



Meditation Lessons for Belonging

By [Charles Vogl](#)



For many years now, I've kept up a regular practice of meditation which crosses over with contemplative prayer practice.

I started a daily practice because the stress in graduate school was more than I could take. My life was so ridiculously stretched that during my second semester I knew that something had to change. I made midnight a hard stop for my work each night. Then I would change clothes, drive the mile to central campus, and sit for at least 20 minutes, by candlelight, in Battell Chapel's sacred space.

Many of those nighttime trips were in cold and snowstorms, and I'd pause at a radiator before entering the sanctuary to warm up. So much peace, calm, and patience came from disciplining my life this way.

If this space is dedicated to ways to create belonging, why am I writing today about meditation?

If you've seen or read other parts of my work, then you know that I discuss the "trap of the inner ring." It is an idea that acknowledges that we all want to enter inside a "ring" or group of people that are cooler than the group(s) to which we currently belong. C.S. Lewis spoke on this in his 1944 lecture *The Inner Ring*.

Lewis says that we will do terrible things to get accepted into a more exclusive inner ring, but once we are inside it, we will always discover the same thing... that there is another, even more exclusive, ring to enter. You probably have some experience with this. Because we are always striving for the next inner ring, we live in a trap that will never end, unless we break it. He summarizes this by saying, "Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain." Outsiders of course don't yet feel belonging. It is also hard for them to create belonging for anyone else.

Keep in mind that the rings themselves are not the problem. The problem lies with our desire, longing really, to pursue the next ring, and the next one and the next one — to live in this trap where there is no true belonging and much loneliness.

These days, I regularly receive invitations to join exclusive groups comprised of people who are "good to know". Fortunately, Lewis helps me see that most are simply more inner rings, and that I can choose carefully how much I want to commit to in my life. I don't need to pursue every (or even many) of these inner rings.

If we live focused on getting into that next ring, we are not living in the present. We are not focused on the people who are already available to us without more time, money, and/or loss of dignity.

Meditation and contemplative prayer help me become present. It may help you notice what you already have and how great it already is, instead of living trapped in longing for what you don't have, who you don't know, or what you haven't yet achieved.

When we are (1) present with the people around us, (2) no longer distracted by the infinite inner rings elsewhere, and (3) aware of and appreciating the people, places, and opportunities available to us right now, then we have real power to create belonging.

Imagine that someone tells you that they are creating a culture of belonging, but you know that they're not really interested in spending time with you. Do you want to hang out with them? I think that you'd rather these people left you alone and you go find people who really care about you.

If you decide that a meditation practice could help you, find teachers who can support your growth in their tradition. There are many traditions. The first one you try may not be the right one for you. That is unimportant. What matters is to keep exploring. Whatever tradition helps you develop a habit of meditating and noticing what is already great in your life is the right way for you.

Over the years as I've traveled the world learning about spiritual and religious traditions, many teachers have taught me how to grow. In time I'm sure you will find many teachers too. Below are some lessons for those of you who are just beginning. (Remember that we were all beginners at one time.)

It always starts badly

If you're new to meditating, you will spend a large part of your meditation time convinced that it is not working, that you're wasting your time, and that you're doing it all wrong. Welcome to the beginners club.

Unfortunately this is everyone's experience. We can't know when the meditation is enriching us or not. The parts which feel like a waste of time are just part of the road. My favorite wisdom about this is "If you are meditating, then you are doing it right." (Alison Tinsley and Chris Fields)

Please give up worry about whether any given moment is working. For at least the first two months of meditating in graduate school, I was confident that nothing was working. Then there was a change. Not every later session was fantastic, but I felt different. Over time, more and more sessions felt calming and present. In retrospect, those seemingly pointless early sessions were necessary to get to a more mature place with my practice.

Meditating in Community

The best way to create a consistent practice is to practice with others. It doesn't matter if these "others" are your best friends (or not). It doesn't matter if you really like them. It doesn't matter if you're all meditating the same way. Sitting together quietly in a room is a powerful experience. It makes the practice more fun and after a while, if you find yourself meditating alone, you will realize that you miss those partners. This is not only true for meditation, it's kind of true for everything.

Special Place (super comfortable)

There's nothing wrong with meditating where you are right now. But creating a special place where you meditate can make a big difference. It's best if you can choose a spot where you do not do other things (like watch TV or cook). It doesn't have to be a place at home or a whole room. You can pick a spot on the floor. Right now, I sit in a corner in our guest room. It is set aside from the rest of my life. Whenever I approach that spot, my body remembers what I do there and I can settle in more comfortably and quickly.

Further, I make this space as compatible as possible with its purpose. I have a favorite blanket there to cover my legs, a space heater behind me, and the little table with a small lamp that lights the space just so. Late at night when I go there to sit, the room is already quiet and ready for my time there.

Good pillows

If you can, get good pillows. Obviously, you can meditate anywhere with any furniture or no equipment. But it's astounding how good our minds are at coming up with distractions and allowing the time to get away so that the meditation doesn't happen — even if we commit to meditating only 10 minutes a day. So being arranging comfort matters.

Good pillows are one more element that makes a new meditation practice easier and more fun. It reduces the discomfort in the early stages. I use a buckwheat filled zafu cushion (a round pillow) and cotton filled zabuton cushion (square flat pillow.) Mine are fancy and more expensive than other options, but I've used both for several years and see no signs of wear so I consider them a great investment.

When I travel, I use a robust travel air cushion designed for meditation. In fact, it lives deflated in my suitcase ready for the next trip. I discovered that if I have the travel cushion with me I meditate regularly on the road. I just put any blanket on the ground and then use my cushion on top. Assembling couch cushions wherever I stayed, while possible, was enough of a pain to give my mind an excuse to skip meditating regularly.

Digital Help

There are digital apps that can help too. In 2014, when I wanted to make my practice regular again, I used the Headspace app ([headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com)). Founder Andy Puddicombe was ordained as a Buddhist monk before creating the resource. The app offers a series of 10-minute daily guided meditations. If you choose to go

further, the daily guided meditations slowly get longer. Whether Andy's style will be your regular tradition, the regularity of the program can get you into the routine. For my current daily practice, I use the Insight Timer app (insighttimer.com). It allows me to set session times with interval bells and ends my time without an unsettling alarm. Further, the app offers literally hundreds of guided meditation for days when a silent sit doesn't feel right. The app can also track how much you meditation, how often and when. I'm working on letting go of such measures because they mean nothing to me, but you may find them helpful.

There are hundreds of meditation traditions. Don't worry about finding the "best" one. The great thing about meditation practice is that it can become a lifelong journey. You can experiment and grow with different traditions as you change. If you can't sit still for 10 minutes in silence on the first day, then a guided meditation may be the best way to start. Who's to say how much you will enjoy the silence in years to come?

I promise: The more comfortable you are with who you are, where you are, and how you are, the more others will feel comfortable around you. They will know more clearly, even if they can't tell us why, that they belong.

- Charles Vogl

(painting from Matoom Art Space: matoomartspace.weebly.com)

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