

Stillness

The State of Meditation in LA: Cushion is the New Mat

BY DAISY SWAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID YOUNG-WOLFF



UNPLUG MEDITATION TEACHER MEGAN NONAHAN WEARS VIRGO YOGA TANK IN ARCTIC WHITE AND GEMINI YOGA PANTS IN OPTIC WHITE AND TRANQUIL BLUE BY COZY ORANGE (COZYORANGE.COM) JEWELRY BY LOVEPRAV JEWELRY (LOVEPRAVJEWELRY.COM) SHOT ON LOCATION AT UNPLUG MEDITATION (UNPLUGMEDITATION.COM)



California has always been on the forefront of the personal discovery and development movement, and LA in particular has led the way.



A barely noticeable breeze blows through the leaves of the plants on my porch. I hear people walking their dogs down the sidewalk, feel the sun on my neck and shoulders, hear squirrels in the trees down the street. There is a sense of calm that comes over me, a sense of quiet from being right here, right now. It is a quiet Saturday morning, so perhaps it's easier to experience this, but so calm is also accessible throughout my busy days of work and family responsibilities. This is a calm that meditation has helped me to cultivate throughout much of my life. I am prone to overworking. I set high expectations for myself, and I'm a single mom with a teenage son who has been known to push my buttons, so I've had many opportunities to lose my cool. Thankfully, over the past 10 years I have spent a good deal of time on my meditation cushion. Mindfulness meditation is a regular practice in my life that I cannot, will not, live without.

Clearly, I'm not alone. Feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression have become epidemic as our hyper-connected, fast-paced lives demand more and more attention. California has always been on the forefront of the personal discovery and development movement, and LA in particular has led the way. We don't have to go far to find a place where we can lay down a yoga mat. And meditation centers are joining the line-up. Buddhists call a community of like-minded people a "sangha," and it plays an important part in spiritual development. Practicing with others is instructive, supportive, helpful, and powerful. When a group of people gather regularly to meditate and learn more about their practice, there's a sense of support that can sustain and increase the discipline of meditation.

Just as there are many flavors of yoga, the same is true of meditation. I practice (and teach) a method called Mindfulness meditation, in which the practitioner intentionally brings awareness to the present moment with open curiosity, without judgment, and with a bit of kindness. Repeatedly bringing awareness back to the body and the breath helps us to interrupt the constant barrage of thoughts—the "monkey mind"—that takes up so much real estate in our minds. It's monkey mind that keeps us awake when we'd rather be asleep. Just to be clear: Mindfulness meditation is not a state or a way of taking oneself to a higher consciousness. Rather, it is a simple practice of bringing focus to the breath and away from thought. Simple. Not always easy.

Mindfulness has become mainstream in medical institutions worldwide, thanks to curious scientists and physicians with a meditation practice. Chief among them: scientist Jon Kabat-Zinn who more than 30 years ago used mindfulness techniques to develop the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program for people with chronic pain and stress, and Dr. Dan Siegel, a noted psychiatrist, educator, author, and mindfulness instructor.

The mainstreaming of meditation is also due to university researchers and their astrophysically increased attention to scientific validation of the benefits of mindfulness practices. The number of scientific research papers investigating the health benefits of meditation has increased from 21 in 2001 to 477 in 2012, according to statistics presented at an MBSR training I attended last February, by Saki Santorelli, the executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. These studies, and good press from celebrities like Oprah, Deepak Chopra, and author/teacher Eckhart Tolle, contributed to the popularity and awareness of meditation. You may notice that meditation may be called Mindful Awareness Practice, Mindfulness Practice or simply Sitting Practice. In the

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Zen tradition this is called Zazen. In some traditional Buddhist centers this is called Shamatha Practice. There are many names and many varieties of practice. Not all of them are covered in this article—our predominant focus here is mindfulness.

The many meditation centers in LA welcome newcomers; all you need is your breath. New people walk into these centers every day without any meditation experience. If you don't connect with a particular teacher, know that you can meet many others. And if the practice feels awkward or difficult at first, remember that any new activity we begin feels this way; with repeated practice we gain strength and familiarity, eventually feeling right at home.

Insight LA has grown to become a beloved and accessible meditation center offering both a secular (non-religious) and a Buddhist approach to meditation. Over the past twelve

and-a-half years, Insight LA, lovingly tended to by founder Trudy Goodman and her team, has grown to offer over 100 classes as well as special speaker and meditation events each year. They offer sitting groups and classes throughout the LA area and have expanded to include a space in Benedict Canyon where they will offer retreats and programs. I recall attending Insight LA in 2010 when there was a small group of meditators at the one location in Santa Monica. Trudy mentioned that they were looking for a space to hold more groups and classes. That might someone said she knew of a space that might be appropriate; that very space, as well as others in Malibu, Los Feliz and Long Beach, have now become annex locations for the organization. Trudy says, "It's impossible to overestimate the importance of community in creating a strong foundation for our practice—for ourselves, our children and families, and our world. Community is the key to integrating

mindfulness into our everyday life." Other meditation centers with their own distinct flavor have been steadily growing: Against the Stream on Melrose Avenue was opened in 2008 by Noah Levine, a young teacher with a rebellious streak whose father is the well-known American Buddhist author Stephen Levine. Noah was trained by Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and has written several books, including the wildly popular Dharma Bums. With the center on Melrose and one in Santa Monica, they offer retreats, special programs, and classes with traditional Buddhist teachings as the foundation. The center also now includes the Refuge Recovery program and meetings specifically developed for those in addiction recovery.

UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARCA) was founded by Dr. Sue Shalley in

2006 to research the effects of mindfulness on the brain and body. Meditation teacher Diana Winston was brought in to develop mindfulness classes and community, which she has done in spades. Starting with one teacher and four classes on campus, the center now has a full team of teachers (including me) teaching classes on campus (one offered for credit) and at locations all over the city. MARC also offers a training program to certify people as mindfulness facilitators, as well as special events, and weekend and day-long retreats. This center approaches mindfulness as a non-religious, secular practice and is now merged with the Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology, which researches mind/body interventions and the benefits of Mindfulness meditation practice.

In the mid-1970s, the Tibetan Buddhist, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche began teaching the

Shambhala vision. The Shambhala Meditation Center of LA has grown from its original Eagle Rock center to include a Westside location as well as programs held in Ojai and Orange County. While Shambhala Meditation Center is based on the contemplative teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, it offers a fresh expression of the spiritual journey and is available to practitioners of any tradition. Shambhala offers classes, events, and specific programs including those for artists, families, and those in addiction recovery. Here, as with other centers, you'll find a deep tradition and focus on self-compassion and recognition of one's innate goodness as exemplified by the writings of Shambhala's most well-known teacher, Pema Chödrön.

Most recently, LA has welcomed Unplug Meditation to the scene. Suzie Yalof Schwartz opened this West LA center in April 2014, to

provide an easily accessible, beautiful place to learn and practice meditation. When asked about why she opened Unplug, Suzie says, "I created the place where I wanted to go to meditate. I wanted to share it with all of my friends. What I envisioned did not exist so I made it happen." The center offers several drop-in sessions a day, seven days a week, led by a variety of teachers and special events and teachers from a wide variety of backgrounds can be found here. Steve Ross, the beloved owner of Maha Yoga in Brentwood, teaches one of Unplug's most popular meditation classes on Monday nights. He explains the value of learning to meditate in class with a teacher, "When we practice yoga in a group of people, there is a collective energy that can be helpful, especially as a beginner. Meditation is the same way. Misery loves company. So does bliss. When we spend time in the presence of someone who lives in a state of presence,

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meditation happens...you kind of get meditated! Which is why in all wisdom traditions, a teacher was essential. Not a teacher in the usual sense of a conveyor of concepts, but rather a being whose presence radiates the recognition and realization of truth."

At this point I want to mention the use of the word *practice* when talking about meditation. Just as with practicing yoga, every day we sit to meditate we'll find that our mind is different. The technique is the same but it's not something we master once and for all and then move on. We are always practicing, always becoming more familiar with our minds, just as when we do yoga, we are finding out what's happening in our body, connecting with who is here today.

Personally, I find it a tremendous relief that there's now regular acknowledgement that unhealthy stress is doing harm to us humans and our ability to focus, to be present. I was a teenager when I started meditating and I was definitely aware of my distracted mind. Acknowledging at last that these contemplative practices help us in countless, healthy ways, is good for all of us. Just like yoga.



Tips for the newbie meditator:

Don't believe the hype! You may have the idea that you're supposed to be able to sit down to meditate and empty your mind of thoughts. Mindful awareness practice is about becoming familiar with the mind; recognizing when the mind has wandered, and then bringing it back to the breath and the body. The moments of awareness in meditation—returning to the breath without judgment about our thoughts or about having been lost in thoughts, memories, or planning—these become more frequent over time. Letting go becomes a part of our daily life experience, and brings an increased sense of peace. We don't have to be caught up in all of the distraction, anxiety, or regret that we consider real. Training our minds to let go is doable; and it provides tremendous mental, emotional, and physical benefits.

Lotus pose is not a requirement. Meditation can be done sitting in a chair and most centers offer seating of one kind or another. Be comfortable and honor your body when you meditate. Meditation teachers are there to help you find the appropriate posture, so know that your questions about posture are important and appropriate. Don't worry about how you dress to meditate, but do plan to remove your shoes. Most centers will request you store your shoes outside of the meditation hall. And don't forget to turn off your phone.

When choosing a place to begin, look for introductory classes, drop in meditations, or free informational sessions. Know that new meditators will be at just about any class you go to so you will always find yourself welcome and in good company.

Daisy Swan is the author of *Misery Work Work*. She is a nationally recognized career strategist dedicated to helping people of all ages find the way of living and working that brings their best to life. She is also a meditation instructor. You can learn more about Daisy at daisyswan.com