



Five Essential Keys to a Sustained Meditation Practice

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Increasingly, we hear that meditation may be a remedy for stress, the overactive mind, time urgency, and inner malaise. So we find a teacher, a program or a group. We begin with enthusiasm and great hope. We may even try it and experience some of the early results—a calmer mind, less reactivity, more patience, and inner peace.

But regardless of these improvements in life, too often we drop away from this simple yet profound and transformative practice. Why do we fall away from meditation and its allied practices, and how do we begin again with a more certain footing? Let's look at five keys to sustaining an ongoing and successful meditation practice.

1. Meditation is More than Relaxation

In the West, meditation is usually taught as a relaxation technique. Instead of seeking enduring happiness, peace, and wisdom—the aim of inner development—we aim at the feel-good sense of relaxation, and are satisfied with this very modest sense of self-improvement.

Once our life calms down we fall away from meditation. Of course our usual state of stress and distress returns, but by that point we have either given up on the practice or simply “don't have time for it.” We are unable to overcome the active mind or lose interest and let go of practice.

Meditation is a learned skill. There are three progressive stages of meditation—calming the mind, progressing towards a stable serenity, and progressively gaining the transforming insights and wisdom that ensure sustained health, serenity, and happiness. Meditation is far more than relaxation. We must be convinced of that.

2. Meditation as a Way of Life

Although it's most frequently taught as a stand-alone practice, meditation is not an isolated technique. It's part of a lifetime path of inner development that seamlessly integrates formal practice with daily life.

All of life is part of this pathway. Relationships, work, and the challenge and adversities of life can all become sources of practice. When addressed from a growing consciousness, all aspects of life become important teachers.

When we understand meditation as part of a comprehensive approach to life that aims to realize our full potential, and we are properly instructed on how to use our life experience to support our effort, we are primed for a lifetime of benefits.

3. An Expansive Motivation

The initial motivation to begin meditation is most often the desire to alleviate mental stress and distress. And that is fine, as far as it goes. But if that remains our singular motivation it is likely that once achieved, or even partially achieved, our efforts will drop away.

However, if we persist and recognize the benefits to body, mind, and spirit, we will then be motivated by the possibility of further benefits. This is an upgrade in our motivation. That enhances perseverance.

But there is more. What we have achieved for our self we will surely wish for others as well. Ultimately, the most expansive motivation for meditative practice is a profound and noble intention—the desire to practice and enhance our own life in order to be of help and benefit to others. This increasingly selfless motivation underlies the long-term stability and richness of the meditative approach to life.

If we mature and evolve our motivation, we are likely to continue a juicy and vital practice throughout our lifetime.

4. Grasping at Transcendence

Meditation is the cultivation of a state of being, in contrast to a state of doing. The aim, if it can be called that, is to rest effortlessly in our natural and ever present state of harmonious being. If we hold as a goal a perfected or developed state of enlightenment, we miss the point. There is nothing to be attained, nothing to achieve. There is just living in the moment in peace and well-being.

Grasping toward an ideal future accomplishment leads to frustration and disappointment, and a falling away from practice. On the contrary, staying with the daily practice without judgment or striving will lead to a progressive improvement of our life and relationships. And one morning we will wake up and suddenly realize we are home, where we have always been, free, and alive.

5. We Are Human

Lest we forget, it's important to remind ourselves that we are human, and humans learn by falling away. Consider an infant learning to walk. When the infant falls down, as it surely will, it immediately gets up again. It does not remain on the ground enmeshed in a mental conversation of shame, doubt, or self-questioning. It simply gets up and starts again. If it did otherwise, it would never learn to walk.

What's most important is that we follow the example of the infant and return to practice, over and over, without self-judgment. The inability to recognize that falling off is part of learning is a key reason for prematurely dropping our practice.

Meditation is a learned skill. There is no magic or mystery. If we follow precise and accurate instructions tailored to our style and disposition we will in time progress, master meditation, and experience its lifelong benefits.

Reflect and keep in mind these five keys to a successful and enduring meditation practice. They come to us through generations of successful meditators.