

M E D I T A T I O N
F O R T H E
L O V E
O F I T

enjoying your own deepest experience

S A L L Y K E M P T O N



SOUNDS TRUE

Boulder, Colorado

FOREWORD

The thing about me and meditation is that I do it pretty much all the time. If meditation is devotional, focused, one-pointed concentration on a single thought or notion or feeling . . . well, turns out I'm really fantastic at that. Would you like to know what I was meditating about this morning, as I walked my dog in the lovely summer woods? I'd recently had a quarrel with a friend of mine, and I was meditating on how unfairly he had treated me. With devotional, focused, one-pointed concentration, I got my meditation boiled down to a single word, echoing endlessly throughout my head: *unfair, unfair, unfair, unfair* . . .

So that was a successful, enlightening way to spend a few focused hours.

But that's not my only accomplishment! Sometimes I also find myself lost in this deep old meditation: *tired, tired, tired, tired, tired* . . .

On other days, it's: *stressed, stressed, stressed, stressed, stressed* . . .

Or: *hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry* . . .

And although such meditations are, of course, *deeply* uplifting, after a while you do start to wonder if perhaps you could be putting your mind to better use. You start to wonder if this is all you are—a constant singsongy litany of complaint, of want, of indignation, of frustration, of weariness. Is this really how you want to spend your one miracle of a

human life? In a clanging mental cage of never-ending blah-blah-blah . . . ?

Yeah, me neither.

This why, over the years, I've made efforts to replace my bouts of *accidental* meditation with a practice of *deliberate* meditation—which is to say, I have been striving to learn the art of replacing the mundane din with a mind full of quiet wonder. What I really want (what we all want, I believe, deep down inside) is the ability to choose my own thoughts, rather than living forever in the sometimes whiny, sometimes angry, sometimes lethargic, always chattering monkey-hut of my unfettered human brain.

My journey began over ten years ago, when I started practicing hatha yoga because of a physical ailment, but found myself strangely transported by the short (but powerful) episodes of guided meditation that followed each practice. My curiosity about that feeling—the absolutely unaccustomed sense of peace and well-being that meditation fleetingly brought upon me—led me to seek out true teachers, who could help me learn how to master this practice. Luckily for me, my search led me to Sally Kempton, whose writings on meditation were beyond helpful to me; they were lifesaving.

The wonderful gift of Sally is her utter lack of pretension. She is not only one of the best meditation teachers in the world; she is also *one of us*. She manages to fearlessly explore the outer reaches of the universe without ever losing the warm voice of your dear friend from just around the block. Most generously of all, Sally is honest about her own shortcomings. She is unafraid to share her own disappointments, her own frustrating

episodes where meditation lost all its joy for her and became inaccessible, dry, or a chore. And then she shows us how she got it all back again, how she stubbornly forged her way once more to the source of all enduring sweetness. And then she shows us how we can get there, too.

Sally's groundedness—her supreme approachability—is a gift beyond measure in a field of study that too often turns teachers into imperious, droning despots of obscure esoterica. Simply put, a patronizing perfectionist is not what you need when you're learning the bone-rattlingly difficult practice of meditation. You don't need somebody who will make you feel even *worse* about your very natural human failings. Instead, you need real warmth and compassion, patience and empathy. Sally has all this.

Not to mention, of course, that she is an encyclopedia of utter wisdom. *Meditation for the Love of It* is like a precious road map, generously handed over from a seasoned and experienced pilgrim. Think of this book as the most important travel guide you'll ever encounter, written by a true nomad of the mind—one who has faced down every demon, investigated every trick door, unburied every mystical hidden village that Consciousness has to offer—and who now offers to show you the way.

Take her counsel. Take her comfort. Yes—even take her tips. (You will need every one of them along your journey.) Best of all, though, please take with you a measure of Sally Kempton's spirit—the irresistibly fun part of her who recognizes that meditation should not merely be a lifeline, or a salvation, but should also be an adventure, nothing less than a stupendous exaltation,

Foreword

a thrilling revolution of the self. What else, after all, are we going to do with our short, wondrous lives that could possibly be more important than transforming ourselves, molecule by molecule, into an experience of pure love?

Embrace that teaching, and watch your mind start to change.

And then watch your life start to change.

As Sally puts it so beautifully: “Let the inner dance unfold.”

Why not start now?

—Elizabeth Gilbert

August, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Awakening to *Meditation*

One summer afternoon during a meditation retreat, I discovered that I contain the entire universe. It happened quite unexpectedly, all in a rush. I was sitting with my eyes closed in a room with several hundred other people, very much aware of the sensations in my body and of the faint rustles, coughs, and other sounds around me. The next thing I knew, there was a kind of implosion. Instead of being around me, the room with all its sensations and sounds was inside me. My awareness started to swell until I could feel the earth, the sky, and even the galaxy inside me. In that moment, I understood, with a surety that was both exhilarating and terrifying, that there is only one thing in the universe—that it is Awareness, and that Awareness is me.

The experience faded after an hour or so, but the understanding it gave me has never gone away.

At the time, I'd been traveling a winding spiritual path for a couple of years. Like so many people, I started meditating not because I longed for enlightenment, but because I was in a moderate life-crisis, and hoped meditation would make me feel better. I was living in New York, writing for *Esquire*, *New York Magazine*, and the *Village Voice*, leading the life that my left-wing humanist upbringing had laid out for me, priding myself on my hipster creds. On the outside, it was fine. I had an advance from a major publisher, a new boyfriend whom I was sure was the love of my life, a rent-controlled apartment—and a chronic case of restlessness and slight despair that never really went away. I'd already investigated marriage, politics, romance, psychotherapy, and the fruits of money without discovering an antidote to my low-grade emotional pain. Meditation drew me because it seemed like a way of getting to the roots of myself. Even in those days, when meditation was still considered an activity for saints, hippies, and other eccentrics, it was supposed to be a great way to settle the mind.

My new boyfriend happened to be a seasoned tourist on the spiritual circuit. He encouraged me to take a three-month spiritual training being conducted by a Bolivian teacher named Oscar Ichazo. The training promised enlightenment—which didn't happen, at least not for me. It did, however, confront me with some inner demons I'd been doing my best to ignore. It also made me fall in love both with yogic wisdom and with the refining power of spiritual community. Along with getting to know some of the tricks of my own ego, I began to crave interior experience.

So when I arrived at that summer meditation retreat, I was ready to let meditation transform me. It was why I had come: the retreat was being conducted by a celebrated spiritual master from India, famous for being able to unlock meditative depth in others.

After that awareness-expanding meditation, I was in a new relationship to myself and to my own inner world.

I opened my eyes to a world scintillating with love and meaning, and felt sure that I had found the answer to everything I wanted in life. Like my expansion of awareness, ecstasy didn't last; but like the expansion itself, it changed everything. The meditation master in whose presence the experience had arisen became my guru—the teacher whose transmissions and guidance would guide my practice for years to come. And meditation became my path.

KUNDALINI AND MEDITATION

What had happened that afternoon was an awakening of the *kundalini shakti*, the inner energy that nearly every esoteric tradition recognizes as the force behind spiritual transformation. Kundalini (literally, “coiled energy”—so-called because when the energy is inactive it is said to be “coiled”) can be awakened in several ways: through yoga postures, through deep meditation, or, as happened that afternoon, through the transmission of energy from a teacher whose own kundalini is active. The awakening of kundalini can be subtle or dramatic, but however it occurs, it brings the energy of Spirit into the foreground of our lives, shifting our priorities and stirring our hidden resources of love, understanding, and insight.

Kundalini's power unfolds as we meditate. The awakened energy draws us into meditative states and begins showing us the tracks of our inner country even as it tunes the body and mind to a new level of subtlety and awareness. Over time, kundalini transforms our vision until we see the world as it really is: not hard and bumpy and irrevocably "other," but filled with a single loving energy that connects us with one another and the world.

The effects of this awakening on my life have been widespread and various. Mainly it has shifted my sense of being. Once I had seen that vastness, no matter how caught up I might get in my thoughts or emotions or agendas, a part of me would always know that I contain a reality beyond all that: that in truth, "I" am expansive Consciousness. Over the years, I have come to measure my spiritual progress by how much I am in alignment with that initial insight—by how firmly I am able to identify myself with Consciousness rather than with the person I sometimes think I am.

It has been a road with many sidetracks and hairpin turns. Yet, little by little, the alignment comes. I've been meditating daily for nearly forty years, and though it didn't happen all at once, I've come to count on entering the space of expanded Awareness for at least a while every day. Over time, meditation has chipped away at my feeling of being only this physical person, defined by my history, my looks, my intelligence, my opinions and emotions. Meditation taught me to identify—precariously at first, then more and more firmly—with that subtler part of myself, with that field of spaciousness behind thoughts, with the tender energy in my heart. With the

pulsation of pure spaciousness that arises when thoughts die down. With love.

From the beginning, sitting meditation has been the most reliable way I know to touch the tenderness of pure being. I have treasured it. Of course, my love affair with meditation has been like any other unfolding relationship. It has had its ups and downs, its fertile seasons, and its apparently barren ones. Meditative states, after all, arrive spontaneously and naturally. They come in their own time and their own way, gifts of the unfolding kundalini. I have fallen spontaneously into meditation while walking, writing, or sitting in a meeting. I have also had weeks when I couldn't touch the meditation bandwidth at all. Meditation is often surprising, and certainly cannot be forced.

But neither can it be approached passively—which is the point of this book. The effort required of a meditator is quite subtle, a matter of attunement and awareness. We learn this attunement gradually, and we learn it by meditating. Fortunately, much of what we learn can be shared, and over the years as I've worked with students and taught classes and retreats in meditation, I've found that some of the attitudes and practices that have helped me have also been useful to other people. This book evolved as an offering to other committed meditators. It is a way to share certain principles and attitudes that meditation has taught me, and that seem to work not just for me but for others as well.

The most important principle to understand about meditation is this: we meditate to know ourselves. We usually think of meditation as a practice or a process, yet meditation is also a

relationship. If it is a process, then it is the process of coming into loving relationship with our own Consciousness. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna defines meditation for his disciple Arjuna by saying, “*dhyānen atmani pashyanti*”: “In meditation, the Self [the pure Awareness that is our essential nature] is seen.”¹ This sounds

*The spirit is so near
that you can't see it!
But reach for it . . .
Don't be the rider
who gallops all night
And never sees the horse
that is beneath him.*

—RUMI²

like a simple enough statement, but as we meditate, we come to realize that knowing the Self is far from simple. Which “self” do we encounter when we meditate? The greater Self, for sure—the *atman*, as the Indian sages call it, the luminous Consciousness beyond the discursive mind. Yet, we also encounter a lot of other aspects of our selves, including the parts of us that seem to hinder the experience of our essence. One of the boons of meditation, if we allow ourselves to engage in it fully, is that we not only come to see all this; we also learn how

to move through it with love. In this daily act of plunging into our inner world, the separated parts of ourselves do come together. The loose ends of our personalities meld with our Awareness, and we become whole.

Of course, this level of transformation doesn't happen overnight. That is where we sometimes get confused. Most of us enter into meditation rather naively. We bring along expectations, ideas, assumptions. For instance, we sometimes imagine that successful meditation is a kind of prolonged honeymoon in which we rove through fields of bliss and float along deep

lagoons of peace. If our relationship with the inner world becomes troublesome, boring, or more intimate than we bargained for, we feel frustrated, disappointed, or even ashamed. We might decide that we really aren't so good at meditation, and it is often at this point that we give it up.

We would feel a lot better if we realized that meditation is like any other intimate relationship: it requires patience, commitment, and deep tolerance. Just as our encounters with others can be wondrous but also baffling, scary, and even irritating, our encounters with the self have their own moods and flavors. Like any other relationship, this one changes over time. And it is best undertaken with love.