

## One Meditation #16, April 2026 (*Apr. 2, 2026, 602 w.*)

*Welcome to this monthly meditation email and thanks for being here! Please consider sharing it with others: I hope it may be helpful. Subjects range from modern to ancient, Western to Eastern, and scientific to spiritual. I began meditating in 1962 and have a couple of graduate degrees in religions. Number of subscribers: about 500. To unsubscribe, email me. – Richard*

### **“A TALE OF TWO CITIES: MEDITATING WITH THE VAGUS NERVE”**

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” says Charles Dickens in the beginning of *Tale of Two Cities* set in the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror. It contrasts calm London with violent Paris. Our own lives often reflect these opposing poles. But one pole generally is better for meditation.

The two opposing physical systems are in our autonomic (automatic) nerves. They are like hot and cooling water. One system is dramatic and restless. Named the “sympathetic,” scientists nickname it the “fight-or flight” system. It is what our Western culture honors in the “adrenaline hype” of sports, drama, politics, and romance.

The other, the calming “parasympathetic,” is our “rest-and-digest” system. It contains the longest nerve in our bodies that starts from the brain. Several feet in length, it is called the “vagus nerve.”

#### **How The Two Systems Work**

Ideally, the two systems alternate between busy workday vs. relaxation and sleep. It’s also very good to practice mindfulness even during our most excited times. But scientists say that often we are overstimulated. We fight and flee excitedly with high-pressure jobs, digital devices, sugar, caffeine, and entertainment. In meditation, we encounter this as restlessness, impatience, and monkey mind.

The opposite realm—the vagus nerve—is a place of calmness. Your heartbeat slows, blood pressure decreases, muscles relax. You may become more peaceful, even sleepy. Congestion, dampness of eyes or mouth, underarm dryness, and greater sensitivity to beauty, art, and music occur. Scientists also call the vagus the “feed-and-breed” nerve because it leads to more mindful pleasure in eating, movement, and touch.

#### **Meditating with the Vagus**

Meditation on these qualities can help turn on the vagus. However, you may need to stimulate the vagus nerve for up to 30 minutes while your adrenaline slowly drains away. (Note, too, that low energy, tiredness, or depression may call for more mindful stimulation of the sympathetic nerves.)

Several books now feature vagus-stimulation methods from one-minute practices at work to longer ones at home. In the well-illustrated and detailed *Simple Exercises to Stimulate the Vagus Nerve*, Lienhard, Schmid-Fetzer, and Cobb note that the vagus nerve connects with nearly every organ in our bodies, directly or indirectly. They recommend that people develop “a greater capacity for accurately perceiving...their bodies” so they “are better able to deal with external stress factors...” (16). The authors suggest many mindful or meditative activities for connecting to the vagus nerve. Examples include:

## Mindful Vagus Activities

- Counting backward
  - Focusing on smells and tastes
  - Massaging chest and stomach
  - Vibrating the throat (humming)
  - Kegels (pelvic contractions)
  - Exhaling & holding your breath
  - Breathing long and deep
- Bilateral body movements such as:
- “No-no” & “yes-yes” head tilts
  - Hand swivels
  - Arm or leg waving
  - Horizontal eye movements
  - Tongue movements
  - Trunk rotations while standing

Breathing is especially important. Scientists state a typical full breath (inhale plus exhale), awake and asleep, is 2-5 seconds. However, vagus stimulation needs more. Researcher Teruhisa Komori reports in the *Mental Illness Journal* that at least 8 seconds per full breath is needed to turn off the fight-or-flight system and turn on the vagus nerve’s deep calming.

The vagus nerve also has a spot just outside each ear canal where it comes to the surface. Rubbing both places can create fast calming in some people, say scientists. See diagrams of this location at [NIH.gov \(ABVN\)](http://NIH.gov) and [Psychology Today](http://Psychology Today).

“Vagus” in Latin means “wandering” or “straying” because this nerve meanders downward, vagabond-like, from skull to digestive organs in two major branches around the spine. Meditation is a vagus state of mind. In its *Tale of Two Cities*, the vagus brings inner peace, focus, and love.

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**Next Month:** “Pure-Land Buddhism: Three Levels of Practice”

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### Peace, Strength, Joy

Richard Jewell

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“**Meditation has two major definitions:** (1) science says it is a conscious calming of the body and mind, and (2) experienced practitioners often define it as aware attention for the purpose of inner growth. Using these two meanings, the word covers most major spiritual practices. Mindfulness, too, say the Mayo Clinic and other scientists, is a type of meditating. All of these outer forms and more are linked by having, in common, very similar purposes and scientific results.” – “One Meditation #1,” Jan. 2025

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**Previous issues:** <https://www.richardjewell.org/Meditation/default.htm>