

Meditation 101

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It would be lovely to think of sitting atop a mountain cross-legged and meditating for 2 hours with your body warmed to the sun and to be able to bring that sense of peace and calm to all the arenas of your everyday life. As a work-from-home mom I appreciate that there is often just not enough time or space to do this.

Whether you are practicing at home or in a studio you may not realize that you have the potential to tap into a deep well of creativity coming from a very focused meditation. In this article, what I will show you is that by placing attention on **6** specific techniques or triggers during your practice, you will deepen your practice in a way you may not have realized possible.

First though, let's put meditation into its proper context. Meditation is just like any other skill - you need to practice. It IS as simple as that. But what exactly are you practicing? We have all heard it boiled down to **being in the moment**, but what does THAT really mean?

The 'monkey mind'

Life is glorious! Especially **if** you can escape the trappings of the 'monkey' mind. Humans are thinking creatures. The busier we get the more the mind gets full. Full of little details. Full of expectations. And full of thoughts of past experiences, dreading them, enjoying them, anticipating future occurrences with either a positive or negative spin on them.

The 'monkey' mind is one description of the way that the mind can jump, flit and fly from one subject to 10 others in the blink of an eye.

Whatever way you look at it... thinking about all that stuff takes you away from enjoying or fully experiencing the moment that really counts – the one you are in right now.

The purpose of meditation is to slow this process right down to something manageable and to empty the mind to the point where you can sense some space between your thoughts.

Being an observer

I heard a radio interview the other day about how we are all prejudiced in some way. What the person meant by this is that we have to store up some kind of opinion or create some kind of belief in order to understand new experiences. Otherwise we would be approaching every single moment like a newborn baby – as if we had never encountered such a phenomenon before. Reading the world with fresh new eyes every moment, may sound good but it is just not possible nor is it practical.

What we are trying to do is judiciously use our experience to understand new experiences but with enough open mindedness to ***see things as they really are***. We try to free ourselves of thoughts that would cloud our judgment. We try simply to observe. To notice what is going on without subjective emotive language to describe it.

When we practice yoga and particularly this Hot Stuff that we all love(!) we move the body into positions and stay there. We breathe, move into a pose, and focus on breath, alignment and then depth. Often we can enter the space and roll the mat out, with the head awash with a million thoughts.

But pretty soon, sometimes by the end of the first Pranayama breath, and certainly once you have a regular yoga practice, we begin to tame the mind and it starts to S L O W down. Sometimes it happens with just the thought of going to yoga. Now we're getting somewhere ☺. Sometimes it happens just with a deep full body breath. Aaaahhhhh.

Yoga = 'union'

We tough it out sometimes putting ourselves through some kind of discomfort. There are many people who complain about the difficulty of some poses, or styles of yoga (sound familiar?). But if you didn't have this challenge or this discomfort and intensity then we would just be doing a few neat stretches or compressions.

When we experience the intensity, we actually make the union – the yoga – of the mind and body. Our attention may go to those points of discomfort and we breathe. We experience something – whatever that is. And we learn to be in that moment.

Everyone's definition of spiritualism is different. Having been a teacher for many years, I can tell you that most students come to Hot Yoga for physical improvements (yes, chances are you probably did too!). Pretty soon they realize that they get soooo much more out of doing their yoga. I like to say that this yoga has the 'back door approach' to spiritualism. You don't come here for it, but it is what you stay here for.

A deep self-connection is nurtured. The results are astounding. I can't tell you how many people I have taught or met (including me and my husband) who have said that they feel as if they have come 'home'. This doesn't happen with simple gym exercise.

Probably none of us will achieve total enlightenment – like Gautama the Buddha – but at least with this yoga, whether you realize it or not – you are meditating, learning how to be in the moment, and finding your own personal brand of spiritualism.

What's next?

Everyone enters some kind of trance or meditative state at some point. The skill is being able to harness it and make it work for you. Now it's time to introduce you to the concept of the **Flywheel Effect** and some different styles of meditation and yoga.

It may just give you the understanding that will help you work out why different styles of yoga or meditation suit your particular constitution. Then I will show you how to take that 90 minutes of now deeper meditation and make it touch every aspect of your life (if you want it to, that is ☺).

How your lifestyle clutters your mind

Remember *that* classic meditation position? Have YOU ever tried just sitting like that: legs crossed, back straight, eyes closed and breathing? Chances are you have tried at some time to be still with your body and just breathe.

Bridging the gap to stillness

Attaining the calm and the stillness of mind **looks** like it would be easy but it can be the hardest thing to do in the world.

Why? Because generally the lifestyles and habits of the Western World are fast-paced. That is not really the problem. The issue is trying to **bridge the gap** between your present naturally distracted and distractible mind to the calmness that most seek at some time!

When the gap is large, then the simplest of tasks, and I mean just sitting and being with yourself, is extremely difficult. This is why many folk have to DO something in their free time.

Having made the sea change 8 years ago, I can tell you there is a HUGE difference between big city life and that which I have experienced living in a smallish town and very small city where I am now.

Have you been conditioned to be “busy”?

It may not be the same for you but I noticed how much of our lives in the big city were taken up with pursuits that have now dropped way, way down on my list of priorities. I remember making shopping an entertainment outing! When I finished work I would head off somewhere for some activity: it was either gym and later yoga, or it was out to drinks, or dinner to friends or a restaurant, or entertaining or going home for filling my head with some mindless television.

While I am on the subject of television, have you ever noticed that there are people out there who talk about a terrible program that they watched (and even continue to watch) because there was nothing else on?

It just seems to me that once the mind gets very “full” it is hard to switch it off enough to even sit with yourself and enjoy unwinding, doing nothing.

So you can see that the bigger the gap between the busy-mind state and the stillness of the activity of meditation (or maybe the inactivity) the harder it is for the mind to just let go. The thoughts keep whirling around. The body stops but then gets restless very easily.

This is why the average Westerner finds it difficult to launch themselves into a meditation if it involves stillness of the body. There has been no conditioning to 'empty' the head a bit by some process. That process could in fact be **as simple as learning how to breathe, self-soothe when reactive, attending regular yoga classes.**

Going to gym can sometimes offer this ability to discharge the mind's potent and distractive energies, but it seems that the effect is far less than that which yoga can offer.

So let's take a brief look at meditation as a 'standalone practice

In general terms meditation techniques use a single point of focus on a thought, an object or an awareness of some aspect of something to access a greater consciousness.

The elements that people use are very varied. Here is a list of just a few:

- A picture, a mandala, a visualization of body parts, breath movement, chakras
- A sound like om, chanting, sounds of nature, guided visualizations through audio programs, counting, mantras, music
- Breath, and the physical characteristics like sound, feel, location
- Body movement, trance-like states (even induced by dance or movement), yoga asana and all the different stationary and moving poses that are possible

There are so many styles of meditation it would take a whole series just to examine these. There are different beliefs as to how deeply you can meditate with the styles of meditation. For example Vipassana meditation is the style that the Buddha taught to his disciples over 2500 years ago and if you go to a Vipassana course the teachings are supposed to be pure, taught just the way he taught them centuries ago.

It is said that the reliance on focusing on the breath and the sensations in the body rather than an external thing such as counting or mantras actually allows a far deeper form of meditation than any other. Meditation styles where the mind's activities can be diverted to a chant or a visualization are much easier for the Western mind to cope with and need less getting used to and possibly less practice to get benefits that have some long term effects.

Having said that I have had some great experiences using a meditation program on CD that uses sounds to facilitate very deep meditative trance states. Being a yoga site however, Meditation 101 will focus on the physical yoga asana practice because most of us are here for that!

The choice of meditation really has to go with your lifestyle and how well initiated into the world of meditation you already are. It does depend on the style of meditation that you are looking for: maybe a sitting practice of Raja Yoga (meditation and no poses), or it could be a style of Hatha Yoga of asana or poses.

If you have never meditated before and you have a busy lifestyle then you would probably get a lot more out of a style that offers you a focus like chanting or visualizations, an audio program, or like yoga, offers you body movement that will help you still your mind.

Launching into the stillest kind of meditation as your first point of call is a possible path but the journey may feel a little bit bumpier. But, as one of my Vipassana teachers once said to me: **"sooner or later, you are going to have to face your pain"**. In other words, meditation is a way of processing your life's experiences, (consciously or unconsciously) through the reactions of your body. You can either deny your body's integral relationship with your life or you can embrace it and work with it.

It is my belief that to work with the body to cleanse and heal is a far healthier approach to leading a full and happy life.

A quick word about guided spoken audio meditations

Meditations that take you on a journey, can be very useful and tend to be great for escaping your current state of mind. Mostly I like to use them with to gain clarity on a particular aspect of life, make improvements consistent with a specific intention. This is a completely different style of meditation than simply trying to *be* with the aid of music, attention to breath or even movement.

Because the speaker leads you through your own visualization the conscious mind is being distracted to varying degrees. This type of meditation relies very heavily on the languaging skills of the leader so that you can create your own unique journey. This could be a great place to start your practice. Choose your program carefully.

Yoga asana as meditation

All yogas were not created equal! Don't we know it. We have gentle, anusara, happy, power, vinyasa, hatha, woga (yes really!), iyengar, ashtanga, Bikram, hot, kundalini and many other styles. More and more are being developed as we speak.

What makes them different can be whether they are:

- a constant set or series of poses, or maybe the sequence changes from class to class
- practiced in the heat
- led by a teacher or self-led
- taught with or without teacher's demonstration
- incorporating eastern aspects in their teachings: kriya, chakra, reincarnation
- practiced with or without props

The Flywheel Effect

I like to introduce a principle I've called the "**Flywheel Effect**" to help describe the way each style manages the *gap* between your distracted 'monkey mind' and your calm meditative state.

A flywheel is a rotating disc in a motor which stores energy and helps resist changes in rotational speed. In other words, a flywheel in a car or a washing machine spins up to speed during operation but then continues to spin for a while after the machine has stopped. This is just like your mind after great mental activity or distracted thoughts of any kind. Or when you move from your busy day to your time doing yoga.

Have you noticed that it takes some time to calm your mind down?

Each of the above styles has its own way of helping you achieve some level of 'enlightenment'. Each provides conditions which – by the very nature of the style – allow the mind to slow down to achieve physical, mental, emotional and spiritual awareness.

I know that for myself I have been often disappointed in the *satisfaction quotient* of any Iyengar class I have ever attended. Sure, I enjoy the poses but the constant moving away from my *home* at my mat to run and get some prop, and the change of focus from inward to outward and back in again means that my time for me where I can have extended periods of meditative focus is often minimized to several minutes.

On the contrary I really relish the 90 minutes of hot yoga classes like Bikram or other styles that follow a series with an intensity of focus and **find them EXTREMELY and soulfully satisfying**.

You see, we are not conditioned to calm ourselves instantly. It takes some time after the body stops moving, to wind down. If you have no 'wind down' time then you become even more aware of the gap between activity and inactivity.

This is where Bikram and Hot Yoga meet *the Flywheel Effect*. When you start a Bikram Hot Yoga class you start with Pranayama breathing. Most Hot Yoga styles start with Sun Salutations or some variation. These are complex integrations of movements which are not static or slow.

In Pranayama, the body is still for the most part with the head and neck and shoulders being worked. And in Hot Yoga, the body moves fluidly but also stays motionless for moments during the sequence. There is no jolt for the senses. These are not sudden yoga poses.

They don't force you to make extended eye contact (which can be confronting early on in the piece, if you are practicing with a mirror that is), the eyes move with the head movements. Instead, you have to come to terms with the immediacy of activity in your first yoga exercise and what it takes to coordinate that.

I particularly like Bikram (and Hot) Yoga for this effect. After Pranayama you spend most of the next hour looking into your own eyes. But by this stage it is already tolerable and possible for most.

How do you access a deep state of meditation in your yoga practice?

Using anchors or triggers is a wonderful way to maximize the effects of your yoga.

The 6 following triggers will give you the right mindset and physiology to create and then recreate with predictability the right conditions every single time. It will take practice to coordinate all these 'activities'.

You are probably doing one or more of them unconsciously right now anyway, to varying degrees. Making them conscious for a while and practicing your new subset of skills will help you consistently and deliberately access a deep meditative state at every single class. Separately practiced each is a valuable skill. Together, they produce an alchemy of incredible potency.

Trigger number 1 – Set your contexts

Pranayama and your salutations are the key to setting up your entire 90 mins. And if I were to give away one of my key secrets, the yoga starts the moment you walk in the door. When you **get** this you will literally feel your consciousness shift from a practice that starts with a pose, to one that starts with the touch of your hand on the studio door.

So, make your yoga start when you enter the room. You may be practicing a **series** of poses but make them integrate into something whole. Not just a finite number of body positions.

Next time you go to your class, whether at home or not, ready yourself, and just before entering the room, stand by yourself and take a few full deep body breaths. Maybe even close your eyes. Set your intention and anchor or trigger the beginning of class the **MOMENT** that you place your hand on the door to enter. **Make this your yoga.**

Trigger number 2 – Use Ujjayi Breath

Use your breath to focus your attention. In yogic terms, you have probably already heard of Ujjayi Breath. See if you can constrict the throat just enough to feel the rush of air in and out of your trachea. But more than that, Ujjayi Breath is also placing attention of the audible characteristics of the breath. In this way you can really bring yourself into the now by focusing on the qualities of your breath.

Breath focus is probably the most common meditation technique anyway. In many types of meditation you may bring your awareness to the way your breath feels on the top lip, in the nostrils, whether it is even through the nostrils, whether it goes in one and out the other, whether it is warm or cool, whether you feel tingling or nothing at all.

There are many distinctions, and the more practiced you are at noticing the very fine stuff the more you can hone and sharpen your mind to gain some kind of mastery over your mind, rather than being a slave to its habitual erratic behavior.

The breath trigger can be constantly revisited especially when you feel yourself losing focus and or your mind drifting into a million thoughts. You can start your class strongly by making your Pranayama breath (at Bikram Yoga) very audible. Some of my students have used all sorts of visualizations or fun games to enhance their experience. Some have made a Darth Vader-like sound, others have imagined they are a fire-breathing dragon to get the power and sound on the open-mouthed exhale.

I personally like to teach it by likening the way the sound is produced to sound like the “Haaaaah” like a hairdryer!

Whatever technique you use, the more you practice breath-awareness the more unconscious your skills will become and the more deep your meditation will be.

Trigger number 3 – Abdomino-diaphragmatic breathing

The more you can use your diaphragm to breathe the calmer your body and mind will be. Make sure you move away from paradoxical breath. You see, if you inhale sharply when for example you are stressed or surprised you are likely to suck in your stomach and gasp your air in. The gaseous exchange is pretty poor and you don't get much air into your lungs, which means you get less oxygen to your whole body. Now that can't be good ;).

It may take quite some practice but work on letting your “belly” fill with air as the diaphragm moves down into the abdominal space. This is how you exercise your diaphragm (because it only works on your inhales) and this is how you build your lung capacity. Then on the exhale you draw your abdomen back in again.

What breathing deeply does besides all those other wonderful lymphatic and cleansing benefits, is to physiologically calm the body by releasing neurotransmitters. This is your parasympathetic system in action.

We take it for granted – but why do you have to breathe through the nose? To breathe properly you must use your nose as a passageway and avoid mouth breathing wherever possible (as you move your belly out and in, just like a baby does). This engages a phenomenon called the Venturi effect and brings a full column of air down into the lungs.

It circumvents the paradoxical breath of gasping and snapping the belly in. I like to deepen that technique and use the analogy of imagining that my passages are a siphon. With a slight constriction at the base of the throat, the nose is a slightly larger aperture than the throat so the air is forced down into the lungs to fill the lungs more fully.

Trigger number 4 – Connecting with yourself

On a gross level Bikram Yoga and many hot yoga styles allow you to literally make eye to eye contact with yourself in the mirror. This may be one of the most confronting parts of your practice, coming face to face with another aspect of your own truth, and not being able to hide behind from your own reflection.

Other styles of yoga may not use eye contact in exactly the same way, but still the gaze or drishti can be worked on with similar effect. One way of approaching your visual focus is not to *burn a hole* in the mirror, floor or wall, but rather to soften your gaze. Allow openness around the eyes and **a feeling of relaxed receptiveness, acceptance and non judgment**. Never strain the eyes.

The qualities and direction of your eye gaze aids concentration. You have probably heard the phrase; “where the eyes go, the body follows”. This is true in so far as how deeply you can get into your poses, but the effects of your ability to still the movement in your eyes to some degree (because eyes do not completely stop moving) is probably an even more significant indicator of your mind’s activity. It becomes obvious that when your mind is distracted, your eyes find little rest. Distracted eye movements are a sign of an overactive mind.

So the crux of this trigger is to direct your attention in a way that will serve to deepen your meditation.

How do you do that?

Try to keep your focus fairly constant in one place without strain. This drishti is going to change from pose to pose. **If your practice involves a mirror then look in the mirror and try to look in your own eyes, if it is consistent with your asana.**

If you cannot look into your own eyes try to look somewhere that will enhance the pose – for example you may find looking at your knee will help you focus your attention on locking the knee. If your knee can be locked with relative ease and you don't need to look at it, work your gaze up higher. If you are trying to balance you will try to look out and forward and not at the floor.

If you are in a compressive pose look into your heart. Work through the intense feelings that may emerge from you by looking into your own eyes. If it is too much to bear then look somewhere a little less intense, maybe your throat, or between your eyes.

When you get to the floor remember that your first trigger about contextualizing your practice is consistent with your eye contact rule. If you start a pose with eye contact, make it your business to ensure eye contact right at the end of the pose BEFORE you turn around to lie down in Savasana.

More than 90% of students completely ignore this small but significant detail.

Most students treat their poses as separate items and get change their mental state in between the poses. Come out of the pose, settle your gaze on yourself as you completely reverse out, breathe, THEN turn around and lie down in Savasana. See how both triggers 4 and 5 work closely hand in hand.

Trigger number 5 – Efficiency in attaining Savasana

This fifth technique focuses on the way you get into and out of your Savasana. Your rest between the poses is designed to give you physiological recovery and to capitalize on the effects of the tourniquets, stretches and compressions that you set up in any pose. This is where you can catch your breath and observe the close interrelationship and reliance of your heart and lungs. As you slow your body, your heart slows and your breathing calms. This puts you in a better state of readiness for your next activity.

The more efficiently you can get into and out of your Savasana the better your practice, the deeper your meditation, the more focus, the better benefits to your life in and out of your class. And over time, perhaps after a few months, you can literally feel your body attending to stress and reducing it – just by triggering your Savasana state of stillness.

What I mean by efficiency is the reduction and removal of every single extraneous or unnecessary movement. When you finish a standing pose, open the chest, drop the shoulders down and back, look forward, make contact, breathe and don't move at all. When you are on the floor it is a little more complex because there is the turning around to get into and out of poses and Savasana states.

Being efficient means having an economy of movement. Turn around lie down with a minimum of fuss and energy expenditure and then lie there without adjusting hair, yoga clothes, wiping sweat and only drink when you really, really need it. Allow yourself to achieve relaxation the moment the pose has finished coming to a peak state as you extend on the floor. Savasana is a process or a state of being.

On a secondary point, your Savasana-efficiency allows you to observe in another context the metaphor or life-patterns you may have regarding anticipation/expectation and of course procrastination. But that my friend, is definitely a whole different topic! Just like Trigger number 1 where your practice starts with your first Pranayama breath or Sun Salutation or perhaps if you *program* yourself with the touch on the door, you can hasten the effects of your Savasana by creating the right mindset and physiological conditions.

Be quietly efficient and move into the same position with no fuss, every time.

Tying triggers 4 and 5 together is a powerful combination. Appropriate eye contact or drishti is a real opportunity to connect with your mind and body unity. Your Savasanas string your poses together to unify your practice. So eye contact acts to 'lengthen' your rest time in Savasana and improve your meditation.

Trigger number 6 – 'Reverse' Tonglen – a way to work the breath with body opening and release

This is a Tonglen-derived (Buddhist) technique that I have found has improved meditative focus in my practice, Robert's and hundreds up hundreds of my students. Tonglen is a practice for connecting with the suffering of everyone around us and to spread compassion. In the simplest of terms, it uses breath in a focused way to draw anyone's pain into the body on an inhale, energetically take it through the heart, dissolving the sensations, adding joy and love and then breathing it out to spread that joy.

In the context of a yoga class I prefer to modify the practice. **I like to breathe in joy, clarity, compassion, focus, stamina** and any number of positive elements and breathe out pain, discomfort, tension and stress. In this way I have been able to visualize troubles whether physical or emotional, leaving my body.

I can literally feel my body relax and release. I can sense discomfort draining out of my extremities and dissolving in the breath. This is a particularly important technique that works in synergy with yoga asana technique, where we tend to inhale length and strength and then release into a more limber relaxed self.

Many, many students have had success with this deeper way of using breath as a profound tool for personal, physical and spiritual growth and I hope you find it useful too.

Perhaps you have a tool that you find indispensable. I would really love to learn what deepens your practice. Together we can expand this toolbox.

In the meantime, please feel free add your comments (use the link I'll give you below) and share with all of us what you think is your greatest tip to deepening your practice, or something that you have heard.

Remember it doesn't have to be groundbreaking ... just useful, practical and something you want to share!

Tell us all what you think, believe or feel:

<http://www.hotyogadoctor.com/index.php/site/comments/meditation-101/>

Namaste

Gabrielle

More resources can be found at:

<http://www.hotyogadoctor.com/>

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