

**Start Here Now**  
**An Online Course on the Path and Practice of Meditation**  
**Taught by Susan Piver**

**Talk One: Getting Started**

Hello, and welcome to lesson 1 of “Start Here Now,” a four-week e-course meant to introduce you to the practice of meditation. My name is Susan Piver, and I am delighted to be your teacher and guide for this experience. In this first lesson we’re going to talk about what meditation is and what it is not (the three biggest misconceptions about the practice), and then we’re going to dive right in and actually practice together. The practice that we’re going to do in this lesson can be repeated throughout the program, as often as you like.

We’re living in a time where meditation is really having its moment. There’s been a recent deluge of research that has proven meditation to be beneficial beyond any doubt. Neuroscientists tell us that meditation can help with insomnia (if you have trouble sleeping), it can help regulate blood pressure, it lowers the stress hormone cortisol, it prevents relapse into depression by 50 percent if meditation is included as part of the treatment protocol . . . It has even been shown to raise what is called the happiness set point in your mind: it can make you happier, in other words.

So the benefits of meditation are now basically proven beyond doubt, and you can add to that the twenty-six hundred years of Buddhist evidence-based research that has also proven, beyond doubt, that meditation can make you more wise, more compassionate, more patient, more generous, more authentic. So this is one amazing practice. Everything from helping you get a better night’s sleep to attaining complete liberation from suffering. It is quite extraordinary. At the same time (02:00) all it is is sitting down on this earth, taking a good posture, and breathing. It can hardly be simpler, and when we practice together you’ll see just how true this is.

With all of these ideas about meditation, I think it can be helpful as we begin our journey together to really just pose the question: What is meditation? Beyond what it can help you do, what exactly is this magical thing that has so many extraordinary consequences? The definition I want to offer you is very, very simple: all meditation is substituting for your discursive mind another object of attention. And I want to break that down for you. By “discursive mind,” what I mean is that part of you and me that is always doing something like this: “What is she talking about? I’m not sure that’s what meditation is. I never heard it could help you get a better night’s sleep, and I wonder if I’m going to have to sit like that when I do meditation because I don’t think I can do that, and my friend Bill has been

meditating for a long time and he's not any nicer, and I just felt this twinge in my knee—I wonder if I have cancer of the knee. Maybe I could get dinner after this, and why did I say that thing twelve years ago? I wish I hadn't said it. My whole life would have turned out different." And so on and so forth, and so on and so forth. This is the part of ourselves that is always commenting, judging, cataloging, critiquing, labeling, naming, parsing, and so on, and that is the part of ourselves that most often has our attention. And we think, "Well, what else are you going to think about but your thoughts?" But one of the many things that meditation establishes beyond doubt is that you (04:00) have a choice about where to place your meditation, and if it does nothing else, it trains you on how to make those choices: how to choose what you want to place your attention on, and then, further, how to hold it there. In this day and age, when the ability to pay attention is in scarce supply, this is no small thing.

So just to reiterate, meditation is placing your attention on something other than this "blah, blah, blah" that goes all day long and sometimes all night long. And the good news is, you already know exactly how to do this, because if you've ever taken a yoga class or gone for a swim or worked in the garden or made out with someone or cooked a stew or sketched a landscape or tried to solve a math problem, you already know what is meant by placement of attention on something other than your thoughts, because what all of these things have in common is they ask you to place your mind and body in the exact same space. Meditation teachers call this synchronizing mind and body. And it's not that hard to understand what that means. If you are in tree pose, for example, in yoga, if you've ever been to a yoga class, and you start thinking about your e-mail, you fall out of tree pose. If you start wondering how your life is going to turn out while you're trying to drive somewhere, you may end up in Timbuktu.

So meditation is the practice, among other things, that places mind and body in the same exact space and asks you to place attention, again, on something other than your thoughts. In our case, that something is the breath. So it's very convenient and very simple. (06:00) And I would like to point out, just in case you've ever tried this, that it is impossible to breathe in the past, and it is impossible to breathe in the future. Your breath can only be right now. So when your attention is on the breath, you could posit that your attention is also on the present moment, and the breath is a wonderful stand-in for every single other thing that happens in your life. By training to place attention on breath, we're training to place attention on whatever we may choose once our meditation practice is over. It's very pragmatic.

One thing that is not included in this definition is anything about beliefs, anything about religion, anything about discarding beliefs that you may have. So not to worry: if you have strong religious beliefs of any kind, or no religious beliefs, you can still do this practice, no problem.

I want to take a moment and just focus a little bit on what is meant by placement of attention. Since the practice itself is about placement of attention, it behooves us to take a moment and consider just what that means. So I'm going to ask you to do something with me that will help demonstrate what is meant by placement of attention, and you don't have to change or get up or do anything other than what you're doing right now, because it's just something you do on the inside. So if I ask you right now to place your attention on your left knee, I'm sure that you can do that. Just notice your left knee. You probably weren't thinking about it a moment ago, but there it is, and maybe you feel fabric covering it or cool air or (08:00) a little achiness or whatever may be there. Just let your attention hover on your left knee. *[Pause]* Now place it on your right knee. *[Pause]* And now place it on your left earlobe. *[Pause]* Now put it back on your left knee. *[Pause]*

I'm sure that you were able to do that. And you may notice that something moves between those points—knee, knee, ear, knee—and that something is your attention or your awareness, and that is what you place on the breath in meditation. When we get to our practice, you'll see exactly what is meant by that, but I wanted to explain what is meant because attention on breath is different than thinking about breath, and it's different even than observing breath. It's more a quality of being with breath. So I hope that makes sense.

And I will add also, just briefly, that there's one thing that meditation is not, and I already kind of said it, but I think it's worth it to say it again: it is not religious. Beliefs, in fact, are considered an obstacle when it comes to meditation practice. So if you don't have any beliefs, you're already ahead of the game. But if you do, you are welcome to keep them; it's totally fine.

I also wanted to mention the three most common misconceptions about meditation practice so we can just lay those to rest right now. The biggest misconception about meditation, numero uno, is that in order to meditate, you have to stop thinking; you have to clear the mind of thought or at least think happy, perky thoughts. I want to tell you right now, from the bottom of my heart, that is not required. There's only one thing that you have to stop thinking, and it is that. You can think anything you want in the meditation practice. Your thoughts can be speedy (10:00) and wild, they can be peaceful and loving, they can be barbaric and unkind, they can be boring—and, from my personal observation of my own practice, that is most often the case. It's all fine. All of that.

The totality of your thoughts and the way your mind works is welcome in your meditation practice. So if you ever, ever have the idea that "I can't meditate because I can't stop thinking," you're in luck because that is not required. In fact, it would be really weird if you tried to get your mind to just stop and you thought, "Well, I'm going to sit down on my meditation cushion"—or chair, because chair

is also fine—and then you just sort of said, “Shut up, you,” or, you know, you think that you’re going to pull some kind of spiritual emergency brake and the whole thing is just going to stop. That’s (a) not required, and (b) not very useful. Your mind exists to make thoughts, and that is excellent. It is very, very good that that’s what it does, in the same way that your eyes exist to see.

I’m going to ask you to do another little something with me to demonstrate how nutty it is to try to stop thinking, and it involves the eyes, but if you are sight impaired, you are welcome to use your ears. So if I ask you right now to just look out through your eyes, which I presume you are doing anyway, please keep doing that, and now try not to see anything. Try really hard. If you can do that, call me, because it’s pretty much impossible. It’s also extremely frustrating. So there’s no need to stop these very natural processes of thinking, seeing, and so on (12:00) in order to meditate. You don’t have to stop thinking.

The second big misconception I want to mention is that meditation is a form of self-help, and while it is extremely helpful—I enumerated just a few of those ways at the beginning of this lesson, and of course we all come to meditation because we want some kind of help—no one comes to meditation because everything is awesome and let’s just throw meditation on, you know, for good measure. We all come to the practice because of some sort of pain, some sort of difficulty or loss or frustration or confusion, and that’s fine. Any agenda you may have for your practice is fine. But while you are practicing, it is very important to let that agenda go and to consider that when you are meditating, you are not trying to change anything about yourself. You’re not trying to fix yourself. In fact, you start from the premise that who you are already, right now, is unbroken, requires no fixing, is completely whole and totally worthy. You don’t have to believe that, by the way. You don’t have to debate that, make a list of pros and cons: “this is what’s awesome about me; this is what’s terrible.” That’s not required in order to discover this foundation of wholeness and goodness. Your practice actually reveals it to you, and it reveals it most readily when you jump off the self-improvement treadmill that most of us, myself included, have tied ourselves to very, very tightly, and even though I don’t know you, I feel very confident saying you are doing your best. (14:00) You are working as hard as you can. When you accomplish something, you want to accomplish more. You are trying to live the best life you can. You are trying to create happiness for yourself and others. I have no doubt.

During this practice you are invited to let go of all that and instead to simply rest with yourself as you are. Rather than trying to fix or improve or tinker with anything about yourself, instead you extend the hand of friendship toward yourself by simply being with yourself for these ten minutes a day or fifteen minutes or five minutes, or however long you choose to practice. This has great implications.

Don't take my word for that. As your practice progresses, you see for yourself, "Is that true or not?" So rather than being a kind of self-help way of becoming a better anything, meditation asks you to relax with yourself as you are, and through that gesture of gentleness, things begin to shift within you and in the way you are in the world. That's why the subtitle of this class is "An Introduction to the Practice and Path of Meditation." We'll get more into that in future lessons, but for now let's just say it's not self-help. It's a way of waking up and discovering your own worthiness. That's a pretty good thing.

The final misconception I want to mention is that meditation will make you more peaceful. I'm sorry to say (16:00) that it won't. I mean, it kind of does, but maybe not in the way you might expect, or at least not in the way I expected when I first started my practice. I saw pictures of people meditating or read books about it and thought, "Those people must be chill, like, constantly. I bet that if my meditation could really take hold, I could be like that, and I wouldn't have the emotional ups and downs that I have, and painful things would not hurt me, and scary things would not frighten me, and if they did, I would just be able to shake it off through some meditation mojo and just recover this kind of, you know, peacefulness." It's kind of true, but the road to get to that didn't look anything like I expected it would. In fact, it looked a little bit like the opposite of more peaceful. I'm going to explain to you what I mean by that.

As you sit in your practice and you soften toward yourself through this non-self-improvement, you start to relax. When you start to relax in this way, quite naturally, because this is how we're built as human beings, you spontaneously begin to soften to others. It doesn't mean you have to like everyone; it just means you are open and you can feel their presence and you can intuit what is in their mind and heart a little more readily. As you soften in this way—first to yourself, and then to others—a wall begins to come down that you have held up. (I have, with all my might, in an effort to protect myself from (18:00) things that might hurt me or upset me or scare me.) Through this practice, very interestingly and wonderfully, that wall just starts to come down, and you peek over and you see the world, and what you see impacts you more directly.

One thing I've noticed about meditators is they laugh a lot, they cry a lot, they have a kind of vitality and aliveness that I associate with this practice. Don't take my word for that. You're going to have to check everything I'm saying for yourself, and I really, really mean that. So yes, it does, in a sense, introduce a note of vulnerability that we might not anticipate through this general gesture of softening, and you may notice a greater emotional response, or maybe not. But the practice of meditation is famously associated with the quality of compassion, and this is why: because through this practice—this very simple thing, just sitting there breathing, nothing fancy—things touch you, and you start to respond

more. Your heart wakes up. So rather than making you more peaceful, meditation actually makes you more genuine, and you have greater access to the realm of feeling, the realm of creativity, the realm of insight, the realm of wisdom. Yes, there is increased vulnerability, but these rewards can be your (20:00) counterbalance.

Just to recap what we've spoken about so far today, meditation is simply this: the substitution of another object of attention for your discursive mind. In our case, that object is the breath. Meditation is not religious. There are three big misconceptions about the practice, which I invite you to contemplate at your leisure. Maybe I'm making this up; maybe it's not true! Check these things out for yourself. I know I've said that multiple times, but it is of the utmost importance as you begin or restart your practice that your own intelligence be your guide. There's nothing more important than that. The misconceptions are that (1) in order to meditate, you have to stop thinking (stop thinking that!), (2) meditation is a form of self-help, and (3) meditation will make you more peaceful. In the long run, it will, but along the way, it makes you more authentic.

So as we begin this exploration together, I want to offer you a few suggestions for setting up your own practice at home, which will be part of what you're asked to do this week between this lesson and the next one. There are a few things that could be helpful in establishing your practice, and the first is to establish an actual place where you're going to practice. It doesn't have to be fancy, you don't have to set up a whole special shrine in your house or anything, unless you want. Best to keep it very, very simple. Find a place to sit, whether it's on a cushion on the floor or on a chair—both are excellent (no extra points for sitting on the floor!)—and place it somewhere that feels nice to you. If you have a home office, you can do it there. You can place your meditation cushion or chair in your bedroom. (22:00) If you have a lot of roommates, you can sort of find a corner of one room where you're unlikely to be disturbed. Make it someplace pleasing, which basically means clean, and where you feel like, "Oh, I'd like to sit there." Again, it doesn't have to be fancy, although if you like, you can have a little table or something with a picture of someone or something you love, or flowers, or just some mementos of some sort that are meaningful to you, and return to that place each time you practice. There's nothing magical about finding the perfect place, but there is something magical about going back to the same place every time, because just when you approach that place, you already sort of start your practice. You're like, "OK, it's starting."

It's also good to practice at the same time every day. Choose what is the optimum time for you. For most people, it's the morning, because they're most awake and if they wait too long the day gets away from them and it becomes harder to do. So if you are like most people, you could begin to

establish your practice in the morning. If you have a supercompressed morning and you've got everything sort of parsed to the minute, just wake up ten minutes earlier. However, if you have nine children that you're trying to get to school and mornings are really, really bad, or you're a night owl—you know, you don't wake up until noon anyway . . . No matter what time you get up, that's fine. Practice in the evening. Practice when you come home from work, if that is a conducive time, or right before you go to bed. And again, you may have to experiment a little bit to find the optimal time for you, and there's not a time that's the magic time. Again, it's just the consistency of the same time every day that helps (24:00) create a habit. That's why that's good.

The only thing you need, besides something to sit on, is some kind of a timer. If you use the guided instruction that comes with this program, then you don't need it, and that's cool. You're welcome to use it as many times as you like, but if you want to do the practice on your own without the guidance, then you can get some kind of app on your smartphone—there are many. Or you can use a kitchen timer or set an alarm clock. It's good to have some sense so you don't have to keep looking at your . . . nobody has a watch anymore, but you don't have to keep looking at some timing device in order to know how long you've practiced. I hope those are useful.

That is a good lead-in for me to give you your homework for this week. What I ask you to do between this lesson and the next is to set up your home practice. Find the place where you want to sit. Get whatever accoutrements you may need. I ask you to practice for ten minutes each day. So think about that. Look at your calendar, if you're a very busy person, and try to see, "Yes, this is when I will do that ten minutes." If it's the same time every day, that's ideal, but otherwise, fit it in some other time for the day.

And there's a final piece to the homework, which is I ask you to keep a practice log. It's very, very simple. You don't have to spend hours journaling, unless you want to. At the end of your practice, simply write, "I practiced today for ten minutes and it felt . . . weird" or "It seemed fine" or "I'm confused." Whatever it might be. Again, you can keep it simple. If you feel inspired to continue to journal and contemplate what your experience was like, that's fine, but otherwise, just very simple. This includes (26:00) days where you practiced for no minutes, right? "I practiced for no minutes." So everyday, it's like a captain's log on a ship. Just, you know, check in with yourself: "Today I practiced for no minutes. Uh-oh." "Today I practiced for ten minutes, felt fine." Again, whatever it might be.

If you are brand-new to meditation, I want to add one other thing. Please only practice for ten minutes. If you feel, after two or three days, "I think I got this. I'm going to try twenty minutes," don't do it. Stick with this very simple plan: ten minutes a day, each day, as best you can, and if you miss a day, I

want you to feel really, really bad for like five seconds, and then you gotta cut that out, because it is totally useless. So if you want to, time yourself—one, two, three, four, five—and then stop, because it's really not useful at all. Does not help. So don't do that. I wish you all the best with your practice this week.