

INCUBATIO

MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

There are many ways of practising mindfulness, but the fundamental intention is to pay attention to current experience in terms of sensation, emotion, and thoughts. A daily practice of even 15 minutes can enhance considerably one's experience – and at the very least will give an indication of how one's mind processes experience. Sitting in meditation posture is extremely helpful, as it helps the body settle down, and the mind stop its endless chatter, but the practice can equally be done by sitting on a chair with one's feet firmly on the ground – or sitting outside in the fresh air – or even lying down.

Described here are three fundamental practices for bringing attention to the body, the breath, emotions. A short 3-minute meditation is also described derived from Mark Williams' book, *Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*.

FORMAL PRACTICES

As taught in the Triratna Buddhist Order (Formerly Western Buddhist Order)

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

1 BODY AWARENESS

Try to 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.

2 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.

3 MINDFULNESS OF EMOTIONS : 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.

BREATHING SPACE MEDITATION – a practice to be used in daily life when you need a moment to pull back from what is happening and reconnect with the inner self.

From Mark Williams, Mindfulness : a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world, published by Piatkus books.

Step 1: Becoming aware

Deliberately adopt an erect and dignified posture, whether sitting or standing. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledge it, asking: what is my experience right now?

- What thoughts are going through the mind? As best you can, acknowledge thoughts as mental events.
- What feelings are here? Turn towards any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging them without trying to make them different from how you find them.

Step 2: gathering and focusing attention

Now, redirecting the attention to a narrow ‘spotlight’ on the physical sensations of the breath, move in close to the physical sensations of the breath in the abdomen . . . expanding as the breath comes in . . . and falling back as the breath goes out. Follow the breath all the way in and all the way out. Use each breath as an opportunity to anchor yourself into the present. And if the mind wanders, gently escort the attention back to the breath.

Step 3: expanding attention

Now, expand the field of awareness around the breathing so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture and facial expression, as if the whole body was

breathing. Finally expand your awareness still further to include the sounds around you and the silences in-between - again without judging or needing to react - just observing them simply as sounds.

It is helpful to view your awareness during the Breathing Space as forming the shape of an hourglass. The wide opening at the top of an hourglass - you open your attention and gently acknowledge whatever is entering and leaving awareness.

The second step of the Breathing Space is like the narrowing of the hourglass's neck. It's where you focus your attention on the breath in the lower abdomen. You focus on the physical sensations of breathing, gently coaxing the mind back to the breath when it wanders away. This helps to anchor the mind – grounding you back in the present moment.

The third step of the Breathing Space is like the broadening base of an hourglass. In this, you open your awareness. In this opening, you are opening to life as it is, preparing yourself for the next moments of your day. Here you are, gently but firmly, reaffirming a sense that you have a place in the world – your whole mind–body, just as it is, in all its peace, dignity and completeness.