



Personal altar

If you practise meditation or visualisation but find it difficult to commit it can be helpful to create a special space dedicated to self-reflection. It could be just the prompt you need

In many ancient practices and belief systems an altar is at the centre of personal meditation. Coming from the Latin word to mean 'high', an altar refers to a raised, sacred space (often a table) in which to come to during times of reflection. But the concept need not be restricted to the religious, it can also be used to help meditation and visualisation, a place that encourages commitment and helps to connect with the true self without judgment or fear. Using an altar can help a person to understand their mental landscape, develop creativity, find clarity and discover solutions to problems. It can also make it easier to clear a busy mind for the day ahead.

'A special place can serve as an anchor, a reminder of what you know to be true, what matters most in your practice and to bring a sense of that feeling or energy you want to encounter when you go and meditate there,' says Emma Mills, meditation expert and author of *Inhale, Exhale, Repeat*. 'I suspect that a space can take on the energy and vibration of the activity that has been happening there,' she adds. 'Of course, you don't need anything to practise, just yourself. But if it inspires you to commit, then it's a lovely thing.'

Turn the page to discover how to create your own personal altar



'Let me love and be loved'



'Right now, right here in this moment, nothing is missing'

Meditation and visualisation: what's the difference?

Meditation refers to a form of mindfulness in which a person achieves stillness through various techniques, including breath work, to calm the thoughts and find acceptance. Numerous studies have found that with regular practice it can ease anxiety, improve sleep and mental clarity and, in some cases, help those who live with chronic illnesses to manage pain. Many claim that using meditation to live within the present moment increases a sense of self-awareness and happiness, too.

Visualisation, on the other hand, is an active event, which uses the imagination as a tool to create success or build confidence by picturing future scenarios in the mind. Research using brain imagery shows the mind isn't able to tell the difference between a thought of an action and a real action, which could have astounding implications.

It suggests visualisation can work as effective training for future scenarios, such as a speech or driving test, because you can see the potential outcome. 'Visualisation is a tool of imagination with many applications,' says Emma. 'You might close your eyes and visualise a friend, seeing them really happy and well. You might imagine you could Hoover your entire body and refresh yourself. Exploring your visualising faculty can be a good way to explore your mental landscape, develop your imagination and find insights.'

'In many ways, if visualising is talking, then meditation is listening, and they both go really well together,' adds Emma. And an altar can truly provide the space to explore these interesting mindfulness techniques every day.

To begin, take a moment to think about your home and the activity that goes on in it. Choose a private space that is often quiet, like the bedroom or the conservatory. You might feel

particularly drawn to an area close to a window where natural light can flood in, or a space close to the garden door, which can be opened to allow the sounds of birdsong or the rustle of trees and the smell of fresh-cut grass to waft through during meditation. Take a moment to sit in this space and focus on the breath. Think about what it is you need from an altar in order to show up regularly in this place.

Take stock of all your senses: consider the smells or visuals that bring about a sense of peace, happiness and positivity to you. It is down to personal preference whether or not to use a low, raised table for an altar to set the stage – a clear, minimal and serene floor space works just as well. Emma advises that sitting on a soft, comfortable pillow, for example, 'can act as a reminder to be gentle and compassionate with yourself and others'. Before decorating, it's important to clear it of any clutter – a 2017 study published in *Current Psychology* journal found that clutter and mess in your physical environment might be linked to life dissatisfaction.

A stone's throw away

Precious and semi-precious gems have long been associated with healing and wellbeing and, if anything, they can act as a simple grounding device. They can also serve as a wonderful physical representation of what it is you'd like to achieve from your practice, whether that's growth, relaxation or energy. 'It's a good idea to look at a few crystals and pick the ones you feel most drawn to,' says Emma. 'Rose quartz [associated with releasing negative feelings and opening the heart to love] seems a lovely all-rounder.'

Bring a feeling of balance to your altar with simple clear quartz. To inspire personal growth, the lemon-coloured citrine

stone is associated with joy and positive possibilities. Choose two to three stones that most represent the energy of your practice and group them together in the centre of your altar. Of course, crystals and gems aren't essential – you could use any personal items you find grounding.

Plant power

Research into the health benefits of being in and around nature is hugely abundant. The space agency Nasa found that houseplants alone could absorb up to 87 per cent of air toxins within 24 hours, while a 2018 study in the journal *Behavioural Sciences* revealed that walking through nature boosts mood and has even been found to increase productivity.

'A plant reminds you of the natural effortlessness of life,' explains Emma. 'You might even add a little quote to your plant pot, such as: "Spring comes and the grass grows by itself."'

Many indoor plants require little maintenance, which makes them the perfect addition to your altar space. To begin, opt for a beautiful succulent or a sansevieria plant, which is known for its air-purifying abilities and is stunning in its simplicity.

Nose for peace

Essential oils play a powerful role in promoting relaxation and are often used in yoga classes for this very reason. Aromatherapy oils, then, are an excellent aid in calming the thoughts in preparation for meditation. They can also be useful in conjuring up memories and stimulating the imagination for visualisation. Different fragrances wake up the senses in various ways, so choose one that makes you feel positive. Lavender aroma has long been linked to helping reduce stress and promoting healthy sleep. Meanwhile, citrus notes like

lemons, oranges or grapefruit have been found to stimulate production of the happiness hormone serotonin and lift spirits, so you can fill your space with gorgeous-smelling aromas and increase wellbeing all at once. Rub a drop or two of your chosen essential oil between your hands. Next, rest your hands facing upwards on your legs to inhale the notes during meditation.

Language talks

You might wish to keep a favourite novel or collection of poetry nearby which best mirrors your thoughts in that moment. Language can have a powerful effect on the way an individual feels, and literature can shape perceptions of the world. 'I like the book *Soul Food: Nourishing Poems For Starved Minds* by Neil Astley,' suggests Emma. 'It's perfect to pick out a lovely mindful or spiritual poem to begin or end your meditation.' You could also try some of Emma's mood-boosting mantras for the morning, including 'let me love and be loved' and 'right now, right here in this moment, nothing is missing'.

Quiet reflection in any capacity, whether that's meditation, visualisation or simply gathering your thoughts, is a deeply personal experience. So it's crucial that where, what and how you come to your altar reflects your true self. Also, says Emma: 'It's important to remember not to give your power away to a crystal or poem or a scented candle. The power is within you.'

For more information about creating a space, meditation and visualisation, visit Emmamillslondon.com.

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