, visualizing whatever it is that you desire. This can be something concrete (a house, a baby, travel) or something more ephemeral — peace of mind, for example. Whatever it is, try and evoke all of your senses. For example, if you've always wanted to do a trek through Thailand but couldn't go because of financial restraints, imagine hiking through Southeast





Move the white, healing light down to your toes; then bring it upward through your body.

Asia. "Feel, taste, and smell everything you want so you can really see what it feels like to make things happen," says Levy.

open yourself to the light

"The Light is a protective beam of energy that reconnects you, as a human being, with the ultimate universal energy source," writes Jodi Levy in *The*

Healing Handbook. "You don't have to believe in God... You just have to be open to the idea that we are all made up of energy that is part of a greater energy than ourselves."

Refocus your energy and imagine a white light or positive energy entering your body in the space between your eyes — your "third eye," as it is referred to by meditators. Mentally, move this white light energy all the way down to your feet. Take your time as you imagine it moving slowly through your

whole body, your face, your neck, your shoulders, arms, hands, chest, belly, pelvis, legs, until it reaches your toes. Steep in this positive energy for a bit, allowing it to heal you.

breathe with a mantra

With the positive energy "settled" inside of you, focus again on your breathing. To help facilitate this, Levy

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suggests using a mantra which you will repeat several times. If you are meditating in the morning, she suggests your mantra be "Amm"; if in the afternoon or evening, "Ohmm."

Some experts don't encourage novices to use mantras, instead urging beginners to focus only on their breathing. This is up to you; if you find repeating the mantra helps you focus, use it, if not, don't.

bring the light back up

You've moved the white, healing light down to your toes; now start bringing it upward through your body, taking along with it any negative energy you might have. Let that negative energy exit with the light out through your third eye (the area between your eyes, on your forehead).

keep breathing

Regulate your breathing again: in through your nose, out through your mouth, or again, whichever way is most comfortable for you. (As you can see, it is important throughout this exercise to constantly bring the focus back to your breath, becoming aware

again and again of your own inhale and exhale.)

ease back into the world

You are nearing the end of your meditation. Take a moment, however much time you need, to return to a "normal" routine. As Sarah McClain notes, if you are in a deep meditation, you'll want to allow yourself some time to ease back into daily existence, so as not to jolt yourself with too quick a transition.

According to Levy, a beginning meditator will probably find some of these steps more useful than others, and some perhaps not useful at all. "That's fine," she says — they're merely tools that the beginner can use until she finds her own pattern.

The main point to remember is that there is *no* wrong way to meditate. Take your time. It may take more than a few times before you feel a real shift in consciousness. One person in McClain's class told me that although he didn't feel a difference day to day, when he reflects back over the last six months of meditation, paying attention to his general outlook on himself and life, he realizes how much the practice has helped him.

Levy says that meditation saved her from her own self-destructive impulses. "My mother died and my life was out of control. I was partying a lot," she says. "Then I realized there was so much inside of me, so I wanted a different way of life. I started going to Ashrams; I started meditating."

And meditation can help with literal physical health as well. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, associate professor of medicine and executive director for mindfulness in medicine and healthcare & society at The University of Massachusetts Medical School, says that tentative studies suggest that meditation can actually help to boost the immune system. (I'm certainly convinced: Since beginning this article, I had a medical emergency, a burst ovarian cyst which landed me in the hospital. In my weakened state, meditation has been enormously comforting, helping me to remain calm, and allowing me to play an active role in my body's self-healing process.)

Meditation is not the SATs. It's not spiritual boot camp. In fact, it's really no more complicated than inhale and exhale — something as natural as can be. So allow yourself to pause, to heal, to live in the moment. If a meditation delinquent like me can do it, you can too. 🌿

MORE MEDITATING

Read

• *The Healing Handbook* (a pamphlet, currently available) and *The Healing Handbook, A Beginner's Guide and Journal To Meditation* (Pocket Books), Jodi Levy, due out Mother's Day 1999 (888/HEAL-999 for info)

• *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (Hyperion) and *Full Catastrophe Living* (Dell), Jon Kabat-Zinn

• *Meditation Made Easy* (Harper San Francisco), Lorin Roche

Listen

• *Meditation for Beginners* audiocassette (Sounds True), Jack Kornfield

Surf

• <http://www.spiritweb.org/Spirit/meditation.html> — good comprehensive site with "frequently asked questions" and excellent links to other sites