
The Practice of Meditation

Spencer Adler

Basics

DESPITE WHAT MANY PEOPLE THINK, YOU DON'T NEED A TEACHER TO LEARN MEDITATION. IF YOU KNOW HOW TO SIT QUIETLY AND THINK, OR STARE INTO YOUR MORNING CUP OF COFFEE AND absent-mindedly watch the rings of steam rise off its surface, then you know how to meditate. It's something you already do, even if you never use the word meditation.

People who practice meditation have simply learned to recognize and create these snatches of quiet, and have become more conscientious of what to think about, and what not to think about, when they do happen.

Time spent meditating sometimes seems governed by the reverse of a familiar maxim: Don't just do something, sit there. In the East, Buddhists, Hindus, and people of other religions have much experience sitting silently. In the West, monotheists, be they Christian, Muslims, or Jews, have their own, often overlooked door into the world of meditation in the form of the Sabbath.

Focused meditation requires consciously creating the same frame of mind as on the Sabbath. Phone calls do not get returned, reports do not get written, a leaky faucet does not get fixed, and, for the well experienced, even thoughts of work do not enter the mind. If the workweek is about doing, then the Sabbath and these times of meditation are about simply being. They are about sitting in the chair at work and not moving, not doing, and perhaps not even thinking, for sixty seconds straight. It sounds so easy, but most of us would rather take another trip to the water cooler. Meditation instead says: Don't Just Do Something, Sit There.

There. That's the lesson. I know it's a short article, but it really is quite simple. Anything else would simply be commentary or illustration. Thank you for reading.

[Editors' Note: Dear Spencer: This is lovely, but a bit under our word target for this article. Could you perhaps give some examples from your own life to flesh this out some? Possibly something about logistics and what to focus on and another section giving examples?]

Logistics

You can meditate while scrubbing a floor, admiring a sunset, working out at the gym, or typing at the computer. To be sure, external events can be important, but the focal point must be what happens internally.

Nonetheless, most people find that at the beginning, they meditate most clearly and powerfully when sitting quietly. So, here are my logistical preferences for how to sit quietly. They are offered not as directives, but simply as illustrations of one person's methods.

I prefer the early morning, since it allows my body to be well rested. In addition, there is something intrinsically calming about being awake while the rest of the world sleeps, while the fax machines and the car horns and blinding sun are still in hiding. If there is such a thing as psychic pollution, it surely hits a lull at four in the morning.

I like to do a few things preliminary to meditation. First, if I need to eat, I eat sparingly. Second, I stretch my muscles to make sure cramps do not distract me later. Third, I sometimes hum a favorite tune, which tends to ensure that I'm in a positive frame of mind. Meditation can intensify one's thoughts and emotions, be they calm, negative, or positive. If I begin in a positive frame of mind, then I can be reasonably certain that I will end the session even more so.

I often sit cross-legged in a comfortable chair, with a pillow under the base of my spine and another behind my lower back. Whether my feet are on the floor or not, though, I try to keep my back straight, as if a thread runs up it to a spot high above me. To drown out background noise, I often use earplugs from the pharmacy. I try to sit as motionless as possible.

I close my eyes, and focus them on what would be the inside of my upper forehead. In yogic practices this is considered the third eye point; in

Judaism it is the point of tefillin placement. My eyes tend to stay focused on the same spot, watching as though they were watching a movie screen in a darkened theater. If it is quiet enough, the only sound is the inhale and exhale of my breath, which eventually becomes regular, and slow. If there were tiny down feathers sitting under my nose, they would scarcely move.

I often keep a blanket nearby, since longtime meditators tend to experience a drop in body heat when the body slows down substantially, as it can in meditation. For those well practiced and in a solid routine, time spent meditating tends to displace time spent sleeping. An hour of deep meditation, for instance, might be worth two hours of sleep. For me, this only works when my routine is regular and predictable, which is often not the case.

AS TO WHAT TO THINK ABOUT DURING MEDITATION, I LIKE TO FOCUS ON A mental image of the letter aleph, a practice for which there is some historical precedent. The aleph makes an excellent skeleton on which to hang some of the meditative notions hidden within Judaism and monotheism.

1. Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, evoking the number one and a central lesson of Judaism: unity. I particularly enjoy this message because it makes me think of Albert Einstein who was convinced that a Unified Field Theory connects all things, though he never proved it. This unity which transcends time and space is the world of the unpronounceable “Y” name of God: Y-H-V-H, written in Hebrew as *yud-heh-vav-heh* and referred to in prayer as “Adonai.” On a level internal to the aleph itself, the Y-name is the upper yud, which traditionally represents the heavens above.

2. Aleph is the first letter of the “E” name of God, Elohim. Literally, Elohim is “The God of All Powers,” or “The Many Powers.” The word itself is masculine plural, which reiterates its connotations of disunity, and of separateness. The E-name is the lower yud of the aleph, which traditionally represents the earth below and nature. It is meditation on the various mundane powers which surround us.



The aleph is structured with three component Hebrew letters—two yuds and a vav. Each yud represents the divine, for a number of reasons, including: (1) the yud is the first letter in the unpronounceable name yud-heh-vav-heh or Y-H-V-H; and (2) yud is the tenth letter, which is the number of divine emanations in the tree of life. So, the yud above and the yud below represent the divine above, in the heavens, and the divine below, on earth. The vav component represents the individual, among other reasons because it is the sixth letter, corresponding to the day on which man and woman are said to have been created.

3. Aleph reminds me of the six-word declaration of faith, the Sh'ma: *Sh'ma Yisra'el Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad*. I think of the Sh'ma as unifying the Y name with the E name: “Hear, O Israel, the Y name of Unity and the E name of Disunity, in Truth it is all Unity.”

Or, more elaborately:

Sh'ma = Hear. Still the mind and Listen.

Yisra'el = Those who go Straight (*Yashar/Yisr*) to the Power (*el*).

Adonai/Y-H-V-H = That Which Was, Is, and Will Be. Unity. That Which Is So Beyond Time and Space That We Cannot Even Pronounce Its Name. *Elohaynu* = [and] The [Apparently] Many Powers. The disunity and the varied laws of the physical world.

Adonai/Y-H-V-H = Unity. That which transcends time and space.

Einstein's Unified Field Theory.

Echad = Is One. Is All There Is.

producing the following translation:

Listen, Those Who Wrestle With The Ultimate Truth:
What Appears As Both Unity and Disunity:
In Truth, It Is All Unity.

I know that Einstein never articulated a complete Unified Field Theory. But I also know that he died convinced it existed, and looked over his notes the day before he passed away. I don't know if Einstein said the Sh'ma before he died, but I cannot imagine a more appropriate way for him to declare this same conviction than by reading those notes one last time.

4. The aleph begins what the Zohar considers the ultimate name of God, the *Ayn Sof*, meaning the Without End, or sometimes called the *Ayn*, meaning the Nothing, which is a popular focus for meditations in many eastern meditative disciplines, particularly a number of forms of Buddhism. Perhaps "Nothing" is an a-religious, or agnostic, or even atheistic name to use as the ultimate Jewish name for the divine. I'm not sure, but I do know that meditating on "Nothing" is tremendously effective at quieting my mind. In an odd way, it also pulls me closer to my roots without forcing me to believe in anything particular.

5. Perhaps most importantly, the aleph is a silent letter. Many days, I don't need any theology. I don't need any breathing in of the Y name and breathing out of the E name. Sometimes even that seems too foreign, too complicated, and too cerebral. At times like that, all I need is a bit of quiet in the midst of a busy week. Then, it is enough to simply shut my eyes, listen to my breath, and think about the power of silence.

In the end, only you can know where you like to sit, or if you like to sit at all, to do your best thinking. And only you can know what you like, or need, to think about. Meditation is an intensely personal endeavor. In this regard, perhaps the last thing you need is an article, or a book, or a teacher. If you have any questions before you begin, then begin anyway. You may find that you already know how to do all this.

Meditations

WHAT FOLLOWS ARE THREE EXAMPLES OF MEDITATIONS, INTENDED TO illustrate some possibilities of visualization involving the letter aleph. The first piece explores some of the subtleties of aleph. It is the type of visualization a student in a meditation class might be guided through in order to give meaning to the letter, so that in the future, when an image of the aleph is called up from the imagination, it also brings up associations which are both positive and helpful.

Aleph Meditation

Lie comfortably and relax. Arms and legs are uncrossed. Eyes are closed.

To relax a bit more, clench your fists and squeeze tightly. Breathe in as deeply as you can and hold the breath. Keep squeezing. When you cannot hold your breath any longer, release your muscles and your breath. Next, tense and release your entire arms. Then, tense your feet and legs, holding them tense until you cannot hold your breath any longer. Then do the same with the face muscles and the neck. Finally, tense your entire body, and release.

As you lie comfortably, feeling yourself breathing slowly in and slowly out, imagine walking through a field of grass, in a place which feels comfortable and familiar. You are walking towards the edge of the field, where the woods begin. You walk into the woods, down a path alongside the edge of a stream, and you are struck by how beautiful it all looks.

You come to a clearing and you notice an enormous aleph, sitting solidly on the earth, reaching high into the heavens, as if it had sat that way for thousands of years. As you get closer, you notice that the lower yud of the aleph is made of stone and has a small entrance, almost like a door, just large enough for you to comfortably enter, which you do. Inside is a cave. The stone walls are cold. All around you, on the walls of this cave, are written repetitions of the letter aleph, and you know that they represent the E name, Elohim.

As you look down, you notice that around your shoulders are straps which hold up a knapsack on your back. It is a burden you did not even notice you had been carrying. Suddenly, it feels quite heavy. You swing it off, and carefully set it down on the stone floor in front of you. You open up

the top, and inside is a pile of stones. One by one you remove them, pausing with each one to feel its heft and shape. Each one is a burden, each one has a name. One is a burden from work. Another is an argument with a spouse or relative, or a health ailment you are working to overcome. You feel the coldness and hardness of each rock, the hardness of each burden you carry. Finally, these rocks are all surrounding you on the rock floor of the rock cave, and there are no more left in the bag.

You notice now that a stream of light has broken through an opening in the ceiling of the cave, and that it is big enough to fit through. Just as you notice this, you find yourself rising up through the hole and soaring up into the sky, as if you had wings. Below, you can see the field, the aleph, and the opening in the lower yud that you just left. The scene gets smaller and smaller as you rise. Soon, the entire horizon of the round earth is in view, and you soar through the clouds and beyond, until the planet itself is just a tiny speck in the distance. Finally, even that speck disappears, and you are left in the silent, distant heavens, certainly beyond your normal conception of space, and almost beyond time itself. This is the realm of the upper yud, the unpronounceable Y name.

You can now only faintly remember what it was like to be locked within time and space, within the mundane world. Here there is no longer any past or future, no near and no far away. All things combine into one here, and this Unity seems perfectly clear.

If a place exists where it is possible to speak with those who are no longer living down on earth, where it is possible to see deep into the future or far into the past, this would have to be it—a place where past, present, and future all blend into one. This is the place which is not even pronounceable down on earth.

Look around you and remember what it is like to be here. It will make it easier to return.

Gradually, it feels time to return. As you feel yourself being pulled back to your spot on earth, you first are drawn back to the cave. The earth begins to look larger beneath you, and you can see the enormous stone which hides the cave. Soon, you are back inside. You see at your feet all the stones and burdens you left behind. You look at them closely and you notice that they have all turned into beautiful gems. Only their outer coverings were made of stone,

all along, and those stone coverings have fallen away, turned to dust.

You pack up the gems into the backpack, and take them with you back the way you came, along the path by the stream, and back to the field. Finally, you are ready to open your eyes again, feeling relaxed, alert, and refreshed.

THE NEXT MEDITATION IS WRITTEN IN THE SPIRIT OF THE LOWER YUD. ITS tone is curt and impersonal, like the world of Elohim itself. Its substance involves a woman who temporarily feels trapped by the burdens of her working day, and struggles to see beyond them, to a place of peacefulness and harmony. In the vocabulary of this paper, she is in the lower yud, struggling to see the upper yud. Stated alternatively, she is in the E-name world of disunity, struggling to see the Y-name world of unity—staring at a stone, struggling to see the gem inside it.

Table-Top Meditation

Imagine a somewhat experienced meditator, for whom the concepts evoked by the aleph, and the method of evoking them, are both helpful and refreshing, but not entirely automatic. Such a person would run through the average day without any desire to meditate. But perhaps she finds herself in a business meeting that is infuriating her. She begins to feel frustrated and annoyed. Tension builds, until she feels ready to explode in impatience. Yet she knows it is a bad idea. She wants to stop herself, and slow down her thoughts and emotions.

Imagine also that she has already done her homework with the aleph. She has made the emotional associations with quiet and peacefulness, as well as the more cerebral associations with unity and disunity. By now, the image of the aleph reminds her only of helpful things.

So, at this moment of frustration, she draws or imagines the aleph written on the pad in front of her. Once this happens, she gradually imagines it taking shape and becoming an enormous letter, sitting in the middle of the conference table, reminding her to be calm. As she inhales, the entire letter

seems to flutter towards her. As she exhales, it flutters away, like a sheet hanging from a clothesline.

The aleph remains for as long as she needs it, through the disagreement, and through the moments of tedium. She sees through it, peers around it, and talks as if the aleph is just another person at the meeting, who happens to be sitting on the middle of the table.

In this way, meditation does not require silence, nor does it even require any external changes. It only requires the proper intention.

THE FINAL MEDITATION EXPLORES THE UPPER YUD. IT IS GENTLE AND personal, both attributes of Y-H-V-H. It is the narrative of a man at home in the world of the Y-name, who has a great deal of experience with meditation, and for whom the aleph acts as a constant companion.

The Bowl of Cereal

It is still quite early and uneventful when the old man awakens. At this hour, only the odd insomniac songbird sings from her night perch, from high within the branches of the old nearby oak tree. Mostly, though, the rest of the forest lies comfortably asleep. Soon, even the bird will slow her chirping, lay her tiny head onto her feathered chest, close her eyes, and lean once more against the familiar, warm, grass side of her nest. Unlike the songbird, he will remain awake through the dawn.

For now, they are both awake, and as he sits up in bed, her pretty chirping reminds him of a favorite tune. He begins humming.

He slowly lifts his body out from underneath the warm blankets, and steps towards the armchair next to the wood stove. He sits down, and prepares to rekindle the fire. The stove's latched iron door swings open easily, and the embers inside finally reveal themselves to his brown eyes once again. He rearranges them with the worn brass poker, adds fresh wood, and blows a lungful of air quietly and steadily towards the smoldering orange coals. They burst into life, as if they had long ago exhaled and ever since had been hoping to inhale once again, but instead had sat patiently all evening long, staring at the inside of the stove's latch, waiting for it to turn, and for

the breath which would finally follow.

He shuts the iron door and leans back into the softness of the familiar chair. He settles into the renewed warmth, and closes his eyes. He searches for that place somewhere in between sleep and wakefulness. Sometimes he finds it. Other times he finds something very different.

This morning, he begins by etching into his imagination a picture of the Hebrew letter aleph. He sees the familiar combination of marks as if they were on an enormous sheet of parchment paper in front of him. The three parts appear distinct and familiar, like the clear face of an old friend.

He listens to the silent letter, and as he does, the sounds from beyond his little room begin to crumble and dissolve, like stone castle walls turning to sand. The aleph, like all silent things, refuses to contribute to the noise of the world. Yet it also seems to have the power to absorb noise, to soak up confused sounds the way a sponge soaks up water from a puddle, and then to squirrel those sounds far away in some secret, silent place.

He continues to sit, silent and motionless, mesmerized. All that moves is his gentle breath. With each inhale, the aleph flutters lightly towards him, as if it can feel the draw from his lungs. With each exhale, the letter flutters away, a loose sail being blown by the wind.

This continues for a long while, until, eventually, as if a light switch has suddenly been flipped, he knows that it is time to get up. Like a flower unfolding in the morning sun, he unfolds himself to find the day finally beginning to get light.

He looks around, and finds himself alone in the world of the mundane again, with little to remind him of where he just was. Everything in his life still looks the same. Nothing has changed. Troubles have not metamorphosed into something else. The pile of paperwork has not shrunk. The stack of messages have still not been returned. He taps on the walls and they still sound the same. He rubs his skin and it still turns red. Nothing has changed. Yet he is somehow looking at it all a bit differently, a bit more perceptively.

He walks into the kitchen and opens the handle of the refrigerator door. He sees the white ceramic pitcher of milk, notices the flowers painted on its surface, and pulls it off its shelf. The cereal box comes down from the cupboard, and they all sit down at the table together, enjoying the feel of the

worn wooden surface. He pulls the bowl closer and listens to the soft cascade of the cereal falling gently into its new home.

The handle of the milk pitcher fits smoothly into his hand, and he raises it, noticing its perfect balance. As the milk pours smoothly out, over its own invisible bridge into the bowl, he spots the first one. It is a tiny aleph, pouring out over the lip of the pitcher, and then another one, just behind it. Hundreds, and soon, thousands of alephs pour into the bowl, as if the milk itself were made of alephs. Then it stops, and he puts down the pitcher.

The spoon feels cool as it rests in the curve of his hand, and he peers into the bowl. Scooping the first spoonful of breakfast, he picks up the grains, and as the alephs pass over his lips, he feels them swish through his mouth, past his teeth, and over the end of his tongue. Suddenly, what he never would have noticed otherwise is now entirely present. Every sound, every taste, every touch is rich and complete. It seems that without this level of presence he must live entire days while being functionally still asleep. It is a lucid moment, and he knows it.

Rising, he reaches for the door, and sets the bowl outside for the birds to finish. He steps inside again, and as he puts his breakfast companions into their respective cupboards, he hums the same tune he woke up to. Soon, the words which accompany it drift to mind, and the first of them slips out from between his lips. As it does, his eyes glance down, and he sees the word fly out of his mouth. It is accompanied by a tiny letter aleph, which flits around the room, and flutters out the open window into the world outside. The song continues as he gets dressed for work, and the entire room at some moments feels packed with fluttering alephs, dallying momentarily before making their way out the open window or through the crack of the door.

As the hours tick by, his world is filled with alephs, always reminding him of exactly those things which help him most. Nonetheless, he is in perfect control of whether they appear or disappear.

Finally, by very early in the next morning, he knows he has spoken the last word for the day. The alephs have run out, as if they had been pulled one by one out of a small paper bag which now sits empty. Then he knows that it is time to lift himself out of bed and sit in his familiar chair once again.

Spencer Adler is an attorney in private practice in Washington, D.C. This essay is adapted from a recent talk he gave at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.