

Practical Guidelines & Tips for Mindfulness Meditation

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Mindfulness Meditation: The Heart & Soul of Mindfulness

- Mindfulness meditation is the purest form of training our mind to develop stable attention and powerful awareness. It is about allowing the mind to be still (like the settling down of a snow globe), so that clarity and calm can arise. It is important to remember that this stillness is our mind's natural state; we just get into bad habits of agitating it all the time, so that it becomes wild.
- Including a regular, daily practice that involves stillness and “non-doing” in mindfulness practice (in addition to mindfulness in everyday life) is extremely important. Both meditation and everyday mindfulness support and reinforce each other.
- Mindfulness meditation can be practiced while sitting, lying down, or standing. However, since the goal is to cultivate attention and awareness, sitting is the best option (since lying down often leads to sleep, and standing for extended periods tends to be difficult and uncomfortable). Standing can be a good option for times when you are trying to meditate but you are quite fatigued. Lying down is a good option if a severe medical condition or disability precludes sitting. Either of these other options are fine (and good) to use in ADDITION to a primary sitting practice.

Instructions and tips for sitting:

- Sit in a comfortable yet upright position, with your back straight, with your head, neck, and back in alignment (your posture should lead you to feel alert and “dignified”; avoid a slouching or lounging posture). It is fine to sit on a chair, a cushion, or a bench. If sitting in a chair, it is fine to use lower back support (with a pillow or cushion) if needed but try to make sure that your upper back and shoulders are upright.
- Although anything can be an object of meditation, as long as it grounds us in the present moment (e.g., sounds, bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions), *the breath* is what we usually focus on, for several important reasons:
 - The breath is always with us, no matter where we are.
 - The breath connects us with life, as it flows moment-by-moment. As such, it is an ideal anchor to the present moment, a great “home base” to always be able to return to, when we get distracted.
 - The breath symbolizes the process of accepting (with each inhale) and letting go (with each exhale). As such, it helps us remember the importance of non-attachment and non-aversion. (If we tried to cling to our breath or refuse to accept the next breath, this would not work out so well).

General steps to follow:

1. Set a timer (with a pleasant bell or other tone), so that you can “set it and forget it,” preventing the need to check a watch or clock. There are plenty of free meditation timer smartphone apps available that can be customized for different tones and settings (I particularly recommend the “Insight Timer” app).
2. Close your eyes (you can keep them open, if you prefer, but I strongly recommend closed eyes).
3. While maintaining a straight back, let go of any tension in your mind and body.
4. Set the intention to practice diligently (yet patiently and non-judgmentally) for the full duration of your meditation session, no matter what happens.
5. Breathe naturally through your nose, without trying to control or influence your breath. Simply allow yourself to *feel* your body breathe, focusing on each inhale and each exhale. You can pay attention either

to the sensations of the abdomen (as it rises and falls with each in-breath and each out-breath) or to the sensations at the tip of the nose (or upper lip) as air flows in and out (or both at the same time).

- Allow your *attention to stay focused on the breath* while still allowing your *peripheral awareness to remain open* to whatever arises (thoughts, sounds, sensations, feelings, etc.). This is equivalent to focusing your vision on some central object, while still being able to see things in the periphery of your visual field. The goal is to focus on the breath, but without trying to “block out” anything. When anything else arises in awareness, simply let it come, let it be, and let it go.
 - Follow the *full cycle of the breath*; inhale, exhale, and the pauses between the breaths.
6. Inevitably, *your mind will get distracted* (this is just what the untrained mind does); you will forget to focus on the breath, and your mind will start to wander.
 - When this happens, *simply recognize that your mind has wandered*. Pause briefly to *appreciate this “aha” moment* when you remembered to focus on your breath and give yourself a “mental pat on the back” (remember, we want to positively reinforce the behaviors of the mind that we want, rather than punishing the ones we don’t want).
 7. *Without any judgment, gently but firmly return* the attention to the breath.
 8. Simply repeat this process until the meditation session is over.
- Additional tips: Particularly when starting out with mindful breathing, it can be helpful to use helpful phrases that you think to yourself, such as “*breathing in...breathing out,*” or “*in...out.*” Or, you can *count your breaths* (either count every breath up to 5 or 10; if you lose count, simply start over, without any judgment of yourself, and making sure you mentally congratulate yourself for recognizing that you lost count).