

Five Key Ingredients for a Sustainable Meditation Practice

I've had a busy seven years since first beginning my mindfulness meditation practice. I've overcome chronic physical pain and debilitating anxiety and depression. I've learned to love a diet rich in plant-based whole foods, and I've learned to recognize when I'm eating emotionally. (Oh, and I've lost 65 pounds in the process.) I've changed my career from something I was not passionate about to something I absolutely love: teaching yoga. And, perhaps most difficult to quantify but most important: I've become really (really) happy. *I personally believe that a combination of Western modalities and Eastern wisdom has been crucial to my health (and I use many tools to foster health for myself).* However, one thing stands apart as a critical ingredient for my wellbeing: every day I sit quietly for at least 10 minutes and I focus my attention on my breath. Inevitably, at least a few hundred times, my attention will stray and I will smile and take a deeper breath and return to the present moment. This has profoundly changed my life in ways I cannot even begin to comprehend.

And it's not just me. You can find hundreds upon hundreds of studies citing the benefits of this simple practice. The short list? **Meditation:** regulates stress hormones, increases mental resilience (including after trauma), improves cognitive function, improves focus, decreases loneliness, increases immunity, helps improve sleep quality, aids in the treatment of depression and anxiety, reduces blood pressure, helps relieve pain, and helps you be nicer to those around you. Whew. Still, I believe that the profundity of this experience cannot be described in words or captured in studies; it must be experienced.

Convinced and ready to try it? It's challenging to set up a sustainable practice and even many long-time yoga practitioners I know have a hard time making the time every day. Here are my five top ingredients for a successful, sustainable meditation practice. I have given them a good run for their money. See the reference list below or come to class for more information. **All credit** for this knowledge goes to my teachers, especially Ani Pema Chodron.



1. Planning. OK, I'll admit it. I had a lot of false starts. This did not come easily to me. At all. Part of creating a new habit (or *samskara* as we'd say in yoga) involved learning how to outsmart that lazier part of myself that rebelled at the idea of ... *just sitting there*. Practice suggestions:

- *Set the space.* Create a special spot in your home for your practice. If possible, adorn it with inspirational images or objects. Place it in a prominent location where you are reminded of the importance of your practice
- *RPM: Rise, pee, meditate.* Do not pass go; do not go for the coffee. It works for many yogis, including me. Try it out.
- *You might not feel like it.* I rarely do, and I talk about how great meditation is to anyone who will listen. That's OK. That's an old *samskara* resisting the new. Resolve to practice, whether you feel like it or not. Even if you're just sitting there not counting a single breath, you have made the commitment to your new practice.

2. Compassion. My main meditation teacher, Ani Pema Chodron, emphasizes time and time again, “Harshness is an obstacle to meditation.” Harshness, or any other form of escapism, is not the way to enlightenment. It’s moving in the opposite direction of connection with the true self. When I started, I received basic mindfulness meditation instruction: notice the thoughts as they arrive, acknowledge them with the word *thinking*, and return to the breath. Well, it wasn’t long before I became like that old cartoon of Elmer Fudd hunting rabbits. Every time a thought even dared to peek around the tree, I was there firing off my bazooka and yelling *THINKING. I gotcha! BAD.* Which spiraled into *I’m a bad meditator. I can’t do anything right. I quit.* This harshness did not take me further into peace (surprised?). It took me further into anger and confusion and self-aggression for several years. As one of my teachers says, “A jerk can walk into a meditation hall and emerge a more focused jerk.” That was pretty much what I did for a while. It’s possible, even with the best of intentions, to use these practices to become harsher, more narrow minded, and profoundly unhappy. Practice suggestions:

- *Smile.* When you get distracted, regard your mind as you would a child you love very much. Smile, take its hand, and guide it back to the breath. It’s really hard to be happy if you are mean to yourself all the time. Trust me.
- *Be realistic.* You are not trying to eliminate your thoughts. You’d probably have to sever a part of your brain off to do that. I’ve never been given that instruction in any of the traditions I’ve studied. Thoughts will come and go. Soften and allow that process. Use gentle persistence and lighten up a little.

3. Curiosity. Ram Dass says, “Everything changes once we identify with being the witness to the story, instead of the actor in it.” Learning to be mindful is the process of learning to take a step back and become the observer. This means that we practice realizing that we are not any of the endless streams of thoughts and emotions that parade through our minds. We cultivate the witness by becoming curious about what’s happening. As Ani Pema teaches, whatever is happening (even the most terrifying of emotions) is an opportunity to become more aware of what goes on in our minds and in turn more compassionate for ourselves and for others. Practice suggestion:

- *“Isn’t that interesting.”* This is my favorite phrase of all time. When you catch yourself getting caught by a thought or emotion, step back, take on the role of the curious observer, refrain from judgment, and say to yourself, “That’s interesting.”

4. Bravery. One of the most profound misunderstandings about mindfulness meditation is that it’s a “relaxing” activity. Some forms of meditation I do find to be relaxing, but sitting quietly and attending to the various thoughts that vie for my attention? I don’t find that relaxing all the time. Ultimately, it *leads* to greater overall relaxation through a greater ability to stay in the present moment. So it’s more like training, really, and sometimes training in mindfulness can feel uncomfortable, boring, or even downright scary. All that we have been trying to avoid, repress, keep quiet, annihilate resurfaces; it all comes up because it never really went away. So, my dear friends, we must be very, very brave to be meditators. We must be powerful warriors to sit in stillness. Practice suggestion:

- *“Everything in life is a vehicle for awakening. Nothing needs to be rejected.” Pema Chodron.* That flat tire? Your outburst of frustration? Yay, a promotion! That grand moment of forgiveness? Uh, oh, rejection! That “fantastic” meditation session? The friendship that ended in betrayal? **It’s all part of the path. All of it.** Pema teaches that every event, however big or small, is a chance to wake up. This is because all of it is a chance to soften, to find compassion for ourselves, and ultimately to create greater understanding of ourselves and of others.

5. Community. I truly believe that we were meant to work toward our goals of peace together. This is why the community at Moksha Yoga Center has been such an important aspect of keeping my practice sustainable. As a student, I find that the support of an entire room holding space for meditation is incredibly powerful. I also find so much guidance and support from my friends and teachers in the community. As a teacher at Moksha, I want you to know that I'm happy to help you develop a practice in whatever way I can. I always incorporate mindfulness meditation into my public yoga classes, and I have a new class specifically focusing on guiding you in meditation. [Check out my schedule here](#) and commit to a regular practice with me or another teacher of your choosing.

This practice has tremendous power for transformation, but you absolutely have to put in the work and commitment. I wish you really well on your path, and I hope to see you soon.

Resources and Recommended Reading

- Pema Chodron, [*The Places That Scare You.*](#)
- Pema Chodron, [*How to Meditate.*](#)
- [“Mindfulness Meditation Benefits.”](#) *Huffington Post.* (Includes links to relevant studies.)