

Introduction — at the beginning

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*On this path there are no carriers,
only other wanderers and their traces.*

At the beginning, *meditation* is a practice for coming into ever deeper concentration, mental clarity, and emotional composure. It is a path on which I become, step by step, finer and at the same time stronger, and so more composed and more open, perceiving and understanding my being ever more deeply, with all its many facets and automatisms.

There is nothing esoteric about meditation, and nothing therapeutic either. I can learn it, much like hiking in the mountains, and keep deepening it. But what I *experience* in it – in meditation as in hiking – I can neither read somewhere nor buy; I can open it up for myself only through *my own doing*. Meditation is practice, not theory, and not only at the beginning.

at the beginning

I live in a noisy world – noisy on the outside, with all the encounters, the news, the perceptions, and noisy on the inside, with my tasks, my hopes, my worries, and perceptions again. For meditation I withdraw from this noise, I stop letting it take me over. Then I can look without preconception at what *is*, and finally simply *be*. This is a path, step by step, not something you attain in a hurry.

techniques and tools

Here, at the beginning, it is mainly about learning and practicing techniques and tools. Because if I simply sit down and try to become still, an avalanche of thoughts and feelings usually floods over me – first from whatever was active a moment ago, shopping list included, later from something deeper, the oppressive as much as the liberating. Every stillness is filled at once. That is normal.

focused attention I begin by concentrating on something tangible: my body, or an object lying in front of me. The more strongly I concentrate on it, the further my ordinary world of thoughts and feelings recedes into the background. Then I carry the concentration to something finer – the breath is simplest – until I feel a deeper stillness settling in, and now I slowly release the focus and widen this “space of stillness”.

For a moment this “space” can feel quiet and empty. At the beginning that is rare and short, and often you only notice it afterward. In any case it closes again quickly, and an incessant stream of thoughts and feelings starts to dominate. This stream is our brain’s normal answer to emptiness. It “offers various topics I might attend to now”. Trying to work against it is the wrong way.

open perception And here is the second great work site on the path to meditation: that incessant stream of thoughts and feelings. In fact I would not want to stop it, even if I could. Why? Alongside the disturbance and the temptation, it also opens windows into my deeper inside. So it is about learning not to let this stream carry me away, and to look nonetheless at what it shows.

Once I am in somewhat deeper stillness, I begin to perceive that this stream consists of small fragments – splinters of thought and shreds of feeling – appearing abruptly, in quick succession and fairly disconnected, and vanishing just as quickly. But I also notice how some of these fragments become lines of thought and worlds of feeling that I follow involuntarily, that I keep developing further. That is what “being carried away” means. It can take several minutes before I become aware of it, and at the beginning it takes a conscious effort to break it off.

How often and for how long I am carried away during an exercise tells me something about my current state, and about whether anything is changing. The topics that carry me away, on the other hand, illuminate the “reactive surface” of my being. Important: this is not about judging these topics, let alone suppressing or encouraging them. It is about freeing myself from their automatisms.

Even in the phases where I am not carried away, the stream of thought and feeling fragments remains. Again and again they sound aspects of me, and so they show me my “inner landscape”, parts of which I may not know at all yet. Here it matters even more not to judge, not to want to “give shape”. That only fixes what is already there, ever more narrowly. It is about looking, enduring, and accepting. Each time anew, and ever more finely.

step by step Focusing attention, and thereby making open perception possible: these are the two “legs” with which I “walk” this path. They make each other possible – and limit each other! In deeper stillness, finer layers of my being open up, with its egos, its notions, its stage sets. Through open perception their automatic hold falls apart, I become freer, I find my way into stillness deeper still.

This is a slow transformation, stretching over years, over a whole life. The path is endless and I only ever see the next stretch of it. Here, at the beginning, though, it is only about learning and practicing this “walking”, so that the path – *your path* – can begin to unfold. My experience with it: *I can force nothing, only make it possible.*

mind – body Already in the first exercise the “mind” guides attention through the “body”: it perceives, but it can also set off bodily reactions (tingling, warmth, . . .), and perceiving those in turn sets off thoughts and feelings, which change something in the body. The close connection between the two shows itself here quite naturally. Later exercises will make use of it – and develop it –, to produce resonances that still carry where words no longer reach.

exercises (audios)

The exercises here have the outer form of a meditation, but you are guided fairly closely. In this way you get to know techniques and tools that you can then adapt and refine for yourself – and should, in the end without the audios as well.

They are laid out to be done in the order given. My advice: do not move on to the next exercise until you feel comfortable with the one you are on.

They begin with *focused attention*: on the body, on an object, on the breath. This is the first stretch of every meditation, later as well. It leads out of the ordinary noise

and into stillness. The only difference between the beginner and the master is the effort and the time that this passage takes her each time. The later exercises then all aim at *open perception*: at perceiving the stream of thoughts and feelings, at the temptation to “let yourself be carried away”, and at the art of perceiving in passing.

Each of these exercises can set a process going, and then unfold a greater depth and complexity than it first appears to have. Let yourself be inspired, adapt what does not sit right with you, explore. Explore the resistances just as much as the joy you may meet along the way. Both of them often point to something (still) hidden. And in doing so:

Don't fight, don't let yourself be lured, dance.

a note on words In the audios I use the “I” form. With it I describe my actions (“I concentrate on my breath”,...) and my perceptions during the exercise. You can follow the actions and hold your perceptions up against mine. Yours are what matter. The comparison may at most inspire, never induce. To induce something that is not in you that way – that is the greatest danger of any guidance.

More important, and deeper: expressions like “my body” or “I observe my egos”. Who is “I”? Here, at the beginning, we are far from being able to approach that question. I use these expressions as provisional descriptions, to make perceptions graspable. Further along the path all these concepts will dissolve. So do not hold too tightly to the meaning of any particular word; use words as temporary tools. The only solid footing is *your* perceptions, which you go on refining beyond such crutches – mine as well as yours.

stories

Short stories illuminate the path as a whole as well as a few of its facets, and they point much further than long-winded explanations can. These stories can be quite flat, sometimes downright impossible. It is not, after all, about the stories themselves, but about the analogies, the resonances they set going in your imagination. Unexpected windows can then open onto the exercises, even onto your life.

For these stories there is no “right” interpretation, no “correct” understanding. There is only *your* experience, which will change as you go along your path.

practice

Meditation is practice, and naturally all sorts of practical questions come up, especially at the beginning. The remarks that follow illuminate a few of them, followed by a guide to “getting into your practice”. Important: these are all only *suggestions*. On this path it is not about following any prescribed forms. It is about finding *your* forms, gradually coming to understand them, and, much later, becoming free of them again.

surroundings

As a *place* for the exercise I choose quiet, somewhat darkened surroundings, with no outside disturbances I would have to react to. Whatever I absolutely must do, I have

either taken care of before starting, or made sure I can put off for that stretch of time.

The *practice space* can be a room set aside for it, or simply a blanket (70 cm × 70 cm is enough) in the study, the living room, or the bedroom. It is easier to practice in a closed room, there are fewer disturbances. With more experience it works outdoors as well, even in a train station at rush hour.

preparation

On the threshold of the practice space I pause briefly, to leave behind – *consciously* – the thoughts, feelings, worries, needs, . . . that dominate me right now. Do I even want to? If not, what is the exercise for? So I make myself conscious of *this*: that I *want* to let go, that for the duration of the exercise there is nothing more important.

I take a step into the practice space, pause once more, and remind myself that I *want* to leave behind all intention and expectation, that I *want* to be open. Then I walk to my place, concentrated and quiet, and sit down – perhaps after a small bow.

during the exercise

posture In *sitting* – as these exercises are also called – the body is stable and relaxed. That can be “classical”: on a small cushion, legs crossed and firmly on the floor (lotus); or kneeling with the help of a small bench; or simply sitting upright on a chair. What matters is that the pelvis rests solidly and carries the main weight of the body.

The upper body is upright, leaning on nothing, and the head too is free, vertically above the pelvis; the hands rest relaxed in the lap. The body then feels like a pyramid: a broad base firmly on the ground, the tip free toward the sky.

The eyes are either closed or slightly open, the gaze directed downward without focusing on anything. Try out what works best for you.

This is the “normal” posture in meditation. Some of the exercises depart from it, for instance with the eyes open and the gaze focused. Let yourself be guided, and see how it is for you.

The details of your posture are not decisive. What matters: a stable base, an upright carriage, the head vertically above the pelvis, everything as motionless as possible but relaxed. Pain is not part of this path. If it appears, your posture is wrong for you. Experiment a little, until you can sit still for some time, comfortable and concentrated at once.

If you have physical limitations, explore postures that are possible for you and come close to the idea sketched here.

coming to stillness At the beginning the greatest challenge is to come to stillness at all, and so to make room for something else. Stillness means: limiting the activities of my being to what is necessary. I have to breathe, the heart has to beat, and much else has to go on too. But I do not have to think about my shopping list.

“Have to come to stillness” is quickly said, but it takes some knowledge and then a great deal of practice. Sitting down is quick enough, and I can wait a while until breath and heartbeat find their quiet, regular rhythm. But thoughts and feelings keep welling up, and they cannot be suppressed, not even with much practice. Trying only makes

them stronger. Try it! This is the experience I named above: in meditation I can force nothing, only make it possible.

What I *can* learn, though: to let the spontaneously arising thoughts and feelings pass, to perceive them – and to recognize much of “me” in doing so – but not to hold on to them. This takes concentration and much practice, because at the start the urge to spin thought and feeling worlds out further is overwhelmingly strong.

At first you will need a while to come into deeper stillness, and you will be torn out of it again by a thought or a feeling soon after. This is a difficult phase. Do not stiffen into having to *become* still; let it happen instead. Whatever disturbs you – an itch or a tickle in the throat, worlds of thought and feeling, a terrific idea, . . . – do not suppress it; just perceive it evenly at first, endure it, and see which doors open. But if it starts to block your whole attention, then you scratch, you clear your throat, you cough. If it is more that thoughts are taking you over, you can concentrate on the posture or on particular places in the body – the highest point of the head, the tip of the nose, the belly, the pelvis, . . . – or you follow the breath, the heartbeat. Force nothing, let it happen. Stay attentive and open, without analyzing or judging. You will learn a great deal about yourself and how you work, and the unhurried exercise will carry you forward quickly. Sometimes, though, nothing helps. Then you break off the exercise, without reproaching yourself in any way, and come back later.

coming out

Toward the end of an exercise I am (usually) in a deeply relaxed and concentrated state. I do not jump from there back into my ordinary being without transition; I take a little time for it. Then I stand up, perhaps bow briefly, and leave the practice space quiet and concentrated.

duration

For a (if possible) daily practice you should plan on 20 . . . 30 minutes. At first you will only be able to stay really still for a few minutes. The audios take this into account and have only short silent stretches to begin with. You will notice that sitting comes more easily to you over time. That happens by itself, once you let go and the body carries out harmoniously what you did consciously before for posture, stillness, attention.

Longer meditations, let alone retreats with several hours of meditation a day, are worth considering only when your experience is correspondingly deep and you clearly feel why this is now necessary for you.

getting into your practice

start with exercise 1 Sit down as described above and let yourself be guided through the whole exercise. If something in the body hurts, change your posture and let the audio keep running. Do not worry if you miss one instruction or another along the way. What matters is your walking and your perceiving, not the guidance.

practice without the guidance Even if you have never meditated before, practice the next time – the following day, in a few days – without the guidance of the audio. Do not try to remember the *exact* line and follow it; simply perceive what happens in you as you sit down, and let it be. If you notice that you are being carried away, come back, concentrate consciously on your body again, guide your attention slowly from the head down to the feet once more. Again and again. At the beginning it is nothing more than that.

If it becomes too much, do not force yourself to more: end your exercise without bad feelings, even if it only lasted a few minutes. Do this once or twice more over the next days, and then let the audio guide you through the whole exercise again. That way you go back and forth a few times, and explore the terrain the exercise leads into as you go. Spread this whole process over days, even over a few weeks, and do not pack it into a weekend. Development takes time.

onward If exercise 1 feels good, move on to exercise 2. By then you already know the opening rhythm and you adapt it for yourself. As you go, your own practice should carry more and more weight. That is what this is about: that you develop *your* meditation practice.

challenges

Meditation is not “simply good”; it comes with challenges too. Here, at the beginning, the main ones are (i) expectations that are too great, (ii) an exercise that unexpectedly touches or sets off something (too) deep, and (iii) the feeling that nothing whatsoever is happening. With these and with others, it often helps to sit regularly with someone, perhaps also in a small group. Two wanderers get through difficult terrain more easily, even though each of them, of course, walks for themselves.

great expectations

In every tradition there are beautiful notions of wonderful experiences, enlightenment,... and more besides. Here, at the beginning of the path, none of that has any meaning; it only fogs up the landscape, and I lose my bearings. Such terms and concepts are only attempts to point at something that gains meaning much further along the path, and that is very different from anything all those words and images can mean here, at the beginning. To build hopes and ideas around them, even to set goals: that only lengthens and complicates the path, sometimes endlessly.

Rather than losing myself in deciphering such stories, I look for the experience itself, the experience I have to have myself in any case. So I practice concentrating ever more deeply and becoming quieter, seeing and understanding ever more finely... and these words too only point in the direction of the experience at issue, because here I do not see with my eyes, I do not understand with my intellect.

Only rarely, and in passing, do I glance at the great stories, as at a distant mountain, and wonder what they might mean.

deeper than expected

At the beginning it is mainly about technique and tools, about focusing and perceiving openly. The exercises accordingly stay at the surface of your being. Even so, something *can* be set going that reaches deeper than expected. It is unlikely, especially here at the beginning, but it happens.

Foundations of your notions can be touched, memories you thought forgotten can come up, and more besides. A dull fear may then stand before you out of nowhere – sometimes also as dizziness, as though an abyss had suddenly opened – but so may an unfathomable joy. From the one you recoil; in the other, you would like to lose yourself.

Alongside thoughts and emotions, unexpected bodily reactions can appear as well: sudden fast breathing or a racing heart, trembling, a feeling of dizziness, and more. And that in turn can set off emotions and thoughts.

First: all of this is normal! It is part of you, whether you recognize it or not, whether you want to admit it or not. The bodily reactions are usually normal consequences of relaxation and concentration. They may also belong to emotions that have come up. It is similar with the fears and the joys that deeper perceiving in stillness can set off.

As long as it is not overwhelming you, none of it is very important here, in meditation. Here the only thing that matters is that you let it all be, as far as you can, without influencing it. Seemingly terrible or seemingly wonderful – here there is no difference. Just try to perceive, without interpreting, let alone judging. What does it set off in you? Only the “what”, not the “why”. Where in the body do you feel something of it? How does it feel there? When you have seen enough, you let it go again.

But if *it* will not let go of you, come back to the perception of the body, of the breath, back to stillness. If that does not work, break off the exercise: open your eyes, look around you, tap yourself *lightly* with your palms on chest, belly, seat, legs and arms... and come back later.

But if something moves you too deeply, too strongly, too long, then let it stand in the uncertain. Forced answers, explanations, even excuses, only produce constructed stories that you will later have to dismantle again with great effort. If you cannot “let it stand”, and it weighs on you in everyday life as well, then talk to someone about it. You are not alone on the path; there are other wanderers, like me¹.

Most of this is harmless in the end, even when it is a challenge for a while. But there are things, physical as well as psychological, that are not harmless and that call for professional help. Sudden chest pain is one of them, and so is a trauma breaking open again. Do not experiment there; get the help you need.

it feels like nothing is happening

By far the most common challenge, though, is this: for weeks now you have been honestly toiling away at daily meditations, and what happens? Nothing. The dominant thoughts stay, they even get stronger, you often spin them out further, restlessness instead of stillness, maybe pain as well,... and the time you would need for more important things is draining away. At the beginning most people have this frustrating experience.

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The first cause is often that the exercises become boring. For the umpteenth time “guiding attention through the body” and “perceiving the breath”. You do it more and more automatically, and more superficially. With that, concentration weakens, the stream of thoughts starts to flood you again, and you begin to fight it. A vicious circle. Better to deepen the concentration exercise, to concentrate on finer aspects.

Another cause is expectations – not the great ones above, but the small, obvious ones, like “coming to stillness” and “seeing deeper”. But meditation is an odd practice. It is not about *doing* something, it is about *letting*. The more you recognize something as a goal, try to grasp it, even to force it, the more you *do* – and the more what actually matters withdraws from you. If you let go, and finally let go of the letting go as well, it begins to show itself. Meditation is an odd practice.

And then it may also be that your “nothing” is only a felt “nothing”, that beneath the surface of your perception something is indeed changing. To check that, look more closely, openly and critically, not expecting, not hoping, not fearing. Look at the stream of your thoughts, the topics that appear, the ones that carry you away. Notice too how long topics stay, how long it takes you to notice you are being carried away, and to be “back” again. And then: how is it outside meditation – is anything changing in your inner perception?

But if nothing changes in your experience, if you stiffen rather than loosen, and that not just over weeks but over months, then meditation may not be your path – not now. Perhaps something else draws you, something that also opens up an immediate perception of your being in *the* world. That might be walking in the woods, hiking in the mountains or the desert, working in the garden, sipping tea with friends at a sidewalk café, yoga, and more besides. Whenever it stops being about walking, hiking, working, talking, postures, . . . you are close to meditation.

and then?

You have learned a few techniques. Good. You are setting out now to shape your own meditation practice – perhaps with the support of the [departure point](https://arolla.net/werkstatt/meditation/departure-point/)²– and you are starting to meditate daily. Good.

And then? Go on drinking, eating, working, dancing, meditating, sleeping,... through thick and thin.

Just living.

There is nothing to attain here.

exchange

If you have questions or remarks about this introduction or about the exercises, or would like to share your experiences, send me a note (kurt.rothfauchere@bluewin.ch).

Text, exercises, and the practice underlying them come from my own experience over many years. In working them out I used the AI system “Claude Opus 5 (Anthropic)” as a critical counterpart – to test concepts, to reveal gaps, and to sharpen the language. I have kept and written down here only what held up under that scrutiny and matches my experience. The responsibility for everything written here is mine. (KRF)

Translated from the German with the help of the same system; the German version is the original.

² <https://arolla.net/werkstatt/meditation/departure-point/>