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**HOW TO TEACH AND LEAD
MEDITATION**

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In these notes you will find a holistic view on meditation. You can then choose to develop particular strategies that are most appropriate for your approach and your groups.

1. OVERVIEW

Approach: student-centred, person-centred.

Methodology: holistic, action-learning, inclusive, welcoming diversity.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Surely meditation emerged as a natural behaviour.

Some people have an instinct to take time alone away from the noise of social/work life.

In this time alone, quietly in peaceful solitude, they develop a deeper and more subtle awareness of . . . everything . . . nature, themselves, all that is, the mystery, the wonder, the fields of consciousness . . .

This natural behaviour then became organised in small religious geographically isolated communities. Dogmas about meditation began to be solidified. How to sit. How to breathe. What to do.

There are profound meditation traditions in all faith communities, religions and spiritual paths — each with their own particular ways.

Recently the Buddhist approach to detached witnessing in the form of mindfulness has become very popular. But this is just one approach.

Today in the modern world we have the blessing of being aware of all these different approaches and we can see the core concepts, skills and experiences that they share.

TEMPLATE

Our basic model is:

- **Gateways** — There are different gateways into meditation such as: breath, sound and movement.
- **The 'Zone'** — There is one state which is common to all types of meditation: calm, connected, at ease, watchful. The 'Zone'

- **Practices** — There are different activities inside meditation such as: just being, healing, prayer, self-care, journeying.

Gateways into Meditation



THE ZONE



Activities in Meditation

THE ZONE

Whichever tradition you use the actual experience of meditation is always the same. There is a certain common baseline that we all experience. Let's call it the Zone.

The Baseline of the Zone

- Body at ease
- Breath and heart beat integrated
- Gut calm
- Adrenalin/cortisol reduced; endorphins/oxytocin/serotonin balanced
- Mindful — mind at ease and watchful
- Heart open
- A sense of connection and oneness with all that is
- Self-soothed

POSTURE AND BREATH

In my opinion posture is not important except that we do not want people to hurt their backs. People with disabilities can of course meditate, so to over-emphasise posture is inappropriate. That said, a straight spine is a body language that may enable alertness.

Breath just needs to be soft and natural. Yogic breath may be useful for some as a gateway into meditation but not for ongoing practice. If you hear people breathing loud enough for you to hear, ask them to be quiet unless they have a physical problem.

SPIRITUAL?

What is 'spiritual meditation' as opposed to secular meditation or mindfulness?

Taking a student-centred approach it is best to ask learners to develop their own answer to this query.

My personal opinion is: Spiritual meditation is a commitment to a certain path of self-managed personal development. This path leads to:

- Greater love, compassion and wisdom
- Deepening union with all that is and experience of life's wonder
- Subtle service to all sentient beings through healing and co-presence (just being with their suffering and their genius)
- Expanded consciousness; the emergence of one's compassionate witnessing self, higher self, big mind, core self

Oxford English Dictionary definition of mindfulness: *a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.*

OED definition of meditation: *Focus one's mind for a period of time, in silence or with the aid of chanting, for religious or spiritual purposes or as a method of relaxation.*

2. HEALTH BENEFITS

Because the whole physiological system is put at ease.

Possible Physiological Benefits

- Reduces the hazards of any illness where stress is a factor
- Lower blood pressure
- Enhanced pain management
- Strengthens immune system
- Lower cholesterol levels
- Improved airflow, eg asthma
- Slows ageing, rejuvenates and vitalizes
- Helps you sleep

Possible Emotional/Psychological Benefits

- Stress reduced
- Self-management leading to improved confidence and self-esteem
- Sense of self
- Reality check on thinking (CBT)
- Supports intelligence and concentration
- Reduces depression
- Increases emotional control
- Supports self-esteem and confidence
- Feel more vital and alert
- Better relationships
- Supports learning ability
- Enhances moral reasoning and memory

- Less irritability and moodiness
- We get to know our ‘true’ selves
- Clears away the overload from daily life
- Spills over to create a calmer and more centred life style

Possible Spiritual Benefits

- Emptying and dissolving into oneness with all that is/the mystery/spirit
- Greater sense of connection and harmony with all life
- Opens the heart, develops compassion
- Supports and accelerates spiritual development
- Expands consciousness and awareness
- Develops the witnessing self
- Self-healing
- Empowers self-responsibility and self-management
- Service through presence, healing and prayer

NB: HEALTH AND SAFETY

Be realistic and compassionate to the human condition.

It is in meditation that people may first meet their repressed wounds and shadow aspects. Old stuff emerges. It is possible for meditators to be flooded and overwhelmed if their development is too fast. It is also possible for people with a disposition towards mental health challenges to go into a full mental health crisis.

That is why meditators must have the core skill of grounded compassionate witnessing. As teachers/leaders/therapists we model this.

3. GATEWAYS INTO MEDITATION

There are many gateways and methods into the Zone of meditation.

NB: Be aware that every religious, spiritual and shamanic tradition will give its own colouring and opinion to these activities congruent with its own beliefs and worldview. Sometimes they may be in competition.

Being

Just wait, be patient and watchful

Breath

Many variations

- Just notice how the breath moves
- Counting
- In-breath, pause. Out-breath, pause. And variations
- Alternating between nostrils and mouth; alternating nostrils
- Alternating the pressure of the breath, eg soft to vigorous
- Breathing into different locations in the body, chakras, dantiens

Body Kinaesthetic

- Body scan – toes to crown, or crown to toes
- Tense then relax
- Sinking into abdomen and soft stomach
- Grounding, rooting and earthing
- Focusing – giving kind attention to body, area by area, organs, chakras, meridians, dantiens
- Dance, movement, exertion, shaking, laughter, sex, drumming
- Prayer beads, knitting

- Contemplative movement, hatha yoga, walking, body prayer, tai chi, posture

Sound & Mantra

- Vibrational sounds (OM)
- Song, chant
- Prayers
- Gong, bell, drum
- Mantra, affirmations

Visual

- Mandalas
- Icons
- Colour
- Guided journeys
- Candle Flames
- Nature

Ceremony

Using all the above, plus artefacts — candles, aroma ...

Arts, Creativity, Crafts

Painting, dance, music, clay, weaving. . .

Touch

Holding a stone, crystal, meaningful object . . .

Sacred Space

In a temple, church, grove, medicine wheel . . . Light a candle to create sacred space (this is also related to ceremony)

Repetition

Of any activity

Induced Altered States of Consciousness

- Fasting
- Postures
- Drugs
- Pain

Aroma

- Essential oils
- Incense

Attitude

- Conscious listening
- Gratitude
- Focussed awareness
- Appreciation

4. STAYING IN THE ZONE

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Past Wounds In meditation people pause and become aware of their own condition. They can feel themselves, sometimes for the first time. Our bodies carry the cellular memory, the tissue and muscle memory, of past wounds and pain. Inevitably these will surface and be felt. Understandably this is uncomfortable and people seek to avoid it. So they walk away from meditation.

Old Habits We are also all caught in habitual behaviours and attitudes. These are our neuro-endocrinal grooves. It is can be uncomfortable to stop these compulsive moods and behaviours. The brakes screech and we resist.

A meditation practice is a new groove. It usually takes time and persistence to develop this groove. Though some people may just drop gracefully into it.

POSSIBLE CHALLENGES FOR MEDITATORS

All of these are normal.

- Body shame
- Cannot establish the time/space
- Discomfort from unrecognised anxiety
- Easily aroused and distracted by external stimuli
- Has not found the appropriate Gateway
- Memories of punishment, associations with fear
- Mistakenly thinks the mind should be absolutely quiet
- Prefers the groove of daily life
- Repressed arousals
- Resistance to new behaviour
- Resistance to self-development; uncomfortable with change
- Self-critical
- The 'frigid' problem: has misunderstood the calm quiet of meditation; not understood that the ocean of cosmic consciousness is warm, always moving, always emerging, always in flux. The 'void' has room for everything.
- The 'militaristic' problem: has been caught in the semi-patriarchal martial arts approach and therefore goes into anxiety and tension. Freezes
- Trauma memory
- Unworthy of self-care; internal judge/parent/teacher

Therefore your groups and students need you to be patient, reassuring and caring.

CORE STRATEGIES TO HELP PEOPLE STAY IN MEDITATION WHEN THERE IS DISCOMFORT

- Commitment and self-discipline
- Compassionate and caring self-awareness as discomfort arises
- An attitude of psychological spaciousness in which all feelings and thoughts are allowed
- Soft breath — just being aware of it; or guiding it – perhaps with a particular rhythm
- Dropping down into the body. Consciously and deliberately allowing your body to slump and drop into being at ease

ACTIVE MEDITATION IS EASIER FOR SOME

- Practice any of the strategies that are in the next section. *Active* meditation distracts us from the discomforts whilst we focus on a meditative activity.

GROUPS

- For many people sitting in a regular meditation group can be very helpful and supportive.

5. ACTIVITIES IN MEDITATION

Just Being — Self-Reflection — Metaphysics — Service

Repetition: Be aware that every religious, spiritual and shamanic tradition will give its own colouring and opinion to these activities congruent with its own beliefs and worldview.

(A) JUST BEING – FORMLESS – PASSIVE

- Just watch, breathe and witness. Compassionate detachment. Equanimity. Patience.
- Noticing, sensing, feeling, cognising, accepting.
- Vipassana. Zen. Christian emptying. The Void.
- Through this process over time we melt, integrate, fuse and liberate into oneness, cosmic consciousness, nirvana, nothing, moksha (liberation from wheel of incarnation)

(B) COMPASSIONATE SELF-REFLECTION

Reflect and Awaken Consciousness

- Mindful, compassionate witnessing of yourself – ‘Know thyself’
- Slow and careful review and assessment of your recent actions, thoughts, feelings
- Contemplating yourself with crystal clear honesty
- Identifying shadow behaviours and patterns – just noticing, bringing them into the light
- Noticing too your good things, talents, kindness
- Always with self-compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, integration

- Always aware that this is developing love and expanding your consciousness

Healing

- Inner Smile: give kindness to yourself – psycho-neuro-endocrinal benefits
- Inner dialogue – therapist to yourself
- Self-healing: benevolent qi/prana/energy; Reiki etc
- Qi Gung, Kabbalah, Tantra: experiment with subtle sensations and energies of body and consciousness; releasing blocks, enabling flexibility and flow

Planning

- Contemplate next steps needed for personal /spiritual development
- Contemplate work and relationships; greet souls; allow insights and intuitions about next steps
- Meditation is a great space to contemplate your life. What better space could there be?
- Mind-chatter is not a problem. The issue is: Is the chatter useful and is it benevolent? Is it focusing on something that is creative, positive and useful? Is it loving and understanding?

(C) SEED THOUGHTS AND CONTEMPLATION

In meditation you are free to explore and tune into anything. Knowledge and wisdom are intuitively accessible through what Patanjali described as the ‘raincloud of knowable things’.

1. You start with a seed-thought, just a soft and gentle awareness of some thing
2. You stay calmly and patiently aware of it

3. You let thoughts and insights come to you
4. You witness these thoughts and intuitions
5. Some go, some stay

Imagine doing this day-by-day for months.

Your subjects for contemplation and exploration might include:

Beings: Christ, Buddha, gods, goddesses, avatars, saints, angels

Maps: planes, astrology, kabbalah, rays

Concepts: God, infinity, source, purpose, love, compassion, evil, redemption

Vibration: Mantra, sound, the Word, AUM, OM, Amen

Esoteric anatomy: Chakras, meridians, etheric body

Perhaps the most important contemplative exercise is to empty and contemplate the benevolence of the cosmos

(D) SERVICE

- Prayer
- Healing
- Soul rescue
- Tonglen (inhale negativity, exhale blessing)

(E) NATURAL WORLD

Just being with nature and natural world, from a blade of grass to distant stars. Just being present to the sensations and shifts of consciousness that come from this awareness.

6. TEACHING AND LEADING MEDITATION

**Always do your preparation inside your own meditation practice.
(Where else?)**

Namaste

Long in advance greet the souls of those who may come into your group. Do this often and regularly. Acclimatise yourself to them.

Culture

Identify the culture of your group and the language that is appropriate for them.

Purpose

Clarify your purpose. Will you just have them experience a Gateway or do you want to take them into an activity. Only work with practices that you yourself practise. You may just be teaching self-soothing.

Attitude

Have an attitude of openhearted generosity, welcoming all that they are.

Holding

Always hold your group with warmth and kindness. Open your heart to your group. Let your warm and reassuring energy field hold the group.

Your Vibe

Be aware that your vibe will be felt by your group. Self-manage.

Empathic Leadership

Learn to trust that what you feel and sense when you are in a group is the group dynamic.

First Bird in the Flock

Whatever focus you are leading your group into, go into that space yourself so that your experience/ambience leads the group.

Facilitate

You are drawing out of people what is a natural behaviour. Don't teach as if it is either difficult or special new sacred knowledge.

What to Say

Your voice must be loud enough and reassuring.

When in doubt, say nothing, keep breathing.

Rehearse your words with a friend.

Practise them out loud in your own private meditation practice.

Have your words align directly with your purpose. No surplus words.

Closing

If you sense that some members may be vulnerable because they are too open, reassuringly name this and suggest, for example, towards the end of the meditation that they close themselves up safely like a tulip at night closing its petals. (Or other words that are appropriate.)

My approach to teaching meditation is that it is a natural behaviour. People do it instinctively when they need to be quiet, alone and reflective.

“So perhaps it might be easy for you. Sit comfortably on your sofa. Switch off the TV. And just be there for 10 minutes. See if you enjoy that ...”

