

Meditator-in-Training

by Alyssa Giacobbe

Our writer lowers her stress level and enters the present with an age-old method: breathing

One holiday when I was young, my dad, a lawyer, gave me a set of business cards that read “Attorney-in-Training.” They were pink—and meant as a gag. But they were also a clear mark of

a goal-oriented American mentality: to get what you want in life, plan ahead.

That cultural attitude has only ballooned since I was a kid. These days, twentysomethings working their first jobs are encouraged to start saving for retirement. Young couples research preschools before they even conceive. All of this can make it difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate the present.

As a magazine editor, I face this challenge daily; we plan our issues far in advance, so future-thinking comes with the territory. At the start of summer,

prop styling by Allison Liebman; wardrobe styling by Cate Sheehy; hair and makeup by Sheri Terry

I'm conceptualizing fall; in October, my thoughts are on the new year. Sometimes it's an effort to remember what month I'm living in, never mind which moment—and this has been taking a toll. Whereas I once thrived at work, I recently found myself getting stressed. Outside of work, too, something didn't feel right. There was nothing I could pinpoint—everything was “fine”—but I was reacting more quickly and getting angry more easily.

Eventually, in an effort to ground myself in the moment (and maybe reclaim some balance), I turned to meditation. Latching on to a practice proved difficult, however, for the very reasons I needed it. First, it takes time—time that could be spent writing, reading, sleeping, and, yes, planning. Second, it's hard. Whenever I plunked down on my cushion to meditate, I popped back up about a minute later, my mind racing.

A few months ago, I went to a yoga class at Boston's Back Bay Yoga Studio and stayed for the guided meditation that followed. A structured group could provide accountability, I reasoned, and perhaps even inspiration.

While the act of meditating—sitting and focusing on your breathing—may

ed meditation, like the one Summers leads, is ideal if you're a beginner, because an instructor typically talks you through the practice, giving instructions and approaches.)

So I headed for the “basement,” mixing group practice with occasional at-home sessions. Sometimes I could

Here and there, I found the elusive present, listening to my breath as if it were the only thing that mattered.

look simple, there's a lot going on, explained my teacher, Joshua Summers. “Meditating is like draining the flooded basement of your unconscious,” he said. “Patterns of reactivity, conditioned habits, and exiled aspects of ourselves reside in that basement.” So why do it? “By recognizing what's there, you can start to harmonize various aspects of your being.” (Guid-

nit for five minutes; sometimes seven or eight. At first, as soon as I shut my eyes, a tangle of thoughts poured in—everything from what I needed to do that night to things I'd said the day before to when my last oil change was.

On the rare occasions when I managed to let go of my thoughts and be present with my breathing, panic rushed in. Like most ambitious pro-

©2007 Kikkoman International, Inc.

Healthy starts here.

Start your day on the right foot with PEARL® Soymilk. It's a delicious way to add nutritious, organic soy protein to your diet. The makers of PEARL have been crafting legendary soy products for more than three centuries. With seven tasty flavors, including Original, Unsweetened, Creamy Vanilla, Chocolate, Green Tea, Tropical Delight® and now Coffee, PEARL Soymilk is as good for your taste buds as it is for your body. Look for PEARL wherever fine foods are sold or visit us online at pearlsoymilk.com

Good health starts
with a good dinner.



DREAM DINNERS®

It's never been easier to make dinner delicious and nutritious. We know your life is busy and a healthy meal is what you ultimately want for your family but sometimes difficult. Dream Dinners helps you assemble delicious, home-cooked dinners that are ready to serve in no time. Plus, most of our Mom approved, family-friendly dinners have less than 10 grams of fat per serving. *Go ahead give them a meal you can be proud of and feel good about...and they will love!* **Dream Dinners.**

All the ingredients for a great meal.™

dreamdinners.com

fessionals, I work hard to collect ideas and information. What would it mean to release it all, even if only temporarily? Did I even want that?

It's a common concern, Summers told me, but it's unfounded. "People wonder where creativity fits into meditation. There's a fear you will become this flat-line observer." But as he explained it, and I came to experience, the opposite is true. "You get better at recognizing which thoughts are worth listening to and which you'd be better off letting pass by." There are dozens of incidents each day that I used to get worked up about. I began to pick and choose which required that sort of response and which I could let go.

After four classes with Summers, I could sit through about three-quarters of the hour-long class. Here and there, I found the elusive present, listening to my own breath as if it were the only thing that mattered—not the gurgling stomach of the guy next to me or the piles of work I'd face tomorrow. Still, about 10 minutes before class ended, I'd get anxious. It's not that I was uncomfortable—although even with a decent cushion, sitting for 50 minutes can cause various body parts to fall asleep. It's just that, you know, I had things to do.

"It's an hour of your day, or even simply 20 minutes of your day," counters Summers. "Learning to be mindful will allow you to experience your life more fully, which means you'll get extremely high returns on your investment." I began making an effort to sit every morning—sometimes for 10 minutes, sometimes for half that. And it was strange, but when I finished meditating, everything I did seemed to have more purpose. I'd once been inclined to rush through the shower and spoon cereal into my mouth as I fed the cat and made my bed. Now I slowed down the pace a bit. Things started to seem more intentional. The days didn't all run together; today was more specifically Today.

Tips for Beginners

“Meditating can help us relate to everything else in our experience with greater skill, greater compassion, and greater ease,” says Boston yoga and meditation instructor Joshua Summers. These tips will get you started.

- + Start slowly.** If you'd like to meditate but feel you don't have time, start with one minute a day, says Summers. “The amount of time itself is somewhat irrelevant. The key is to start with something manageable and build on that. No one can really say, ‘I can't find a single minute.’” After a week, add another minute, and keep adding a minute every week. In 20 weeks, you'll be sitting for 20 minutes; in a year, almost an hour.
- + Be consistent.** Meditation requires consistency, being there whether you want to or not. You'll have days when you just don't feel like it, but that's precisely the time you should get on the cushion to observe and work with your resistance, says Summers. “There are great lessons within the resistance.” Meditating at the same time every day may also help solidify your practice.
- + Go easy on yourself.** Let go of the idea that the goal of meditation is to stop thinking. “If you go in with that agenda, you're in for a lot of frustration,” says Summers. The experience of meditation is different for everyone. The point isn't not to think; it's to be aware of your thoughts and learn to let them be.
- + Get a group.** Sitting with other meditators at least once a week can fuel your practice. “There is something supportive about the group dynamic that helps to hold you in the environment,” says Summers.

Meditation, I realized, is not a mind eraser. It's a tool to help me spend less time obsessing over what's to come and more time focusing on what I have—and to help me separate what I do from who I am. About two months into my regular practice, I'm seeing changes at work. I get less agitated, I react more slowly (for me, that's a good thing), and I'm generally more pleasant (go ahead, ask my coworkers!). I make an effort to spend my weekends doing things that aren't related to work. Like any significant life change, my practice is a work in progress, but I have already seen the products of my efforts. That's not the point, of course, and I am starting to let go of that results-oriented, future-focused mind-set. And it feels pretty nice, right here and now.

ALYSSA GIACOBBE *is an editor at Boston magazine. She lives in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.*

LIST OF INGREDIENTS:

PEANUTS
and a pinch of salt.

No stabilizers. No hydrogenated oils.
When we say natural, we mean it.

©/TM/® The J. M. Smucker Company