



ON MEDITATION

Documenting the Inner Journey

A film by Rebecca Dreyfus

2015 / USA / 65 min. / Color / In English

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Synopsis:

On Meditation is a compilation of portraits that explore the deeply personal practice of meditation in all its myriad forms. Practiced for thousands of years, meditation is at once profound and simple: the focused attempt to move beyond conditioned thinking into a deeper state of awareness. Yet, what does that path, one of the inner journey, which is above all a private, interior one really look like? *On Meditation* conveys first-hand experiences of those who have developed meaningful practices and are willing to share their experiences. From teachers to everyday people to celebrities, the subjects of *On Meditation* offer a rare glimpse into the private insights and rituals of its subjects.

About the Series:

On Meditation is an evolving series of portrait films that explore the deeply personal practice of meditation. Practiced for thousands of years, meditation is at once profound and simple: the focused attempt to move beyond conditioned “thinking” into a deeper state of awareness.

Yet, what does that path – the path of the inner journey, which is above all a private, interior one – really look like?

On Meditation conveys first-hand experiences of those who have developed meaningful practices and are willing to share their experiences. From teachers to everyday people to celebrities, the subjects of *On Meditation* offer a rare glimpse into the private insights and rituals of its subjects.

Each film, or portrait, focuses on a single individual – and explores how meditation works for them, how it has changed or continues to change them in the deepest or subtlest ways, and what it looks like on the most basic physical level.

Ten Portraits:

Portrait 1:

Born in Lumbini, Nepal (the birthplace of the Buddha), **The Venerable Metteyya** is a renowned student and teacher of meditation ordained as a Buddhist Monk in 2007. He talks about his lifelong pursuit of enlightenment and shares his observations on the relationship between mind and body.

Portrait 2:

Elena Brower, one of the most respected Hatha yoga teachers in the United States, talks about how meditation, once a struggle, has become crucial to her well being and shares how meditation can be incorporated into one's life anywhere and everywhere, even in the hustle and bustle of New York City.

Portrait 3:

The late **Peter Matthiessen** is a three-time National Book Award-winning American novelist, non-fiction writer, and environmental activist. He received the National Book Award for Fiction in November 2008, at age 81, for *Shadow Country*, an 890-page revision of three novels set in frontier Florida that were published in the 1990s. A student of Zen Buddhism for more than three decades, Matthiessen talked about the calming influence of his spiritual practices at his home in Sagaponack, Long Island where he kept a zendo, a beautiful space dedicated for meditation.

Portrait 4:

Film and television actor **Giancarlo Esposito**, known for his roles in films such as *Do the Right Thing*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *King of New York*, and his portrayal of drug kingpin Gustavo "Gus" Fring on the AMC series *Breaking Bad*, shares how meditation has transformed his personal life and informed his acting technique.

Portrait 5:

Six term Ohio Congressman **Tim Ryan** was first elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2002 and currently serves as a member of the House Appropriations and Budget Committees. The author of *A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit*, Ryan shares how his personal commitment to daily meditation has influenced his efforts to bring mindfulness training into the health care system and the military.

Portrait 6:

Acclaimed film director **David Lynch** is a longtime practitioner of Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the founder of the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, which funds implementation of stress-reduction programs for underserved populations and supports medical research on the benefits of meditation. He talks about how meditation has affected both his personal and professional lives in unimaginable ways.

Portrait 7:

Named “a next-generation thought leader” by Oprah Winfrey and “a new role model” by The New York Times, **Gabrielle Bernstein** is the New York Times bestselling author of *Miracles Now*, and *May Cause Miracles*. She shares her personal journey and struggles with addiction and how her practice keeps her healthy and happy.

Portrait 8:

Sharon Salzberg is the author of nine books including *Lovingkindness*, the New York Times best seller *Real Happiness*, and *Real Happiness at Work*. She is also the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and the Forest Refuge. She explores how the practice of Loving Kindness became a healing force in her life.

Portrait 9:

A well-known business magnate, **Russell Simmons** co-founded the hip-hop music label Def Jam records as well as numerous other companies. Simmons has been described as the third richest figure in hip hop. He is a devout meditator as well as a public advocate for the practice. He reveals how his own practice is an integral part of his epic success.

Portrait 10:

Psychiatrist **Mark Epstein**, who has explored the interface of Buddhism and psychotherapy in several books including *The Trauma of Everyday Life* which was published in April 2013, and artist **Arlene Shechet** have been married for more than 30 years. EndFragmentThis segment of *On Meditation* is the first to be created as a double portrait exploring the effects of the practice on their relationship.

Q&A with Director Rebecca Dreyfus:

How did you get interested in meditation?

I wanted to start a practice but I didn't know where to begin. For me personally, the idea of meditating or more broadly "going inward" felt a little overwhelming. The idea made me feel simultaneously attracted and repelled so I knew I had to work with it in some way. I wanted to know more about other people's practices. And I figured if I felt this way other people probably did too—so why not do a film project? That kind of got the ball rolling and it quickly became clear once we started shooting that the material is very rich and largely unexplored in mainstream media.

For me, the idea is/was to make the subject matter palatable and accessible based on my own desire to understand it better. My work generally starts with an authentic desire to explore a particular subject. The vision for the project actually became real to me sitting in an ancient temple in Kyoto. I was so moved by the environment (it was the Ryoan-ji temple) and in general the great lengths Japanese society had gone to cultivate spaces in which to feel peaceful. I wanted to know more. I hope at some point we can go and shoot segments in the temples there with some of the great Zen masters.

You're known for your feature length documentaries. Why a series of short films?

While I was in Kyoto, I stumbled upon an interesting fact: The Zen garden was originally conceived as an enclosure that would provide a manageable way for humans to commune with the vastness of nature.

Since going inward felt so vast to me I thought small packages or short films might be the perfect way to explore the material—offer it up in small Zen-like packages so the viewer may find a manageable way to commune with the vastness of the subject matter.

You've focused on a pretty eclectic group of individuals. How do you go about choosing your subjects?

First and foremost, as always when choosing people to put in front of the camera I look for compelling people. In this case, there was also a requisite that the subjects have a practice of some seriousness and regularity. After that it's mostly instinct. I just kind of get an idea in my head... like "I have to shoot so and so" and then I do my best to make it happen.

As a group, Susannah and Elena and I also decided it would be good to include "notable personalities" and not just teachers and gurus- to make it more accessible to everyone (not just yogis and people already on the path.)

What have you learned about meditation from doing these portraits? Any surprises about what your subjects have had to say about their practices?

Across the board, I've learned that meditation is something we are all meant to do. It's so obvious once you start listening to people who do it a lot; it's innate for humans to sit.

Have you started meditating? What are the biggest challenges you have faced? What has been most rewarding?

I have been cultivating a practice for a while now. The biggest challenge is keeping it regular and getting myself to sit. I go through phases where I sit more but then I get busy and it kind of slips away. Perhaps I should state clearly here that I make no claims on spiritual advancement as a maker of this project—maybe just the opposite. I find getting myself to sit a huge challenge. I would say I bring, rather, the novice's curiosity and passion to the project.

Crew:

Directed by.... Rebecca Dreyfus

Producer.... Rebecca Dreyfus, Susannah Ludwig, Sharon Guskin

Executive Producer.... Elena Brower, Rebecca Dreyfus, Susannah Ludwig

Director of Photography....Gregg Conde

Music by....Garth Stevenson, Craig Wedren

Film Editor....Konstantinos Antonopoulos, David Gutnik, Andrew Hafitz, Uгла Hauksdottir, Chelvendra Sathieaanandha

Sound Editor....Tom Jucarone

Cast (starring as themselves):

The Venerable Metteyya

Elena Brower

Peter Matthiessen

Giancarlo Esposito

Tim Ryan

David Lynch

Gabrielle Bernstein

Sharon Salzberg

Russell Simmons

Mark Epstein & Arlene Shechet