

Be part of something bigger

Meditation can help us get in touch with the universal life force that connects us all. By Richard Miller, PhD

WITHIN EACH OF US is unchanging equanimity, peace, joy, and stillness, no matter what is happening in our lives. It's just that sometimes tapping into these feelings seems impossible. This is where meditation can help. With a regular practice, you can learn to align with something called the universal life force, or *shakti* in Sanskrit—a primordial energy that animates every atom throughout your body, and throughout the cosmos. The good news is that this isn't as unattainable and fantastical as it may sound. Modern neuroscientific research has revealed that meditation turns on and off a variety of pathways, or neural networks—the interconnected webs of neurons transmitting elaborate patterns of electrical signals through your gray matter—and in so doing can help you rewire your brain and gain access to those feelings associated with what yogis call *shakti*.

Research published over the last several years in the journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* reveals that during meditation, your default network switches off. This is the network that enables you to locate yourself in time and space as an individual with a past, present, and future. While this network shuts down during meditation, three others—your attention, control, and present centered

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Meditation opens you up to a world of infinite possibility and insight.



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networks—remain switched on. Your attention and control networks help you focus and enhance attention and concentration. The present centered network can boost your experience of being interconnected and in harmony with everything around you, or the underlying universal life force.

When your default network turns off and the other three stay on, you're able to focus and concentrate, but you lose your sense of being a separate individual. Instead, you may experience yourself as vast and spacious, feeling interconnected to the entire cosmos and at peace. This can open you up to what Dan Siegel, co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, calls the world of "infinite possibility and insight," in which you gain access to creativity and insight into how to solve problems.

Practice: How to tap into the universal life force

Begin your meditation practice by setting an intention to connect with shakti. Then

systematically scan your body from head to toe, using the following exercise to release any gripping you discover along the way.

1. **Welcome sensation** in your jaw, mouth, inner and outer ears, and all around your eyes, forehead, and scalp. Welcome sensation in your neck, throat, shoulders, and shoulder blades; and arms, palms, and fingers. Welcome sensation in your upper, middle, and lower torso; back, pelvis, and sacrum; and hips, legs, and feet.
2. **Sense every part of your body** at the same time—front and back, right and left, internal and on the surface. Then feel your entire body as shimmering, vibrant energy, a glowing, pulsing field of sensation that emanates and radiates both inwardly and outwardly at the same time. Keep turning your attention back to this feeling of your body as radiant sensation, even as thoughts or other distractions arise.
3. **Keep focused on feeling physical sensation.** For example, notice where you feel tension and how your breath

travels through you on your inhales and exhales. As you do this, you're consciously switching off your default network of time-space separation, and enlivening your attention and control networks so that ultimately you can switch on your present centered network—the final gateway to connecting with the universal life force and infinite possibility.

4. **Welcome every cell** throughout your body to join and experience the underlying pulse or throb of the universal life force that is animating and enlivening every atom, molecule, and particle of your being, and every thing in the cosmos.
5. **Continue affirming your intention,** sitting for 10 to 20 minutes. When distracting thoughts arise, note them, then turn your attention back to welcoming and feeling the body as the vibrant, radiant, innate universal life force. When you're ready to stop meditating, reaffirm an intention to keep a window to this life force open all day.

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Notice how tapping into *shakti* enables you to respond and interact, rather than react and contract.

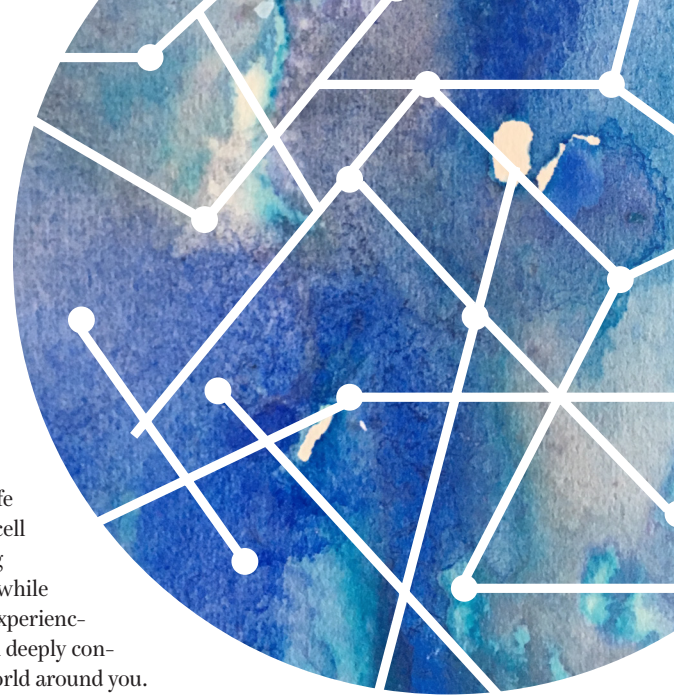
Experiencing the innate universal life force requires the use of your attention, control, and present centered networks, and it nourishes your connection with the world around you. It also strengthens those control centers, making it easier to tap into feelings of peace, joy, and stillness. You'll start to rewire your nervous system and get in touch with the underlying force that infuses your life with meaning, purpose, and value. All told, experiencing shakti will make you want to come back to your meditation cushion.

Stay the course

Try to practice this meditation daily and experience what happens when, for instance, you're in the midst of a conversation, working at your desk, out walking, or slipping into bed

at the end of your day. In these moments, you may suddenly feel the universal life force that's animating every cell in your body. Continue doing whatever you're engaged in, while feeling this radiant energy, experiencing how it enables you to feel deeply connected to yourself and the world around you. Notice how it enables you to respond and interact, rather than react and contract. 🕉

Richard Miller, PhD, is the founding president of the Integrative Restoration Institute (*irest.us*), co-founder of the International Association of Yoga Therapists, and author of *iRest Meditation* and *Yoga Nidra*. This is his second in a series of 10 columns designed to help you create a lasting and impactful meditation practice.



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