

Basic Meditation Guidelines for Daylong practice and Home practice

Welcome one and all! Daylong practice, particularly in a group setting, helps deepen our concentration and strengthen our understanding that meditation practice is a worthwhile activity. As we become more able to establish composure and calm the mind, the more peace and joy we find. These guidelines are an orientation for new practitioners, and a set of reminders for seasoned meditators.

Motivation

Why meditate? Don't we already have enough to do?

Meditation develops qualities of heart and mind that would otherwise take years of study or therapy, such as compassion, joy, patience, understanding, sharp judgment and decision-making, peacefulness, and loving kindness. These build more skillful inter-relationships, both personally and professionally. They are a source of greater satisfaction and happiness because they improve our mental and emotional state, reducing anger, ill will, jealousy, and the Type A tendencies and pressure of our highly competitive world.

These goals are universal. Who doesn't want to be happier? It's important to remember these things so we don't fool ourselves into thinking that sitting is a waste of time.

Goals & Intentions

Goals point to the big picture, while intentions are simple statements of what we specifically intend to accomplish right here, right now, as we sit. For example, as a beginning meditator, an intention might be: "May I stay with the sensations of my breath as best I can, and come back to them quickly when distracted." But as we overcome distraction and obstacles like sleepiness, our intention might change to, for example, "May I pay steady attention to the sensations of breathing and let go of any thoughts that intrude."

As you can see, intentions can change daily depending on what we want to accomplish right now, while goals, although they too can change, tend to be more stable.

Posture

It's important to be comfortable, upright and alert, whether you sit on the floor in one of the several traditional meditation postures, or on a chair. For those who need to lie down while meditating, the biggest challenge is staying awake, but once you've learned to relax and keep alert, the prone position works well. When sitting upright however, it is beneficial for your hips to be slightly higher than your knees, spine straight but not rigid, belly soft and relaxed, with hands at ease.

Here is a link to a thorough and illustrated guide to posture. The last page is a summary or quick review.

<http://shinzen.org/Retreat%20Reading/POSTURE-PEDIA.pdf>

Technique

These guidelines are about “Mindfulness Meditation.” To be mindful means to stay attuned to the present moment, “right here, right now.” Mindfulness of the sensations of breathing is a basic and highly effective way to keep our attention in the present moment. After all, what is more “right here, right now” than that?

When you meditate at home, set a timer and decide not to get up until it goes off. This is much easier, and far less distracting, than watching the clock. Most people can find at least five minutes to sit, but 15 or 20 is better. Twice a day is great, but once daily is essential to make this a habit, a new habit that we come to look forward to.

Check your posture as you settle in, allowing it to be upright but not tense, comfortable yet alert. If you are aware of tension, especially in your face, neck or shoulders, let it go as much as possible. Your eyes can be open or closed. If open, let the eyes be soft and rest your gaze on the floor a few feet in front of you.

The physical sensations of breathing are easiest to feel in several different places: the belly, the chest, the throat, and at or in your nostrils. When learning to meditate, explore them all and find the one or two places where the breath is easiest for you to feel, then anchor your attention there while you sit. Tune in to the *physical* sensations associated with breathing and pay continuous, close attention to them, including the little pauses or gaps at the top and bottom of the in-breath and the out-breath.

If you notice any discomfort in your body or with your breathing, you can experiment to see if changing the way you breath makes an improvement. For example, if sleepy you could try breathing in a more energetic way, or if in pain, you could breathe gently.

You'll soon notice that while breath sensations are always in the present moment, distractions are always about the past or the future. So by definition, being distracted is not being "mindful." The good news is that distractions are inevitable, so just come back to the breath as soon as you can. In fact, the "Aha!" moment – when you realize you've been distracted – is called the "Golden Moment" because the effort you make to start meditating again brings you right back into mindfulness. It's like a mini-workout in the mental gym, as we build the "meditation muscle" and strengthen the meditation habit.

Consider each return from mind wandering a success and cause for celebration. In fact, give yourself a mental pat on the back! In this way, from the very beginning of our meditation practice, we look for and take deliberate pleasure in even our small successes, while letting go of any tendency to be judgmental or critical of our efforts.

Walking Meditation

Meditators don't only sit! Sometimes physical movement is the best way to practice, such as when we're outdoors in an awe-inspiring or very peaceful place, or even when we're at home, feeling restless or agitated. Walking meditation is just as good as seated practice for developing concentration and mindfulness. Mindful walking can be done any time we're on our feet, or more formally as part of a daily practice period.

Our meditation object while walking is usually the sensations in the soles of our feet, but any sensations in the lower part of the body associated with walking work just as well. Start off slowly, directing awareness towards the soles of the feet. Use a mental note at first: "lifting, moving, and placing" for each footstep, or just note "left," "right," "left." At some point, try only focusing on the sensations without mental noting. We can experiment to find what works best at any particular time. Because we're concentrating, we tend to look downward, but this isn't necessary.

Choose a path about 20 paces long (it can be done in a much smaller space as well) and walk mindfully back and forth. Being outdoors is ideal, but we can walk anywhere. Pause and turn at each end, taking a moment to refocus on your body before starting up again. Plan to walk at least 15 minutes. Many people find 30 minutes seems to work best.

While keeping attention on the sensations of walking, we also want to stay aware of what's happening around us. This is called "peripheral awareness." Strong mindfulness is the optimum combination of focused attention and peripheral awareness. In fact, no matter what kind of meditation we do, we always try to fully cultivate *both* attention and peripheral awareness, keeping our attention fixed on the sensations of walking, and bringing it back in when it gets hijacked by some distraction.

There are many things we see while walking. We can actually feel our attention being pulled from our focus on the soles of the feet by, and to, some of these objects. Be aware of this tendency. If there is something of interest, be deliberate about shifting attention to it. Otherwise, remain focused on the sensations of walking. When we sense that our attention has been pulled away, gently bring it back.

How fast or slow should we walk? In the beginning, walking very slowly is helpful for good concentration, although we may have to go faster to keep balanced. One dharma teacher calls this "Zombie Walking." But in the long run it's good to walk at a wide variety of speeds, opting for a brisk pace as an antidote to sleepiness or stiffness and choosing to slow things down if we're feeling speedy or ungrounded.

Maintaining Noble Silence

As part of the effort to establish a calm inner and outer environment, we usually observe silence during our time together. We expend a lot of energy in conversation and looking around. When we talk, we arouse thinking, and *that* interferes with the stillness and mental focus we're cultivating today. This practice is called "Noble Silence" because it helps us increase our awareness and cultivate a peaceful mind, which is a noble goal. We meditate, walk, and eat in silence, and we attempt to avoid non-verbal communication as well. The best way to do that is to avoid eye contact with others during the day, if possible.

Although we're conserving considerable energy by not speaking aloud or looking around, it's likely that our mental self-talk continues unabated. Usually we hardly notice this, but now that it's quiet in there, self-talk is in the spotlight. It is not always positive. In fact, it can be harsh and critical towards ourselves and others. It's been said that we'd never dare talk to other people the way we sometimes talk to ourselves. *Internal* noble silence involves not just noticing when we're caught up in chatter, but also noticing how much time we spend judging ourselves and our practice. The effort here is to not only let all that go, but to intentionally replace it with a spirit of lovingkindness and self-compassion.

We hope these guidelines will serve you well in your practice, and thank you for making use of them.