

Spring Washam
Week One, *Beginning Again*
February 28, 2016
“Why Meditate? Identifying Stress and its Causes”



Hello, my name is Spring Washam and I'm a teacher here at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in West Marin, California. I've been teaching meditation and mindfulness for many years. I also teach in Oakland, where I founded a center there to teach people about mindfulness, meditating and how to work with the mind.

I'm very excited today because I want to introduce you to a four-part class. It's an online series that will walk you through meditation and mindfulness. We're filming for *Tricycle* for March Meditation Month. They want to inspire you to begin your practice, to start a practice.

I titled this course “Beginning Again” and in many ways that's what we're always doing with meditation. We forget, we begin again, over and over. Whether you have years of experience—maybe you've meditated twenty years and you've been on retreats and suddenly you find that you've just lost interest in it—or you're brand new to meditation and you want to learn. You've heard the benefits. You're excited, you want to understand what this could do for you, and how it could be of benefit to your life. Then this is the perfect course for you.

I want to inspire you and answer your questions. Each week I will go through the course and we'll start today by beginning our practice: “Why are we meditating? How does this help me? How do we work with this? My mind's crazy.” We'll go through all of these questions, ideas, and how to work with the mind.

The second part of this course is what I think of as a real introduction to mindfulness. What is mindfulness? We hear it everywhere in the culture, “Mindful this and that,” and mindfulness in dancing and education and healthcare. So what is this word? It's everywhere, so we're going to define it. What are we really talking about when we say we're being “mindful”? It's important to define it so you understand what it is that you're actually doing.

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In the third class, we'll go into the nuts and bolts of meditation and mindfulness: how we use the body, how we use the breath to become more present, how we train the mind, how we become more observant of experience versus being lost in experience all the time.

The fourth class will include working with what comes up in meditation. Meditation is a way of living, a way of being, but at times it's challenging because we work with our thoughts and our emotions. We all know what it's like to have difficult emotions.

So the idea of the course is to help you work with that. How do we deal with anger, sadness, sorrow, and confusion? How do we deal with the stress of our lives? Meditation is not a quick fix; it's a way of living, it's a way of being. I'll say that repeatedly throughout this course because it's a way of training the mind to live in the present moment. Most of us decide to go on a meditation retreat or to do an online class because we feel suffering and we feel stress.

That's why I initially came into meditation when I was very young: I felt like my life was falling apart. My mind was insane. You may relate to that. I was looking for a way that I could deal with it. That's why people begin to practice. They want to find a calm place. They want to find their center in the midst of everything that's going on in life. More than ever, stress is a huge factor and a contributor to all kinds of illness, mental disorders—how to navigate and reduce our stress is a key component of why we meditate and why we teach meditation. We want to learn how to find some sense of inner peace and learn how to be here, now.

Habitually, we are lost in the mind. The mind is like a cruel dictator and we follow. We follow everything, and there's no spaciousness. We're on a roller coaster most of the day. To have a practice where you intentionally turn your phone off, you disengage, you find a seat, (it can be a cushion or a chair) and learn how to consciously be present: that's what meditation is. You don't have to go anywhere. You don't have to climb a mountain. You don't have to wear beads or outfits, you don't have to even be Buddhist to practice meditation. It's a simple thing. What we're doing is we're just sitting and being here, now. We're learning how to deal with the mind.

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What I would like to do is sit with you and breathe and practice together. For some of you this'll be a new experience and for others: you've done this for years. But wherever you are—whether you're experienced or new—you're always beginning again in the moment. I'm always beginning again.

When I teach meditation, the funny thing is: I'm teaching myself. I'm sitting with you. I'm also learning all the time even after years of practice. I love Suzuki Roshi's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* because in essence he's saying, “We're all just beginners.”

Be patient with yourself. We're not experts. It's a humble practice of just returning our attention to the present moment. So find your comfortable seat wherever you are. If you have physical pain, you can even stand. Lying down is another option. I only recommend that if you have a lot of body pain or an injury of some kind. Just find yourself in an upright position, keep your posture aligned, close the eyes and begin to relax.

As you sit, just begin sense of feeling your whole body sitting. You want to relax your neck and your shoulders; you might want to move your neck and shoulders around. Take a deep breath in and deep breath out. With meditation practice what's so funny is we're not doing anything. It's the art of non-doing, of just being here with what is arising. Whatever you're experiencing is always fine. It's always perfect. It's organic, it's natural. So as you begin to just settle in, feeling your breath, see if you can get a sense of just feeling your whole body breathing.

As you breathe in, invite in relaxation on the in-breath.

Relaxing on the out-breath.

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You might start experiencing the mind wandering: thinking about work, or it may be your family or a difficult problem. The idea is, when the mind starts to become distracted and lost, you just bring it back.

That is really what the practice of meditation is training us to do, is to come back. It's the practice of returning home again and again, home to the heart. I always say that we're coming "home" when we're practicing. We're learning how to be in our body in this present moment.

Just see if you can allow that even for one or two moments here. It can be a powerful reminder of just presence. Giving yourself this attention for just this moment, just feeling what's here.

Simple. Not complicated. But also not easy to do. So we practice in this way. Gentle.

Feeling the breath.

One moment at a time.

Staying as connected as you can to the sense of your body, the felt sense of sitting in the chair, feeling your feet, connecting to the sensations and feeling your hands touching. Again, letting everything relax itself. If there's anywhere in your body where you feel that you're holding tension, just soften that. There's a softness in meditation where we let go, where we just open. The stress that we habitually hold, we just begin to let that energy move out with the breath, feeling the body, just taking another moment here.

Just be present, as best you can. It's not about perfecting anything. It's just the intention to practice. Just for one moment, then another moment, then another moment.

Meditation is training the mind, and over time we develop more capacity, more awareness.

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Staying as connected to this moment. Bringing your awareness back.

We'll stop there for the moment. I want to encourage you over this next week to just find time every day. It could be as short as five minutes or, if you're more experienced and you want to sit longer, just remember that we're beginning again, coming back, and keeping things simple.

Remember that it's just about being present, feeling the heart, feeling the body, and letting go.

Thank you. Join me for next week's class.