

Establishing a Contemplative Practice

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Establishing a Daily Practice

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Establishing a Daily Practice

Introduction

A regular, daily practice is the foundation of any spiritual or contemplative path, and a primary condition for bringing about transformation and well-being in one's life. Most paths involve being part of a community, associating with good people and having an ongoing relationship with a teacher or mentor. There is immense value and learning in these.

Yet there is also a fundamental necessity to spend time with oneself, to look deeply into the heart and mind in the service of healing and understanding. Over time it is through the steady, ongoing and patient application of a daily practice that transformation occurs. Eventually, we learn to be our own guide on the path.

This booklet offers an outline of the basics for setting up a daily practice. While the various components are presented sequentially, in reality they're more fluid than that. For example, as part of "Choose a Practice, Learning the Basics," you may have already begun exploring the right time and place to practice.

For some, getting started can be the hardest part. We may need to gather a lot of energy to overcome the inertia of our habits and build enough momentum to sustain our practice. For others, there is a certain amount of enthusiasm at the beginning, so getting started can be easier. After the novelty and rush of energy has worn off, maintaining the practice can be more challenging.

Regardless of where you find yourself on this spectrum, laying a strong foundation for daily practice is a reliable key for developing your heart and mind, cultivating more well-being, and ultimately of sharing your unique gifts with the world. I hope this little booklet will be of some use to you.



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I. Choose a Practice, Learn the Basics

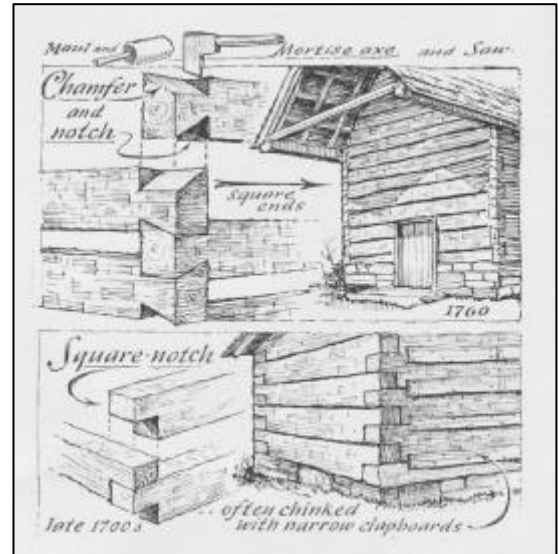
If you want to build a house, you generally need to do a little legwork first. You find a plot of land, put together blueprints, gather raw materials and tools.

Establishing a daily practice is no different. Once it's built we have a lovely, solid, and safe place to dwell each day. But it can take a lot of work to arrive at that point. Just like building a house, we may need to do some research and planning to get things going. Choosing a practice is like getting the blueprints for your house. Learning the basics is like having the raw materials and tools you need to build.

Today, we have access to a vast array of information. For one interested in spiritual practice, this can be a boon or a barrier. We discover a wealth of teachings, but can get lost in the spiritual marketplace. Tempted by novelty, we never settle enough into any one practice to experience its benefits. As the saying goes, if you're drilling a well you'll never get water if every time you get ten feet down you change your mind and move to another spot. To get down to the water we need to stick with one path.

Finding the right path can take time. It often involves a fair degree of guess work, asking questions and listening. We explore, gather information, try things out, and ultimately we trust our intuition and choose.

Learning the basics is next. We need to know how to practice. This is an essential foundation that occurs gradually over time. This is best done with a teacher or mentor, but a lot can be learned from books and audio recordings. It begins with knowing the mechanics of our chosen path, and over time leads to a more nuanced understanding of how to use the forms of practice with skill and intelligence. In some sense, the true practitioner is continually refining their understanding of the basics.



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II. Set the Place and Time

When and where we do our formal practice is important. Human beings are relational, sensitive creatures, which means that we're hard-wired to attune to our environment. All our senses are continually receiving information from our surroundings and determining what's safe, useful or irrelevant.

When we find a physical place that is appealing, we'll often want to linger there. Think of the last time you were out in nature, in a park or even over a friend's house, and found a spot that felt good. Your body probably felt a little more relaxed. You likely had a sense of ease and enjoyment, however small.



We *want* to spend time in comfortable places that look, feel, or even smell pleasant. Our bodies enjoy that! Creating a beautiful place to practice uses this natural tendency to our advantage.

Dedicate a specific place in your room or home for contemplative practice, and try to make it beautiful. It doesn't need to be big; any corner or patch of ground will do. Keep it clean and tidy, and take care to not do other things there. Coming back to the same spot every day will help build momentum for the new habit of daily, contemplative practice.

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If you live in a small room or apartment and don't have the space for a separate area for practice, that's okay. You can create your "place of practice" symbolically with a piece of cloth or fabric. This could be anything from a pillowcase or bandana to a shawl, a scarf or a sarong. Ideally, it will be visually appealing or have some sentimental value.

Do your practice in the same *physical* spot every day: a chair, a cushion on the floor, a folded pillow on the bed. When it's time to practice, spread your cloth carefully and deliberately on the ground in front of you. Make this a kind of ritual to mark entering your place of practice, like stepping into a room or sitting before a shrine.

When you come to your place of practice (whether a physical spot or a symbolic cloth), let this act become a signal that you are setting aside everything else in your life. The dishes in the sink, the email inbox, the bills, the relationship ... all of it can wait. As you enter your place of practice, exhale with the intention to put down the busyness and concerns of life.

Our place of practice then becomes like a temple in the truest sense of the word: it is a *temple*, an area of ground "cut out" and designated for a specific, sacred purpose. To con-temple is to dwell in that temple with awareness.



The outward beauty and order of our place of practice can motivate us to want to spend time there. It can also begin to catalyze the sorts of inner qualities we wish to develop. Turn your attention to its beauty, and your mind can pick up that signs and begin to align with those qualities.

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This is one of the great uses of an altar or shrine. We can use images and objects that carry meaning to remind us of our deeper intentions and aspirations. This could be more traditional representations of a religious icon or historical figure, pictures of a mentor, teacher or relative, a poem or quote, flowers, or even objects from nature like a stone or seashell — anything that uplifts and brings you into a quiet space of remembering the best in yourself.

Just as *where* practice matters, *when* we practice matters. **Set a set time each day that you do your formal practice. This helps to create a rhythm for our consciousness,** a cycle of engaging outwardly and disengaging to reflect inwardly.

Across various cultures and traditions, the ideal times for contemplative practice are early in the morning and at night, before and after bed. These transitions between sleeping and waking are potent times to look inward. They mark the inherent natural cycle of day and night. In both human society and the animal world, early dawn and after dusk are often quieter times of less outward activity.

All that said, it's equally important to find what works for you, for your own body and life! If you don't have a regular schedule, try to choose the same *place* in your daily flow. Even if you wake up and work at different times on different days of the week you can still do your practice in the same temporal place each day, for example after you wash your face in the morning but before breakfast, or as you wind down for bed each night.



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III. Create a Structure

Having chosen a practice, learned some of the basics, set aside a place and time to practice, the next step is to create some structure for this new habit of inner cultivate and reflection. This involves three steps: a) choosing the amount of time you'll practice each day; b) deciding how long you want to try it out for; and c) setting a date to evaluate how it's going.

Just like making lofty new year's resolutions that fall away after a few weeks, we can have grand ideas about how much time we will spend doing contemplate practice each day. This can be especially true in the beginning, after a vacation or a meditation retreat. So it's important that our goals be realistic.

You'll also want to watch out for the yo-yo pattern that's so common with diets and exercise. One applies intense effort towards stringent ideals for a short spurt, then burns out and gives it up, only to swing back into the same cycle weeks or months later.

Our conditioned thinking is that "more is better." Yet when dealing with inner transformation, the quality, sincerity and consistency of our effort are more important than the quantity. It's the steady, patient application of effort that reveals the patterns of our mind and creates the opportunity to shift them.

What's going to serve us best in the long run is something that's sustainable. Start small with something that feels doable. Given your responsibilities, your current schedule, your needs for rest and social engagement, what's a reasonable amount of time you can actually commit to practicing each day? 15 minutes in the morning? Five minutes? *Two minutes?*

***Quality, sincerity and consistency
are more important than quantity.***

If you only devote the space of three breaths before bed, but you do it every day with wholehearted, genuine attention, you will be on your way to growing a robust spiritual practice.

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Your life may be so full that adding anything else feels overwhelming. In this case, you'll want to take a step back from things and consider what you can let go of to make some room for contemplative practice. There is a Taoist saying, "To add, subtract." So take stock of your current habits and responsibilities. Is there anything you can let go of that's not fully necessary?

The last two aspects of creating a structure are setting the duration to try it out, and then evaluating. This is another area where we can go awry. We choose out an amount of time for our daily practice that feels sustainable, and then assume it'll continue indefinitely. That's rare.

Establishing a daily practice is like nourishing a sapling or bud. We set up the right conditions, give it time to grow, and then check on it periodically to ensure it still has enough light, water, and nutriment.

Similarly, we're more likely to succeed in creating a new habit if we choose a duration of time to "let thing grow," and then reevaluate. At the beginning, make this short — one or two weeks. That way, if things don't work out as intended you can adjust without losing too much ground. As things progress, you can space the intervals out further to a month, two months, or longer.

Schedule an actual time to review how things are going. Put it in your calendar, as if you were making a date or an appointment with yourself. We'll go over how to use that time below.



IV. Make a Resolve

For some people, setting an intention to practice every day for a certain amount of time is enough to begin. For most of us, however, it takes a little more “umph” to get the ball rolling! This is where the quality of resolve, or strong determination comes in.

Once you’ve decided when, where and for how long you want to practice each day, **make a firm commitment to yourself to follow through**. You can feel it inside when you know you’re going to make something happen. It’s the difference between wishfully setting your alarm in the morning and thinking, “Well, we’ll see how I feel,” and setting your alarm when you have a ride to catch or a big interview to get to in the morning.

You know yourself best, so use your creativity to figure out how to best make this strong resolve to follow through. You might want to take a few moments to sit quietly, reflect on why this is important to you, and then inwardly direct your mind to the specifics of the commitment: “I’m going to practice every morning for five minutes after I get up and wash my face.”

Some people find it helpful to write it down, or to tell someone else who can hold you accountable. Others use technology to stay on track, like setting an alarm or reminder on their phone, or using an app like Insight Timer that can track their daily spiritual practice.

Aim to follow through to the best of your ability, but don’t worry if it’s not 100%. Life is unpredictable and things come up. If you miss a day don’t berate yourself, just regroup and put your attention on gathering energy to get started again the next day. The more days in a row you can practice, the easier it will be to continue.



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V. Reevaluate, Refine, and Recommit

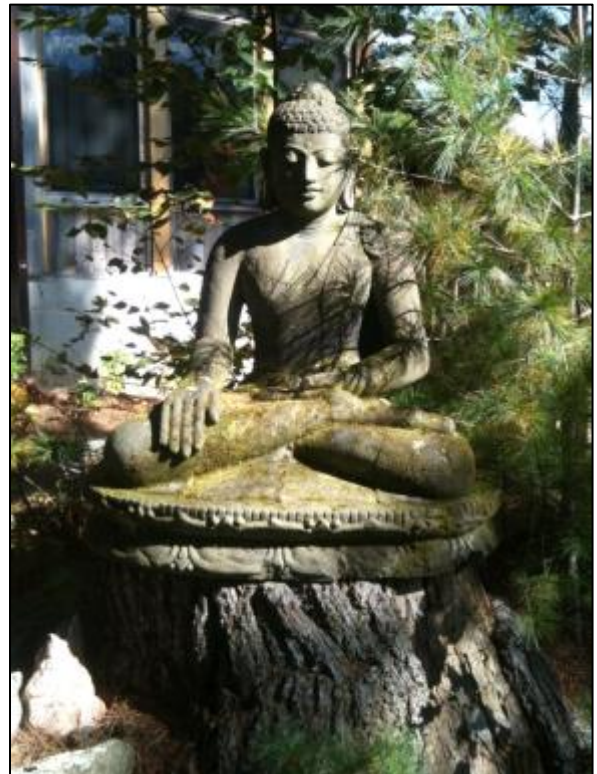
The final phase of establishing your daily practice is a process of reflection to assess how it's going and adjust as needed.

After the initial period of time to which you committed has elapsed, it's important to keep the "appointment" you made with yourself and reevaluate. How did things go? As you turn your attention to this question, try to bring an attitude of curiosity to the process. This is ultimately about learning how to live well, not a performance test by which to grade ourselves!

Remember that you're evaluating the *structure* rather than the *content* of your practice. While it's important to assess our practice periodically ("Is this helping in my life?"), this is best done over longer periods (years, rather than weeks or months) and with the guidance of an experienced teacher.

For this short-term review, you're looking at whether or not the structure you've created is serving its purpose — and if not, what needs to shift. Is the amount of time you chose to practice realistic? Is it working in your daily rhythm or would it be easier at another time of day? Is the physical place you chose the right spot?

If things are going smoothly, consider keeping the same amount of time or increasing it slightly. Remember not to be overly ambitious. **Building slowly, a little at a time, will yield a robust contemplative practice.**



Given the pace and pressures of modern life, things may have gone off track in one way or another. Perhaps the amount of time you thought would be realistic wasn't. Maybe you forgot altogether until the reminder for the review

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appointment popped up on your calendar! As you reflect and review, use your creativity to refine the structure and figure out what can shift and how you can do things differently.

Finally, recommit. Make a firm resolve to follow through and give this your best. Think creatively about what other support you might need to keep going. Reach out to a friend or companion and ask them to check with you periodically. Set the period of time before your next review and schedule another “appointment” to reevaluate.



VI. Find Community

While our individual contemplative practice is essential for making progress on any path, having meaningful connections with other practitioners is equally important.

Community provides important nourishment and balance for our efforts. Spiritual companions learn from and support one another along the way. Wise friends are there in times of need, are able to encourage us when our energy lags, and can gently and lovingly point things out that we might not see ourselves. If we are truly interested in deepening our practice and realizing our potential, this kind of feedback is invaluable.

Similarly, attending a weekly group in your spiritual community can bring renewed energy and refine your understanding of the practice. It’s a tried and true way to continue your learning, to stay connected, and to kindle a sense of confidence and aspiration.

If you don’t have a connection with a local community, consider seeking one out. If there’s nothing nearby where you live, try exploring any online communities in your tradition.

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Good luck with your practice. The potentials of the human heart for beauty, insight and freedom are vast. May you discover them all!

