

Mindfulness Meditation Instructions

By Peter B. Williams

Mindfulness meditation is simple, but not necessarily easy. Mindfulness is simply knowing what is happening in the present moment. If you are drinking a glass of water, it is feeling the smoothness of the glass as you pick it up and the coolness of the water in your mouth. However, because we are so habitually caught up in thinking, we are rarely aware of what we are doing. Meditation is a practice that reduces activity in order to increase the chances of being aware. We start with the training wheels of sitting still and being with the breath, but eventually we can expand our awareness to include all activities in our lives.

The instructions that follow are non-sectarian and can be practiced by anyone without regard to religious or spiritual beliefs. They are derived from insight meditation, or vipassana, which comes out of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. I gratefully acknowledge the teachers at the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock Meditation Center, who imparted the following meditation instructions to me with great wisdom and clarity.

Awareness of Breath

Correct posture is a strong support for meditation. The key is to find a posture that is erect yet relaxed, one in which you can stay relatively still during your meditation period. Sitting in a chair, kneeling on a bench, or sitting on a cushion are all fine. Make sure you are sitting so that the spine is in its natural position, with the lower back curved inward. The back is erect and the chin slightly lowered. You can either close your eyes or leave them open. If you prefer them open, lower your gaze, focusing on a fixed point on the floor about four feet in front of you. Relax your body around the support of your back by taking a few deep breaths, relaxing all your muscles as you breathe out. Then pay particular attention to relaxing the tongue, the throat, and the area near the eyes.

Start by taking a few moments to feel the sensations of the body, especially points that are in contact with something, such as the buttocks, hands, knees, and feet. Notice the difference between feeling the actual sensation (pressure, tingling, heat, etc...) and your thoughts about the sensation, or your image of the area of the body in which the sensation is arising. You may notice that being in the body gives you a sense of groundedness.

Notice any sounds that arise. Notice that you do not have to do anything but be undistracted; sounds come to you and are heard, automatically. You may notice that hearing is accompanied by a sense of spaciousness.

Out of the groundedness of sitting and the spaciousness of hearing, receive the sensations of the breath. One can focus on the sensations at the tips of nostrils, or the sensations associated with the rising and falling of the chest or the abdomen. Spend a little time assessing which of the three areas is the most prominent. Then keep your attention focused on this area. What are the sensations of breathing? Again and again, keep returning to these sensations. Keep your attitude soft and relaxed. Trying to screw your attention down to the breath in a grim effort to never leave it can only backfire. In addition, you do not have to go out and try to find the sensations. Just relax and let the sensations come to you. Make an effort to be present, but let it be a gentle effort, made with gentle determination.

A technique you may find useful is mental noting. In this technique, we make a very light mental note to help tether the mind to the present. On an in breath we make the note "In" and on the out breath we make the note "Out." If you are focusing on the chest or the abdomen, make the notes "Rise" and "Fall." Maybe five percent of our attention is assigned to labeling. Try this and see if it

helps you connect more fully to the sensations of breathing. Some people find it a bit distracting or thought-inducing to do mental noting. If so, you do not need to use it. But try it at least a few meditation sessions before deciding to drop it.

As you continue meditating, you will undoubtedly find that you have been thinking and are not with the breath. Just notice this and return to the sensations of breathing. Some people find it helpful to make a light mental note of "thinking" as they return to the breath. The key to meditation is our attitude when we notice we have been lost. It is very unlikely that the mind will stay on the breath for long without wandering away. After all, we practice distraction just about every moment of our lives. Can you return to the breath with a sense of forgiveness and without judgment? Can you just simply begin again? It is also tempting to try to resolve any problem or finish any story or memory the mind is engaged in. This too is just more distraction. Just begin again. Beginning again is the wisdom of letting go whatever thinking mind is seduced by, knowing that we can access a deeper peace and happiness by being mindful.

It can be a common experience to judge your practice when noticing you have been distracted. Castigating yourself because you have been away is too late; you are already back in present time. Judging yourself is just plunging you back into distraction. Isn't this amazing, judging cannot work in meditation!

The genius of meditation is that it shows us how our mind works. We see how common it is to evaluate our experience even when doing something as simple as being aware of the breath. Working with judgment in meditation is training for letting go of judgment in every aspect of our lives. Because the one thing we bring to every situation is our minds, changing mental habits is the most effective route to happiness.

Expanding Awareness

As stated above, we can broaden our awareness to include all aspects of our lives.

We start to do this in our formal meditation practice by bringing mindfulness to sensations in the body, to hearing, and even to emotions and to thinking. It is best to keep this process simple by starting with one object, such as body sensations. Notice sensations wherever they are prominent in the body. What are they like - buzzy, tingly, warm, cool, heavy, or light? Do they change? You may find it helpful to make occasional, light mental notes of the experience, like "tingling or tightness." If the mind images the body, or if you find yourself thinking about the sensation instead of feeling it, just notice this and come back to the sensation itself. If you are getting distracted, return to breathing until you feel your attention has stabilized. The breath acts as an anchor or home, a simple place we can return to when our minds are lost.

You can expand your awareness further by including sounds. Let the sounds come to you. You do not have to go out and find them. Hearing happens automatically just by staying undistracted. Notice how changeable the field of hearing is, with sounds arising and falling away all around you. Use the mental note "hearing" if it helps.

When your mind feels very quiet, you can start to be aware of emotions. Emotions are combinations of thoughts and body sensations. In working with them, it is best to ground your attention in the body and pay attention to the thoughts peripherally, much like gazing at the moon but peripherally seeing stars in the sky. Bring a curiosity to your emotional life. What does fear or joy feel like in the body? Where is it located? Is pleasant or unpleasant? What are your reactions to it? How long does it last? Are there repetitive thoughts associated with the emotion? No need to analyze the thoughts and figure out where they came from, just notice them. Mental notes like "fear or joy" can be very helpful in working with emotions. If you get lost, return to the anchor of breathing until your attention is settled again. It can be an amazing discovery to realize that emotions come and go all by themselves if one does not get lost in the story line associated with them. The power of emotions over us begins to lessen with this realization.

When your mind is especially quiet, you can also be aware of thinking. This can be quite tricky, as thoughts are very seductive. Make sure your awareness is grounded in your breath, and then makes sporadic efforts to follow your thoughts. Keep returning to breathing to make sure you are not getting lost. Those mindful of thinking have consistently found that thoughts happen all by themselves. They just arise and dissipate on their own, one thought conditioning the next. This can be a profound insight and gives us tremendous freedom. If "I" am not my thoughts, then I do not have to be run by them. I can just watch them come and go, and choose which ones to act on. No longer am I defined by my job, my body type, my age, my personality. All these exist, and yet, they do not have to limit me, because awareness is larger than all of it.

Finally, you can just let it all hang out and be aware of anything that happens in experience - the breath, body sensations, sounds, emotions, and thoughts. In this choiceless awareness, just let the attention go to where it is drawn. Stay with it as long as you are aware and not distracted, otherwise return to breathing until the attention is more stable.

Bringing Awareness into Our Lives

We can expand meditation even further by bring it into our daily lives. Meditation is often called practice. What are we practicing for? For living fully. Ultimately, the point of mindfulness is to bring it into our lives, into our relations with others, our jobs, our playtime, our household chores. There are many ways to do this, and it takes lots of trial and error. You can be with the breath when you are sitting down, or the sensations of your feet on the ground when you are walking or standing. Some people find that their emotional life is the best mindfulness object, that they are often aware of their emotional state, and can ground themselves in the body sensations of their feelings.

Effort is also a consideration. For many, it is too much of a strain to try to be mindful all day. Maybe for you it is best to pick a few short periods during the day

where you try to be present, or a simple activity you do every day, like eating a meal or going through doors. Noticing your breath while waiting at a stoplight is a favorite. Some people use the telephone ring as a mindfulness bell, and always let it ring at least twice before answering.

The most important point is to have fun with meditation in daily life. If it is a burden or a feeling like it is something you *should* do, your efforts probably will not last long.