

# Time Is on Your Side

Find it hard to meditate daily? The key to establishing a steady practice is shifting your perception of time.

By Rolf Sovik

Many years ago I was fortunate to spend a few months in a remote ashram in Nepal. Founded by my guru, Swami Rama, the ashram was located in the scenic foothills of the Himalayas, twenty kilometers outside Kathmandu. One afternoon, Swamiji called for the ashram's trusted Ambassador automobile to transport an American student to the airport and invited me to come along. It was always a privilege to spend time with him, so this trip felt like a gift. Sitting in the front passenger seat, Swamiji was in a quiet mood. As we traveled, the driver, the student, and I remained silent, gazing out at the passing terrain.

After a long interval, Swami Rama turned and looked at my companion. In a firm voice, and without any context for his thought, he said simply, "You should establish a daily meditation practice now." The man nodded, and did not say another word.

The exchange surprised me, and I wondered what had prompted it. Were the words a scolding or a much needed piece of advice? Since this student was an experienced meditator, I guessed they were a mixture of both. As silence returned to the car, I filed the moment away, sensing that it was a lesson for me as well as for my companion.

## Cycles of Time

Most of us don't have a yoga master to encourage us to sit regularly. Nonetheless, daily practice is an essential step in the development of our meditation. Without it, our bodies cannot settle into stillness as we sit; today's meditative insights become tomorrow's forgotten dreams; and the agitation of life outruns the peacefulness we gain from regular practice.

Establishing a daily sitting routine requires patience and discipline, a quiet resolve to show up at your seat even when you're not in the mood. But ultimately, the experience of sitting daily will leave you with the feeling that if you *don't* meditate, something important will be missing. Meditation then becomes a kind of love affair. Once we are touched by the joy of meditating regularly, our life proves painful without it.

But given the many commitments of everyday life, how do we convince ourselves to meditate daily? One approach is to examine our conception of time itself. How we think about time, it turns out, affects how we use it. Early Greeks recognized various ways of perceiving time. When they viewed it in a linear way—as a stream of events winding from the past, through the present, and into the future—they called it *chronos*, or measured time. Chronos is ordered time. We know it directly only through the thinnest slice of our personal timeline: the moment we call *now*.

Becoming stuck in linear thinking complicates the process of making a commitment to daily meditation. When we envision time extending further and further into the future, our uncertainty about that future is magnified. How can we possibly know whether or not we'll have time to meditate six months or a year from now? How ready are we to commit ourselves to the daily practice of *anything*? Is there a better way to think about time than the linear model—one that will seem less...obligating?

Yes, there is. It helps to think of time as cyclical rather than linear. Cyclical time is still measured time; just think of a clock face. But it is actually quite different than linear time. When we think in terms of cycles, we measure time by the rising and setting of the sun, by lunar months, by seasons, and by anniversaries. Cyclical time circles round and returns to us, changed by its journey yet curiously the same.

How does a cyclical conception of time help us meditate? Because meditation is an event occurring in time. If we conceive of time as linear, the points on the line representing meditation are isolated from one another. They are brief moments in a line extending into the distant future. When we think of time as linear, that line swallows the way we view meditation, reducing its impact and rendering it less important.

Thinking of time as cyclical changes things. Whatever we do as part of a daily cycle takes on new significance. Regularly performed activities become a part of who we are. People who play golf regularly become golfers; those who garden become gardeners; and those who meditate soon become meditators. In this sense, we become the architects of our lives. Each day our actions reflect and mirror the larger identity we have chosen for ourselves.

Conceiving of time as cyclical reinforces both the meditation we do each day and the meditative identity that evolves through our practice. What we choose to include in the cycle of our day makes an enormous difference. It determines who we are.

## Inner Time

There is still a more subtle conception of time, one that is similar to cyclical time but takes us further inward. In this way of thinking, time is perceived as a feeling rather than a measurement. For the Greeks, this concept required a separate word: *kairos*. In their mythology, *Kairos* was the youngest son of Zeus. He was the deity associated with the arrival of the favorable moment—the right time to plant, to tend, or to harvest; the moment to invest or to sell investments; the time for peace, for war, or for negotiation. For our purposes, *kairos* gives us the sense that the time for meditation has arrived; an internal clock tells us that it is the right moment

to turn inward.

An ancient sculpted image of Kairos shows him as a wing-footed youth with a tuft of hair on the front of his head, but baldness in the back. His winged feet depict the speed with which moments of opportunity fly by. The tuft of hair symbolizes the means by which opportunity can be seized when it is met. And the bald scalp signifies that once missed, a passed opportunity cannot be seized by chasing after it.

Approaching time in the manner of kairos allows us to relinquish concerns about measuring. Suppose you have set a daily meditation time. In the beginning, you may need to set an alarm to remind yourself that the time is approaching. But soon that need will pass. As meditation becomes a natural part of your life, an inner timekeeper will announce the moment for meditation in your mind. Your inner resolve—the knowledge that the time is right—will also cause your meditation to unfold more favorably.

When you decide to meditate each day, you are acknowledging the importance of spiritual discipline, your desire to be a meditator, and the call of an inner voice that really transcends ordinary time. Daily meditation represents both a commitment and an opportunity. With each passing day the intersection of chronos and kairos, of ordinary measured time and your own inner sense of time, leads you back to your meditation seat to nurture your practice again.

### **Sunrise, Sunset**

Are certain times more favorable for meditation than others? Yes. In the morning and evening, when day and night momentarily mingle, nature draws the mind inward. As a result, many choose to meditate just after awakening or in the evening, near sunset.

Unfortunately, many of us have lost our sensitivity to nature's influence, and we do not feel the internal pull created by the joining of night and day. But by paying attention as dawn or dusk approaches, we can observe nature's work. Winds quiet down, animals hush, and the sky floods with color. The mind is also quieted in these moments, and as night and day briefly embrace, our concentration and our sense of inner balance deepen.

There are some practitioners who choose night hours for meditation. A familiar verse in one of yoga's most beloved texts, the *Bhagavad Gita*, explains, "That which is night for most living beings is like day for one whose senses are controlled; that which is day for most living beings is like night for the introspective sage." In the silence of night, when others sleep, a meditator finds pleasure in meditation. But the outward affairs of daily life are like sleep to a sage. That is why some meditators choose to practice at bedtime or in the very early morning when the darkness is conducive to meditation.

Although these various times are all recommended, it is important not to neglect one more suggestion, which is to meditate at the time that works best for you. That might mean meditating at the beginning of a lunch break, at the end of the workday, or when your children are napping. Finding the time that best fits your personal schedule makes it more likely that you will settle into a regular practice.

### **Day by Day**

How important is it to sit *precisely* at the same time each day? The discipline of maintaining a fixed meditation or prayer time is extraordinarily beneficial. That's why this practice is maintained by so many traditions, from Islam with its calls to prayer, to the Divine Office (matins, lauds, etc.) that measures the day for many Christian monks and nuns.

But maintaining an unwavering time for meditation demands a level of discipline and detachment from affairs that may not be practical—or even desired. For those of us with families, there are many occasions when our responsibilities may conflict with our meditation time. So, while a fixed time for meditation is certainly praiseworthy, it may not be the way your personal practice evolves.

As an experiment, try sitting at approximately the same time each day. You'll soon develop a rhythm that will gradually reinforce itself. After you've tried it for a while, you can then decide how strictly you would like, or are able, to observe a fixed meditation time.

### **Turning Inward**

When I lived in Nepal, meditation time was announced by the call of nearby roosters and by the faint light of the pre-dawn. The rhythm of the day was un-complicated, and few interruptions were important enough to pull me away from meditating. These days I live in a city, where there are no roosters and it is difficult to see if the sun has risen or not. But the inner call to meditate remains. The satisfaction meditation brings leads me back to my seat each day—as I hope it does you. If not, consider that time is passing, and the fellow with the tufted hair is about to run by.+

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## **3 Meditation Tips**

One of the questions that every meditator finds difficult to answer is: How long should I meditate? Here are some steps you can follow to find the right amount of time for you.

### **Establish your basic practice.**

Make sure you have the essentials of your meditation practice clear in your mind. In general, this means establishing a basic sitting posture, training yourself to breathe comfortably, and witnessing your mind from an inner distance—either focusing on your breath or a mantra.

**Add time in small increments.**

Begin by sitting for 10 to 12 minutes on a regular basis. When you are ready, increase your sitting time to 15 minutes. Then, work your way up to 20 minutes. At that point, your meditation will be well established.

**Don't take on too much.**

Ultimately, the length of your meditation will be determined by your mind's capacity to concentrate. The key to sitting longer is to relax and deepen the process of concentration. From a practical point of view, when the mind becomes so tired of concentrating that you are no longer engaged in the process, the meditation is moving toward its end.