

A Microbook of Micropractices:
Brief Meditation Practices for the Workplace.

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Although this is a small offering, when one meditates and studies the source materials and contemporary teachers it becomes clear that nothing exists independently. At some point you realize at a felt level that there is what Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh refers to as *Interbeing*.

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Introduction

In the field of meditation, “micropractices” are meditations that are brief and can be done more than once a day. They can range in duration but are shorter than the more typical meditation dose of 20 minutes a day that is cited in the scientific literature. Micropractices can range from a several seconds to about 5 minutes. From a pragmatic perspective, I look at a micropractice as a moment that you can take to “hit the reset button”. Our lives are busy, and the workplace is often stressful and overwhelming, even when you like your job and career path. Even if your job “checks all the boxes” and is gratifying at multiple levels, by the end of the day you may still find moments where you just can’t think effectively and at the end of the day you are exhausted and brain dead (hopefully not literally). It is easy to become overwhelmed and to even find yourself in a “fight/flight/freeze” state whereby your sympathetic nervous system is over activated and you literally can’t think. In addition to increased stress hormones being released into your system, your actual ability to think through a problem will be negatively impacted. This is because stress and anxiety interfere with what psychologists and neuroscientists call “executive functions”, which include sustained attention, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. Sustained attention is the ability to maintain your focus on one task, but of course, there are jobs where you must also shift effectively from one task to another, which requires cognitive flexibility. Working memory is the capacity to hold information in awareness and manipulate it in some way. Examples of this would include being verbally given financial information and needing to then jot it down or input it in an accounting program. This would tax both working memory and cognitive flexibility.

The sympathetic nervous system *upregulates*, meaning that it increases arousal. The parasympathetic nervous system *downregulates*, meaning that it decreases arousal and leads to a calm and relaxed state.

At one level, the brain is a complex biological machine and organ just like any other organ in the body. It engages in work, uses resources, and while different cognitive capacities can be strengthened with practice, everyone is vulnerable to the cognitive load of a situation becoming overwhelming. It is at those times that I recommend doing a micropractice to hit the reset button, or better yet, doing micropractices periodically to strengthen the capacity to quickly downregulate and reset before becoming overwhelmed.

What follows is a collection of micropractices that I have developed working with clients and students and which I have adapted from other resources. Each can be done from between one to five minutes. I recommend using a timer, such as the timer on your cellphone or computer.

I would like to explain a few basic terms that I will be using:

Attention and awareness: In the context of the practices offered here, think of awareness as a vast field that you can observe where all sensations, emotions, and thoughts reside. Other traditions refer to this vast field as “mind”, but I will refer to it as awareness. Attention is like a laser pointer that moves through this field of awareness and illuminates different objects of attention (some traditions use the word “awareness” in this context, but I will use the word “attention”). And like a laser pointer, one can still make out objects that are not directly being illuminated by the beam. This is important to keep in mind, although you may be focusing on a particular sensation, thought, or experience, other phenomena will enter into awareness. This is completely normal and please do not view yourself as somehow “failing” if you notice a multitude of experiences in addition to what you are directing your attention to. I have often heard clients and students say, “I can’t meditate,” and upon inquiry what they report is engaging in a particular practice and experiencing extraneous thoughts and emotions. My response invariably is, “that is so great, you are meditating!” There is invariably a belief that you must be able to stop thoughts and distractions, but that is not how it works.

At one level, meditation is about being with thoughts and distractions, but in a different way than we normally allow ourselves, that is, in a way that is accepting and not judgmental. In the context of brief micropractices, you can’t make the thinking mind stop thinking, rather, you can create conditions where the thinking mind may quiet down and be less distressing.

At another level, a more fundamental level, meditation is about returning home, returning to ourselves. Meditation teacher Lorin Roche, PhD, has described meditation as a natural process. I agree with him and believe that it is fundamental to our being, but in our modern age we have forgotten it as we have forgotten ourselves, and nowhere is that more acute than in the workplace.

Breath Cycle: A full inhale and exhale. This includes the brief momentary pause between the inhale and exhale and between the exhale and inhale.

Sensation: For our purposes, everything that you observe in the field of awareness is a sensation. This refers to physical sensations, the experience of your breath and energy, feelings and emotions, and thoughts. In this way of thinking, your memory of an event and the experience of focusing your attention on your hand are both essentially tuning into sensations.

Body Scan: Guiding your attention through the body in a systematic manner. The yogic and psychological literature have numerous approaches to body scans.

For the most part, each practice will be on a separate page so that the practitioner can print out or separate the desired practice for easy reference at their workplace.

The practices that are described are general guidelines and are not be thought of as rigid or “written in stone”. As one of my teachers, Richard Miller said to me, quoting his own teacher, Jean Klein, “make them your own.” Truly. I am offering them to you, but they are not mine to give, rather, I am just the vehicle for transmission and I hoping that you find something useful to take with you.

Basic Breath Practices

In meditation, focusing on the breath is considered a basic practice, although it can also seem very difficult, particularly at the beginning. In each of these practices focus your attention on the breath. You will invariably have other sensations and you will experience thoughts. Remember that thinking happens on its own and you can't make it stop by willing it to cease. I will offer a few basic breath practices:

Observing the Breath:

- 1) Close your eyes or softly gaze at an object on your desk or in your office. Your gaze should be soft and gentle, you are not "staring down" the object, rather, allow yourself to blink.
- 2) Perhaps place a hand on your belly and breath into your hand, thereby engaging diaphragmatic breathing.
- 3) For whatever time you have, simply breathe. Nothing more. Breathe. Let the breath happen naturally with its own rhythm. Experience breath breathing though you with its own intention and intelligence. Trust it do to do what it needs to do. If you find yourself "thinking the breath", by that I mean thinking "inhale" and thinking "exhale", rather, let go of thinking the breath and trust the breath to do what it needs to do entirely on its own. Not to get too metaphysical, but think of the breath as an expression of life itself, just like you are an expression of life, expressing itself through you.
- 4) Observe the sensation of the expansion and contraction of the body on the inhale and exhale, respectively, and observe the pauses between the inhale and the exhale and the exhale and the inhale.
- 5) Continue until your timer sounds, do a brief body scan.

Coherent Breathing:

- 1) Same as the above, but the breath is controlled rather than following its own rhythm.
- 2) Exert some control over the inhale and exhale whereby the inhale and exhale are the same length. This could be anywhere between four to ten seconds, find the rhythm that is right for you, which could take a couple of minutes, which is perfectly fine.
- 3) Continue until you timer sounds, do a brief scan of the body.

Breath Counting:

Counting the breaths is a common method of which there are a few variations. This one is intended to promote a relaxation response. Essentially, you will count backwards on the exhale of the breath cycle. Pick a number to start with, I suggest either five or seven, and you give one count on the exhale. Don't worry about keeping an accurate count, if you lose track just start the series again.

Caveat: backward breath counting can be very relaxing to the point where one will readily drift off to sleep. Try this at home a couple of times to gauge how you tend to respond.

- 1) Sit comfortably.
- 2) Do a couple of breath cycles naturally without counting.
- 3) Begin counting the exhales from 7 to 1.
- 4) If you lose count, not problem, start at the beginning again.
- 5) Repeat until the timer sounds.
- 6) Do a full breath cycle without counting and open your eyes.

Peace Breathing.

This practice is the same as the Breath Counting micropractice described above, but instead of counting one silently says a word associated with wellbeing, such as “peace”, “calm”, “relax”, “love”, etc. Also, holding a particular visualization throughout the practice that fits the word that is used can be added as well.

Step Breathing

This is a gross simplification of more complicated yogic breathing practices which are referred to with different terms depending on the yoga teachers and their lineage. I have dispensed with directions to count seconds or beats during this practice, rather, I will simply refer to “moments”. Essentially, you alternate breathing for a few moments with not breathing for a few moments. It takes a bit of practice to find the rhythm and timing that works for you. Don’t attempt long pauses between moments of inhale and exhale, nor should you elongate the entire breath cycle too much as it may elicit a panic response. Also, don’t be surprised if you find in either the inhale or exhale phase that you begin to exhale or inhale. This type of “reset” happens and is totally fine, just let it happen. OK, this all seems very complicated and ominous, but in practice once you get it down this practice can be very enjoyable.

- 1) On the inhale, inhale for a few moments.
- 2) Pause the inhale for a few moments.
- 3) Continue the inhale for a few moments.
- 4) Pause the inhale for a few moments.
- 5) Continue the inhale for a few moments. The inhale is “complete” after the third segment.
- 6) Pause for a few moments.
- 7) Begin the exhale for a few moments.
- 8) Pause the exhale for a few moments.
- 9) Continue the exhale for a few moments.
- 10) Pause the exhale for a few moments.
- 11) Continue the exhale for a few moments.
- 12) Pause, then begin the inhale.
- 13) When your timer sounds, return to breathing naturally and do so for several breath cycle and then do a brief body scan.

So, this all may seem complicated and overwhelming, and that is how I felt when I was taught more formal versions and variations of this practice, but after you do it a couple of times you will realize how easy it is. This practice can be thought of as a modification and elongation of coherent breathing, and in my personal experience and the experience of clients and students can really help focus on the breath.

Body Scan

Body Scan #1

There are numerous ways to do a body scan, and some may be better suited for some circumstances than others. I have used numerous ones, and the first will be a the very first one that I used when I was introduced to a very basic yoga nidra meditation when I was about twelve. This involves a degree of autosuggestion, which may or may not work for some people.

- 1) Focus on your feet, invite your feet to relax.
- 2) Focus on your legs, invite your legs to relax.
- 3) Focus on your pelvis, invite your pelvis to relax.
- 4) Focus on your belly and lower back, invite your belly and lower back to relax.
- 5) Focus on your chest and upper back, invite your chest and upper back to relax.
- 6) Focus on your arms and hands, invite your arms and hands to relax.
- 7) Focus on your neck and throat, invite your neck and throat to relax.
- 8) Focus on your head, invite your head to relax.
- 9) Feel the whole body, invite the body to relax.
- 10) Feel the entire body until the timer sounds.

It is important to accept that some parts of the body may retain tension, and that is perfectly fine. That is simply the way it is during your practice at this moment. Just notice where are you are retaining tension without judgement or an agenda. Sometimes a release of tension may occur, or not. Either is perfectly fine.

Body Scan #2

This is an abbreviated version of the body scan developed by yogic scholar and clinical psychologist, Richard Miller, PhD, who developed Integrative Restoration (iRest) Yoga Nidra.

- 1) Feel your mouth.
- 2) Feel your ears.
- 3) Feel your eyes.
- 4) Feel your nose and cheeks.
- 5) Feel your forehead.
- 6) Feel your entire head.
- 7) Feel your throat.
- 8) Feel your shoulders.
- 9) Feel your elbows.
- 10) Feel your hands.
- 11) Feel your chest.
- 12) Feel your belly.
- 13) Feel your pelvis.
- 14) Feel your upper legs.
- 15) Feel your knees.
- 16) Feel your feet.
- 17) Feel the whole body to the extent possible.
- 18) Even if there are places where you do not feel anything, that is still a sensation.
- 19) When the time sounds, breathe a full inhale and exhale.

While this seems overly complicated, once you do this body scan a few times you might find it quite intuitive.

Breath Sweeping Body Scan

In this practice, notice the inhale and exhale. With both the inhale and exhale, you might feel both an upwards sensation and a downwards sensation, sometimes simultaneously. In this practice, simply note these sensations and allow them to draw your attention through the body.

- 1) Sit in a comfortable position.
- 2) Take a few breath cycles to notice the upward and/or downward sensations of both the inhalation and exhalation.
- 3) Allow your attention to move with the breath up and down the body. Don't worry about being perfectly in time with the breath, rather, allow the breath to "sweep" your attention through the body.
- 4) When the timer sounds, scan the body for a couple of breath cycles and open your eyes.

Wandering Attention Body Scan

This practice is simple in that rather than scanning the body in a systematic manner, you simply allow your attention to move at random through the body, and you gently keep it moving if it seems to stay anywhere for any length of time.

- 1) Sit in a comfortable position.
- 2) Allow your attention to just move through your body at random, allowing it to move on its own. I like to think of one's attention in this practice as being like a leaf floating on the surface of a pond in which there is a gentle and slow-moving current.
- 3) If your attention seems to get "stuck" on a particular place in your body, gently 'nudge' it back out into the current.
- 4) When the timer sounds, scan the body up and down for a couple of breaths and open your eyes.

Heart Centered Practices

The heart, whether it is the actual anatomical heart or the space near the heart in the center of the chest, is a central point of focus in numerous traditions. What follows are a few brief heart centered practices. There truly is something interesting about that area, where one can feel both comfortable and uncomfortable emotions, sometimes simultaneously.

Brief Heart Centered Practice #1

- 1) Sit comfortably with your eyes closed.
- 2) Do a very brief body scan and simply notice what you are feeling in the body.
- 3) Focus your attention on the heart or heart center and note if you feel the sensation of the heart itself.
- 4) Observe what emotions and thoughts become evident.
- 5) When the timer sounds, scan the body for a couple of breath cycles and open your eyes.

Brief Heart Centered Practice #2

This one involved placing your hands on your sternum, which stimulates the release of oxytocin, the hormone associated with interpersonal bonding.

- 1) Sit comfortably with your eyes closed.
- 2) Take a moment to rub the palms of your hands together to warm the palms.
- 3) Place the palms of your hands on heart center with a little pressure.
- 4) Visualize by imagining or remembering physical contact with a being that you feel affection or love for. This could be a spouse, lover, family member, parent, child, or beloved pet.
- 5) To the extent possible, experience the memory or imagined contact as a felt sense.

Antar Mouna

The name of this practice translates as “inner silence” and traditionally involves attending to sound outside of the body and transitioning to inside the body and then the practitioner stops thinking. That was a gross simplification as the process can have many stages, and this abbreviated version only has five. I am also not interested in directing you to cease all cognitive processes for two reasons. The first is that the practices I am offering are brief and it doubtful that conscious thoughts would stop in such a short time. Second, from my perspective one can't force one's conscious thoughts to cease. They might cease under certain circumstances, but not by forcing them to stop.

- 1) Sit comfortably with your eyes shut.
- 2) Listen to sounds off in the distance and relax the tendency to name and analyze the sounds that you hear. Rather, notice the sounds as sensation, and to the extent possible, as felt sensation in the body.
- 3) Listen to sounds that are close by and relax the tendency to name and analyze the sounds that you hear. Rather, notice the sounds as sensation, and to the extent possible, as felt sensation in the body.
- 4) Listen to sounds within the body itself and relax the tendency to analyze the sounds that you hear. Feel the sounds as sensation.
- 5) Listen to all sounds that arise as well as the spaces of silence between the sounds. Feel the sounds and silence as sensation.
- 6) When the timer sounds, take a moment to feel into the experience of the timer and then open your eyes.

Mantra/Chant

Repeated phrases in the forms of mantras, chants, prayers, songs, etc, are ubiquitous across various traditions. If there is a phrase or word that has some meaning for you, and it does not need to be complex or profound, a simple word such as “peace” is sufficient.

- 1) Sit comfortably with your eyes closed.
- 2) Take a couple of full breath cycles as you settle in.
- 3) Say your phrase or word silently on the exhale. If there is a scene, symbol, or beings that you associate with your phrase or word, visualize it as vividly as possible.
- 4) As you repeat the mantra/chant, note where you feel it in your body, if at all.
- 5) When the timer sounds, let go of the phrase and take a few full breath cycles before opening your eyes.

Soles of the Feet (SOF) Meditation.

This has been adapted from the work of Nirbhay N. Singh, PhD, who developed Soles of the Feet meditation (SOF) as an intervention with developmentally delayed adolescents who were exhibiting aggressive behavior. His research has shown that it is effective in reducing aggressive behavior in that population and I have adapted it for general use with adolescents and adults. As you have no doubt noticed, the soles of your feet are very sensitive. This is due to the high concentration of sensory nerve endings, up to 200,000 per sole. This makes them excellent objects to focus your attention on. I also tend to walk around my office with my shoes off as much as possible because I enjoy the stimulation. I suggest that you give that a try as well.

The micropractice is as follows:

- 1) Either sit or stand with the soles of your feet firmly connected to the floor. This can be done with the eyes open or closed, but I suggest having the eyes closed.
- 2) Take a moment to notice the breath. All you need to do is simply notice the natural rhythm of the breath at this moment.
- 3) Briefly scan the body by bringing your attention down from the head through the trunk of the body, down your legs and settling into the soles of both feet at the same time. You may prefer to momentarily go back and forth between the right and left foot for a few moments before settling on both soles at the same time.
- 4) While maintaining attention on the soles of both feet, it is expected that you will also be aware of different thoughts and emotions. This is totally fine and expected, allow them to come and go, but to the extent possible keep the laser pointer of your attention of the soles of the feet.
- 5) At the end of the practice, possibly signaled by your timer going off, take a couple breath cycles to scan the body and to open your eyes.

Both Hands Meditation

It seems fitting that this meditation follows the SOF meditation. This is actually one of my favorites and it is derived from a portion of iRest meditation, and I routinely teach this to clients and students as a micropractice. The practice is as follows:

- 1) Sit with your eyes closed. Your palms can face up where they are only touching the air, or down where they are touching your lap or the arms of a chair. Choose whichever you prefer.
- 2) Simply notice the natural rhythm of your breath at this moment. Allow the the breath to guide a brief body scan from the top of the head through the trunk of the body and down into your feet.
- 3) Scan down each arm either together or separately.
- 4) Spend one breath cycle (a full inhale and a full exhale) focusing your attention on the palm of one hand.
- 5) Spend one breath cycle focusing your attention on the palm of the other hand.
- 6) Now attend to both hands simultaneously. Other sensations, thoughts, and emotions may be present as you keep your attention focused on the palms of your hands.
- 7) After the timer rings, scan the body from the feet to the top of the head and open your eyes.

Micropractice to Shift Tasks

WHEN YOU ARE SWITCHING BETWEEN TWO LARGE TASKS DO THE FOLLOWING. Over time it will become automatic and will serve to increase heart rate variability, decrease anxiety, and increase executive functions:

- 1) When you are switching gears from one larger task to another take about 60 seconds to focus on the breath going in and out of the body.
- 2) Use either basic breath awareness or coherent breathing.
- 3) Eyes closed or open. If Open the eyes should have a soft gaze at a fixed point (in yogic terms, a Dristi). If eyes are closed find a spot within the body on which to focus.
- 4) After about a minute, take a full inhale & exhale and mindfully transition to the next big task.

Open Eyes Practice

Although any of the practices that have been described can be done with the eyes open, this is explicitly so and is based on Zen Buddhist practice.

- 1) Sit comfortably and for a few moments notice your breath.
- 2) Choose a spot to observe with a soft gaze. In yogic terms the point on which you fix your gaze is referred to as a *dristi*. You do not stare at the dristi, and you are allowed to blink. This is not a staring contest.
- 3) Your dristi can be a specific object, or the edge between two objects or surfaces.
- 4) Relax the mind's tendency to analyze what is being seen, rather, observe the sensation of what is being seen.
- 5) When the timer sounds, blink, move your eyes around the space that you are in, and gently ease yourself back into work.

Nature Visualization

Visualizing nature is often used in yoga nidra and guided meditations. In this micropractice, pick an image from either memory and/ or imagination, such as a forest, alpine mountain environment, ocean beach, etc. However, don't limit yourself to visualization, rather, bring in all of the senses as well. Feel imagine the smells, the sounds (e.g. wind in the trees, the sounds of birds), the sense of the sun on the skin (or rain, for that matter), the texture of the ground or sand on the feet. Also, don't "grasp" the image, rather, gently hold it and allow it to change and shift. Also, the image can be static or filled with movement.

- 1) Settle into a comfortable position.
- 2) Settle into noticing your breath and allow your breath to quickly draw your attention through your body.
- 3) First visualize the nature scene (if you prefer to begin with visualization) and then bring in each of the sense to the extent that they are available.
- 4) Gently hold the image, allowing it to change without conscious intent.
- 5) Notice the felt sense of the image across all of the senses in the body.
- 6) When the timer sounds, allow the breath to sweep attention through the body and open your eyes.

Being Held

This final practice asks you to sense where you are making contact with your chair, particularly around your sacrum, buttocks, lower back, and legs, and to allow yourself to feel supported and “held” by that which is supporting you. These areas include the so called “root chakra”, which is thought to be the responsible for one’s sense of safety and security.

- 1) Sit in a comfortable position.
- 2) Take a moment to briefly scan the body via the breath sweeping body scan or wandering attention body scan.
- 3) Settle your attention to the lower parts of the body making contact with the chair, such as the buttocks, sacrum, lower back and the back of the legs.
- 4) Allow yourself to feel gravity pulling you into the chair.
- 5) Feel supported and “held” by the chair beneath you and trust it to hold you.
- 6) Continue with the practice feeling held by the chair.
- 7) When the timer sounds, do a body scan for a couple of breath cycles and open your eyes.