

SIMPLE GUIDE

Setting Up a Home Meditation Practice

Susan Piver

(c) Open Heart Project 2022



Welcome!

Hello. Thank you so much for your interest in meditation. This guide is a step-by-step overview of setting up your own home practice. It includes suggestions for creating your meditation space, figuring out your practice schedule, and tips for establishing the correct posture.

With love, Susan



open heart project

About Meditation



As you get started on your practice, the main thing to remember is this:

Simplicity is key.

All the things covered in this guide: your practice space, the attitude you take, the ideas you may have, and the way you approach the practice should be kept very, very simple. The simpler, the better. Did I mention simple?

Please take your time going through this material. Be patient with yourself. Check your expectations at the door. Open to what happens rather than what you think ought to happen. The journey you are beginning is bigger than you may imagine.

I am delighted to support you on your way home to yourself.

A truly comprehensive list of meditation benefits would be long indeed.

Some of the benefits that have been demonstrated recently through modern scientific inquiry include the following:

- It relieves stress (by lowering the stress hormone cortisol).
- It improves focus and memory (by raising the level of gamma waves).
- It prevents relapse into depression by 50 percent (according to studies by Jon Kabat-Zinn, MD, and Zindel Segal, PhD).
- It boosts immunity (in one study, meditators demonstrated higher levels of antibodies than non-meditators in reaction to a vaccination).
- It actually makes you demonstrably happier (by reducing activation in the amygdala and increasing it in the prefrontal cortex).

The health benefits don't stop there. In addition, it has been demonstrated that meditation can help with the following:

- Lowering high blood pressure
- Decreasing symptoms in illnesses with a stress-related component (ulcers, for example)
- Decreasing serum cholesterol levels
- Reducing muscular tension
- Reducing oxygen and energy consumption
- Improving sleep

In short, it has been scientifically proven that meditation is awesome.

Other sorts of benefits have been recounted in reports from countless meditators over thousands of years. To this amazing list, add that for millennia, saints, yogis, and gurus have been urging meditation as a way to become more peaceful, kind, and wise. It is offered as the foundation of a life of sanity and joy. It is counseled as a way to increase loving kindness and compassion for all. It is even taught as a path to enlightenment and lasting bliss.

From relieving stress to complete liberation from suffering: this is one amazing technique.

The practice I teach in this guide is called shamatha meditation.

Shamatha is a Sanskrit word that is translated variously as “the practice of peacefully abiding” or “the practice of tranquillity.” Shamatha is said to have been taught by the Buddha himself more than twenty-five hundred years ago. It has been practiced by countless individuals over the millennia, and there is a tremendous body of knowledge about how this practice can create and sustain balance, even in a speedy, out-of-control world.



Essential Principles



I've taught meditation for over 10 years and have shared the practice with tens of thousands of people. I have seen over and over how these core principles help to create a sustainable practice.

1. **Try to practice at the same time each day.** Most people find that the morning works out best, but some of you may have a dozen kids to get off to school or a job that requires your presence at 6:00 A.M. Or you may simply be a night owl and find it better to practice when you get home from work or before bed. You can experiment with times of day, but whatever seems best, stick with it. There is nothing magical about this, it just seems that habits thrive on routine.
2. **Establish a realistic goal.** Don't say to yourself, "I'm going to meditate every single day for 20 minutes." Why? Because you won't. Then, when you fall off the wagon, you'll feel bad and become even less likely to practice. Instead, set up something completely doable—for you. For example: promise yourself to practice for 10 minutes per day, M-F for 4 weeks. At the end of that time, reassess. If 10 minutes is too long, do 5. If M-F is extreme, just do the weekends. You get the idea.
3. **Consistency over duration.** It is better to practice for 10 minutes per day, 5 days a week than 50 minutes, 1 day a week.
4. **Before practice, affirm your commitment** to what you are about to do by saying to yourself, "now is my time for practice—everything else can wait." Because it can.

4. **Establish a place for your practice.** No need to get fancy. Place your meditation cushion or chair in a spot you feel happy to be in—perhaps in a part of your house that gets gorgeous light or a corner of your bedroom that is quiet and peaceful. If you like, you could have a small offering table or shrine with fresh flowers or a candle or a photo of someone or something inspiring. This is optional.
5. **Follow the 12-second rule.** This rule states that when you screw up (i.e. miss a day or a week or a month on the cushion), you must feel awful, guilty, and ashamed—but only for 12 seconds!! Then you have just got to CUT THAT BS OUT!! It's thoroughly NOT useful. The only thing worse than slacking off in your practice is feeling like crap for slacking off in your practice. Don't do that.



6. **Keep a Journal** Take time after each practice session to make a few notes about how it went. Note how many minutes you practiced. (If you did not practice, write down “sat for zero minutes.” That is no problem. This is not a race and you will not be graded or evaluated. This is simply a way to track your experience.) Jot down any insights, feelings, or sensations that seem relevant. Note any questions you may have. Keep it simple.

They say it takes 21 days to create a new habit. Try to keep a journal for that period. You can print out the following pages and use them for this purpose if you like. Doing so can help you to note issues and stay on track.

Optional: Have a book about meditation nearby and read a paragraph, page, or chapter before or after your practice. When we marry even the slightest bit of study to our practice, our practice deepens.

DAY 1

How did your practice go today?

DAY 2

Make a few notes about how it went.

DAY 3

Take a moment to check in with yourself

DAY 4

What did you discover, if anything?

DAY 5

What did you notice about today's practice?

DAY 6

How are you feeling today?

DAY 7

What did you notice about yourself?

Reflections on Week One:

DAY 8

Did time pass slowly or quickly today?

DAY 9

How was today’s practice like/unlike other days?

DAY 10

DAY 11

How do you feel right now?

DAY 12

Take a moment to check in with yourself.

DAY 13

What do you most need to tell yourself today?

DAY 14

What three words best describe how you feel right now?

Reflections on Week Two:

DAY 15

What did you learn today, if anything?

DAY 16

How did you feel when you began your practice? When it ended?

DAY 17

How are you right now?

DAY 18

How would you describe your practice today?

DAY 19

What did you notice about today's practice?

DAY 20

What have you learned about meditation so far?

DAY 21

What have you learned about yourself during this challenge?

Reflections on your 21-days of practice:

Notes

On Posture



Good posture for sitting on the floor: Knees and pelvis create a supportive triangle. For some people, this is the best posture, or the best one to work toward. In the side view (see stick figure 2), notice the straight line of the neck and relaxed palms:

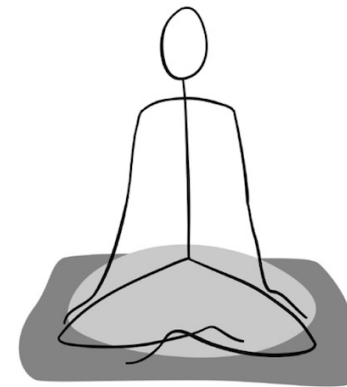


FIG. 1

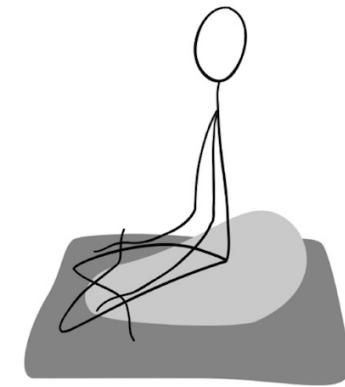


FIG. 2

Bad posture for sitting on the floor: Don't arch or round your back too much—look at the potential for neck strain in both cases:

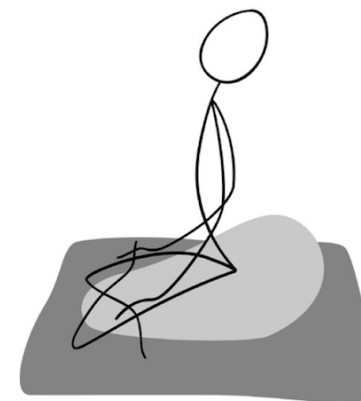


FIG. 3



FIG. 4

Sitting with the knees slightly elevated is fine if you prefer that. **Good posture for those who prefer to sit with the knees slightly elevated:**

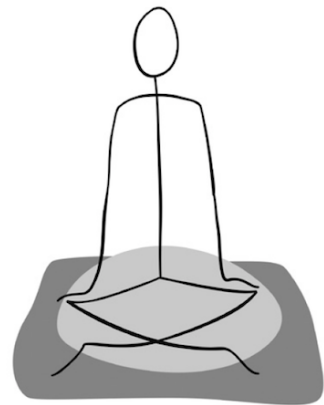


FIG. 5

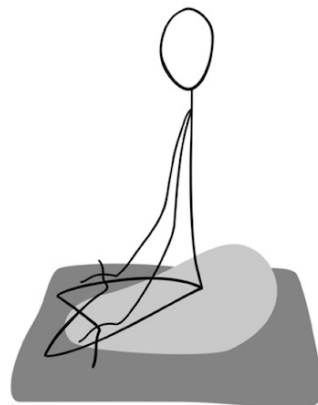


FIG. 6

Good posture for those who prefer to sit on a meditation bench:
Some people prefer to sit on a meditation bench, knees down and in front.

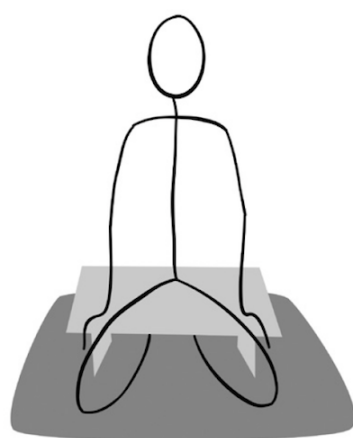


FIG. 7

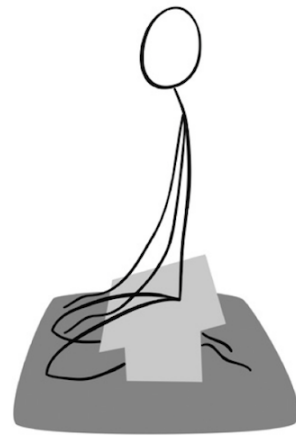


FIG. 8

Bad posture for those who prefer to sit on a meditation bench: But there's still no need to slump.

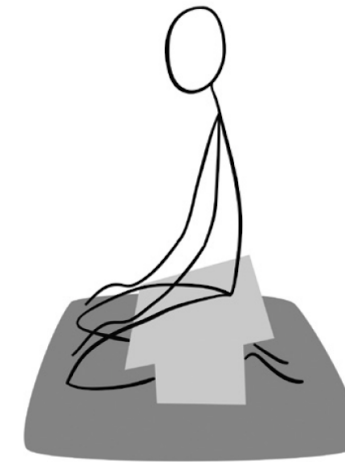


FIG. 9

Sitting on a chair: If you choose to sit on a chair, that is great. Sit with your feet flat on the floor and scoot forward so that your back isn't leaning on anything. If you find any back strain in this position, experiment with placing a cushion underneath your feet to raise your knees to be level with your hips.

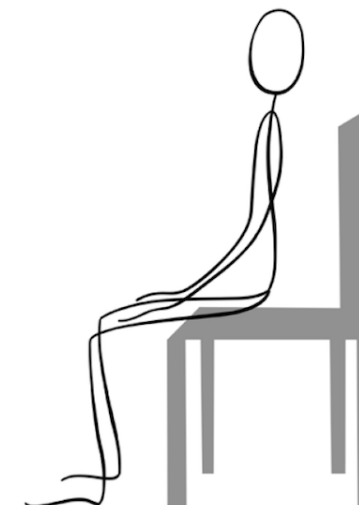


FIG. 11

Meditation Instruction

Find a comfortable place to sit. If you can sit on a meditation cushion, that's great. If this is too uncomfortable for any reason, it's fine to sit on a chair. It's helpful to designate a particular spot for meditation, so, if possible, choose a particular room or corner of a room to establish your practice. Make your sitting area pleasant. If you wish, you could sit in front of a shelf or table with some cherished or beautiful objects on them, like fresh flowers, some river stones, or a picture of someone or something you love. Keep it simple. The idea is to create a spot that you feel good about returning to.

There are three aspects to pay attention to in meditation practice.

BODY

The practice begins with how you take your seat. Meditation posture is actually quite specific. Simply sit up straight, not rigidly, but in a relaxed, upright position. The main thing to remember is to feel yourself in your body, not outside of it, judging your posture as correct or incorrect. (I sometimes feel as though I am hovering around or just outside of my body, hoping I might be able to ignore it somehow.) The practice actually begins when you "land." You could feel that as your sit bones reach down into the earth, the crown of your head reaches slightly up, as if some kind and gentle person had put his palm a few centimeters above it and you would like to touch it. Imagine yourself as a tree whose roots are planted in the ground, but that also sways and moves with the wind. In this way, your posture should be firmly planted but also supple. When you sit upright like this, you are proclaiming your dignity.

If you are seated on a cushion, cross your legs loosely in front of you. Some people prefer to have their knees lower than the hips, some higher. Play around and see what works for you.

Some people feel most comfortable with only a very thin cushion to elevate their hips; others require a cushion that is one or two feet high. You may have to experiment with cushion heights to find the right setup for yourself.

If you are on a chair, scoot forward so that your back is not resting on anything and your feet are flat on the floor. For most people who meditate sitting in a chair, it's nice to have the knees a little higher than the hips. To accomplish this, place a cushion under your feet.

When you've found a comfortable posture, place your hands, palms down, just above your knees or at mid-thigh. Let your shoulders and belly relax.

Tuck your chin a little bit so that the back of the neck is long. Your mouth should be closed, with the lips slightly parted, tongue resting on the roof of the mouth. Let the jaw relax.

In this practice, the eyes remain open. The gaze is soft and cast slightly down, to a spot about six feet in front of you. (Or a couple of meters if you are in a metric country.) It's not like you're staring at that spot or at anything in particular—it's more like vision is streaming out from your eyes and mixing with space instead of targeting anything in particular. Although they are open, your eyes are relaxed with the sense that they are sitting back in their sockets, as opposed to straining forward. It doesn't matter what your gaze comes to rest on; just let it settle on a spot six feet in front.

BREATH

Once you have established your posture, begin to notice the rise and fall of your breath. Feel yourself breathing. Decisively be with your breath. Each breath is different. Can you tell how? Breathe naturally. Allow attention to ride the breath like waves in the ocean.

Placing awareness on the breath is different from thinking about the breath. Here is a simple demonstration of what is meant by placement of attention. Without moving or looking, right now allow your awareness to settle around your right big toe. Allow yourself simply to become conscious of that little piggy. Notice if it feels squished or snug in your sock, or if you can feel the air around it. Now, also without moving or looking, move your awareness to your left ear lobe. Again, just notice it hanging out there in space. Maybe it's adorned with an earring, perhaps it's covered by your hair. Now move awareness back to the right big toe. And again up to the left ear lobe.

Whatever just moved is your attention. That is what you place on the breath in meditation.

MIND

At some point, you may notice that your attention has drifted away from the breath and become absorbed in thought. That is absolutely no problem, none whatsoever. Often, I hear people say things like, "I tried to meditate but I couldn't stop thinking! There's no way I can do it." But there is no need to stop thinking, only to develop a different relationship to your thoughts. When thoughts arise, simply notice them and allow them to float by. Keep your attention on your breath. When a particular thought absconds with your attention, as soon as you notice this, just let it go and return attention to breath. It doesn't matter how long you've been "gone." The important thing is to come back. Gently let the thought ease away like a wave eases back into the ocean. It doesn't

matter how wonderful, horrendous, boring, creative, or critically insightful your thought has been. Just let go.

When it comes to thoughts, let them touch you and then flow away, as if you were standing barefoot in a stream and occasional leaves or pebbles momentarily brushed up against you and then were gone. In meditation, thoughts are also famously equated to clouds in the sky. Some are cheerful and bright while some seem to bear ominous portent. Some are fat and fluffy and beautiful and others are barely perceptible beyond a far-off streak of white. Sometimes clouds block the sky altogether. But you know that just beyond them, the sun is always shining, clear and bright. The meditation researcher and practitioner Jon Kabat-Zinn says that in meditation practice, instead of identifying with the clouds, we identify ourselves as the sky. The sky doesn't care what kind of clouds pass through or how long they stay. And, just like the sky, we can hold it all and know that no matter what direction we happen to be facing, somewhere it is always east and somewhere the sun is always rising.

Mindfulness of body can create a sense of stability. Mindfulness of breath creates a sense of peace. And mindfulness of mind creates a sense of tremendous spaciousness. Together, mindfulness of body, breath, and mind create your meditation practice.

Going Forward

If you would like to continue to practice together, please join the [Open Heart Project Sangha](#). Sangha is the Sanskrit word for community. It is a full meditation center that lives in the cloud. You can drop by anytime of day or night!

Benefits of Sangha membership include:

Daily audio meditations sent right to your inbox

A new video every month to explore a different aspect of the journey

Online retreats, classes, and workshops

Peer group accountability and friendship circles

Access to an archive of over 1000 meditation videos and talks

Weekly “office hours” with me to check in about your practice

and

If you sign up for a year, an autographed copy of *Start Here Now*:

An Open-Hearted Guide to the Path and Practice of Meditation

Cost: \$27 a month or \$270 for the year

JOIN HERE