

mindset



BY KAREN STEWART, MA

a different sense

For more than 30 years, I have practiced yoga, deep relaxation techniques, guided meditation, self-hypnosis, and different meditation techniques. While I have never been as diligent or disciplined about these practices as I would wish, I have been able to find in them a way to be in touch with an inner sense, a place in which I feel connected to the life force within me that in turn connects me with everything else in the universe.

Getting in touch with this inner sense is a deeply rewarding experience and one would think that I would be motivated to a more devoted, disciplined practice of any of the many techniques that can bring it to awareness. Unfortunately, that has not been true because in fact I think I shrink from fully being aware and in touch with such a powerful force.

Recognition of the health benefits of yoga, meditation, tai chi, and other Eastern practices continues to grow. These practices are slowly being widely accorded their rightful place in Western thought and healing. If each of us were to devote 30 minutes a day to one of these gentle and life-giving practices I am quite sure the rate of heart disease, high blood pressure, and other stress related disease would drop dramatically. Further, were each of us grounded in this deep inner peace and aware of our connectedness with all other creatures there would be a seismic shift in our culture.

Devotion to a practice like yoga or meditation requires a radical departure from our driven, compulsive life styles, which focus on *doing* rather than *being*. We must slow down and be willing to sit and do nothing in order to meditate, to move mindfully and sometimes slowly in yoga or tai chi. Through these practices we become aware of the busyness of our minds and the tensions we carry in our bodies and slowly let go of them—only a little at first, gradually more and more. I offer the following as a very simple way to use a few yoga stretches

to become ready for meditation and then some simple suggestions for a beginning practice of meditation.

First lie down on the floor on thick carpet or a mat for cushioning. This seems perfectly simple, right? Not so for many people. Some of us are so tense and tight that to lie down on our backs is painful; our necks arch uncomfortably, our chins tilt up and back and our lower backs ache. If our lower back hurts, we can bend our legs and gently let our knees fall together. If our necks arch, we can get a small towel, fold it and place it under our heads until our chin is able to rest in a comfortable position, slightly tilted down. Then we just lie there and watch our breath until we are able to breathe deeply and slowly, letting go as much as possible of the tension we notice in our muscles.

Next we focus on sending energy through to our feet, feeling our feet firmly planted on the ground. This is not a forced movement, but a simple shift in energy and through a conscious attempt to flow energy into our feet. If our legs are not already bent, we bend them and place our feet approximately hip width apart. As we do so we notice the shift in our spines, how they flatten a bit and our shoulders open a bit. From there we can do a few pelvic tilts if we like. As we breathe in we consciously flatten our lower backs as much as possible and as we breathe out we release our backs and let them arch a bit. Finally we hug our knees into our chests and release our backs and legs.

Normally I do a little more than this, but it is enough to allow my body to center and release a bit of tension and my breathing to slow and become deeper. Next I go into a version of meditation. I sit on a couch or comfortable chair and I make sure my back is well supported. I place my hands on my knees or in my lap.

Finally I am ready to further focus inward. I watch my breathing and make it as smooth and deep as possible at first in order to focus, but as I meditate it slows and becomes very quiet

and gentle. At this point, sometimes my mind is chattering so much I simply notice the chatter and listen to what it sounds and feels like (Bees buzzing? A noisy stream?) Sometimes my mind will quiet, just by focusing on the chatter. Sometimes it is so noisy and busy I must use a memorized passage to repeat to quiet my mind. It can be any beautiful and meaningful passage: “Lord make me an instrument of thy peace” (prayer of Saint Francis), a poem or the name of the divine as you know it to be. Sometimes this is all I can do.

But sometimes—and it always feels like grace—I am able to be in touch with the energy flowing deep within my body, connecting me at body, mind and spirit levels. A deep sense of peace descends in which I feel loved and whole and at one with the world. I know in my heart and mind and soul that in Therese of Avila’s words “All will be well” no matter what my own condition or the condition of friends, family, community or the world. I feel safe and loved and cared for. Many times I do not reach this place, but knowing that it exists always within me is a comfort to me at all times.

So why do I not do this every chance I get? Why don’t I make this the most important part of my day above all else? I could say that it is because of work, commitments, etc., but that would not be totally true. I think it is that I shrink from becoming fully in touch and aware because I am not yet able to face the changes that might be wrought in my life if I acted from that deeply centered place. In other words, I am not quite ready to be what I might be, to do what I might be called to do if I acted from that loving compassionate place. Might I be called to give up possessions and radically alter where I live? What I do? I am not yet fully ready to accept what might come. So I continue on, gradually becoming more comfortable in that place, gradually trying to increase the practices that take me to this place, all the while trying to be patient and forgiving of myself for not having the courage I need . . . yet. **kkk**

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. Web address: www.stewartpsychologists.com.