

some notes on meditation

posture

Ensure that you are sitting comfortably, placing your bottom on cushions and your knees resting on the floor for stability. If you decide to sit on a chair, sit upright with your feet square on the floor or on a firm cushion. Use a suitable number of cushions that will allow your pelvis to sit square and your spine to rise naturally.

Sit like a tree, with your lower body rooted and grounded like the roots and your spine and upper body rising like the trunk and branches. Allow your shoulders to fall down and back, letting your chest open and your breath flow freely.

How you sit will affect your meditation enormously. Adjust your posture to balance your state of mind – settling down or waking up as appropriate.

At any point when you 'lose the place', just return to your posture, this simple sense of yourself sitting here, aware, relaxed. Then come back to the meditation practice.

Body like a mountain, heart like the ocean, mind like the sky. – Dogen

body awareness

Always take a few moments at the start of any meditation to tune into your body.

After setting up your sitting posture bring your attention to each part of your body - beginning with your toes and your feet, then scanning up through your legs, pelvic area, spine, stomach, chest, shoulders, arms, neck, head and face.

Sometimes it helps to spend longer doing this, making it a practice in itself. Slowly scan over your body for about a quarter of an hour or even longer, noticing if you are still paying attention, coming back again and again to the simple immediate experiences that make up the sense of your body. Allow an open awareness to grow of your whole body as you sit here.

Through this practice we are letting ourselves arrive and be fully present. The more we are present the more we are meditating. When we are distracted from our experience we can find that we don't get around to actually arriving *anywhere*. This is what the Buddha was talking about when he said that the unmindful are like the dead.

mindfulness of breathing

Once you have established a measure of awareness of your overall body, bring your attention to your breath. You are using the

breath as a focus to become more fully present in your experience and thus more wholeheartedly engaged in life. We use counting in the first stages...

stage 1. Follow the breath, placing one number lightly after each out breath - from 1 to 10 and then beginning at 1 again. If you wander off or lose count, don't worry, just come back to yourself sitting here, back to the breath and resume with the number 1.

stage 2. Change your counting slightly by dropping in your number at the point of the inbreath.

stage 3. Drop the counting and stay absorbed in overall breath.

stage 4. Focus on the fine point where you feel air becoming breath in your nostrils or upper lip.

Practice with a gentle, patient persistence – don't give yourself a hard time for losing count, this happens to every meditator – simply notice when you've drifted off and come back, gently and patiently. The persistence lies in doing this repeatedly, gradually deepening our focus and continuity with the breath. Practice with a balanced effort, neither forced nor vague. At the end of each practice take the time to reconnect gradually with the world. Become aware of your whole body sitting here again, take in the sounds around you. Give yourself the space for some of the clarity and calm you've been developing to stay with you. Never underestimate what has been happening.

cultivating loving kindness

In this practice we are cultivating empathy and well-wishing to all living beings and by this reclaiming the energy we waste in irritation and hate.

Begin your meditation as usual with an awareness of your body and a sense of relaxedness. Then include your thoughts and feelings, allowing whatever is going on to come to light. You are simply observing and feeling, without judging or getting caught up in your thoughts.

You can then focus on the positive thoughts and feelings in your current experience, whatever you find that is kinder and more beautiful. You can help this along by recollecting something kind you did for someone recently or that someone has done for you, or by recollecting something of beauty you have seen or heard recently. At this stage you are finding the seeds of positivity in your current experience that

will grow into *metta*. Connect and stay with the quality of this kindness and appreciation.

There are five stages to this practice.

Choose yourself and three other people; a friend, a neutral person and someone we have difficulty with.

stage 1. Include yourself in your positive feelings – wishing yourself well. We can encourage this by repeating a simple phrase such as 'may I be well, may I be happy'. Allow the words to sink in and have their effect as they resonate in your heart. Or if you are a visual person bring to mind a colour or image that you associate with kindness and immerse yourself in this. Or stay with the warmth of your heart allowing it to expand and glow through us.

stage 2. Include a good friend, someone you find easy to wish well. Say their name in your phrase, immerse them in your colour or image, picture their face or recollect a time recently when you got on well together.

stage 3. Include someone you are more or less indifferent towards. Allow them to fill out as human beings in your imagination - they have their own hopes and fears, their own desire for happiness, just as much as you and your friend. You may wander off the point more in this stage as this person is the least interesting to us. Keep coming back to yourself sitting here, reconnecting with your sense of kindness and then with the person in this stage.

stage 4. Include a person you have difficulty with - they too have feelings, desires and fears like ours. Connect with the wider person beyond your own particular slant on them. To empathise means to feel with, to make an imaginative connection between our feelings and theirs. We don't have to pretend that this is a good person, we just wish them well no matter what they are like. Metta is like sunlight shining on good and bad alike, not a reward we hand out for good behaviour.

stage 5. Bring all four people together in your mind without your usual preferences and biases, connecting and empathising with all four equally.

Then we include the whole world, connecting with all of life, from those in the same room and building out to all life on this planet and beyond. Wherever there is life there is the same wish to be well and to avoid suffering.

At the end of each practice take the time to reconnect with the wider world, just as with

the mindfulness of breathing. Let some of the kindness remain with us - don't leap back into activity too quickly.

try this out at home...

Every so often take a mindfulness break, wherever you are - standing at the bus stop, waiting in a shop or at your computer. Pause for a moment and allow yourself to be present with your experience. Notice your feet on the floor, notice your breath. Spend a minute with your breathing. What happens?

Be aware of your feet as you walk. Try this out for two minutes as you move around your house. Be sensitive to the subtle flexing motions of your feet. How does this feel? Does your sense of your body change? Spend a few minutes sitting in the posture we tried here. Take 5 or 10 minutes in the morning or evening to sit quietly and see your awareness grow and flow through your body, thoughts and feelings. Are there any aspects of this experience you can usefully take to other parts of your life?

"Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from your own actions."

- the Dalai Lama

recommended reading list

You can pick these up from the Glasgow Buddhist Centre's bookshop or from Amazon.

Change Your Mind by Paramananda – very accessible meditation guide, complete with poems and stories.

Introducing Buddhism by Chris Pauling – if you're interested in investigating Buddhism then have a look at this; a regular best seller over the last 17 years and a clear basic introduction to the essential teachings of mainstream Buddhism.

contact us for details of classes in meditation, Buddhism, tai chi and yoga

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