

# Piece of Cake

*Annabelle Gurwitch* never stops trying to meditate, even when her mantra eludes her.

**I** WAS A teenager in Miami Beach when I had my introduction to meditation. These were the halcyon days before we'd heard the words *skin* and *cancer* used in a sentence together, so I was slathering on baby oil under a scorching sun when I heard a melodic sound coming from an oceanfront hotel.

Following the music inside, I found a gaggle of gorgeous hippies. They invited me to join them for a round of chanting in their pop-up ashram. They were so friendly I couldn't resist. Looking back, they were probably hungry and thought I might have snacks in my bag.

I stayed for only an hour because I had chemistry

homework to avoid doing at home. Brain science teaches us that mantra meditation can produce a dopamine rush, but all I knew was that when I sailed out of there, hair scented with patchouli incense, I felt like I was floating on a magic carpet.

A few months later, I moved to New York City to attend college and discovered other techniques. For years, I sampled meditation styles like tapas.

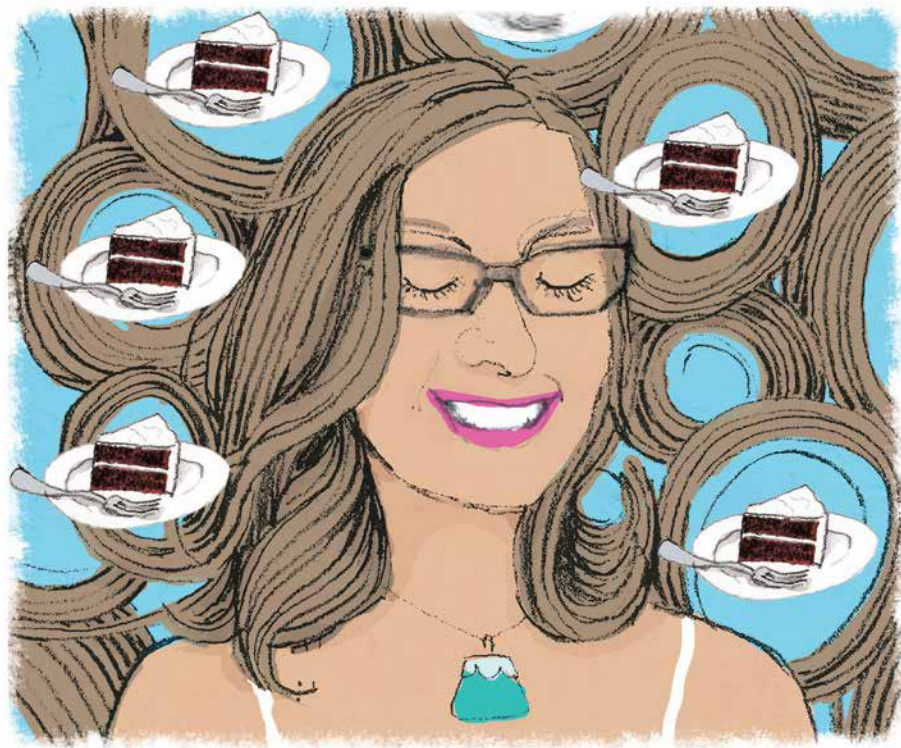
I tried a taste of Zen at a center where legendary singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen was also a fixture. Just my luck, the monastery was located next to a quaint little French inn. The monks' strict discipline wasn't for me, but I sure did enjoy the most delicious crepes in North America.

I went to a bite-size retreat with the same guru who inspired Elizabeth Gilbert to eat, pray, and love her way into a best-selling career. Alas, that guru didn't have the same effect on me. She had such great skin that all I wanted was the name of her dermatologist.

I nibbled at guided meditations and even dervish whirling, but I was only grazing. Then last year, having moved to Los Angeles, I noticed that my attention span was the length of half a tweet. When



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DANIEL BAXTER



a friend mentioned a free lecture that promised a “brain tune-up,” I decided to attend. Some might say the universe was sending me a message, because I showed up on the wrong day. I’d missed the free talk, arriving instead at the start of an expensive 3-day tutorial.

Honestly, I would have turned around and left, but I’d gotten a great parking spot. In LA, only an earthquake or an offer to star opposite George Clooney in a film would make someone give up a good spot, so I forked over the absurd amount of cash and signed up.

The teacher told our class of 30 that we were going to learn a very simple

method for quieting the mind. “Practice doesn’t make perfect,” he informed us. “Practice makes for more practice.” My fellow students nodded, chuckling, while I suppressed a scream. I took that as a sign that I should start meditating stat! The teacher went around the room whispering individualized mantras into our ears, which he said he’d selected especially for each person. Then we sat for our first 20-minute session.

I closed my eyes and felt my breathing slow down immediately. A calm passed through my body, and I had one of those epiphanies you hear about people having when they begin to meditate:

*I am really good at this. I am so great at this, I should teach this technique. I might be the best meditator in the world. I feel so refreshed. I am a new person. Exactly 2 minutes had passed.*

What? I had 18 more minutes of this? I considered packing it in, but George Clooney hadn’t called, so I stayed put. Afterward, I felt able to inhale more deeply, so I returned that evening for a second sitting. I surprised myself by completing the entire course.

I’ve kept this twice-daily ritual for the past 4 years. I’d love to report that I’ve gotten a direct line to enlightenment, but that’s not the case. Sometimes a bit of wisdom seeps through, though it’s mostly on the order of *Remember not to go to that dry cleaner where the clothes come back smelling like burned hair*. Regular meditation does afford me a 30-second delay before I yell at my cell phone when the signal drops, and sometimes I don’t even curse at all. OK, that’s an exaggeration—I am an inveterate curser. But it’s progress, not perfection.

And I am clearly a work in progress. The inner monologue of a terrible meditator goes something like this:

*Why is it so hot in here?  
Why did I put on a sweater?*

*Oh, no, I’m not wearing a sweater. Note to self: Google whether yams are effective in stopping hot flashes.*

*I hate my mantra. What is my mantra? I wonder if the woman sitting next to me got a better mantra. What if I got a bum mantra?*

*Yam is a funny word. Yam. Yam. Yam, I’m hungry.*

*If I make it through this, I’d love a slice of red velvet cake. I just cut dessert out of my diet, but I really deserve a treat.*

*Neck is thrusting forward. Must work on posture. My grandmother lost several inches in height and ended up the size of a ladybug. Must buy calcium supplements and remember to take them.*

*Ladybugs are really cute. If I can accomplish the same amount of relaxation in 10 minutes as other people can in 20, I won’t need to sit for a whole 20 minutes, right?*

*You know what would be a good mantra? Red velvet cake.*

*Wait a minute...I feel something...tingling...Is this my Kundalini energy rising? No, that’s my foot falling asleep.*

*It’s been 19 minutes, but it’s going to take at least a minute to stretch my legs out of this pretzel, so I think that should count as the last minute.*

*It’s cake time! ■*

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