A BEGINNER'S JOURNAL

Seven Days *of Meditation*

Seven small practices. One week.

AMANDA AGUILÓ

AUM

Seven Days of Meditation

A Beginner's Journal for Arriving, Breathing and Coming Home

SEVEN SIMPLE PRACTICES. SEVEN DAYS.
A WAY HOME YOU CAN KEEP.

A FREE COMPANION TO *21 Days of Meditation*

Amanda Aguiló

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THESE SEVEN DAYS ARE DEDICATED TO

_____

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_____

Write a name, or many names. Someone you are sitting for, someone you are sitting with, or simply yourself.

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A Note Before You Begin

Hello, and welcome.

If you are holding this journal, something in you is ready to sit down. Maybe you have tried meditation before and it never quite stuck. Maybe you have never tried at all, and someone, a doctor or a friend or a quiet voice of your own, suggested it might help. Maybe you simply want a little more peace in your days. All of these are good reasons. None of them needs to be explained.

I am a meditation guide and writer, and I remain a student. I made this small journal for the very first week, the week when many of us give up because we think we are doing it wrong.

If your mind wanders, you are not doing it wrong. Wandering is part of the practice, and every page here shows you a way to come back.

> **Begin here.** If you would like to start right now, turn straight to Day One on page 24. Three minutes is enough to begin, and the reading can wait for another day.

The first part of this journal is a long, gentle introduction, and it is entirely optional: where meditation comes from, the many ways people have practised it, what it has been asked to heal over the centuries, and what doctors and researchers can honestly say about it today. Read it slowly, over a cup of tea, or skip ahead and come back later. The second part is seven days of practice. Each day has a short meditation, a page to write on, and one small question to carry.

Seven days will not change everything. They may simply show you what it is like to sit for a few minutes and come back, again and again. Whatever you notice along the way is worth noticing.

I am so glad you are here.

Amanda

INTRODUCTION

The Oldest Way Home

"I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."

BLAISE PASCAL, PENSÉES

Pascal wrote those words in seventeenth-century France, long before smartphones, notifications or the twenty-four-hour news. Even then, it seems, people found it hard to sit still with themselves. We reach for distraction the moment things go quiet. And yet, in almost every culture that has ever existed, someone has discovered the same quiet secret: if you stop, and sit, and pay attention, something in you begins to settle. Something begins to heal.

This introduction is a map of that secret. It is longer than most, because I believe you deserve to know what you are beginning: where it comes from, how it works, what it can do, and what it cannot.

What meditation is, and what it is not

At its simplest, meditation is the practice of resting your attention on something, noticing when it wanders, and gently bringing it back. The something can be the breath, a word, a sound, the sensations of the body, a feeling of kindness, or even the wide open space of awareness itself. The wandering is guaranteed. The returning is the practice.

That is all. It sounds almost too simple to matter. But think about how rarely, in an ordinary day, you choose where your attention goes. Most of the time it is pulled: by a screen, a worry, a memory, a to-do list. Meditation is the slow, patient training

of the one faculty that shapes every experience you have.

Meditation is *not* emptying the mind. Nobody can switch off their thoughts, and you do not need to. It is not a feeling of constant bliss, a performance, or a religion you must join. It is not only for calm, flexible, spiritual people who have their lives in order. It is not quite the same as relaxation, although it is often relaxing. Its deeper gift is awareness: seeing clearly what is happening inside and around you, with a little more kindness than before.

The English word comes from the Latin *meditari*, to think over, to consider, to ponder. In the twelfth century, a Carthusian monk named Guigo II described a ladder of prayer with four rungs: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. For him, reading put food whole into the mouth, and meditation chewed it slowly and broke it open, so its taste could be known. In the East, the older words carry a similar flavour. The Sanskrit *dhyana* means sustained attention or absorption. The Pali *bhavana* means cultivation, the way a gardener cultivates soil. Different languages, the same gesture: a mind turned gently inward, again and again.

Where it began

No one knows exactly where meditation began, and I find that comforting. Some of the oldest things human beings do arrived without a signature. Long before anyone wrote it down, someone sat by a fire or a river, grew quiet, and noticed that the quiet changed them.

India. Among the stone seals of the Indus Valley civilization, from around 2500 BCE, is one showing a figure seated with the knees wide and the heels drawn together. Early archaeologists called it a yogi. Many scholars today are more careful: we cannot read the Indus script, and calling that figure a meditator is a lovely guess, nothing more. What is certain is that by the time of the Upanishads, from around 800 BCE, the sages of India were describing a practice of turning inward, quieting the senses and resting the mind in what they called the Self. Later, the Bhagavad Gita compared the steady mind to a lamp in a windless place whose flame does not flicker, and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali defined yoga itself as the settling of the fluctuations of the mind.

The Buddha. Around the fifth century BCE, a young man named Siddhartha Gautama left a comfortable life in search of the end of suffering. After years of trying every austerity of his day, he sat down beneath a fig tree and resolved not to rise until he understood. What he taught afterward was, in large part, a training of attention: mindfulness of the breath, of the body, of feelings and of the mind itself. His instructions on breathing, still recited today, are some of the clearest meditation guidance ever written. Buddhist practice spread across Asia, taking new forms in each land: Chan in China, Zen in Japan, Seon in Korea, and the rich visualization practices of Tibet.

China. Alongside Buddhism, the Daoist sages taught their own ways of stillness. The *Zhuangzi*, from around the fourth century BCE, describes *zuowang*, "sitting and forgetting", a dissolving of the busy self until one moves in harmony with the Way. Later Chinese traditions joined meditation with breath and gentle movement, practices that live on today in qigong and tai chi.

The desert. In the fourth century CE, thousands of Christian men and women went to live in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. These Desert Mothers and Fathers prayed in silence, repeating short phrases of scripture through the day and night. Their practice grew into the Jesus Prayer of the Eastern Church and, by the fourteenth century, into hesychasm, the prayer of stillness practised on Mount Athos, where monks joined a sacred phrase to the rhythm of the breath.

Remembrance. In the early centuries of Islam, the Sufi mystics developed *dhikr*, the remembrance of God through the repetition of sacred names, sometimes silently, sometimes in song and movement. In Judaism, contemplative prayer runs through the mystical tradition, and at the end of the eighteenth century Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught *hitbodedut*, going out alone, often into nature, to pour out one's heart in one's own words and then rest in silence.

Silence together. In seventeenth-century England, the Quakers began to gather for worship with no priest, no music and no script, simply sitting together in silence until someone felt moved to speak. Many Quaker meetings still worship this way. It may be the plainest form of group meditation in the Western world.

I love this part of the story most of all. These traditions disagree about a great many things: about God, about the self, about what suffering is and what ends it. But they kept arriving, separately, at the same simple act. Sit down. Be still. Pay attention. Return.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SITTING STILL

C. 2500 BCE	**The Indus Valley** A stone seal shows a figure seated with the knees wide. A meditator, perhaps; no one can say.
FROM C. 800 BCE	**The Upanishads** India's sages turn inward, quieting the senses to rest in the Self.
C. 5TH CENTURY BCE	**The Buddha** Teaches mindfulness of breath, body, feeling and mind.
C. 4TH CENTURY BCE	**The Zhuangzi** Daoist "sitting and forgetting" in China.
4TH CENTURY CE	**The desert** Christian monks and nuns pray in silence in Egypt and Syria.
EARLY ISLAM	**Dhikr** Sufi mystics practise the remembrance of God.
12TH CENTURY	**Guigo II** Names *meditatio* as a rung on the ladder of prayer.
13TH CENTURY	**Dōgen** Teaches *zazen*, seated meditation, in Japan.
14TH CENTURY	**Mount Athos** Hesychasm joins prayer to the breath.
17TH CENTURY	**The Quakers** Gather in shared silence.
18TH CENTURY	**Rebbe Nachman** Teaches *hitbodedut*, solitary prayer and silence.
1893	**Chicago** Swami Vivekananda introduces yoga philosophy to the West.
1975	**Harvard** Herbert Benson publishes *The Relaxation Response*.
1979	**A hospital** Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction begins at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.
TODAY	**Everywhere** About one in six American adults now meditates.

From the monastery to the clinic

For most of history, meditation lived in temples, monasteries, forests and prayer rooms. That began to change at the end of the nineteenth century, when teachers from India and Japan began to travel west, and accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, when a generation went looking for something their culture had not given them.

Then the doctors became curious. In 1975, Herbert Benson, a cardiologist at Harvard Medical School, published *The Relaxation Response*. He had measured what happened in the bodies of people who meditated and found the opposite of the stress response: a slower heart, slower breathing, lower oxygen use. He argued that this quiet state was available to anyone, through simple repetition of a word or phrase and a passive, accepting attitude toward wandering thoughts.

Four years later, in 1979, a molecular biologist and longtime meditator named Jon Kabat-Zinn opened a stress reduction clinic in the basement of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. He invited patients whose doctors had run out of options, people living with chronic pain, heart disease and cancer, to spend eight weeks learning to meditate. His program, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, removed the religious language but kept the practice: breath awareness, the body scan, gentle yoga and sitting meditation. It has since been taught in hospitals, universities and medical centres around the world.

Since then, thousands of scientific studies have been published on meditation. Some are excellent. Many are small, short or hard to compare. But taken together, they have moved meditation from the edges of medicine toward its centre. In the United States, the share of adults who meditate more than doubled in twenty years, from 7.5 percent in 2002 to 17.3 percent in 2022.

The many ways in

There are hundreds of ways to meditate, but most rest on a single gesture: choose something to attend to, and when the mind wanders, gently return. What changes from one practice to the next is the anchor. Here are the families you will meet most often, including the ones we will practise together this week.

PRACTICE	THE ANCHOR	WHERE IT COMES FROM	TRY IT WHEN YOU
Breath awareness	The breath	Buddhist mindfulness of breathing; yogic *pranayama*	have a busy mind
Body scan	Sensations, part by part	Buddhist and yogic roots; refined in modern clinics	feel tense or far from your body
Mantra or sacred word	A repeated sound or phrase	Vedic chant, the Jesus Prayer, Sufi *dhikr*, Jewish devotion	find silence hard
Loving-kindness	Warm wishes	Buddhist *metta*	feel heavy-hearted or self-critical
Walking meditation	Each step	Buddhist walking practice, Zen *kinhin*, pilgrim traditions	feel restless
Listening	The sounds around you	Many traditions; modern mindfulness	live somewhere noisy
Guided and visualization	A voice or an image	Tibetan practice, yoga nidra, modern guided recordings	are tired, or new to sitting
Open awareness	Whatever arises	Zen "just sitting", Quaker silence, contemplative prayer	have practised a little already

None of these is better than the others. Different practices suit different people and different days. This week you will try seven of them, one a day, and you will notice which one feels like coming home.

What it has been asked to heal

For as long as people have meditated, they have spoken of its fruits. The old texts promise much. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, a fifteenth-century manual of yoga, says that steady practice of the breath clears disease from the body. Buddhist texts speak

of the mind becoming calm, clear and free from fear. Christian mystics wrote of a peace beyond understanding. Chinese traditions describe meditation as a way to nourish life itself and lengthen the years.

Over the centuries, people have turned to stillness for an extraordinary range of troubles: restlessness and racing thoughts, worry and fear, sleeplessness, grief, anger and irritability, sadness and despair, pain in the body, a tight chest and shallow breath, headaches, an unsettled stomach, exhaustion, loneliness, and the deeper ache of not knowing who we are or why we are here.

Some of these traditional promises are poetry and devotion rather than medicine, and I think they are beautiful read that way. But some of them, it turns out, have been tested. Here is an honest picture of what the research suggests today.

WHAT TRADITION PROMISED, AND WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS

SAID TO EASE	WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS TODAY
Stress	ENCOURAGING Many careful trials find that meditation programs reduce feelings of stress and help people respond to it with more steadiness.
Anxiety and worry	ENCOURAGING A large review of 47 trials found moderate improvements in anxiety after eight-week mindfulness programs.
Low mood and depression	ENCOURAGING Moderate improvements in symptoms. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy helps prevent depression from returning for some people and is recommended in national clinical guidelines.
Chronic pain	PROMISING Small to moderate improvements in pain and in how much it limits daily life. Meditation does not remove pain, but it can change our relationship with it.
Sleeplessness	PROMISING Randomized trials have found that mindfulness practice can improve sleep quality.

SAID TO EASE	WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS TODAY
Blood pressure and the heart	PROMISING Modest benefits for blood pressure and cardiovascular risk. Cardiologists say meditation may be considered alongside standard care, not instead of it.
Attention and focus	PROMISING Regular practice is linked with steadier attention and less mind-wandering, though results vary between studies.
Kindness and joy	PROMISING Loving-kindness practice has been found to increase everyday positive emotions such as joy, gratitude and contentment.
Immune health and inflammation	TENTATIVE Early studies suggest some effects on markers of inflammation and immunity. More research is needed.
Life force and energy	TRADITION Yoga and Chinese medicine describe meditation as balancing *prana* or *qi*. Science cannot measure these, but many people feel warmth, lightness or renewed vitality.
Awakening	TRADITION The great contemplative traditions describe meditation as a path to liberation, union or peace with God. That is a matter for the heart, not the laboratory.

These labels are my plain-language summary of published reviews, not a formal grading. Encouraging: consistent results across many trials. Promising: positive results that need more or larger studies. Tentative: early signs only. Tradition: held by long tradition, outside what science can test. Most of this research studies structured programs, often eight weeks long; it does not show that a few minutes a day will have the same effects. Findings are mixed in places, and some people have unpleasant experiences while meditating.

What doctors recommend today

Something remarkable has happened in my lifetime. Meditation, once seen as exotic or fringe, is now recommended by doctors and written into medical guidelines. It is offered in hospitals, cancer centres, pain clinics, schools and prisons. Many family doctors now suggest it to patients living with stress, anxiety, low mood, poor sleep, chronic pain or high blood pressure.

A few examples:

For depression. In the United Kingdom, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that people who have recovered from depression, and are at higher risk of it returning, can be offered mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, an eight-session group program built around meditation, to help prevent relapse.

For back pain. The American College of Physicians lists mindfulness-based stress reduction among the first treatments to try for chronic low back pain, alongside exercise, yoga and tai chi, before reaching for medication.

For the heart. The American Heart Association reviewed the evidence on meditation and concluded that it may be considered as an addition to standard care for reducing cardiovascular risk.

During cancer treatment. Clinical guidelines for integrative care during and after breast cancer treatment, endorsed by the American Society of Clinical Oncology, recommend meditation to help with anxiety, low mood and quality of life.

Notice the words these doctors choose: *offered*, *alongside*, *in addition to*. Meditation has earned a place in medicine as a companion to care, not a replacement for it. That, to me, is exactly right. It is one of the few things we can do every day that asks for nothing but our attention, costs nothing, and can be carried into every room of our lives.

The language of energy

Many people who meditate describe something they struggle to put into words: a warmth spreading through the chest, a tingling in the hands, a sense of energy moving or settling, a feeling of being lighter, clearer, more alive. The ancient traditions have their own language for this. Yoga speaks of *prana*, the life force carried on the breath, flowing through channels called *nadis* and gathering in centres called chakras. Chinese medicine speaks of *qi*. Christian mystics spoke of the warmth of the heart.

Science does not have instruments that can find *prana* or measure a chakra. But it is beginning to describe some of what people feel in its own language. Slow breathing, especially with a long, unhurried exhalation, shifts the nervous system toward its resting state, slows the heart and makes its rhythm more flexible, something researchers measure as heart rate variability. When the body leaves its state of alarm, energy that was spent on bracing becomes available again. These are different maps, drawn for different purposes. One does not prove the other, but you may find both useful.

You do not need to believe in either map to begin. Simply notice what you feel. Your own experience is the most honest teacher you will ever have.

What meditation cannot do

Because I love this practice, I want to be honest about its limits.

Meditation is not a cure for any illness. It does not replace medication, therapy or the care of a doctor, and no one should stop a treatment because they have started to meditate. It will not make every feeling pleasant. Sometimes, sitting quietly lets difficult feelings or memories rise to the surface. That is normal, and you are always allowed to open your eyes, shorten your sit or stop. And it will not work all at once. The benefits in most studies come from weeks of regular practice, often just a few minutes a day.

What meditation can do is quieter and, I think, more precious. It can give you a place to return to. It can teach you that you are more than your thoughts, that feelings rise and pass, that a breath is always available. It can make you a little gentler with yourself and, in time, with everyone else. And its gifts rarely stay with the one who sits. A calmer person may find it easier to be a patient parent, a steady friend, a kinder colleague.

There is a quiet thread that runs through every practice in this journal: the gentle art of setting things down. Sometimes that will look like rest. Sometimes like acceptance. And sometimes, when you are ready and not before, like forgiveness. You never have to force it. Noticing what you are carrying is already enough.

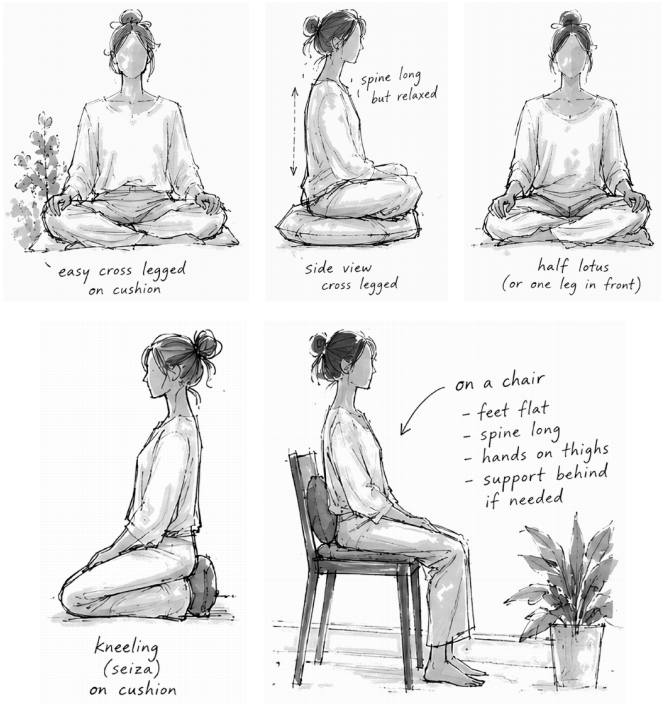
How to Sit

Finding your seat

Choose a place where you will not be interrupted. You can sit on a cushion on the floor, on a chair with your feet flat, kneeling with a cushion between your heels, or lying on your back if sitting is uncomfortable today, though you may find it harder to stay awake. What matters is that your spine can rise without effort and your body can rest without strain.

Sit tall and let the rest of you soften. Imagine a thread drawing the crown of your head gently toward the sky. Let the shoulders fall away from the ears, and rest your hands wherever they are comfortable. Close your eyes, or let them rest softly on the floor a little way in front of you.

SITTING FOR MEDITATION



How long

Begin with whatever feels possible. Two minutes is a real meditation. Five is a lovely daily habit. Ten gives the mind time to settle. Each day in this journal suggests a length, but you are always free to sit for less. Three honest minutes are worth more than thirty endured. Set a gentle timer so you do not need to watch the clock.

What to do when the mind wanders

It will. Within a few breaths, you will find yourself planning dinner, replaying a conversation or wondering whether you are doing it right. This is not failure. It is the very moment meditation happens. Each time you notice that you have wandered, you have woken up a little. Silently note "thinking", and come back to your anchor, as kindly as you would guide a small child back to the path. If you wander a hundred times, you have practised returning a hundred times.

A simple shape for each sit

Arrive: take three slow breaths and let your body settle. Practise: rest your attention on the day's anchor, returning whenever you wander. Close: when the timer sounds, return slowly. Move your fingers and toes, open your eyes and take in the room. Then turn to your journal while the stillness is still fresh.

Why write?

Studies of expressive writing suggest that putting our inner life into words can ease stress and help us make sense of what we feel. These pages are a safe place for your voice. No one needs to read them. They are only yours.

Caring for yourself

This journal is a companion, not a substitute for a doctor, a therapist or any professional care. If you live with trauma, severe anxiety or depression, psychosis or epilepsy, please speak with a health professional before beginning, and keep your sits short and your eyes open if that feels safer. Take extra care with breathing practices if you are pregnant or live with a heart or blood pressure condition, asthma or panic attacks: keep to slow, easy breathing, never hold your breath, and stop if you feel light-headed.

Meditation is not always gentle. If you feel dizzy, panicky or overwhelmed, stop. Open your eyes, feel your feet on the floor and name five things you can see. If difficult feelings continue, reach out to someone qualified. In Canada and the United States, you can call or text 9-8-8 at any time; elsewhere, contact your local emergency services.

PART TWO

Your Seven Days

Here is how the week unfolds. Each day introduces one simple practice, building gently on the day before. You begin by simply arriving, then meet the breath, the body, sound, movement and kindness, and on the seventh day you rest in open awareness, the practice that holds all the others.

Each day has two parts: a page that explains the practice, and journal pages to write on afterward. If you like, circle how you feel from one to five before you sit, and again afterward. There is no right number, and a practice can be useful without making you calmer. Skip it whenever you wish.

Sit at the same time each day if you can. Any time you will actually keep is the right time. If you miss a day, simply begin again.

DAY	PRACTICE	LENGTH	THE ANCHOR
One	Arriving	3 minutes	Simply being here
Two	The Breath	5 minutes	Counting breaths
Three	The Body	8 minutes	A gentle body scan
Four	Listening	5 minutes	Sound
Five	Walking	10 minutes	Each step
Six	Kindness	7 minutes	Warm wishes
Seven	Simply Sitting	10 minutes	Whatever arises

Colour in a circle each day you sit. If you miss a day, simply begin again.



The time and place I can keep

A letter to myself

Write to the person who will finish these seven days. Tell them where you are today, what you are carrying and what you are quietly hoping for. You will read this again on day seven.

DAY ONE

Arriving

"Return unto thy rest, O my soul."

PSALM 116:7

3 MINUTES SIMPLY BEING HERE

We begin by doing almost nothing at all.

Most of us move through the day without ever fully arriving anywhere. Our bodies are in one place and our minds are already in the next. Today's practice is simply to land: to let the body be where it is, and to let the mind join it.

There is nothing to achieve and nothing to fix. If you only manage to notice that you are sitting, breathing and alive for a few moments, the practice has done its work.

How to practise. Find your seat and set a timer for three minutes. Take three slow breaths, a little deeper than usual, and let each one out with a soft sigh. Then let the breath return to its own rhythm. Feel the weight of your body resting on the chair or cushion. Feel your feet. Feel your hands. Notice the temperature of the air on your skin. Notice any sounds. Each time your mind runs ahead, silently say *here*, and feel the weight of your body again.

Take care. If closing your eyes feels uncomfortable, keep them open and rest your gaze on the floor.

1

HOW I FEEL BEFORE 1 2 3 4 5 AFTER 1 2 3 4 5

PRACTICE _____ MINUTES _____

Why did you open this journal? What are you hoping for?

What did you notice in the moment you finally arrived?

DAY TWO

The Breath

"When the breath wanders, the mind is unsteady. When the breath is still, so is the mind."

HATHA YOGA PRADIPIKA

5 MINUTES COUNTING BREATHS

We breathe some twenty thousand times a day, almost always without noticing. Yet the breath is the one thing in the body that runs on its own and still answers the moment we turn toward it. It is always with you, always in the present moment, and always free. That is why so many traditions begin here.

Today we use one of the oldest aids to attention: counting.

How to practise. Sit comfortably and breathe through the nose. Watch the natural breath for a few moments without changing it. Then begin to count each out-breath, silently: *one* on the first exhalation, *two* on the next, up to *ten*. Then begin again at one. When you lose count, and you will, simply start again at one, without any judgement. Losing count is not a mistake. It is how you discover that the mind has wandered, and coming back is the practice.

For the last minute, let go of the counting and simply feel the breath: the cool air entering the nose, the gentle rise and fall of the belly.

Take care. Do not force or deepen the breath. If counting makes your breathing feel strained, stop counting and simply watch.

2

HOW I FEEL BEFORE (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) AFTER (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

PRACTICE _____ MINUTES _____

What did you notice about your breath today? Where did you feel it most clearly?

What is one ordinary thing you appreciated today?

DAY THREE

The Body

"I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass."

WALT WHITMAN, SONG OF MYSELF

8 MINUTES A GENTLE BODY SCAN

The body is always in the present moment. The mind may be lost in yesterday or tomorrow, but the body is only ever here. That makes it a wonderful place to rest our attention.

The body scan, at the heart of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, is one of the most widely used meditations in hospitals today. It is simple: we move our attention slowly through the body, noticing whatever is there, without trying to change it.

How to practise. Sit, or lie on your back with a cushion under your knees. Take a few slow breaths. Bring your attention to the toes of your left foot. Notice any sensation: warmth, coolness, tingling, pressure, or nothing at all. Nothing at all is fine. Slowly move up through the foot, the ankle, the calf, the knee and the thigh. Then do the same with the right leg. Continue up through the hips, the belly, the lower and upper back, the chest, the hands and arms, the shoulders, the neck, the face and the crown of the head. Wherever you find tension, imagine breathing into that place, and let it soften on the out-breath, if it wants to. End by feeling the whole body breathing at once.

Take care. If attending to an area brings up pain or distress, move on, or open your eyes. You are always in charge.

3

HOW I FEEL BEFORE (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) AFTER (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

PRACTICE _____ MINUTES _____

Where in your body do you hold the most? What did it feel like to simply notice it?

What was your body asking for today?

DAY FOUR

Listening

"There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN

5 MINUTES SOUND

Many people think they need silence to meditate. Today we discover the opposite. Sound itself can be the doorway.

A car passing. A bird. The hum of the fridge. Your own heartbeat. Most of the time we hear these things without listening, or we label them as interruptions. In listening meditation, every sound becomes part of the practice. There is nothing to block out, so there is nothing to fight.

How to practise. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Take three slow breaths. Now open your attention to sound, as if your whole body were an ear. Notice the loudest sound, then the quietest. Notice sounds close by and far away. Notice how each sound rises, lingers and fades. Try to hear sounds as pure sound, before the mind names them: not *dog* but the shape and texture of the barking. When you find yourself thinking about a sound, wondering whose dog it is, gently return to simply hearing. In the last minute, notice the silence between the sounds.

Take care. If a sound feels unpleasant or startling, notice how your body responds, then let your attention rest on a gentler sound or on the breath.

4

HOW I FEEL BEFORE 1 2 3 4 5 AFTER 1 2 3 4 5

PRACTICE _____ MINUTES _____

What did you hear that you usually miss? What was it like to listen without judging?

Which sound would you like to remember?

DAY FIVE

Walking

"Solvitur ambulando. It is solved by walking."

LATIN SAYING

10 MINUTES EACH STEP

Meditation does not have to happen on a cushion. Monks in Buddhist monasteries alternate sitting with slow walking meditation, and Zen practitioners walk between periods of sitting in a practice called *kinhin*. Pilgrims of every faith have walked their prayers for thousands of years. If you are restless, or if sitting still feels impossible today, walking may be your way in.

How to practise. Find a quiet path ten or twenty steps long, indoors or outside. Stand at one end and feel your feet on the ground. Then begin to walk, much more slowly than usual. Feel each part of the step: the heel lifting, the foot swinging forward, the heel touching down, the weight rolling through the sole. You might silently note *lifting, moving, placing*. When you reach the end of your path, pause, breathe, turn slowly and walk back. When your mind wanders, stop for a moment, feel both feet on the ground, and begin again.

If you prefer, take a slow walk outside instead, and let each step and each breath be your anchor. Notice the air, the light, the ground beneath you.

Take care. Keep your eyes open and choose a safe, level surface. Slow walking can make balance wobbly at first; walk near a wall if that helps.

5

HOW I FEEL BEFORE (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) AFTER (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

PRACTICE _____ MINUTES _____

How did it feel to move slowly, on purpose? What did you notice along the way?

Where did your attention keep wandering off to? What might that be telling you?

DAY SIX

Kindness

"Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings."

KARANIYA METTA SUTTA

7 MINUTES WARM WISHES

Today we turn from attention to the heart. Loving-kindness, called *metta* in the Buddhist tradition, is the practice of gently offering warm wishes, first to ourselves and then, little by little, to others. It has been studied for its ability to increase everyday joy, and many people find it softens something they did not know was hard.

You may find this practice easy, or you may find it surprisingly difficult, especially the part where you wish yourself well. Both are completely normal. You do not need to feel anything special. The intention is enough.

How to practise. Sit comfortably and rest a hand on your heart if that feels good. Bring to mind someone who makes you smile easily, a friend, a grandparent, a pet, and silently offer them these words: *May you be safe. May you be well. May you be at ease. May you be happy.* Then offer the same words to yourself: *May I be safe. May I be well. May I be at ease. May I be happy.* If you wish, offer them to someone you hardly know, and then to someone you find difficult, but only if you are ready. End by offering them to everyone, everywhere.

Take care. If any part brings up pain, return to the person who makes you smile, or to yourself. Kindness should never be forced.

6

HOW I FEEL BEFORE 1 2 3 4 5 AFTER 1 2 3 4 5

PRACTICE _____ MINUTES _____

Who was easiest to wish well? Who was hardest, and what made it hard?

Is there one judgement, of yourself or someone else, you might be willing to question?

DAY SEVEN

Simply Sitting

"Be still, and know that I am God."

PSALM 46:10

10 MINUTES WHATEVER ARISES

All week, you have given the mind something to hold: the breath, the body, sounds, steps, kind words. Today we let go of the anchor and simply sit, aware of whatever arises. In Zen this is sometimes called *shikantaza*, "just sitting". In contemplative Christianity it is close to the prayer of quiet. In a Quaker meeting, it is the silence itself.

Imagine your awareness as a wide, open sky. Thoughts, feelings, sounds and sensations are weather passing through it: clouds, rain, birds, sunlight. The sky does not chase the clouds or push them away. It simply holds them, and stays sky.

How to practise. Find your seat and begin with a few minutes on the breath to settle. Then let the breath go and open your attention wide. Notice whatever is most present: a sound, an itch, a memory, a feeling. Let it come, let it be, let it go. You do not need to follow anything or fix anything. When you notice you have been carried away by a thought, simply return to the open sky. If the mind becomes too busy, come back to the breath for a while. That is always allowed.

When you finish, sit a moment longer. Then turn back to the letter you wrote on your first day.

7

HOW I FEEL BEFORE 1 2 3 4 5 AFTER 1 2 3 4 5

PRACTICE _____ MINUTES _____

Read your letter from day one. What has changed? What would you like to say to yourself now?

What would you like to keep doing after today?

After Seven Days

You did it. Seven days ago you sat down for three minutes. Since then you have met your breath, your body, the sounds around you, your own two feet, a little kindness and the wide sky of awareness. Whatever happened on the cushion, whether you felt calm or restless, bored or moved, you showed up for yourself. That is not small.

Before you close this journal, turn back to the letter you wrote on the first day and read it slowly. Notice what has changed, and what hasn't. Both are welcome.

Then look back over your seven days and ask: which practice felt most like coming home? That is your practice for now. Give it a few minutes each morning for the next few weeks, and let it grow only as much as you want it to. Research on habits suggests that new routines often take a couple of months to feel automatic, so think of this week as a beginning, not a finish line.

If you would like company

Meditation is easier together. Every Tuesday, I hold a small live circle on Zoom called *Sit With Me*: thirty minutes of guided meditation and shared silence with kind people from all over the world, every Tuesday at 8:00 pm Vancouver time. Cameras are optional, beginners are always welcome, and you can join from your kitchen table. You will find it at amandaaguilo.com.

If you would like to go further

21 Days of Meditation is the next step after this journal: eight ways in, from mantra to the chakras, and twenty-one days to find your own practice. *Meditation Yoga Workbook* goes deeper still, weaving meditation back into yoga, week by week. Both are available wherever books are sold.

And every Wednesday, my Letter arrives: writing about being human, what we carry, how we live together and what we cannot fully explain. If this journal reached you, you may already be on the list. If not, you are warmly invited.

Seek peace more than certainty. Keep beginning again. And when you sit down tomorrow, know that somewhere, someone is sitting with you.

With love, Amanda

Which practice felt most like coming home? What would you like to keep?

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Amanda Aguiló is a meditation guide and writer who remains a student. She writes The Letter every Wednesday and holds *Sit With Me*, a live online meditation circle, every Tuesday.

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21 Days of Meditation
A Journal of Stillness, Self-Discovery and the Practice of Returning

Meditation Yoga Workbook
Restoring the Tradition of Meditation in Yoga

If this journal has been a good companion to you, please pass it on to someone who might need it. That is how it is meant to travel.