

**An Introduction to the View and  
Practice of Mindfulness Meditation**

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Our world is a very busy place these days and often we find ourselves floating along with a fast moving current. Rarely does the mind rest, even for a moment. During the day we jump from dwelling on some distant past event to worrying about the future. At night when we should be sound asleep our hopes and fears are re-lived in dreams. We are captivated by thoughts and dragged around by strong emotions. All this activity is tiring and not very fulfilling, though we may feel like we are getting somewhere.

Meditation is often touted as a relaxation technique, which brings some kind of peace of mind. While this is true, it is more like a side benefit. Rather, meditation has profound and far reaching influence in our daily life by empowering us with the element of choice. Normally, when we are caught up in thoughts and feelings we are functioning on auto pilot. Our actions are guided by largely unconscious patterns and beliefs which sometimes bring happiness, but a lot of time they create further problems and suffering. We react to life situations impulsively and then the action bounces back on us. Mindfulness meditation can help illuminate these hidden patterns and beliefs which are essentially running the show. For example, when we wake up on the spot in the middle of an argument or find ourselves avoiding asking our boss for a raise, suddenly a choice arises; we can continue to do the same old thing or we can open up to something fresh.

Fresh experiences tend to be scary as we don't know what will happen. The uncertainty of our life seems like a burden to get away from, but in truth without it healing would not be possible. Change would not be possible without first allowing a gap. In meditation we work on developing the habit of returning to the present moment instead of wandering or being caught up in thoughts. With practice, the mind begins to settle. When the mind is relaxed our vital energy can flow freely which is rejuvenating on all levels. In this sense meditation can be very helpful for appreciating a natural sense of goodness or healthiness in ourselves which is always available.

The technique of meditation is actually very simple, but initially the practice can be challenging. The following is a summary of the basic meditation technique known as Calm Abiding or *Shamatha* in Sanskrit.

**Before you start**

First arrange a quiet space where nothing will disturb you. This could be a special place in your home which you could return to and associate with peace and calm. You might consider lighting a candle and burning some incense. You might also want to make a small shrine of sorts with objects and pictures that are important to you and invoke a sense of sanity and sacredness in your mind. Shut off your cell phone and unplug any other devices that may distract you from your practice. Create a comfortable seat on the floor or on a chair. Once seated begin your session by first recalling your intention for practice. This might be to know greater peace, to work with your mind, to let go of the past and be present. Whatever it is say it to yourself quietly to remind yourself why you are doing this.

**Posture – Taking your seat**

The discipline of sitting meditation begins with how we hold our body. Meditation could be said to be a type of yoga. If we are slouching the energy of the body will stagnate and this will affect our thought process and practise. Begin by feeling your connection to the earth through you cushion or chair. Feel your body in the space. Begin with a quick body scan to see where you are holding tension. See if you can relax these areas with a few deep breaths.

The most important part of meditation posture is to have an erect spine. To do this imagine as if a string in the back of your head was being pulled up. As this is happening your chin is tucking in slightly. As you raise up the spine, the front of your body should be relaxing – your face, shoulders, chest, belly etc... There is a sense of strong back and soft, open front.

Your legs can be crossed loosely in front, or if you are on a chair your feet should be flat on the floor. If the seat of the chair curves toward the back rest, prop up your bottom with a pillow so your spine is not out of alignment. Sit toward the edge of the chair rather than the back. Hands can be resting comfortably on your thighs. Play around with the position so there is no strain in your shoulders.

Many traditions of meditation advocate practising with eyes shut. In Shamatha the eyes are kept slightly open during practice, with an unfocused gaze toward the ground 3- 5 feet in front. Open eyes promotes an attitude of being awake, not falling into day dreams or shutting out the world. Remember to blink. To help the circulation of vital energy in the body and stop excessive salivation, place the tongue gently on the palette behind the front teeth.

The posture should feel comfortable, but you can expect some initial aches and pains as your body gets used to sitting in this way. At any time feel free to adjust you posture to relieve discomfort.

### **Working with the breath – the object of meditation**

Once we have established a foundation of good posture you can turn your mind toward the object of meditation. To rest the mind we need an object to return to when we get distracted. Traditionally the breath is used, though a rock or candle flame could be substituted for beginners to help settle an over active mind. The breath engages the para-sympathetic nervous system helping to induce relaxation. It is also intimately connected with the present moment, thus reminding us to come back.

Start by simply tuning into the feeling of the in and out breath. For most people this is felt in the nostrils, but it maybe else where for yourself. Breathe naturally as you normally would, just observe the in and out breath. If your mind is really busy you can count your breaths for a short period of five minutes. Count the out breath as 1 and continue up to 4. If you get distracted return to 1 and count up again. Once this is mastered, try counting 21 cycles of breath.

Once you feel settled and are able to concentrate, you can just focus on the sensation of the breath as it moves in and out of the body. Eventually as practice develops the emphasis shifts to just the out breath. This allows a little more room to take in what is happening around you, while still remaining alert and present. There is a sense of mind mingling with space on the out breath as well as a feeling of resting. Eventually no object of meditation is needed to remain present, but this a very advanced stage. Still we can work in that direction and eventually the fruits of unbroken awareness begin to show up in our life off the cushion.

### **Working with thoughts**

As we work with the breath at a certain point we realize that five minutes has passed and we were not actually paying attention. We might have been thinking about work or food or worrying about the kids. Once you have woken up to the fact that you got lost in thought, simply return to the breath. There is no need to be hard on yourself. This is a gradual training process. The goal of practice is not to stop thinking, but rather recognize when we have wandered in pursuit of thoughts. When this happens, we can say to ourselves quietly ‘thinking’, then return to the breath. The labeling of thoughts helps to take the charge off so called good and bad thoughts. In the context of meditation certain thoughts are not given special privileges. In fact their façade of

solidity and legitimacy is highly questionable when you really look into them. They arise, dwell and pass very quickly without a trace. We don't really need to treat them so seriously.

Boredom is a common result of this simple process of returning, which should be treated as just another thought. Boredom is a sign that your practice is going well. Without the constant entertainment of habitual patterns we begin to look for something else to fill up the space. However, if we can stick with the process practice begins to de-energize negative patterns by simply recognizing them as they arise and not engaging in them. Without our buy in these storylines lose their power over us and boredom becomes a kind of peace.

### **Making a habit of being present**

Meditation is fundamentally a practice of training ourselves to stay present. This may seem counter intuitive especially if we are experiencing pain of any kind. Being present may be the last thing we wish to do. However, we cannot be free from the challenges faced in life by denying their existence. Such an approach is the root of tension and suffering in general. From the perspective of Chinese Medicine when awareness recedes from the body so too does vitality. To reverse chronic health problems or any problem for that matter we need to lean into it slightly to see what is happening before we act. This requires a shift of intention from denial to exploration and openness. In this regard mindfulness meditation is basic training to help us stay open and work directly with life challenges like illness and the uncertainty they provoke. With the ability of the mind to rest in itself the ups and downs of life can't destabilize us.

Like any form of training repetition is needed. Rather than trying to do 3 hours on the weekend it is better to do shorter sessions regularly to start. Ten minutes a day, either in the morning or evening, is best. With practice you can increase your sessions over time. It can be helpful to sit with others and read books on meditation to inspire your practice.

Over time your practice will become a source of refuge, a path to seeing clearly your truth and to appreciating the goodness in the world.