

# A Path to Peace



**PATH**

**TO**

**PEACE**

*Finding Your True Self Through Daily  
Spiritual Practice*

*Reflections for A Winter Feast for the Soul*

Valerie Skonie

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SUGGESTED READING

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Where would I be without the inspiration of the great poet and mystic, Jelaluddin Rumi, and his embodied translator and spokesman, Coleman Barks? It is to them that I owe immense gratitude for the three lines of poetry that initially inspired the Winter Feast for the Soul and the momentum that led to writing this book.

The first Winter Feast, as well as this book which became part of it, would never have happened had it not been for the support of Rev. John Moreland, Spiritual Director at Light on the Mountains Spiritual Center in Ketchum Idaho. His community provided the momentum to make the first Feast a reality in January of 2008. John's artistic talent took this book from a collection of words and ideas to a work of art. *Thank you* is not nearly enough for his generous support.

The guidance of my friend and Sufi teacher, Shahabuddin David Less, permeates my deepest spiritual understanding and ultimately finds its way into this book. His support of the worldwide expansion of the 2009 Winter Feast for the Soul has carried me through many challenging moments along the way. I am grateful beyond words for knowing him in this lifetime. There have been other teachers—too numerous to mention here—who have led me to open my mind to the Greater Mysteries of Life. I take this opportunity to publicly thank them all.

Others who have been supportive in making this book a reality. They include numerous friends and associates who lent a hand when one was needed. The gentle editing done by Emily Schneider and Alexandra Delis-Abrams was critical to the book finding its present form. The patient and quiet support of my Wheaten terrier, Mr. T, made the long hours at the computer a little less lonely. My sincere thanks to every person on my support team, and to the countless angels who smiled on this work as it progressed.

*Valerie Skonie*  
*September 7, 2008*

## FORWARD

Early in the fall of 2007, Valerie Skonie phoned and asked if we could meet to discuss a new idea that she had been entertaining. A few days later, we found ourselves at a local coffee house, Valerie with her tea and me with my usual coffee, for what would turn out to be the first of many early-morning get-together's at this local spot.

Valerie began to explain to me a seed idea that was growing out of a Rumi poem that just wouldn't leave her alone. The poem spoke of the potential power of a forty-day commitment to spiritual practice. "What if," she posed, "we could create the means for people of all beliefs and faiths to come together in prayer for forty consecutive days?"

We all have numerous ideas that spark during our daily waking consciousness. Occasionally, however, we open to something deeper. Here, from our best Self, the Self that has not forgotten its connection to something greater, plunks a different sort of idea.

Though I could come up with any number of reasons why such an invitation to our community would not be well received, I knew that this idea was one of those deeper, special designs. As impossible as it may have seemed in that moment, I knew that this "What if," would take on a life of its own if we were willing to be led along the way.

We were willing and the result was the first Winter Feast for the Soul in 2008. The idea burst into life, as I knew it would, and support and participation began to pour in from the most unexpected places.

The lesson to learn from this, however, is not that we need to be on the lookout for rare Divine inspiration, but that, if we allow them, these ideas are readily available. The essence of the Feast is the structure of support in which we can be still, receptive, and available to a larger purpose for our lives. It is through our dedication that we discover that there are Divine ideas in our lives now, merely waiting for us to take notice.

It is amazing how simple it can be to increase your level of receptivity. All that is required is a regular spiritual practice of daily prayer or mindful meditation. The form of practice is not as important as your intention and willingness to open up to something greater than your personal self. I invite you to participate in the next Winter Feast for the Soul as a means to deepen your experience of the Divine. May this book support you in your efforts. It has the potential to gently and profoundly change your life.

Rev. John Moreland  
Community Spiritual Leader  
Light on the Mountains Spiritual Center, Sun Valley, Idaho

*"The degree of spiritual consciousness which we attain can be measured by the extent to which we relinquish our dependence on the external world of form and place our faith and confidence in something greater than ourselves, in the Infinite Invisible, which can surmount any and every obstacle. It is an awareness of the grace of God."*

– Joel S. Goldsmith, *Practicing the Presence*

## INTRODUCTION

The idea for the first Winter Feast for the Soul was sparked by a quote from the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, Jelaluddin Rumi. I took a long pause when I came across these three lines in *The Illuminated Prayer*, by Coleman Barks and Michael Green:

*“What nine months does for the embryo  
Forty early mornings  
Will do for your growing awareness.”*  
Rumi

The inspiration began with a question: “What if we were to create an opportunity for people to come together in support of one another in establishing a daily practice of prayer and meditation? Would they see it as an opportunity? Would they commit to and sustain a forty day practice period?” Knowing it could be a risk, I settled with Spirit. I would be happy if twelve people were to commit to the first Feast.

I soon found a willing collaborator in Rev. John Moreland, Spiritual Director of Light on the Mountains Spiritual Center in Ketchum Idaho. We made ourselves and our intentions known through his congregation and through the generous support and curiosity of the local press. By the time the first Feast began on January 15, 2008, we had established seven meditation sites at various locations and times of the day. People gathered in private homes, a local yoga center, a martial arts space, and the Spiritual Center mentioned above. Still others meditated alone in their own homes. All in all, we estimate that 150 people in various places around the country participated in the inaugural Winter Feast for the Soul. An abundance of feedback followed. Many of the participants expressed deep gratitude for having been able to be part of what we had created.

By the conclusion of the first Feast in February of 2008, we had also received numerous inquiries from far corners of the globe. Individuals from Canada, Australia, South Africa, Europe and Iran all found their way to us. At the time of this writing we were blessed to have received endorsements from the Dalai Lama spiritual leader of the exiled Tibetan Buddhist community, Anam Thubten, spiritual leader of the Dharmata Foundation, Pir Zia Inayat Khan, spiritual leader of the Sufi Order International, and Reverend Dr. Kathy Hearn, leader of the United Churches of Religious Science. Most recently we have been acknowledged by the Scripps Institute for Integrative Medicine, where they recognize the need for daily spiritual practice for mental and cardiac well being for their patients.

As I write the introduction to the third edition, we are preparing for the 2009 Winter Feast for the Soul. It seems that the Great Wind of Spirit continues to be at our backs ever since the inception of the Feast in the fall of 2007.

This book came through me as part of the first Winter Feast for the Soul. Part of my own spiritual practice was to offer regular meditation classes in our local community to help others prepare for the coming Feast. My class notes easily lent themselves to becoming the framework for this book. I share it with you in all humility. There are so many schools and spiritual traditions that offer extensive training and writings about how to meditate. This is my attempt to simplify what I know and distill it into a small, approachable piece of writing.

*The most important thing to remember when beginning  
to establish a meditation practice is that you just have to do it—  
no matter how difficult it may seem.*

As we prepare for the coming Feast, I know of many people who plan to us throughout the country, and the world. The 2009 Winter Feast for the Soul will be a global event. As I write this we have received commitments from individuals and groups in twenty-six different countries. Through the generous efforts of volunteers, this book and many of the supplementary materials for the Feast will eventually be translated into French, German, Italian, and Hungarian. These efforts on the part of so many have expanded our global community even farther.

The worldwide 2009 Winter Feast for the Soul presents an opportunity for us to participate in the creation of a new global consciousness by spending time finding our own inner place of peace. Peace is, after all, our natural state. If enough of us go there together, we can create a world where peace will be welcome.

In its core, The Winter Feast for the Soul is an important reminder. It is a reminder that we are deeply spiritual beings who are often lost in a world of illusion and stress. The suffering we endure is brought on by confusion about the reality of our True Nature. The Feast is a chance to remember what we have long forgotten about ourselves and to enjoy the support of people around the world who are awakening with us.

When you can find way to take forty minutes each day to turn your attention to your inner world, you will begin to reframe your sense of who you really are. Once you discover the truth of your being in the stillness of meditation or prayer, you will have found your true home.

Consider this quote from one of the participants in the first Winter Feast for the Soul:

*“ [I felt] an ease in my soul, a quietness, and an absolute sense of rightness. I was able to slip into mediation like I had been doing it forever. I have a place to go to now and once again welcome my soul into my space. What a gift!”*  
–E.T., Hailey, ID

Finding your inner space and knowing how to return to it are gifts of the Feast.

Rumi told of this time over eighth hundred years ago:

*“Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing  
There is a field.  
I’ll meet you there.”*

*Valerie Skonie  
September 7, 2008*



## **Why, When and How to Meditate:** *Insights and Suggestions for New and Experienced Meditators*

**By Valerie Skonie**

The original idea behind the first **Winter Feast for the Soul** was to create support for individuals who would like to establish a daily spiritual practice. For those of us organizing the first *Feast*, our initial focus was the practice of meditation.

This year we have expanded our vision and our outreach to make the 2009 Winter Feast for the Soul a more inclusive event. Looking more closely at the diversity of the global population led us to acknowledge the many ways one can “kneel and kiss the ground” in prayer. We have come to view spiritual practice through a more inclusive lens. It can include any activity that allows a person to focus and settle the mind for a prolonged period. Being in that stillness is to reside with the Divine. We have included many forms of spiritual practice to embrace the goal of the 2009 Winter Feast: yoga, centering prayer, expressive arts, and journaling have been added to the list of practices. In this text we are dealing only with meditation in an effort to offer some guidelines for people who are attempting to begin a daily meditation practice. It will serve as a good beginning.

For myself, I had struggled off and on to be faithful to my daily practice for nearly thirty years before it finally became a habit. I can recall an endless cycle of making and breaking resolutions until one day the intention manifested a new reality. I know now from my own experience that a life grounded in daily spiritual practice is a life that resides in “a peace beyond understanding”. It is the peace that is always there, in spite of how we might be feeling in any one moment.

*To know this is to know where to go when life  
and its inevitable struggles seem to overshadow our experience of that peace.*

What is important is that you make the *commitment* to complete the forty days of spiritual practice. No doubt that a prolonged commitment such as this will require discipline and perhaps sacrifice. By joining with others who have a similar desire and commitment, you are more likely to reach your goal than if you were to attempt to reach it on your own. Another important piece in reaching your goal is to tell someone about your commitment. It should be someone that you see regularly who has your interest at heart and who will check in with you and help monitor your progress.

Through the Winter Feast, people around the world will be united by the power of their intention to create inner peace and a new accommodation for world peace. There is a new field of consciousness arising, out of which will come the power to change the world, as we know it. Never doubt what a small group of committed individuals can do.

The instructions and insights in this text are partially derived from my personal years of study and exploration on the spiritual path. I began my journey in the Catholic Church. By the time I reached my 30<sup>th</sup> year, I had found my way to a variety of

meditation practices including sitting meditation as well as moving meditations such as Yoga and Tai Chi. Years of practice in Zen Buddhism, Sufism, and Tibetan Buddhism have been integrated into the practice that I now consider my daily practice. I have enjoyed the inspiration of many wonderful teachers through my life's journey. I offer these few pages as a distillation of what I have gleaned from my journey and the progression to my own daily practice. I offer these insights and suggestions with deep respect for the teachings of those who offer more in-depth study. The Suggested Readings that follows this text is a sampling of the many teachers who have much more to say to you than this text allows.

Once you have created your own daily practice you will be better able to find your own way to that precious stillness. The discipline required for the beginning steps is essential in training the mind and body to release its place of prominence. Then the Heart Center can open and step forward to lead you to the discovery of your own True Nature.

## WHY MEDITATE

Meditation promises to quiet the mind and to create deep rest and healing for body, mind, and spirit. The mind, thus quieted, is referred to as Clear Mind in Buddhism and the Heart Mind in certain mystical traditions. Meditation is actually quite threatening to the ego and the busy state of mind that most of us experience in our daily lives. Consequently, it requires considerable effort for most beginners to actually *enjoy* a meditation practice. As a culture we are addicted to maintaining a busy state of mind and do not even know we have a choice.

In the Wood River Valley of Idaho, where I live, I know that we are blessed in many ways in our small, but thriving community. For one thing, most of us are not faced with hours of driving in traffic and the other challenges that are part of life in more densely populated environments. In spite of that fact, there still seems to be a habit of mind that creates the experience of stress in the daily lives of many people. The experience of stress is as common here as it is in major population centers.

*Stress is a habit of the conditioned mind.  
The experience of stress is a habit that we can change over time  
with desire and dedication to practice.  
Meditation is one of the ways to change the habits of our mind.*

There are numerous benefits that come from slowing down your experience of life through a regular meditation practice. This doesn't mean that you will always drive in the slow lane as you make your way through traffic. When confronted with difficult situations, your state of mind will shift and your stress levels will decrease as you learn to focus on the task at hand without worrying about the entire day ahead of you. Meditation is great training for the practice of Presence. Remaining in the present moment allows us to release our thoughts about the past and to stop worrying about the future. Your effectiveness diminishes when you scatter your attention into the past or the future.

*The best place to be is the here and now. Learning to stay in the present through a meditation practice is a great gift that only you can give to yourself.*

To understand what we are trying to accomplish during meditation, it helps to look at the activity of the brain as it is recorded during an electroencephalogram (EEG) examination. During an EEG electrodes are placed on the skull to record electrical frequencies in the neurological tissue of the brain while the individual is involved in various activities. The designations of these different brain wave activities are Beta, Alpha, Theta and Delta.

**BETA:** During your normal daily activities, the functioning of your brain is described as being in a Beta frequency, a very busy frequency where there is little room for creativity or relaxation. In this state you are efficient and very busy. Multi-tasking is a norm when we are in this brain state: driving to work, drinking our coffee, listening to the radio, and talking on the phone happen with more or less efficiency when we are in this state.

**ALPHA:** When you sit, lie down and relax, or focus your attention on a single point of focus or activity, your brain shifts into an Alpha state, which is a state of a decreased frequency brain wave activity. This is the state where we are able to focus, visualize, and create an intention.

**THETA:** During the dream state of sleep, you sink further into this pattern of relaxation until you reach what is referred to as the Theta state. Theta is a very creative brain state. It is one that we strive to reach during our meditation practice. The secret is to do so without falling asleep. Young children live in a Theta brain wave state.

**DELTA:** When you fall into a dreamless sleep, you reach the Delta state, the slowest of the four common frequencies of brain wave activity. It is in this state that healing and rejuvenation take place. It is here in Delta that we contact the unconscious mind and the state referred to as Unity Consciousness. There is no recall of this state because there is no "I" to experience it when we are merged into the Oneness of Being. Newborn infants reside in Delta for many months.

During meditation, your brain waves are slowed down from Beta to Alpha frequencies, eventually, as you become more practiced, to Theta, and Delta. Beginners find that they often fall asleep when they are learning to meditate. The reason this happens is when we reach Theta, our bodies are usually asleep. It is no surprise that the body tends to fall asleep out of sheer force of habit. You might even consider this drowsiness a sign of your success in reaching the lower frequencies. The discipline is to reside in the Theta state without falling asleep. This is one of the reasons for describing certain postures of attention when learning to meditate.

*The goal of meditation is to balance the activity  
of the left and right hemispheres of the brain and be able to slow  
its activity to a Theta or even Delta frequency.*

*It is here in those lower frequency states that we begin to experience the healing  
benefits of a regular meditation practice.*

## **BENEFITS OF A DAILY PRACTICE**

Some of the better-known benefits of a daily meditation practice are listed here. They are presented in a logical sequence and not in the order of their importance.

### **Becoming the Witness**

Infants are born without any sense of separateness. Their brains reside in Delta. They have been *one with* Mom for nine months and that sense of connection continues for much of the first year of life.

As infants grow and develop they gradually become aware of their bodies. Their focus shifts outward and they begin to move into a brain state that is primarily in the Theta frequency. For a long time infants are fascinated by the outer world and their bodily relationship to it, discovering fingers and toes and the fact that these are somehow a part of a separate self.

As they grow, they begin to experience thoughts and feelings, becoming more aware of an inner landscape and identifying with the beliefs that inhabit that landscape. Until the age of six, the brain state of children is entirely in the Theta and Delta frequencies. In these states, there is no discernment or discrimination of what is observed or heard. In the Theta and Delta states, all that we experience is experienced as real and true. Thought patterns that are developed in these early stages of life form a self-definition that becomes a reality. Slowly and surely children become identified with an array of thoughts and feelings that have been imprinted on them from outside sources: *“I am smart...I am not smart enough... I am lovable...I am not lovable... I am lonely...I am angry.* These thoughts are the frequent visitors to the world of the mind and they remain with us, almost indelibly, throughout our lives. These beliefs form a mistaken identity about “Who I am”, sabotaging our authentic self and our way of relating to the world.

In meditation we work with our thoughts, recognizing them as impermanent, and possibly no longer valid. As we do this, we begin to notice the patterns of thought that we have taken to be reality. Once we shift that perspective and become the observer of these thoughts, we are well on our way to no longer identifying with them. As we are able to do this, we begin to identify with the part of ourselves that acts as a witness to thoughts and emotions and does not allow these thoughts and emotions to take over our sense of self. This aspect of the self is often referred to as the Witness, an aspect of the Higher Self.

*As the Witness becomes more practiced through meditation,  
the identification with thoughts and feelings falls away of its own accord, making  
room for a more wise and peaceful version of the True Self.*

To realize that we are not these thoughts and feelings is extremely liberating. We recognize that thoughts and feelings are just passing through the field of the mind. They can be guided to dissolve as quickly as they arrive. This new way of being can set us free from many of the delusions that control our daily thought patterns. The Witness is much

closer to our true identity and is entirely capable of creating new thought patterns to replace our old ones.

### Non-judgment

Allowing thoughts to come and go and not acting on them or responding to them creates a habit of non-judgment. Once we learn not to judge our thoughts, we will be kinder to ourselves in many other ways.

*This kindness to self is the precursor and a pre-requisite to kindness and compassion toward others.*

His Holiness the Dalai Lama once told an interviewer, “My only religion is kindness.” Non-judgment and kindness toward ourselves leads to non-judgment and kindness toward others. The Dalai Lama is a great role model for each of us when it comes to forgiveness and kindness for he has certainly been given a huge challenge which continues to be activated on a regular basis in his relationships with the Chinese authorities.

*Be kind to yourself. Be patient with yourself.  
Allow yourself to be less than perfect.  
This is the first step to a life filled with loving kindness.*

### Inner Peace

In the Clear Mind trained in meditation, peace is the abiding reality. After a short time you will develop new habits of mind through your meditation practice. Because it seems to happen almost without effort do not sabotage yourself by “trying”. Anger, unrest, and other forms of agitation will be more obvious to you as they arise and you will notice that they are simply delusions that you can observe and release at will. Forgiveness and compassion become more familiar when non-judgment is our natural way of thinking. Inner Peace becomes an abiding state of mine and we see the world through new eyes.

### World Peace

When you learn to reside in this state of peace, the love and forgiveness that it engenders will bring peace in *your world*. This peace may not find its way around the globe in your lifetime, but it will certainly become a noticeable part of your own world and will spread easily to those around you.

Through the magic of the internet, I have recently noticed a number of videos and photos of the most unlikely creatures becoming friends and caretakers for one another: tigers nurturing young piglets, cats and crows becoming playmates, dogs curling up with kittens, as well as the kinship of a polar bear and a sled dog that you can see on our Winter Feast DVD. Something very important is being shown to us through these evolving relationships. As we open our minds to form new thought patterns, we will

release ourselves from the old paradigms that tell us that peace is not possible in the world that we live in.

*Peace is possible in our world.  
It all begins at home in the pure potential that is the field of the Clear Mind and  
the Opened Heart*

### Enhanced Creativity

It is in the Theta state that your brain is most creative. Consider the creativity of your dreams and their fascinating outcomes. Fears and hidden thoughts form into stories that are wilder and more creative than our waking consciousness allows. To be awake in this Theta state accesses the creative energies of your mind and allows you to tap into a treasure-trove of new thoughts that you rarely access when your brain is in its normal state of hyper drive, or Beta frequency.

The Theta thought patterns are those that are most closely aligned with the destiny of your soul and the soul's purpose in this incarnation. Consider an "Aha!" moment when you suddenly see the answer to a problem that you have wrestled with for a long time. It is actually during that moment your mind relaxes into the Theta frequency. The more you meditate, the more you will experience those moments, the more creative you are likely to become, and the more easily you will connect with the Divine Inspiration that will lead to manifesting your life's purpose.

### Anti-Aging

We know that the body requires deep sleep to restore and regenerate itself. We know that teenagers require much more sleep during that phase of rapid growth that defines puberty. We are beginning to see that when deprived of enough sleep, these young minds are not allowed to develop normally.

*It is the access to the Theta and Delta states that allows growth  
in the young, as well as regeneration and healing in adults.*

It is never a good idea to deprive anyone of sleep. Many meditators have found their need for sleep to decrease when they establish a regular meditation practice.

Endorphins, "happy" hormones, are released during meditation. Endorphins are substances that create a joyful, pain-free state by attaching to certain receptor sites in the brain. As endorphins are increased, hydrocortisone levels decrease. Cortisols are substances secreted by the adrenal glands in response to stress and which cause tissue inflammation and damage. These cortisols are also responsible for increased blood sugar levels and fat deposits in the body. Without exploring the medical and scientific aspects of this relationship, it is easy to see why increased cortisol levels cause more rapid aging. Decreasing cortisol levels through a regular meditation practice has a profound anti-aging effect on the body.

Consider the Tibetan monks, who have a serious meditation practice from the time that they are quite young. These individuals rarely show their true age.

### [Spiritual Benefits](#)

We have already alluded to many of the spiritual benefits of meditation. Changing the neurochemistry of the brain will lead us to a more peaceful, Spirit-centered life. The time spent in meditation is like an appointment with the Divine. Of all the things that you do each day, nothing can be more important than the time spent with the Divine. Make it your most important appointment of your day.

### [A Note to Parents of Young Children](#)

You may recall my mentioning that infants and young children reside in the Delta and Theta brain states. When you approach your infant child in your normal state, usually Beta, they are likely to be uncomfortable as they try to engage with you. As an experiment, notice what happens when you take just a moment to return to your meditative state of mind before you pick up your baby or sit down to play with your young child.

### [There Are Hundreds of Ways to Kneel and Kiss the Ground](#)

There are many ways to achieve the benefits of a meditative state in our lives. For some, sitting on a “meditation cushion” may not be their way. Other forms of what I call moving meditation have similar effects on the mind and body. Tai Chi, Yoga, Chi Gong, or Aikido, when practiced with regularity can induce many of the same effects as a daily practice of meditation. The secret is in the daily repetition and in the focus of mind that results from a daily practice. 13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, Jelaluddin Rumi, tells us that “There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” Rumi also tells us:

*“What nine months does for the embryo  
Forty early mornings  
Will do for your gradual awareness.”*

What Rumi implies is that there are miracles awaiting you when you make a commitment to a daily spiritual practice. It is hard to imagine there being anything but peace, joy, and healing in store for us when we answer the call to stillness.



## One Last Thing

We have a tendency to set goals for ourselves when we set out on a new adventure. Do not judge your meditative experiences. Simply notice them and let them go. Just as when you begin a routine at the gym, you notice that some days you are great and other days your workout was less effective than you had hoped. In the end, each session is “just another session.”

*When you exercise, what matters is how your body develops  
and how you become stronger and stronger, little by little over time.  
The same holds true with your meditation practice.*

Your experience in meditation is just an experience. How you view your life, and how you live your life each day, is what will change, regardless of your personal experiences while on your meditation cushion.

When connected to an EEG monitor, many people who judged their meditation to be “bad” were actually in a very deep brain state. The sense that the meditation was poor may have come from the fact that the subconscious was able to release some disturbing patterns. That is a good thing – one that might take years of psychotherapy to accomplish. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to exercise non-judgment as you move through your daily practice.

*Meditation is a practice...a practice for daily life.  
Non-judgment, good health, kindness and peace of mind are just a few of the  
benefits that you will discover as you integrate the experiences  
of your practice into your daily life.*

It won't take long before you notice the effects of your practice. Your friends and your family may notice it before you do. Be patient.

## WHEN TO MEDITATE

The time to begin your meditation practice is now. If you are thinking it would be better to wait until tomorrow, you are taking a big risk. Your mind will always create obstacles to keep you from your practice. Mind and ego prefer your life just the way it is. There is some impulse that brought you to these pages, some deep intuitive knowing that there is something more to life than you have previously known. That is the calling of your soul to awakening. Of course, there are times of the day that will work better for you than others. That is not the point. Read the “How To” section of this text. Then, without delay, find a quiet spot and begin your practice. Meditation is the gift you can give to your soul in answer to its call.

Having worked for years to establish my own daily practice, and having taught many other individuals how to establish theirs, it has become clear that for most people it is best to make your meditation the first appointment of the day. I know it is not always easy to do when you have a child or loved one who needs your attention. In these cases, you may choose to get up earlier than anyone else in order to make the time for your practice. You might also consider asking your family for support in carving out that time for yourself. In any event you will find a way to make your meditation your most important appointment of the day.

You may say that you are not a morning person and that you would prefer to wait until evening to fit your practice into your day. You may also notice that by the end of the day, there are any number of distractions that will take you away from your promise to practice. Most students tell me that if it doesn't happen in the morning, it just won't happen. The good thing about the very early morning hours is that the world around you is still quite peaceful and your brain state is closest to the lower frequencies of Theta and Delta that you are seeking in your practice. Find the time and place that works for you and make a commitment to yourself to do it then. It may take some stretching to begin with, but one day you will not want to live without it.

One can go away on retreat for days and meditate for hours each day, which is beneficial periodically in order to deepen your practice. When you return to your life after such periods of retreat, life often presents you with an overwhelming to-do list, and often your meditation practice seems to pale in the face of all that you “have to do.”

*The idea behind the Winter Feast for the Soul is  
to create an opportunity for you **to bring your practice into your daily life.***

When these forty-days come to a close, your habit of making time to practice will have found an important place in your life. There will be no overwhelming to-do list awaiting you. And you will have formed a habit that you may not want to break.

## HOW TO MEDITATE

The subject of “How To Meditate” is quite simple on the surface. How it is done is so simple that offering classes in meditation and writing about it seem almost unnecessary. Classes, however, are useful for the beginner because they give the student an opportunity to experience the deeper states that come when there are several people meditating together. The presence of an individual who has established their own daily practice also helps new practitioners go deeper.

*The hardest part about meditation is just doing it*

Many teachers divide the “How To Meditate” into these three components: body, breath and mind. These are like three legs on a stool. However, when we add a fourth leg, the stool becomes even more stable. That fourth leg is non-judgment. Consider these four words your mantra, something that you will repeat to yourself each time you begin. When I say begin, I don’t mean just when you begin your practice period. Many times during your meditation, you will notice that your mind has become engaged in a series of thoughts: one thing just seems to lead to another. Once you notice this happening, you will begin again, repeating your “mantra”: body, breath, mind and non-judgment. It is then that you will check your posture, check your breathing, check the field of your mind, and release any judgments that you might have made about your success in your practice. You will correct your posture, notice your breathing, and clear your mind of thoughts and judgments in order to “begin again.

To be able to begin again is about daily life. We begin again many times during the day, returning to the things we originally set out to do after allowing ourselves a period of distraction. Once we become aware that we have been distracted we return to our purpose. This is like sets in tennis, or rounds in golf – they are opportunities to begin again. This is how the game of life is played. There is no need to impose harsh judgment on yourself when you do this.

### Body

A straight spine is critical to allowing the energy to flow up and down the spine and to experience an effective meditation. When the posture is slouched and rounded, then it will be easy to be less than attentive during your practice. In the early stages of a meditation practice, it is important to establish an attentive body posture in order to most easily achieve the results you seek and to avoid falling asleep.

- **The spine must be straight.** A straight spine is achieved by creating a solid foundation with the pelvis tipped forward. Sitting on a meditation cushion facilitates the forward tilt of the pelvic structure. If your knees will not allow for the use of a cushion, then sit in a straight-backed chair, making sure that your spine is straight and that you have an inward curve in the small of your back. If the pelvis is not tipped forward, then the entire spine rounds, the shoulders roll forward, and the head drops forward. If the foundation is solid, then it will be easier to maintain a state of alertness during your meditation.

- **The head should be poised lightly at the top of the spine.** Imagine that your head is suspended by a wire or string, as a marionette might be, so it is lifted up, but without tension. When the head is in the correct alignment with the spine, the ears should be directly over the shoulders and the direction of the gaze will be straight toward the horizon, neither tilted up nor dropping down.
- **It is good to have someone check your posture** for you as you begin to establish your practice. Having a teacher who can correct your posture will help to create a bodily memory that you can return to when you “start over” during intervals of practice. If you are sitting in a chair, your feet should be flat on the floor. If you are on a cushion, your knees should both touch the floor. If your knees do not touch the floor, they should be supported by cushions.
- **If you find that you must sit on a couch or in an easy chair,** beware. It is most difficult to maintain proper posture and spinal alignment when using these chairs. However, if you must use them, prop your back up with cushions so that your spine is straight. Sit forward in the chair. Do not lean back. Establish the curve in the small of the back. The pelvis will tip forward and the rest of the spine will fall into alignment. I do not recommend using these chairs. Leave them for your moments of relaxation.

## **Breath**

The importance of the breath is one of the secrets of many esoteric teachings. The breath connects the soul to its Divine origin. The importance of the breath should not be underestimated. Slowing down the breath, as we do when we meditate, relaxes the entire nervous system and directs our focus inward. During your normal day-to-day activities it is always a good idea to notice your breath and use it as a calibrator of your mental state in any one moment.

- Begin by taking two or three deep inhaling breaths, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth with an audible sigh. Then just breathe normally, noticing how the breath becomes softer and more relaxed as you observe it. Your breath will naturally come into rhythm with your heartbeat. If you like, you can regulate your breath to the count of four beats inhaling and four beats exhaling.
- Noticing your breath can be a cornerstone for your entire practice. There are a number of forms of Buddhist meditation practice in which one observes the breath for the entire practice period. When the mind becomes engaged in its habit of thinking, simply return to your breath and you will see how it stills your mind.

## **Mind**

Stilling the mind, thereby slowing its rhythms, is a doorway to the inner peace that we are seeking in our practice. There are many ways to reach the state of peace and it will be up to you to find one that resonates, or feels comfortable or right, for you. If you are working with a teacher, then follow their instructions. In the absence of a teacher, try

one of two of these techniques and see which one works best for you. It is generally an individual choice as to which one serves you best.

- **Breathing in and out through the Heart.** In many spiritual traditions, the Heart Center is recognized as the seat of wisdom and the home of the soul. Focusing one's attention on the Heart Center opens the Center and activates energy there. The poet Antonio Machado writes about the sensation of "bees buzzing in his heart, making honey out of past mistakes." If you focus on that Center you will often feel a similar sensation. Continue gently breathing in and out through the Heart Center and, whether you experience any sensation there, your mind will remain focused. You can even place your right hand gently at the center of your chest as a way of adding focus there.
- **Imagine that you are the ocean.** On the surface the ocean is often turbulent and filled with activity. As you move downward to the floor of the ocean, there is peace, tranquility, and beauty as you leave your thoughts behind. Feel that deep effortless peace until you no longer exist as the person you think you are. When thoughts arise, let them float away like tiny bubbles of no consequence. The important ones will be there for you later in the day.
- **Imagine that your mind as a movie screen.** When you walk into the theater before the movie begins, you may see a clear white empty screen at the front of the theater. Once the movie starts, you see only the images projected on the screen and you lose track of the screen itself. You can, however, shift your focus and notice that the blank screen is still there. This analogy is a lot like the workings of the mind. If you shift your focus from the thoughts that appear to the blank screen of the mind, you will begin to notice thoughts as they arise. In the "Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones", by Patrul Rinpoche, we are reminded that to notice thoughts as they arise is *everything* on the spiritual path.
- **Look for the spaces between your thoughts.** These tiny spaces of Clear Mind will allow you to experience peace and tranquility. Don't look for miracles of huge expanses, although they may come with time. Just begin by looking for the spaces, giving no attention to the thoughts, no matter how important they may seem at the time. There is the story told by another teacher who describes a student during their practice. The student has a thought about something they need to get at the grocery store. Suddenly the single item becomes a list of things to buy or to do. The next thing he knows, the student is in the car on the way to the store. This is the power of the mind. This is also one of the reasons why meditating with others is useful. Such powerful shifts in our attention are less likely to happen when we are sitting with other practitioners. There is truly "strength in numbers."

- **Focus on the space between the eyebrows.** This space is often referred to as the Third Eye. If you feel a sensation when you focus your attention here, then it might be a good place for you to put your attention during your practice. This is another seat of higher wisdom and an opening to Spirit.

### **Non-Judgment**

We have spoken of non-judgment earlier, listing it as one of the benefits of a practice of meditation. We bring it forward this time because it is an important part of our practice. Through your practice, non-judgment will become a habit. We simply observe our inner landscape. We do not judge what we find there. We are curious about this inner world of ours. We do not judge it as good or bad. We name it and let it pass.

*The practice of non-judgment will  
carry through to how you view the world around you during the day.*

As we find our body posture changing, and our thoughts taking over the field of the mind, we simply return to our breath and begin again. We do not judge the thoughts as undesirable. We simply identify them as “thoughts” and return to our breath.

*The only failure in a meditation practice is to not do it at all.*

Without the element of non-judgment, your practice is unstable and the stool that we mentioned earlier is likely to collapse. Starting over is part of life, just as forgiveness and patience are part of our own self-care. These will extend themselves to others without our even noticing. It all begins in the stillness of your inner world.

## CREATING A HOME PRACTICE

There is at least one more thing to consider, and that is the setting for your daily meditation practice. These next items will help you to establish that practice in your home.

- **Find a quiet place that will work for you each day that you practice.** It should be a quiet room where the phone, children, and pets will not disturb you.
- **When it comes to pets,** I must add that animals who are attuned to the meditative energy love it. They will want to be close by, and can be trained not to disturb you. Allowing them to be nearby is a decision that you must make for yourself as you establish your daily routine.
- **Create an altar** with objects that you consider sacred. This is a good way to focus your attention and set your intention to make this time sacred.
- **Lighting a candle** is another way of inviting Spirit into your practice.
- **You will need a timer,** a simple kitchen timer will do, although there are fancier ones available just for meditation. If you don't have a timer, you will probably be tempted to open your eyes to look at your watch or the clock on the wall. That will be a big distraction.
- **You may want to consider wearing a shawl.** I wear the same shawl every day to remind myself that this is a time to close out the distractions of the outside world and to draw my attention and my energy inward. The shawl is also good because your body temperature drops when you meditate and so becoming chilled can be a distraction.

One of the results of setting up a special time and place for your practice is that a charge of energy will build there. This energy will attract you when you spend time there each day. And if your practice is abandoned for periods, you will notice that the energy is no longer there, like a friend who no longer comes to visit. Returning to your practice will recharge the energy of this space.

## IN THE END

I think we have provided you with enough options to establish your own practice and to find what works for you. What is most important is that you actually begin your practice and are faithful to it. Your daily practice itself will become your main teacher in the end.

*The act of setting time aside, placing yourself on a cushion, or attending a meditation class or practice group, is what the soul is longing for. If you do not heed this longing now as it arises, it will quietly disappear and be lost to you until some later time when you are feeling overwhelmed again or desperate.*

Winter is an ideal time to notice this longing as it appear, especially after the holiday rush has worn you out. You know there is more to life! Being in harmony with the rhythms of Nature by going within at this time of year is part of a natural impulse.

Go inside and ask yourself what made you read this text. Maybe you will discover *your* answer there. Opening to your own inner guidance will lead you to the place that you need to go to deepen your practice. When the student is ready, the teacher appears.

In closing, I am reminded of one of my favorite Rumi quotes:

“Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing  
There is a field.  
I’ll meet you there.”

*May Spirit bless us on our journey together. Our daily practice is much more than a personal event. It has profound implications for the entire planet. We do it not only for ourselves. We do it for our friends, our family, and for all whose lives we touch. We do it for our country. We do it for our beloved planet. Nameste.*



## SUGGESTED READING

*The books listed here are just a few of texts that I believe will take you farther on your own journey into stillness and the rediscovery of your own True Nature. There are many others I could mention, but these are my favorites.*

**Adyashanti.** *Emptiness Dancing.* **Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2006.**

**Adyashanti.** *True Meditation: Discover the Freedom of Pure Awareness.* **Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., 2006.**

**Barks, Coleman.** *The Essential Rumi.* **New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.**

**Barks, Coleman, and Michael Green.** *The Illuminated Prayer.* **New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 2000.**

**Eliot, T.S.** *Four Quartets.* **Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1968.**

**Moffitt, Phillip.** *Dancing with Life.* **New York, NY: Rodale Press, Inc., 2008.**

**Norton, Felicia and Smith, Charles.** *An Emerald Earth.* **Two Seas Join Press, New York, NY, 2008.**

**Suzuki, Shunryu.** *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.* **Boston, MA: Random House, Inc., 2005.**

**Tolle, Eckhart.** *The Power of Now.* **Vancouver B.C., Canada: Namaste Publishing Inc., 1997.**

**Yogananda, Paramahansa.** *Autobiography of a Yogi.* **Self Realization Fellowship, 1946.**