

inkwell

Zen and the Art of Writing

Looking for help staying motivated or keeping the words flowing? Here's why meditation may be worth a try.

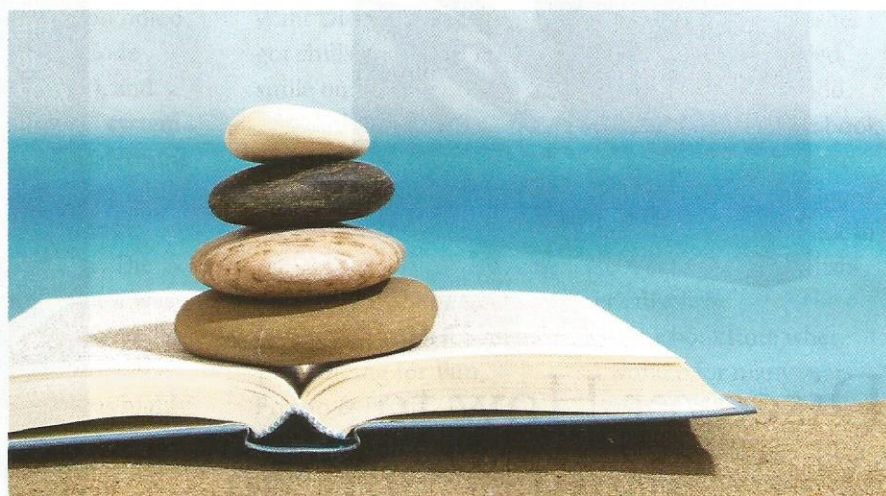
BY TERI BROWN

We writers tend to live inside our own heads. We're constantly worrying about the progress of our story, the future of the publishing industry, or when we're going to get that next soy latte fix. Occasionally the noise reaches a cacophonous level that drowns out the words we *want* to hear. And then what do we do?

With 15 years, seven published books, a novella and one anthology behind me, I have turned to meditation to silence discord, foster creativity and increase productivity. And I'm not alone. Meditation, once the province of aesthetics and hippies, has gone mainstream, with such noted personalities as newscaster Dan Harris, basketball star Kobe Bryant and author Elizabeth Gilbert all espousing its benefits. In our increasingly cluttered, tech-centered lives, meditation makes space for creativity to thrive.

THE BENEFITS OF MEDITATION

Although just about anyone can benefit from meditation, writers—who



need an abundance of both mental space and focus—may find it particularly helpful. Daily practice can quiet the mind, allowing for leaps of inspiration and increasing our ability to ignore distractions.

Several years ago, I found myself staring at four brutal back-to-back deadlines—and a life-altering cancer diagnosis. Meditation made it possible for me to focus on a treatment plan, pain control *and* my writing. Not only did I survive, but I thrived. What started as a low point turned out to be one of the most creative periods of my life.

Maureen Bush, a Canadian children's writer and the author of *Cursed!* and *Feather Brain*, has been a serious meditation advocate for many years. She believes the practice has helped both her creativity *and* her writing.

"[With meditation], I'm less worried about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow, and more able to focus on the story in front of me," Bush says. "It allows me to go deeper into wherever it is that stories emerge from. I'm more likely to hear the mutterings from the deeper meaning of the story if my mind isn't preoccupied with chatter."

Like most authors, Bush has experienced the roller coaster of emotions that often accompanies a career in the publishing industry. Meditation has helped her navigate those emotions, which, in turn, has pushed her to keep writing no matter where she is on the ride. "I'm steadier now," she says. "It's easier to get back to the page. Writing ultimately is about setting aside ego and immersing in the story. Meditation helps me do that."

THE SCIENCE BEHIND MEDITATION

Recent scientific research on the positive effects of meditation has played a large role in its mainstream acceptance. A 2013 collaborative study by Massachusetts General Hospital/Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center on the effects of the relaxation response—a physiologic state of deep rest induced by practices such as meditation, yoga and deep breathing—found that eliciting this state immediately altered the gene expression tied to inflammation, metabolism and insulin.

Dr. Claudia Aguirre, resident neuroscientist at popular meditation website Headspace.com, says the study has exciting implications. "This means that meditating, even just once, can alter our physiology down to our genetic level," Aguirre says. "This kind of study helps us understand not only that meditation and other mind-body therapies work, but *how* they work."

Another study, from the University of Groningen and North Dakota State University, tested how mindfulness affects a person's ability to filter out other mental processes during creative tasks, thus increasing focus. Researchers established a link between mindfulness, meditation

and an increase in divergent thinking, flexibility and originality—all skills writers utilize while solving plot snarls or characterization problems.

Aguirre emphasizes that when looking to implement meditation into your lifestyle, consistency is key. Think of it as a mental training regimen. "Neuroscience has shown that meditating can alter the brain's gray matter volume in certain areas, rewiring the brain to effect changes in behavior or thoughts," she says. "With consistent practice, these brain differences may help people better

- Close your eyes and relax into the space around you. Allow yourself to get used to any outside noises. Notice the weight of your body in the chair and your feet against the floor. What do your hands feel like in your lap?
- Scan down through your body, starting with your head. Are there any places that feel particularly tight? Can you relax them before moving on? Notice how you feel emotionally.
- Think about your breath. What part of your body is your natural

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control their attention, manage their emotions and make mindful choices."

WAYS TO GET STARTED

While many meditation practices are steeped in Eastern tradition, there are plenty that focus on the practice itself without any religious or spiritual connotations. Jumping into meditation is far easier now than it was even five years ago, as step-by-step instructions are readily available in the form of apps (10% Happier), tutorial websites (Headspace.com) and YouTube videos. These resources guide the listener into short, easy meditative sessions, often designed with the novice in mind.

Follow the steps below to help fire up your own meditation habit:

- Sit comfortably with your eyes open in a soft, unfocused gaze.
- Take several deep breaths—in through the nose, out through the mouth.

breath moving? Your chest? Your solar plexus? Focus on that place and begin to count your breaths. Once you reach 10, start over. Every time you feel your mind wandering, gently bring it back to your breathing. At the end of your practice, let your mind go for a moment before gently opening your eyes. Set a timer for five to 10 minutes, if you like.

While meditating is beneficial at any time in a routine, I find it increases my creative focus when I practice it in the morning, just before I start writing. Some find it most helpful as a break in the middle of a writing session, while still others use it on demand if they're stuck or feel their creativity diminishing. Ultimately, the right time to meditate is whenever it works best for you—and your writing.

Teri Brown is the Portland, Ore.-based author of several books for young adults, including the novels *Born of Illusion* and *Velvet Undercover*.