

Rest in Silence: Meditation for Lawyers

By Nancy A. Werner

In 1999, when I first came to work for the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program (LJAP), Nancy Werner was one of the first Bar members I spoke with about the need to help lawyers deal with depression and prevent stress-related illness. At that time, LJAP had just begun describing itself as a “broad-brush” program, meaning we were helping to identify and treat mental health and substance use, but had only scratched the surface. We have since expanded our program considerably.

What Nancy and I talked about the first time we met was our shared interest in holistic health and our vision of a total wellness approach for LJAP that would help attorneys, judges, and law students to cope better with the stresses inherent in the legal profession, to draw on the strengths that brought them to the law, and to become more effective human beings. Since that time, Nancy and I have partnered on numerous projects and presentations, and along the way, developed a very nice friendship. When I consider the evolution of LJAP, I realize that I must credit her and thank her not only for her friendship, but also for her inspiration, dedication, and loyal support. The following article is one among many of her valued contributions to the growth and development of LJAP.

— Martha D. Burkett, Program Administrator, LJAP

Imagine walking on a path through a tropical rain forest. The sounds of your footsteps are muted by the thick, verdant foliage. The only sounds are the crackles and calls of the birds in the trees. Continuing along the path, beautiful tropical flowers of every shape and color grow freely. The tropical air is scented with the perfume of these exotic blossoms. Large, waxy, green leaves hang down gracefully toward you, wafting in the gentle breeze. You delight in the cooler temperature as the canopy of the forest shades you from the warm midday sun.

As you continue to stroll, you hear a faint rush of water. The sound becomes louder, or rather more pronounced, until you find yourself standing in a clearing. Fine, cool spray lightly showers your arms and face. Turning, you face a small waterfall cascading over rocks. A bench, which overlooks the stream and waterfall, looks inviting and comfortable.

You sit on the bench and listen to the gentle sound of the water flowing past you. You close your eyes and let your body relax, allowing the seat of the bench to hold the weight of your body. Your breathing

slows to a rhythmic pace as your muscles begin to loosen. The worries of the day seem a distant memory. The serenity of this place soaks into every pore and cell of your body. Your mind quiets, reflecting its surroundings, and you feel yourself opening to new insights.

Now imagine having the ability to visit this special place each day. You are the only one present. There are no distractions or demands on your time. No cell phone. No pager. No clients.

This place of beauty is of your own making and can be anywhere you feel most comfortable. Your special place may be on a beach, in the mountains, or sitting in a boat on your favorite stream. What is most important in choosing that special place is that it is a place of silence, stillness, and renewal.

Much attention has been paid to the price our body pays for living. Back in the good old days when we were cavemen and cave-women, our bodies needed the “flight or fight” response. But today there is little need to run quickly to escape a wild animal attack. Stress hormones, such as adrenaline, are produced as a result of living in a world of demands. Our blood pressure and heart

rates increase. Our immune systems suffer. Our body systems sustain damage.

Physiological consequences of prolonged stress in our lives give rise to the more hidden emotional and mental costs. We are repeatedly subjected to constant accessibility from increased technology such as cell phones, pagers, fax machines, computers, voice mail, e-mail, and other similar “timesavers.”

Sometimes we find ourselves caught up in the compulsive use of this technology. Our behavior contributes to feelings of anxiety and anger over constant changes in our lives, loss of privacy, loss of personal connection with others, and the belief that we must be multitasking or doing two or more things at the same time. How many of us are guilty of using a cell phone while driving? Instead of enjoying the drive or noticing the fall foliage or the pleasing temperature of the air, we use our time “productively.”

Living in a highly populated area, we compete with tens of thousands of others for places on interstate highways or in lines at grocery stores and banks. Road rage and offshoots such as airplane rage and rage at organized sports activities are front-page news.

This sense of overcrowding may give rise to feelings of impatience, aggression, and anger. When was the last time you counted the number of items in the grocery cart in front of you in the “10 items or less” line?

So we’re all aware of the bombardment of stress in our personal lives. What about our professional lives? Lawyers and judges face different and sometimes more intense forms of stress than non-lawyers: the client who wants to win at all costs, yet won’t pay his or her bill; the lawyer who is ill prepared in court; the inherent alienation judges experience; the lawyer trying to obtain new clients.

Eventually, something must give. But before we haul off and punch someone, drink ourselves into oblivion, or have a heart attack, let’s take a path of lesser resistance.

Meditation.

If this word conjures images of a person chanting and sitting in a lotus position, you are correct. But the wonderful part of meditation is that you are never “wrong.” Whatever you find beneficial in fostering a feeling of inner peace is “right.”

Several synonyms immediately come to mind when considering meditation. We may think of relaxation techniques, quiet contemplation, prayer, stillness, or focus, to name a few.

Although some meditation techniques evolved in a religious context, there is no need to identify with any single belief system to partake of meditation’s benefits. Many find it helpful to incorporate the existence of a being into their meditation time. Others believe in more of a “flow of the universe” or “creative forces”-type mentality. Religion may be used as a touchstone in practicing meditation, but it is by no means necessary or even suggested by this article. Again, the benefits of meditation can be found using different paths.

This article began with an example of a meditative technique known as visualization, which is one of several ways to incorporate meditation in your life. Visualization is a process by which the individual is transported to a place of serenity and calmness, almost like going on a short, very relaxing trip.

Another meditative technique is transcendental meditation, which was popular-

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ized in the 1960s. With this technique, there is no point of focus on a visual image like in visualization, but rather a mantra to calm the mind and turn off distractions. Traditionally, mantras are Sanskrit words that are not intended to engage the mind, but are simply sounds repeated silently to oneself. To incorporate transcendental meditation into a simple format, we can silently repeat “one,” “peace,” “love,” or similar calming words.

A non-denominational form of meditation was developed in the 1970s by Harvard researcher Herbert Benson. Find a quiet place and sit in a comfortable position, closing your eyes if you like. You may play soft music or sit in silence. Starting at your feet and moving to the top of your head, make a concerted effort to relax your muscles. Breathe through your nose, becoming aware of your breathing rhythm. Each time you exhale, silently say to yourself “one,” or a similar calming word.

A variation of the Benson method was suggested by Edgar Cayce, and introduced use of affirmations. An affirmation is a positive statement that can be religious, spiritual, or simply meaningful to you. Here are some suggested affirmations you may incorporate into your meditation time:

- “I enter the silence and my answer comes forth effortlessly and with clarity.”
- “I praise the universe for all the abundance it shares with me.”
- “This day I have no expectations or attachments; I live in the moment.”
- “My enthusiastic attitude in my life now draws to me interesting and happy experiences.”

The underpinnings of the Cayce method are that with every activity in which we

engage, we make choices and build toward something constructive or destructive. Through the process of meditation, we begin to want different things and activities, thereby changing our desires and uplifting ourselves.

The Cayce method uses the same basic posture and breathing as the Benson method. The Cayce method goes one step further by centering the conscious mind on surrounding oneself with a god presence, a pure white light, or other uplifting thought or image. Once this stage is set in our minds and we relax, affirmations are repeated slowly and alternated with periods of silence.

Taking time in your schedule for solitude and reflection has the effect of undoing the anger, feeling of alienation, exaggerated sense of self-importance, and feeling that everything should happen “my way.”

We are not just lawyers and judges. We are human beings. It is essential to take time for silence and refreshment. Meditation opens our minds to creativity and clarity. As we begin to listen to our bodies, we tune into our inner wisdom. Only then are we firmly on the path to balancing mind, body, and spirit and toward lives of harmony and contentment, peace, and joy. ■

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