Essential Meditation - Class 1 Notes

Meditation!

So you have decided to take a class about learning to meditate. Perhaps you have never tried it and have always been curious. Maybe you dabbled in meditation years ago and always wanted to learn about it in a little more structured way. Or maybe you have been mediating for years and you want to connect to others who are exploring meditation. Whatever your reason, I'm glad you are here. Meditation has been an incredible part of my life - a tool for my mind, a friend who has offered solace within the chaos of life, a deep pool into which I have submerged and out from which I have come feeling somehow cleaner, with a newness and freshness in my heart and mind. I am excited to share the things I have learned over my years of practice, and can't wait to hear about how your own practice begins to affect you.

Structure of Class

There will be 3 parts to every class: lecture, group practice, and questions/discussion. Class will last about an hour, though if there are some who want to stay a little longer with questions and discussion, I am always open to that.

We will meet every Wednesday night, with the exception of 11/24, which is the Wednesday before Thanksgiving

There will be homework every week, which will consist of various daily practices. Try to meditate every day, without fail. If you miss a day, just start again. There will be audio guided meditations on the website every week for you to follow along if you wish. Feel free to use them or not.

Theoretical structure: we will be examining the 8 limbs of yoga, which come from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. We will be discussing theory from other traditions, such as Buddhism and Daoism as well, but I have found the limbs to be an invaluable road map of meditation - they not only clearly outline the various preparatory steps that are helpful in achieving a meditative state, but also show a structure for how the consciousness deepens in meditation.

The overall goal for the class, however, is not to be too bound to intellectual theory, but rather to ground ourselves in a practical use of that theory. There is an age-old argument about whether one should study about meditation before practicing, or whether one should just dive in and begin practicing. Having done the "just dive in" method myself at the outset of my journey, I personally feel the best answer is found in doing a little of both, and since you all have signed up for a class about meditation, I am going to assume you do too.

Basic Components of Meditation

The nuts and bolts of practicing meditation are deceptively simple. In its essence, one only needs three things in order to meditate:

Stillness, breath, and observation.

That's it. Simple, right? It is! You can do this anywhere.

Stillness:
Specifically we are talking here about physical stillness. There are lots of moving meditations out there such as walking meditation or movement meditation in the form of *Taiji* or *Qigong*, but I would like to recommend that for the object of this class, these forms of meditation should be considered only as an occasional addition to a robust sitting practice. Finding a relaxed yet resolute physical stillness will allow a depth of quietude and concentration that will deepen your practice in a rapid fashion.

Breath:
We will have an entire class dedicated to how breath is both a) vital to practice, and b) utilized through a series of practices called *pranayama.* But breathing in itself is one of the best anchors for a meditation practice. The most ancient meditation practice is called *anapanasati*, which is the practice of following the breath. One can utilize the breath as the object of concentration during meditation - the breath is always present and it is constantly changing - like water in a waterfall. So as long as you have breath, you can meditate.

Observation:
Perhaps the single most important tool at your disposal in regards to meditation is your attention. Attention is a power that you have which, for the most part, is ignored in modern life. It is pulled in many directions most of the time - how often to we take the time to truly focus it, collect it and apply it with single purpose? This, in many ways is the definition of meditation. To focus one's attention in one place in an effort to hone our ability to utilize it at will.

Development of Samatha and Vipassana

Samatha = Tranquility
Vipassana = Insight

These are two words that you will encounter as you navigate the world of meditation. Entire schools have been developed for Samatha meditation and for Vipassana meditation. There have been countless arguments throughout the world of meditation as to which is better, which is more important in the development of the practitioner. I would like to put this to rest for our class - the Buddha himself did not teach one method that is strictly Samatha, nor did he teach one method that is Vipassana. Rather, he taught, throughout his discourses, that these are two qualities that develop within the consciousness of the practitioner who applies a consistent method of meditation. They are marked by a seemingly paradoxical balance of a deep state of relaxation paired with a sharp, very focused attention. So we will come back to these terms as the class progresses, and hopefully your understanding of what they both mean to you personally will grow and develop over the next 7 classes.

Discernment of Consciousness from the Mind

As we explore the structure of meditation laid out by Patanjali some 2,000 years ago, we will begin to uncover the purpose of meditation. Patanjali stated that the one of the main goals of the entire 8 limbs of yoga is *kaivalya,* which is the discernment of *Purusha,* which is the witness-consciousness, from *Prakriti,* which is the cognitive-apparatus. In his view, the purity of *Purusha* becomes muddied with the entanglement in *Prakriti*. If Sanskrit terms make your head spin, then take heart! My goal is to help

explore this in simple terms. We will utilize the practice of meditation as a means for discerning the different components that make up our mind. It is possible to perceive the separate functions consciousness - pure observation - from the thought that tend to dominate the space of the mind.

8 Limbs of Yoga - Ashtanga

This is just the briefest of introductions to the terms utilized by Patanjali in the 8 limbs, in order to begin to help you familiarize yourself with them. We will be going into each of these stages in depth as the weeks progress. The 8 limbs (Ashtanga) are a step-by-step progression of a meditator (yogi) moving through deeper and deeper states of consciousness. It is a road map, if you will, for the development of a practice. It should be noted that although they are numbered in a certain order, this is not necessarily a linear progression. One could say that they are numbered from the most exterior aspects to the most interior.

1) Yama
&
2) Niyama - These two are often discussed together. They are ethical guidelines, sometimes referred to as restraints and observances. They are aspects that should be restrained in oneself and other aspects that should be unrestrained in order to help guide the mind toward a meditative state.

3) Asana - Anyone who has practiced yoga knows that this refers to posture or pose. The simplest aspect of this is the posture you in which place yourself to meditate.

4) Pranayama - This refers to control over the breath. There are specific practices to harness the breath in different ways, but simple breathing in and out with attention can be a form of pranayama.

5) Pratyahara - This literally translates as 'withdrawal from the senses,' and refers to the point at which your concentration becomes stable, and thoughts cease to be as bothersome.

6) Dharana - One-pointed concentration: this is when your focus is unflappable and is solely centered on the object of meditation.

7) Dhyana - This means meditation. After all the other steps have been reached, meditation finally begins. This state is when your consciousness is absorbed into the object of meditation and insight (Vipassana) unfolds itself.

8) Samadhi - Union, the distinction between the meditator (the observer) and the object of meditation is dissolved. This is quite a pleasurable state and allows depth of insight into the nature of the mind.

Back to the basics!

Okay, you've made it this far, and I want to remind you that although this may all seem overwhelming, it is not the intent of this class to fill your mind with terms. Let's keep it practical and we will see how these terms apply in a slow and methodical manner from this point forward.

Homework!
Ready to give this all a try? Your homework for this coming week is to try to practice every day, at least once per day. Find a quiet place to sit, set a timer for 5 minutes, and just observe the breath moving in and out of your body. You may find it helpful to choose a certain place on your body to place your attention - for example some place their attention on or just below their belly button, some place the attention on the skin just below their nostrils. It doesn't matter where, just pick one place and keep your attention there for the entire five minutes.

Here's the thing: you will become distracted. Thoughts will arise and convince you that they need to be entertained. If you catch your attention wandering, simply remind yourself that you are meditating, and that there are no thoughts, no images, no dreams, no plans that absolutely require your attention during this five-minute period. Simply bring your attention back to your breath.

If you are handling five minutes with ease, feel free to extend the time to 10 minutes, or as long as you want! But I would warn against going too fast too soon if you are an absolute beginner. Let yourself ease into your practice.

I have uploaded two audio files onto the class website of myself guiding a meditation, one for five minutes and one for 10 minutes, with just a few simple prompts to keep things moving forward. Feel free to use them, or don't. They're just available if you want them.

Keep a journal. Write down what you experience. If you run into anything unusual, a stumbling block, or you're just curious about why it seems a certain way, write it down and bring it to class. There may be others with the same question.

Good luck!

Books for those who like to read:

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali - Translation and Commentary by Sri Swami Satchidananda

The Awakwening of Intelligence - Jiddhu Krishnamurti

How to Meditate: A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind – Pema Chödrön

Meditation for Beginners - Jack Kornfield

Zen Mind, Beginners Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice - Shuryu Suzuki and David Chadwick