

Meditation Instruction

How to Meditate

The following is from the first chapter of Alan Wallace's *Genuine Happiness*, and is a very good introduction to basic mindfulness of breathing meditation:

Relaxation

There are two postures I would recommend for this practice: sitting or lying down. Generally, the optimal and most widely recommended posture is sitting cross-legged on a cushion. If this is too uncomfortable, you may sit in a chair, with both feet resting on the ground. But another, less commonly used posture is lying down on the back, with your arms outstretched to your sides, palms up, and your head resting on a pillow. This is especially useful if you have a back problem or if you are physically tired or ill.

Whatever posture you adopt, let your body rest at ease, with your spine straight but not rigid. Relax your shoulders, with your arms loosely dropping to your sides. Allow gravity to take over. Now bring your awareness to your face. It's best if your eyes are hooded, not completely shut. Soften the muscles of your face, specifically the jaw, temples, and forehead. Soften your eyes. Let your face be as relaxed as that of a sleeping baby. Then complete this initial relaxation process by taking three slow, deep, gentle breaths through the nostrils. As you inhale, breathe smoothly and deeply down to the bottom of your abdomen. Like filling a pot with water, feel your abdomen slowly fill and expand, then breathe into your diaphragm, and finally into the upper chest. Then release the breath fully, without forcing it out. Do this three times, keeping your awareness present in the body, especially noting the sensations of the in- and out-breaths. Following these deep breaths, return to normal, unregulated respiration. Let this quality of bodily relaxation be an outer expression of your mind: let your awareness be at ease, releasing all your cares; simply be present in the here and now.

As you breathe in and out, direct your attention to the tactile sensations of the passage of the breath at the apertures of your nostrils or above your upper lip. Take a moment to locate the sensation. Rest your attention right where you feel the incoming and outgoing breaths. Once in a while, check to see that you are still breathing down into the abdomen. This will happen naturally if your body is settled, with your back straight and your belly relaxed and soft.

Stillness

Throughout each meditation session, let your body be as still as possible, with a minimum of fidgeting; remain motionless as a mountain. This helps to bring about the same quality in the mind: one of stillness, where your attention is focused and continuous.

Vigilance

Even if you are lying down, let your posture reflect a sense of vigilance, not just collapsing into drowsiness. If you are sitting up, either on a cushion or in a chair, slightly raise your sternum, while keeping the belly soft and relaxed. In this way, you will naturally breathe into your abdomen first, and when the respiration deepens you may feel your diaphragm and chest expanding as well. Sit at attention, without slouching forward or tilting to either side. This physical posture also reinforces this same quality of vigilance mentally.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Maintaining focused attention is vital for virtually everything we do throughout the day, including working, driving, relating to others, enjoying times of recreation and entertainment, and engaging in spiritual practice. Therefore, the theme for this session is learning to focus the attention. Whatever your normal level of attention—whether you are usually scattered or composed—the quality of your attention can be improved, and this brings with it extraordinary benefits. In this practice, we shift from a compulsively conceptual, fragmented mode of awareness to one of deeper simplicity, moving into a witnessing or observing mode. In addition to honing the attention, this meditation will enhance your health, tune your nervous system, allow you to sleep better, and improve your emotional balance. This is a different way of applying our minds, and it improves with practice. The specific method we will follow is the cultivation of mindfulness of breathing.

Due to habit, thoughts are bound to intrude. When they come, just release them as you exhale, without identifying with them, without emotionally responding to them. Watch the thought emerge, pass before you, and then fade away. Then rest your attention in the sense of repose, not dull and sluggish, but at ease. For the time being, if all you can accomplish in one ghatika, or twenty-four minutes, is to bring forth a sense of mental relaxation, that's great. Maintain your attention right where you feel the sensations of the in- and out-breaths.

Maintain mindfulness of your breathing as continuously as you can. The term mindfulness in this context refers to the faculty of focusing continuously upon a familiar, chosen object without distraction. In Tibetan and Sanskrit, the word translated as mindfulness also means remembering. So the cultivation of mindfulness means maintaining an unbroken flow of remembering, remembering, remembering. It doesn't involve any internal commentary. You are simply remembering to attend to the stream of tactile sensations of the in- and out-breaths. The quality of awareness you are cultivating here is a kind of bare attention, a simple witnessing, with no mental analysis or conceptual elaboration. In addition to sustaining mindfulness, it's crucial to apply introspection intermittently throughout the session. This does not mean thinking about yourself. Rather, it is the internal monitoring of your mental state. By means of introspection, looking within, you can determine whether your attention has disengaged from the breath and has wandered off to sounds, other sensations in your body, or vagrant thoughts, memories, or anticipations of the future. Introspection entails quality control, monitoring the processes of both the mind and the body. From time to time, see if any tension has built up around your eyes or forehead. If so, release it. Let your face soften and relax. Then spend a few minutes seeing if you can divide your attention while remaining at ease. Be mindful of your breath, but also be aware of how your mind is operating.

Let me emphasize that this is not a concentration technique in the Western sense. We are not bearing down with tight, focused effort. It is essential to maintain a physical and mental sense of relaxation, and on that basis we gradually enhance the stability and then the vividness of attention. This entails a spacious quality of awareness, and within that spaciousness, a sense of openness and ease; mindfulness comes to rest on the breath, like a hand laid gently on a child's head. As the vividness of attention increases, you will notice sensations even between breaths. As the turbulence of the mind subsides, you will find that you can simply attend to the tactile sensations of the breath, rather than your thoughts about it.

I'll now introduce a technique you may find useful on occasion, a simple device of counting that, done with precision, may bring greater stability and continuity to your attention. Once again, with a luxurious sense of being at ease and giving your overworked and overwrought conceptual mind a rest, place your attention on the tactile sensations of the breath. After exhaling, just as the next in-breath begins, mentally count "one." Maintaining an erect posture, with the chest raised so the breath flows back in effortlessly, breathe in and follow the tactile sensations of the breath, letting your conceptual mind rest. Then experience the wonderful sense of refreshment as the breath is released, all the way out, until reaching the next turnaround point. Cultivate a "Teflon mind"—a mind to which nothing sticks, that doesn't cling to thoughts about the present, past, or future. In this manner, count from one to ten. You may then repeat counting to ten, or continue counting up from ten to higher numbers. This is a practice of simplifying rather than suppressing your discursive mind. You are reducing mental activity to just counting, taking a holiday from compulsive thinking throughout the entire cycle of the breath. Practice for several minutes before ending this session.

To bring any worthy endeavor to a close in a meaningful fashion, Buddhists dedicate merit. Something has been drawn together in our hearts and minds by applying ourselves to this wholesome activity. After completing a meditation session, you may want to dwell for a minute or so to dedicate the merit of your practice, that it may lead to the fulfillment of whatever you find to be most meaningful for yourself and for others. With intention and attention, that goodness can be directed wherever we wish.