

OPINION | OP-EDS

On the importance of sitting



YASMINE AKKI / YASMINE AKKI

BY [SUZANNE B. GOLDBERG](#) | JANUARY 30, 2018, 2:15 AM

At the Law School, where I teach each spring, a group of students, faculty and staff meet regularly to sit together for mindfulness meditation. When I first heard about this, I wasn't sure what my colleagues were talking about—and I couldn't imagine taking time in the middle of busy days just to sit.

But my curiosity got to me and I decided to try it. It was summertime and I joined a handful of faculty in a small seminar room. A colleague guided us through the session, first focusing us on settling into our chairs, then listening to the sounds around us and finally on our breathing. Every once in a while, she reminded us to bring ourselves back from whatever thoughts were distracting our attention from the moment.

Much to my surprise, I loved it. In just a few minutes, I had gone from thinking about 50 things at once to concentrating on one thing at a time. And even though the whole session lasted five minutes (it was beginner level), it felt transformative in a way that I still remember now.

The next day, I found myself at Book Culture, skimming through a small volume by Thich Nhat Hanh called “How to Sit.” Even better, since I’m often in motion, I found another book by Hanh called “How to Walk.” In the latter, he wrote about using moments of walking as meditation—to concentrate on how it feels to walk rather than thinking about whatever’s next to do while moving from one place to another.

His basic point was that paying attention—to one’s breathing, walking, eating, or whatever it may be—can itself be restorative, even when we feel too busy or overwhelmed to pause.

It takes far more practice than I’ve done to achieve the states of zen that Hanh, a 91-year-old peace activist and spiritual leader, exudes. But I think we can all relate to the need to slow down, at least every once in a while, and that taking steps, whether by sitting, walking, or just taking a deep breath, can make a real difference in how we feel.

[Wellness Days at Columbia](#) provide a jumpstart, with many paths for fun, relaxation, and learning. As I shared in [my message last week](#), we want to hear—and can support—your ideas. The Office of University Life is pleased to offer [mini-grants](#) to student organizations as part of our ongoing focus on mental health, well-being, and community at Columbia—you can [see the full list \(it grows every day!\) of participating student clubs](#) and apply to host events throughout the year.

Wellness Days at Columbia are a great way to kick off the new semester and the new year. There are daily study breaks to unwind, connect, and grab a snack. Or you can pick up skills to carry forward through the semester for managing anxiety or stress, handling finances, or helping a friend. And Winter Wellness Days celebrate partnerships with student leaders and campus resources like Columbia Health, Alice Health! Promotion, CUMC’s Center for Student Wellness, and Columbia Libraries.

Whichever path you choose, I hope you’ll join us, and I look forward to seeing you there!

P.S. We’re giving away a few copies of Thich Nhat Hanh’s “How to Relax” at select study breaks! (Get the full schedule of daily events [here](#).) I hope it brings you some of the enjoyment and insight it has brought to me.

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