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The (Forever) Beginner's Meditation Companion

Tina Foster

Meditation for
Non-Meditators
Book Series

**MEDITATION FOR
NON-MEDITATORS**

The (Forever) Beginner's Meditation Companion

**(From the “Meditation for
Non-Meditators” Series)**

By

Tina Foster

Also Part of the Meditation
for Non-Meditators
Book Series:

Meditation for Non-Meditators: A (Forever) Beginner's
Guide, a book of guided practices

Table of Contents

Introduction: About this Companion	7
The companion's companion	8
- What do we mean by guidance?	9
- What defines instruction?	9
How to use this book	10
- Chapter breakdown	10
- Chapter 1: True Beginnings	10
- Chapter 2: Forever Beginnings	10
- Chapter 3: The Glow and Flow of Insight	11
- Chapter 4: Horizons Everywhere, Forever	11
- Infinite ways to move through these pages	12
Chapter 1: True Beginnings	13
Map it out, make a plan	13
Re-mapping	14
What is meditation?	15
- Meditation as practice	15
- Meditation as experience	15
- Meditation as process and purpose	15
The purpose of meditation: Finding reality in empty spaces	15
What's inside empty space?	16
Standing on the shoulders of giants	16

Chapter 2: Forever Beginnings	19
Your journey of many journeys as a forever beginner	19
The inner toolbox	19
The basic tools and mediums of meditation	20
- The basic tools used in most practices	21
- The mediums through which most practices flow	21
- How the tools and mediums work together	21
Mindfulness mediums	21
Mind in meditation: Patterns of thought	25
- A few patterns of mind you might find in practice	25
Mind in meditation: Awareness, concentration, and mindfulness	26
Mind in meditation: Acceptance	27
Mind in meditation: Inquiry	28
- Review of tools used to work with mind	30
The body: A location, map, and language	30
- Ways to increase body awareness through meditation	31
The weather of emotions: Deluge and drought	32
- Deluge	32
- Drought	34
- Feeling-tones	34
- Emotional mind, emotional body	35
The realm of the senses: Abstinence and indulgence	35
The medium is the message	36
- Practice: How easy and natural? How challenging and unpredictable?	37

Chapter 3: The Glow and Flow of Insight	38
Early insight	38
Deepening insight	41
Effortless insight	43
Nirvana	44
Chapter 4: Horizons Everywhere, Forever	46
The nitty-gritty of meditation-mapping	47
- Nine steps to making your own practice plan	47
- Things to do before each session	49
Embarrassing, kooky, and amazing	49
- Things that might seem kooky and embarrassing	50
- Amazing occurrences that encourage us	51
- How to navigate the ups and downs in the long-term	51
Don't sweat it	52
Too busy to meditate? Of course you are	52
- A few ways to handle being too busy to practice	53
Meditating through life's rough patches	53
- During difficult times, practice under the umbrella of these truths	53
- What to do when shifts happen	54
- A few things to keep an eye out for in the fertile field of your practice	54
Meditation is more than a quiet place	55
Many moments, many approaches	55
Thanks	57
Actually, we're just beginning...	58
About Other Books in the Meditation for Non-Meditators Series	60
More about Tina Foster	61

The (Forever) Beginner's Meditation Companion



Introduction About this Companion

Take a moment to remember a close companion in your life—a friend, family member, lover, or pet.

You might see their face, hear their voice, or sense that special something that first drew you to them. Your heart might warm or feel bittersweet.

Now remember the quality of the companionship itself—that rare and one-of-a-kind fusion of You + Them. Your unique blend of personalities.

What do you cherish most about this companionship? How did it support you or change who you were? What did it show or teach you?

Quite likely, this friend also had their own special way of setting you straight, applying a bit of tough love, or calling you on your BS. Or maybe being around them was enough to automatically bring out your personal best.

I've come to see meditation as this kind of companion. It has the power to lift your mood, help you find courage, or just sit there with you when you need solace. It can take you on a wild internal joyride or the opposite—bring you back to focus on your routine or goals.

Here's another way meditation is like a living companion. There's a living relationship involved that requires effort and respect to maintain.

Compassion, humor, and honesty will foster healthy companionship.

And the opposite can be true. Meditation practice can become an obligatory relationship. It's the friend you dread meeting. You always seem to scrap with each other, but you just can't let go.

Meditation fosters responsibility and accountability. You tend to notice how you show up to the practice relationship, what you hold as you arrive, what you leave with, and what choices you make during the highs and lows.

So, the first piece of advice is to think of your meditation practice as a relationship that you cultivate, rather than a task you're trying to do well.

If you nurture your practice, it nurtures you in return (more about this in “Mindfulness mediums”).

The companion's companion

This book is the companion I wish I'd had when first trying meditation.

Even in a group practice, I sat alone. I pretended to know what I was doing.

I joylessly followed the instructions of my teachers and felt like a fake. There's nothing necessarily wrong with the “fake it till you make it” approach in life—up to a point. But I often sat “in meditation” feeling pain, anxiety, and guilt, wondering what do about so many issues that weren't part of the guidance.

During actual meditation practice, as we sit, usually with eyes closed, we need more guidance than instruction.

What do we mean by guidance?

Guidance is more like having someone hold our hand or nudge us along as we make our way. Guidance inspires our curiosity rather than prescribing our thought processes.

Being guided isn't like being lead. Guided practice tends to allow long moments of quiet and freedom to poke around our inner terrain.

But even with the best guidance we can sometimes get lost during practice, which can be like stumbling through a noisy, foreign city with unmarked crossroads and only the vaguest idea of where to turn. (“Mindfulness mediums” also talks more about these crossroad moments and how to know which way to turn.)

This is where instruction comes in. Even a little instruction before practice helps us feel more confident and safe about finding our way around our inner terrain.

So, what defines instruction?

Instructions often contain guidance. Their job is to teach us and get us thinking about our process.

Instruction is more thorough than guidance and is more likely to employ a “no stone unturned” approach, covering as many topics as possible.

Instruction asks us to learn about practice from the outside, while guidance helps us navigate inside of our practice.

Finding our way is much more fun when we open up to meditation practice as an exploration rather than a test, but we need trustworthy instructions along the way.

This book provides comprehensive instruction about meditation as an overall practice and as a specific technique—as well as what its components are and how these components are used.

Approach meditation as your companion. Use this book as your companion's companion. Remember, embrace meditation and let it:

- Walk shoulder-to-shoulder with you along your journey

- Invite rather than obligate
- Take the lead when the way is unclear
- Challenge you and nudge you along

This book will continually point your compass towards home (that is, to yourself) because meditation is self-companionship. And self-companionship is the root of all the best friendships, right? Great friends are first friends to themselves.

I also wrote this book as a companion to the three guided meditations in my first book, *Meditation for Non-Meditators: A (Forever) Beginner's Guide*. However, this book promises to be a handy companion to any practice you undertake.

How to use this book

Imagine a companion that shows up before and after meditation time with a toolbox to help you build a practice that's designed for you, fix whatever you break, and continuously redesign as your practice grows.

Pretty soon, you'll be using these tools to do your own design and repair until you have a practice that's a safe, efficient, comfortable, and portable sanctuary that adapts to your evolving needs. (In "The inner toolbox," we look at various tools we can use to build the best practice possible, and how we can sustain and evolve it over time.)

Now, a bit about how this book is built.

Chapter breakdown:

Chapter 1: True Beginnings offers metaphors that help us understand what meditation is, what it's like to practice, and how and why to build meditation roadmaps.

"True Beginnings" will get the wheels of your imagination turning, fire up your curiosity, and inspire you to practice. You'll visualize theory and see how theory works through story and scenario.

In Chapter 2: Forever Beginnings, we open the meditation companion's toolbox, look at these handy practice tools, and think about what each one is good for.

We'll also examine the mediums through which practice can flow: Mind, body, emotions, the senses, and breath.

“Forever Beginnings” also sheds light on the nature of thoughts, their patterns, and how a computer hard drive is an evocative metaphor for the mind.

The metaphors and stories deepen our understanding of theory. We get to a point of understanding where theory is able to stand on its own, naked, so we can see it for what it really is.

Then, Chapter 3: The Glow and Flow of Insight sheds light on the moments when practice has become more natural, smooth, and free. We learn how to spot early signs of insight and growth as they occur during practice.

Next we’ll look at Nirvana, which isn’t necessarily the destination of practice, but is the most actualized—some would say idealized—experience of meditation.

So, “The Glow and Flow of Insight” is the chapter that reveals the ties that hold the meditation process together. We bundle up the stories and theories as one big, broad evolving process.

There’s plenty of practicality in the first three chapters, but the **final chapter** (Chapter 4: Horizons Everywhere, Forever) is where the practicality moves from story and theory to utility. The final chapter is all about how to..., what to do when..., avoid this... and look for that.

It lists how to map out your overall journey from the outset, what to do before each session, and how to prepare for the odd or unusual things that can happen during practice (like falling asleep) as well as the peaceful and ecstatic moments (such as sudden Nirvana-like bursts of inner joy).

We’ll also learn how meditation can be a companion in tough times, what to do when you don’t have time to practice, and what happens when you drive yourself into a meditative ditch. (Spoiler alert: There is no true meditation-fail.)

The conclusion gets philosophical about choosing and building the practice that’s right for you, and recognizing what works versus what doesn’t.

Meditation is a practice of forever-beginning as well as a continual returning home. This book is an eternal companion that you return to again and again for practical help and a friendly nudge, whether you’re practicing with the Meditation for Non-Meditators guide or another source.

There are infinite ways to move through these pages.

The simple, straightforward way: Non-stop, chronologically, cover-to-cover in about an hour.

Or the opposite: Dropping in as needed (each time scanning for a particular information nugget), zipping back to practice, nugget in hand, to drop the wisdom into your practice mix, and eventually reading every page at least once, yet never reading cover-to-cover. Two different ways through, two very different experiences.



Chapter 1

True Beginnings

Map out a plan

Your companion has a meditation roadmap. She shows you different ways to make your journey and allows you to choose your own route. You get to decide whether to take the easier or more challenging route. Do you play it safe with a tried-and-true path or risk the road less travelled for the sake of adventure and discovery?

Don't be tempted to blaze a trail without your compass pointing in the direction you intend to go. Decide where you want to go and how you want to get there. Take some time to plan.

Some people like to plan, some don't. But here's one undeniable thing about a plan. When you're lost with no idea where to turn, The Plan is there to fall back on, saving you from getting stymied or having to make rash decisions. ("The Nitty-gritty of meditation-mapping" will guide you through the practical steps needed to create an original roadmap for your unique practice. Even if you hop over there now to read them, definitely read them again later and consider taking the recommended actions before you begin a practice session.)

I want to touch briefly on one particular recommended action right now: The benefits of keeping a meditation journal. I didn't keep a meditation journal. I don't think anyone ever advised me to.

I learned of the benefits of meditation journaling in hindsight. From time to time, I'd stand up from practice and scramble to scribble down a thought, idea, feeling, sensation, or experience. Usually, I scribbled down a crystal clear realization or the opposite—a puzzling experience I barely had words for.

If I had no paper, I wrote on a napkin, a slip of paper, or even my arm. Sometimes I kept the napkins and slips of paper, but never for very long. And I never collected all the fragments into a single pile.

Writing things down was certainly better than nothing. However, had I recorded all those ideas and mysteries in one place, this book would have been written way, way earlier. And at this very moment of writing, I'd know far more about meditation than I currently do.

Keep a meditation journal, but not out of vanity, narcissism, or self-indulgence. As you'll learn, it serves as a map made from a map. A re-map.

Re-mapping

The Plan you make using the considerations in the last chapter of this book will be your original map, the route you imagine taking before hitting the meditation road.

The record you keep in your journal becomes your second map, the real route as best you know it, compiled over many journeys and continual re-mappings.

Now imagine these maps drawn on transparencies. Superimposing one on top of another reveals a more complete and realistic picture of your journey.

Keep re-mapping.

What is meditation?

Let's get clear on what meditation is before we take off. The definitions of "meditation" in this companion book are threefold:

Meditation as practice. This is the act of meditation: What we do, the instructions we follow, and the techniques we use.

Examples of this definition: "How to practice meditation" and "How to meditate by listening to sound."

Meditation as experience. This is what happens as we practice—not what we do, but what we encounter and the reactions (or lack thereof) that the experiences trigger.

Examples of this definition: "What is meditation like?" or "Yesterday's meditation practice was like pulling teeth."

Meditation as process and purpose. This is a fusion of practice and experience: How we encounter (not just react to) our experience; How we navigate the big picture and respond moment to moment; What strategy or direction we take to stay on track.

Examples of this definition: "The process of meditation is to re-focus each time I become distracted" or "Meditation practice shows us a way to relax while paying closer attention."

As we practice meditation over time, the instructions we follow begin to feel less contrived and more fluid. Our experience begins to inform our process. The more skillful our process, the closer we come to our purpose and the smoother we ride.

The purpose of meditation: Finding reality in empty spaces

The purpose of meditation is to get real, not check out from reality. This becomes apparent over time. Once we're less stressed and distracted, we're more likely to see reality through a cleaner lens.

The practice of meditation takes us beyond the noise of our daily lives. At first we find stillness and quiet, then eventually snips of a deeper reality inside the stillness and quiet.

Let's look closer at this idea.

What lies beyond (and even between) the thoughts, noises, and distractions are “empty spaces.” Entering an empty space is like moving from a noisy room to a quiet one. The mind and body sigh with relief.

At first, we might not actually experience empty spaces for what they are. Either they aren't anywhere to be found, or we're unable to notice them amongst all the thoughts, noises, and distractions.

The very first empty spaces we experience often appear in flashes, coming and going in a nanosecond.

These momentary empty spaces are often compared to the spaces between the cars of a passing train. Each train car has its own shape and color. Some are old and rusty, some new and shiny.

Our attention is initially drawn to the cars rather than the blurred spaces between. Yet, something deeper about reality lies on the other side of the train, viewable only through the spaces between the cars. We move from thinking the cars are everything to seeing them as an obstruction to this deeper reality.

What's inside empty space?

For the sake of moving into an empty space, imagine you're the conductor of this train.

You're in the engine car looking ahead onto the tracks. The train rolls into a dense urban area. You see a clutter of buildings and roads. There's plenty of sound, movement, and beauty to capture your attention—like brilliant neon signs and people in fancy suits. There's a palpable feeling that anything can happen. As the conductor, you're trained to navigate through the distraction and stay on track.

This urban area is like the surface of our minds, a dense and dazzling wall of distraction blocking us from empty space. We move through this wall in layers. It might take years of practice to get through.

We still notice potential distractions as we make our way. In fact, the distractions might intensify as we get closer to empty space. We don't exhaust ourselves by fighting off distractions or desperately trying to claw through the wall.

As you conduct the train out of the city, the urban density fades into a huge open desert. Suddenly, there's no noise, buildings, or people. Not even a tree. There's nothing anywhere. Or is there? Past experience rolling through open desert has taught you otherwise.

You adjust to the more open, quieter landscape, but you don't daydream. Instead, your attention begins to perceive greater subtlety. You begin to notice things you'd otherwise miss—a deer hiding in the brush or a lone palm tree on the horizon.

You know plenty of things could go wrong in this landscape, but you're ready for any sudden changes. You stay aware because you still have to drive the train.

This desert is like the empty space in our consciousness where a more nuanced experience awaits us. As we anticipate this nuance to be revealed (especially if we've just been in a noisy space) we might feel impatient or even uncomfortable.

Naturally. In the noisy space, we were letting all the stimuli fall to the background.

Now, in the more open space, we're doing the opposite, waiting for information we can take in. Or so it seems. We may feel an urge to fill this emptiness with something. But we trust our process and keep going.

As we become familiar with empty space, the transition from noise to quiet becomes less awkward. Like the train conductor in the desert, we know that empty space really isn't empty at all.

Within the quiet of our deeper layers of consciousness is a world of boundless insight and creativity. The more we enter this subtler space in meditation, the more insight and creativity we uncover, and the more real we become in our own lives. (More on empty spaces and deeper consciousness in “Effortless insight.”)

Standing on the shoulders of giants

Remember, meditation is universal and is thousands of years old. As a formal practice, it's been passed down for generations.

Each generation stands on the shoulders of giants—its teachers, guides, and influencers who are more familiar with the journey. Sometimes when our practice seems

meaningless, we gain perspective by reflecting on the lineage that extends from us all the way back to the first-ever meditator(s).

You might find yourself naturally cultivating a deep appreciation for the austerity and profundity of the meditative tradition. That's fine, but also cultivate a sense of belonging to the tradition yourself. In a sense, you aren't really alone as you sit there on your cushion or chair.

Meditation is like a simple seed. But once cracked open, it spills out in raw, untranslated form all the core teachings and techniques of the great wisdom traditions.

This concept has been with me so long I can't say where it came from. I find it the most vivid metaphor for the meditative process, though. Perhaps it sounds grandiose, seeing that most of us come to meditation for more practical reasons, like to de-stress or sleep better.

Don't feel the need to have a "noble" reason for meditating—like to reach enlightenment or find inner peace. Lofty-sounding motivations are no more effective than humble-sounding ones. In fact, the only effective motivations are those you really feel. False motivations will create a false practice, which naturally isn't as strong as a real one.

So go ahead: Be totally real from the very start.

You might have some doubts or skepticism about meditation alongside your interest in trying it. Acknowledge those as well. Be clear on what your reasons and reservations are and record them in your journal. An accurate picture of your true beginner self will be helpful down the road, when you pause and look back on your journey.

Would you like to read the rest of this book? Here are links to get the full book.

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