

## Sit still and be quiet: Options for relaxing, stress-relieving meditation abound in Tucson



15 HOURS AGO • BY HANNAH GABER ARIZONA DAILY STAR

On a muggy Tuesday night in central Tucson, about 10 people settle onto a wooden floor. They shuffle around and make room for one another. One man helps a newcomer make her blanket more comfortable.

In the center of the room sits a man with an olive complexion and glasses. He smiles and asks people about their families, and if they know where some missing regulars are. He is **Frank Jude Boccio**, the leader of this meditation group at Yoga Oasis, on North Campbell Avenue.

Oasis, on North Campbell Avenue.

When the actual meditation begins, it's not with the silence one might expect, but with Boccio talking.

"One of the things we looked at the last session or two," he says, "was a kind of meditation that's founded all the different traditions, and the general rubric for it can be called 'choiceless awareness.'"

Those are two long words for what a lot of people probably picture when they think of meditation. In Zen, Boccio says, it's called: just sitting.

"It's funny," he says later, "because it's sometimes the most difficult; it's the one that requires us to stop 'doing.'" At first, that kind of meditating can be like getting pushed into the deep end of the pool, Boccio explains.

So that's not how he starts this class, called MindLab.

Yes, sitting still and being quiet is still required, and closing eyes is helpful. But Boccio's voice helps, too. Rather than shut everything out, he tells everyone to notice everything: their gurgling tummies, the footsteps outside the door, the air conditioner rumbling on.

He says to name things as they pop up, mentally label the talking outside the door "talking." When a thought blooms, to call it a "thought." And then, to let it go.

When that method is applied to breathing, noting each breath and calling it a "breath," deep relaxation sets in. It's not very scary, even for a beginner.

Finding meditation in Tucson is easy. Yoga studios, meditation centers, and retreats all over

town offer pieces of quiet.

Almost everyone has at least heard of meditation these days. Actually getting started can be a bit more daunting, especially if it's new.

"We're really adept at thinking up reasons why we don't want to just sit still in the present moment," says **Blake Ashley** of the Tucson Community Meditation Center in the Jefferson Park neighborhood. "We have a life where we habitually move around and allow our minds free reign to wander. And so we have a sort of a natural resistance, particularly at the beginning."

Ashley says it doesn't have to be mysterious or austere, and it's probably not what most people picture.

"You don't have to sit on the floor in a lotus position for hours," he says. And "a religious connection isn't necessary to get the benefit. It's about bringing awareness and acceptance to your own experience of life as it unfolds."

But, mustering the determination — and finding the time — to start can sometimes seem out of reach.

**Darren Rhodes**, director of Yoga Oasis since 1999, says he thinks what mostly keeps people from meditating is : 'I don't know how' or 'I don't have time.' But, he says, all you really have to do is sit and observe your breath. If you're sitting and attempting to focus on something, then you're meditating, he says. Being good at it is not required.

"Maybe you're not very good at swimming," Rhodes explains, "or maybe you're not very good at jogging. But if you go jogging, then you are jogging and getting the benefit of it, even if you're not an expert."

Rhodes, the father of a 17-month-old who squeezes in an interview for this story between teaching classes at a workshop in Durango, Colo., could justify using his schedule as an excuse not to meditate. But, he says, doing so is even more costly than the time it takes.

"It's not something I can go without," he says. "The lack of it shows quickly in other parts of my life. I get upset easier, I get edgy. The benefits are worth the price of the practice just to have some quiet time, even if my mind is wandering and I'm daydreaming."

This echoes Ashley's advice: Start early, and do it often.

## GETTING STARTED

"For a lot of people yoga is the starting place," says **Priscilla Potter**, who founded the Yoga Connection in 1987. It became a nonprofit a few years later and, three years ago, moved to a location on East Pima Street, more than doubling the space to accommodate demand. "Yoga and meditation are married. They go hand in hand."

In fact, Potter says, if you've ever taken a yoga class, you've already been introduced to meditation.

"There's a relaxation at the end, which isn't really meditation," she says, "but it's a start."

With outspoken advocates like Richard Gere and Madonna over the last couple decades, Potter says meditation has “gotten a lot of good P.R.” The explosion of science on the benefits of meditating, like lowering blood pressure and reducing stress, hasn’t hurt either.

However, Potter says there are still some obstacles. People might picture meditation as less inclusive than it really is.

“For a lot of people there are still religious overtones,” she says, “and they may worry it may conflict with their religious practice. But it really doesn’t.”

They can skip the religious part altogether if they like, or religion can be a way into meditation for those who want that element.

The Zen Desert Sangha, which resident teacher **Dan Dorsey** says was started in a mobile home in Tucson in 1982, is what **Susan Weimar**, also a teacher there, calls “Buddhist with Christian roots.”

Her background is in the contemplative Christian meditation movement. Weimar says she found her way to Zen by way of the Redemptorist Renewal Center, a Christian meditation retreat center in Picture Rocks. She and Dorsey say their late mentor was both a Catholic priest and a Zen Master.

Any religion can be part of a meditation practice, if desired. A quick online search provides practical guides to Jewish meditation, websites for Islamic meditation and links galore to transcendental and Christian approaches.

For meditation leader Boccio, what he described as an approach similar to the scientific method — a “Don’t take my word for it, try it yourself” doctrine — was what appealed to him.

It’s also not necessary to find an hour every time you want to sit (though that is ideal). If you have to choose, it’s more important to meditate often than for long sessions.

“It gets woven into your makeup,” says Weimar. If you can’t find 25 (minutes a day), “do 20. If you can’t do 20, do 15.”

“If 10 minutes a day is all you have, then that’s all you have,” Dorsey says. “It’s more important to do daily, even briefly, than a big retreat once a year.” Like anything else, it’s more difficult the more out of practice you are, they say.

## **FINDING TIME**

It might seem counterintuitive, but those 10 minutes might be easier to find than ever in today’s tech-obsessed world.

Though smartphones and apps might seem like portals to the very distractions that make meditating hard, they can actually be “technological assists,” says Ashley, of the Tucson Community Meditation Center.

Apps abound to aid meditation-on-the-go. Many are free or give introductory sessions — and with names like “The Smiling Mind,” “My Headspace” and “Buddhify,” they offer everything from

tools for the curious dabbler to guides for the serious sitter. The apps also can offer newcomers a way to try meditation in private, should they be of the more timid persuasion.

And all this to help people learn to sit still, be quiet, and pay attention to their thoughts.

“But why?” Ashley asks. “Who cares?”

Well, if you’re like most people, one big part of your life might be stress.

“Chronic stress is one of the great ailments of our society,” he says. “And there is no better cure than mindfulness meditation practice. It really goes right to the root of the problem.”

Ashley says meditating develops three key skills: concentration power, sensory clarity, and resisting the impulse to control or interfere with things around — or within — you.

“Some of the most important benefits of developing those skills are increasing your baseline level of happiness, moment by moment, in life, increasing your satisfaction with the pleasurable experiences in life, and decreasing suffering with unpleasant experiences in life,” Ashley says. “You’re less likely to be driven by unconscious emotional forces, and as a result, your relationships with people improve dramatically.”

He chuckles. “Except you can’t really believe in it until you do it.”

Rhodes, the studio-directing, retreat-teaching, book-writing, touring yoga teacher and dad, says he still experiences resistance to sitting down and meditating from time to time.

“We all have reasons not to meditate,” he says. “But when the reasons to do it are more important, it will happen. All you have to do is sit there, and observe your breath.”

Once the practice and the rewards become a part of life, he says, “I don’t have time” starts to melt away. It becomes as essential as eating and sleeping. When things are crucial, he says, “Well, we make time.”

And there’s no time like the present.

“Start soon,” Ashley says. “Do it every day. Never stop, and you won’t regret it.”

## Words to know

Many words used in meditation and yoga are in Sanskrit, a language some scholars think is about 3,500 years old and comes from the Indian subcontinent. Here are a few you may hear:

**Zen:** The word itself means "meditation." It is a branch of Buddhism that traces roots to India, became more formal in China, then made its way to Japan.

**Buddha:** Born Siddhartha Gautama, he was the prince of a small kingdom in what is now Nepal in the 6th century BCE . The name "Buddha" means "Enlightened One."

**sangha:** Sanskrit for an assembly, used for a meditation group.

**dharma:** Usually means the practice of something, like meditation. The roots "dhar" or "dhri" mean to support or to uphold or sustain. A teacher of dharma is a poep sa (say BPUP-sa)

**dhukka:** (say DOO-kuh) Sometimes defined as struggle, it refers to stress or a state of dissatisfaction. Meditation is supposed to lead to relief from this.

## Where to "sit"

### Yoga Oasis

322-6142, [yogaoasis.com](http://yogaoasis.com)

MindLab: Central location, 2631 N. Campbell Ave.

Dharma Lounge: Downtown location, 245 E. Congress St.

### Tucson Community Meditation Center

1231 E. Edison St., 622-0089, [tucsonmeditation.org](http://tucsonmeditation.org)

### Zen Desert Sangha

3226 N. Martin Ave., 319-6260, [zendesertsangha.org](http://zendesertsangha.org)

### Yoga Connection

3929 E. Pima St., 323-1222, [yogaconnection.org](http://yogaconnection.org)

### Tucson Yoga

150 S. Fourth Ave., 1-877-TUC-YOGA, [tucsonyoga.com](http://tucsonyoga.com)

## Take 10

Nationally recognized yogi and Yoga Oasis director **Darren Rhodes** said making time to meditate takes dedication.

"Any kind of practice is hard to do," Rhodes said. "Don't wait for a teacher, don't wait for a class. Just start by taking 10 minutes."

Here are some tips to make taking 10 easier:

Make a plan. Rhodes says the "three minutes a day" philosophy can actually work against you. He says setting aside less than at least ten minutes doesn't require enough of a commitment, and can undermine your resolve. "I could actually see people saying 'well, it's only three minutes, I'm kind of running late. I'll just skip it.' Whereas ten minutes, you have to kind of make arrangements and plan for it."

Same time, same place. Rhodes said it just makes it much easier. He recommends

plugging it into the morning routine. "It just gets so easy to forget as the day goes on. If you don't do it when you get up first thing, next thing you know it's bedtime and you completely forgot."

Affirmations. Rhodes uses a mantra that he says is part English, part Sanskrit, but says "any kind of positive words, if you take them personally, have a positive impact." He includes his aspirations, his goals, a little prayer for his son. Rhodes says these repetitions are available to anyone to use any time; he does his when he's boarding a plane, for example.

Stick with it (it gets easier!). "Better to be aware of three breaths in a day than none." Rhodes said. Once it's part of life, he said the benefits far outweigh the sacrifices. "Meditation has an effect on all 24 hours of my day," he said. "So it's definitely worth taking a few minutes."

## Frank Jude Boccio

A couple years after moving to Tucson in 2007, **Frank Jude Boccio** started a small meditation group in his living room on Sundays.

"We outgrew my living room," he said. The group, now the Empty Mountain Sangha, draws about 20 to 25 people to Tucson Yoga each Sunday.

It's open to people with "no, little, or lots of experience," Boccio said. There is no fee. "We ask that people give what gives them joy to give, not in a 'fee for service' mentality, but more in order for us to continue to serve others." Boccio said.

He also leads groups at Yoga Oasis: MindLab on Tuesdays at the central location and Dharma Lounge downtown on Wednesdays.

## Lisa O'Neill

**Lisa O'Neill** has been a student of **Frank Jude Boccio's** since she saw an ad for his Intro to Mindfulness class at Tucson Yoga.

"I had a couple of friends who had been going to sangha," she said, "but I didn't really know what it was."

She checked it out and has now been sitting with his Empty Mountain Sangha for about three years.

"My impression of meditation, which I think is many people's, was 'Oh you just sit down and clear your mind, well since that's never gonna happen, why bother?' When I actually went to the class, one of the first things Frank Jude said was 'It's impossible to clear your mind. It's not about clearing your mind, it's about paying attention to your mind and what's going on with yourself.'"

She has also developed a home practice in that time.

"One kind of supports the other," she said. "I feel like being in a community of people helps with my personal practice."