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# There's No Place Like Om

Like yoga's evolution, the ancient Eastern practice of meditation is popping up in myriad forms in contemporary culture.

by EMILY FIFFER

From celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and Howard Stern to the practice of Buddhism, meditation has amassed a strong following in the modern world. In our fast-paced, technology-ridden world, stress levels are high, and chronic stress causes a host of physical, physiological, and psychological health issues. However, relief might come from just 10 minutes a day.

**Herewith, a guide to the elusive practice: *What it is, how it works, and starting points should you choose to integrate it into your life.***

In his renowned book, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (1991), Bhante Gunaratana, a Sri Lankan monk who's been practicing since he was 12 (he's now 86), tackles the heady topic in reverse by explaining what meditation isn't: a dangerous relaxation technique; a state of trance; a quick fix; a way of avoiding reality; a quick fix. So, what is it? Meditation is intended to purify the mind. It cleanses the thought process of what can be called psychic irritants, things like greed, hatred, and jealousy. Meditation brings the mind to a state of tranquility and awareness, a state of "concentration and insight," he says. To meditate is to tune into yourself—your emotions, reactions, and experiences—while simultaneously learning to let go. Achieving this state doesn't come easily. Like physical exercise, meditation requires consistency in order to see improvement. The biggest roadblock beginners face is putting aside the time to practice. Ironically, those who need it the most are often so consumed by their anxiety that focusing on meditation seems impossible. **Here are a few basic tips to get started.**

Decide how long you'd like to meditate and set an alarm. Experts suggest a maximum of 20 minutes if you're a newcomer; 10 minutes is a nice place to start.

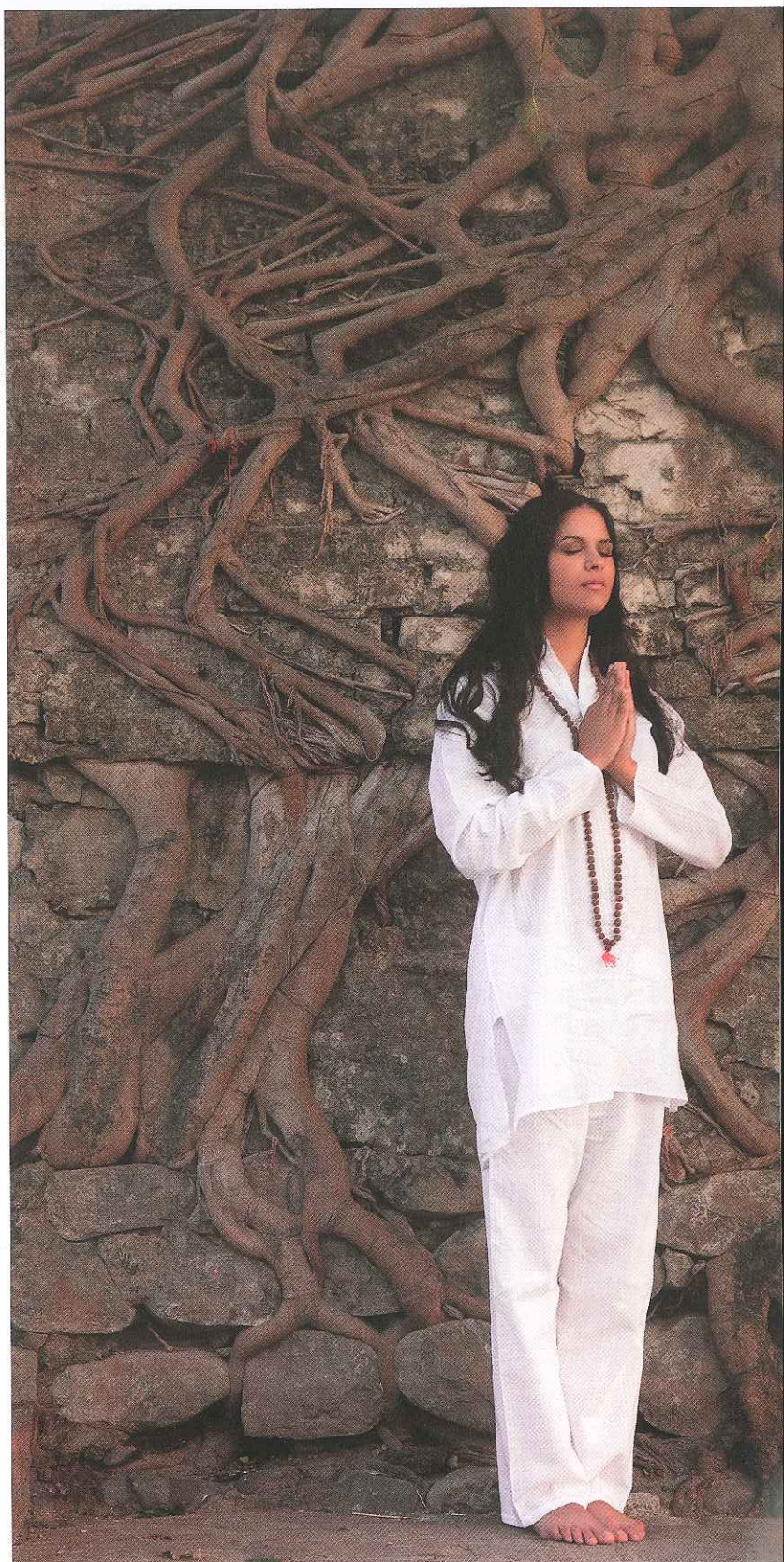
Find a quiet spot in your home and sit comfortably (on a cushion, sofa, chair, or the floor). Keep your spine straight (slouching causes drowsiness—the goal here is not to sleep), but let your body relax, paying special attention to the tension you hold in your shoulders.

Close your eyes and take three deep breaths (diaphragmatic breathing slows the heart rate and activates calm), then begin to breathe normally, all the while focusing your attention on your breath. Chances are your mind will wander (bills to pay...dinner to cook...that friend you forgot to call...). Each time it does, try not to focus on the feeling of frustration or on a goal at hand. Rather, calmly return your attention to your breath. With practice, your breath will become more and more subtle and your body might feel light.

While there are no official rules, the more frequently you meditate, the more likely you'll be able to tune out nagging thoughts. Meditation is like a muscle; you're training your brain to let go. To see "results" and gain proverbial muscle mass, letting go of the goal is the actual goal of meditation. Once you become proficient, meditating two or three times a week may be enough for you. The more consistently you meditate, the calmer and lighter you'll likely feel.

Sitting isn't the sole form of meditation, however. At The Spa at Four Seasons Hotel in Los Angeles ([fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)), lauded practitioner Jeannette Von Johnsbach ([andreamethod.com](http://andreamethod.com)) uses more than 15 years of training in the healing arts to read, reorganize, and reset clients' energies via BioMeditation therapy.

Von Johnsbach designed BioMeditation for people who have difficulty meditating on their own. In her



treatment (offered in blocks of 60 and 120 minutes; from \$180) she acts as a facilitator, using light touch to perceive and clear blockages (negative experiences that, when untreated, manifest emotionally, physiologically, and physically) so clients' bodies can begin to repair from within. You lie on a table, with eyes closed, and your body does the rest. In other words, she kicks your emotional and physiological systems into gear. "The ▷



body has its own list of priorities. BioMeditation stimulates your own self-healing, from the inside out.” After a single 60-minute session, your blockages are released and you are primed to repair. A quicker metabolism, optimized nervous and immune systems, and mental clarity are proof of the therapy’s effectiveness. Most clients see immediate and lasting effects after a single session. Those with chronic illnesses return for multiple sessions.

Von Johnsbach works with all walks of life, from those living with depression and cancer to women with fertility and anxiety problems, to otherwise healthy people who feel emotionally stuck. She’s had stellar success in all areas. “Meditation describes a state of mind,” she says. “It means deep reflecting, getting out of your way so that everything can be and flow in the most effective way. It’s incredible to witness the fast transformation and healings people go through.”

**T**here’s an abundance of scientific evidence to prove meditation’s efficacy, as repeated practice actually changes the brain, a phenomenon referred to as neuroplasticity. Neuroscientists around the world have conducted studies using MR images to track participants’ brains before and after consistent meditation; the results are undeniable. In a study from Massachusetts General Hospital, as reported in *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* (January 2011), researchers observed marked changes in multiple areas of the brains of those participating in an eight-week mindful meditation program. Gray matter decreased in the hippocampus (learning, memory, emotion regulation) and the amygdala, responsible for the fight-or-flight response (proving the amount of gray matter



directly correlated with stress reduction). Activity in the frontal lobe (reasoning/planning) and parietal lobe (environmental processing) slowed down considerably. Meditation reduced the flow of incoming information to the thalamus (aka the gatekeeper) to a mere trickle. What’s the takeaway? There’s a neurobiological reason you’ll feel less stressed after you meditate.

Meditation can be intimidating, esoteric, and abstract, so give yourself some breathing room, literally and figuratively, when you’re starting off. You’re showing up for you and your health, free of judgments and self-criticism. If you stumble along the way or find you have more questions than answers, there are a slew of apps, books, and retreats that provide guidance and help you delve deeper into the practice. Several of these apps provide step-by-step guided meditations and are great for beginners; books are denser, providing context, history, tools, and tips; retreats, though expensive, can be an excellent way for beginners to jump-start their practice (and for experts to strengthen their practice).