

Mindfulness Meditation Group

for stress and anxiety reduction



“Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won’t).”

-James Baraz

“Mindful Breathing helps us stop being preoccupied by sorrows of the past and anxieties of the future. It helps us to be in touch with life in the present moment.”

-Thich Nhat Hanh

We are going to move into a brief meditation

Put your hand on your abdomen (want to breathe with diaphragm)

Gently close your eyes, relax your jaw, drop your shoulders

Notice where else in your body you might be tense, and relax those areas

Breathe in from your diaphragm. Feel your hand rise as your lungs fill with air

Imagine that you are breathing in relaxation and allowing the oxygen to circulate throughout your body

Release the breath; imagine that you are breathing out all of the tension

Continue breathing like this for the next few minutes

As you're breathing out, let go of all the demands and pressures of the day and turn your attention inward

Notice how you are feeling right now. What thoughts are coming up for you? What sensations are you feeling in your body?

Notice all these without judgement

As you continue to relax, appreciate what it took for you to get here today

Ask yourself "What do I want to get out of the group today?"

What is my intention for myself today?

Perhaps this intention is in the form of a word, a phrase, or even an image

Focus on this intention

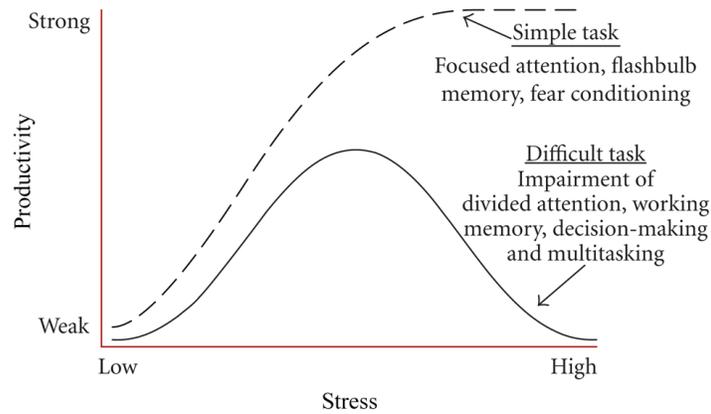
Prepare to return to your surroundings

Slowly open your eyes and bring this awareness with you back to the present moment

The Seven Attitudes of Mindfulness Practice

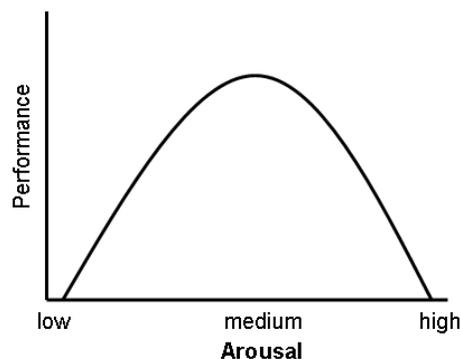
1. Non-judging: Cultivating the stance of being an impartial witness to whatever we are experiencing; breaking out of the habitual categorizing and judging of experiences which locks us into automatic reactions
2. Patience: A type of wisdom; recognizing that, at times, things must unfold at their own pace; letting go of the tendency to be impatient with ourselves and our lives
3. Beginner's Mind: Coming to each experience as if for the first time; freeing ourselves from preconceptions and biases so that we may see things in a new light and perceive the possibilities
4. Trust: Learning to have faith in ourselves and our own intuition; honoring our own feelings, our native wisdom; following our own path, not imitating someone else
5. Non-striving: Non-doing, with the intention of creating space for simply being who we are; being with what is already here; realizing that, in meditation, the best way to achieve our goals is to back off from striving and focus on seeing and accepting things as they are, in the moment.
6. Acceptance: Seeing and accepting things as they really are in the present, which reduces the energy drained by denying, suppressing, or resisting what is already there, thus freeing and focusing our energies for positive change
7. Letting go: Non-attachment; letting go of our investment in particular thoughts, feelings, and experiences; not elevating one thing (trying to prolong or recreate the pleasant: while rejecting another (trying to get rid of the unpleasant), but accepting whatever is here in the moment

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness. NY: Delta.



Yerkes Dodson Law

Human performance at any task varies with *arousal* in a predictable parabolic curve. At low arousal, people are lethargic and perform badly. As arousal increases, performance also increases- but only to a point, after which increasing arousal actually decreases performance.



Arousal in this context can also be thought of as *stress*, which is felt as an inner motivating tension.

Discussion

Without some motivating tension we have no reason to act. In this way, stress can be thought of as a good thing. We are built to be motivated by stress so this often happens.

The problem is that too much stress can cause performance to decline again, sometimes sharply. A downturn can also be caused by excessive attention to a task such that extra factors that are important get missed. Different people also have different overload points.

The behavior in the downturn has been called *satisficing* and is quite differently motivated from the earlier stages. Rather than gain satisfaction or reward from actions, the person who is *satisficing* seeks any way of reducing their stress. This can lead to sub-optimal solutions being used, which accounts in part for the performance decline.

Interestingly, the Chinese character for “stress” or “crisis” is written with two characters. The first is “danger” and the next is “opportunity.” This highlights that stress is not all bad and that benefits can be gained from using felt pressure.

Yerkes, R. M., and Dodson, J. D. (1908). The relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit-formation. *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18, 459-48

Anxiety: Fears vs Facts

People often believe things about anxiety that are not true. Here are some common mistaken fears and the actual facts

False Fears	Facts
Anxiety always means there is some danger. You only feel afraid when you are in danger.	No. The anxiety response can be triggered in your reacting brain even when there's no real danger. You can feel afraid and not be in danger.
Anxiety sensations mean something is physically wrong.	No. Anxiety sensations only mean your fight-or-flight response got triggered.
Anxiety will get worse and worse or happen more and more.	No. What you do and tell yourself makes anxiety worse or better.
An anxiety attack could go on forever and never stop.	No. An anxiety attack can't go on forever because you run out of adrenaline and your body starts activating the peaceful side of the nervous system. But, you should learn how to reduce anxiety and stress because you can stay worried and tense for a long time.
Anxiety can make you go crazy.	No. Anxiety is a natural reaction. It causes problems when it's triggered too often or when you think things or do things that make it worse. Being crazy is a totally different problem. It is not related to anxiety. Anxiety doesn't cause it. Other things do.
Anyone who looks at me when I'm anxious can tell. If people can tell I'm anxious, they'll think I'm weak, or incompetent.	Most people, even in anxiety groups, can't tell when other people are anxious. People who do see that someone is anxious are usually sympathetic.
I won't be able to do anything if I have too much anxiety. Strong anxiety could make me not be able to think or talk or move or work.	No. The purpose of anxiety is to prepare you to act to save your life when you're in danger. A danger response that makes you non-functional wouldn't help save your life. Anxiety can make you tense and scared and put fear thoughts in your mind. It will not make you unable to think or talk or move or work. People have worked for years with bad anxiety.
I'll go out of control or do something crazy.	No. See Facts 5 and 7. But, you may feel revved up because you are prepared to fight or flee.

<p>Anxiety can make you stop breathing, suffocate, choke to death, or unable to swallow.</p>	<p>No. You may feel this way because of tensed muscles, breathing changes, and dry mouth. You won't die (see Fact 7).</p>
<p>The fight or flight response causes physical harm and will damage my body.</p>	<p>The fight or flight response is a natural, life-saving, harmless response. Our bodies are built to have this response and it will not harm a healthy person. However, staying worried or tense may cause physical problems so it is good to reduce stress and self-demands and break the anxiety cycle so you are not afraid of the anxiety reaction any more.</p> <p>Talk to your doctor if you have a medical condition and wonder if anxiety could harm you.</p>
<p>I feel faint or dizzy. That means I'm likely to pass out.</p>	<p>Anxiety causes changes in breathing, blood flow, and vision. These changes make a person feel faint or dizzy. Fainting is very unlikely because it wouldn't help you fight or flee (see Fact 7).</p>

Deep Breathing

Why is it so important to be aware of how we are breathing?

Our breathing directly reflects the level of tension we carry in our body

When we are tense, stressed, and/or anxious we tend to breathe in a shallow way from our chest. When we are relaxed we breathe more fully, slowly, deeply, and from our abdomen.

Why is it important to breathe deeply? What are some benefits of deep abdominal breathing?

- Increased oxygen supply to the brain and muscles
- Abdominal breathing triggers a relaxation response [versus the fight-or-flight response]
 - It activates the parasympathetic nervous system. This is where feelings of relaxation and calmness originate. In contrast, when we breathe shallow, the sympathetic nervous system is activated, which stimulates a state of emotional arousal and the physiological reactions underlying panic.
- Greater feelings of connectedness between mind and body. Anxiety and worry tend to keep you “up in your head.” A few minutes of deep abdominal breathing will help bring you down into your whole body and help you feel more grounded, centered, and balanced.
- Helps to increase your lung capacity, helping you breathe more deeply
- More efficient excretion of bodily toxins. Many toxic substances in the body are excreted through the lungs.
- Improved concentration. If your mind is racing, it’s difficult to focus your attention. Abdominal breathing will help to quiet your mind.

Take a minute to notice how you are breathing right now. Place one hand on your chest and another on your belly (right below your rib cage). Not trying to control your breath. Just observing it. Is your breath slow or rapid? Deep or shallow? Does it center around a point high in your chest or down in your abdomen/belly?

If you find that your breathing is shallow and high in your chest, with practice, you can retrain yourself to breathe more deeply and from your abdomen. By practicing the following Abdominal Breathing Exercise on a regular basis you will learn to shift the center of your breath downward from your chest, and as a result feel more relaxed.

Abdominal Breathing Exercise

- Place one hand on your belly, right beneath your rib cage. Close your eyes if you’d like.
- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the “bottom” of your lungs. Send the air as low down as you can. When you’ve taken in a full breath, pause for a moment and then exhale slowly and fully through your nose or your mouth, whichever you prefer.
- Again, inhale slowly and fully (if you’re breathing from your belly, your hand should actually rise. Your chest should move only slightly while your belly expands). Pause and then exhale slowly and fully. With each exhale, allow your whole body to let go. Visualize your arms and legs going loose and limp like a rag doll.
- Do 10 slow, full abdominal breaths. To help keep your breathing smooth and regular, count to 4 on the inhale, pause, and then slowly count to 4 on the exhale. With each exhalation, count backwards one number starting with 10.
 - Slow inhale.....pause.....slow exhale (count “10”)
 - Slow inhale.....pause.....slow exhale (count “9”)
 - Slow inhale.....pause.....slow exhale (count “8”).....and so on down to “1”

- Extend the exercise if you wish by doing two or three sets of abdominal breaths, remembering to count backwards from 10 to 1 for each set. Five full minutes of abdominal breathing will have a pronounced effect in reducing anxiety or early symptoms of panic.

The Three-Minute Breathing Space

STEP 1. Becoming Aware

Begin by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture, whether you are sitting or standing. If possible, close your eyes. Then, bringing your awareness to your inner experience, ask: What is my experience right now?

- What *thoughts* are going through the mind? As best you can, acknowledging thoughts as mental events, perhaps putting them into words.
- What *feelings* are here? Turning toward any sense of emotional discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging their presence.
- What *body sensations* are here right now? Perhaps quickly scanning the body to pick up any sensations of tightness or bracing.

STEP 2. Gathering

Then redirect your attention to focus on the physical sensations of the breath itself.

Move in close to the sense of the breath in the belly...feeling the sensations of the belly wall 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, using the breathing to anchor yourself in the present.

STEP 3. Expanding

Now expand the field of your awareness around your breathing so that, in addition to the sensations of the breath, it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression.

If you become aware of any sensations of discomfort, tension, or resistance, zero in on them by breathing into them on each in-breath and breathing out from them on each out-breath as you soften and open. If you want to, you might say to yourself on the out-breath,

“It’s okay...whatever it is, it’s already here; let me feel it.”

As best you can, bring this expanded awareness into the next moments of your day.

Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007). *The mindful way through depression: Freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness*. New York: Guilford Press.

Health Hint: Breathing Exercises

Breathing as a bridge

It is thought by many cultures that the process of breathing is the essence of being. A rhythmic process of expansion and contraction, breathing is one example of the consistent polarity we see in nature such as night and day, wake and sleep, seasonal growth and decay and ultimately life and death. In yoga, the breath is known as prana or a universal energy that can be used to find a balance between the body-mind, the conscious-unconscious, and the sympathetic-parasympathetic nervous system. Unlike other bodily functions, the breath is easily used to communicate between these systems, which gives us an excellent tool to help facilitate positive change. It is the only bodily function that we do both voluntarily and involuntarily. We can consciously use breathing to influence the involuntary (sympathetic nervous system) that regulates blood pressure, heart rate, circulation, digestion and many other bodily functions. Pranayama is a yoga practice that literally means the control of life or energy. It uses breathing techniques to change subtle energies within the body for health and well being. Breathing exercises can act as a bridge into those functions of the body of which we generally do not have conscious control.

An example of how life effects physiology

During times of emotional stress our sympathetic nervous system is stimulated and effects a number of physical responses. Our heart rate rises, we perspire, our muscles tense and our breathing becomes rapid and shallow. If this process happens over a long period of time, the sympathetic nervous system becomes over stimulated leading to an imbalance that can effect our physical health resulting in inflammation, high blood pressure and muscle pain to name a few. Consciously slowing our heart rate, decreasing perspiration and relaxing muscles is more difficult than simply slowing and deepening breathing. The breath can be used to directly influence these stressful changes causing a direction stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system resulting in relaxation and a reversal of the changes seen with the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system. We can see how our bodies know to do this naturally when we take a deep breath or sigh when a stress is relieved.

The breathing process can be trained

Breathing can be trained for both positive and negative influences on health. Chronic stress can lead to a restriction of this connective and muscular tissue in the chest resulting in a decrease range of motion of the chest wall. Due to rapid more shallow breathing, the chest does not expand as much as it would with slower deeper breaths and much of the air exchange occurs at the top of the lung tissue towards the head. This results in “chest” breathing. You can see if you are a chest breather by placing your right hand on your chest and your left hand on your abdomen. As your breathe, see which hand rises more. If your right had rises more, you are a chest breather. If your left hand rises more, you are a abdomen breather.

Chest breathing is inefficient because the greatest amount of blood flow occurs in the lower lobes of the lungs, areas that have limited air expansion in chest breathers. Rapid, shallow, chest breathing results in less oxygen transfer to the blood and subsequent poor delivery of nutrients to the tissues. The good news it that similar to learning to play an instrument or riding a bike, you can train the body to improve its breathing technique. With regular practice you will breathe from the abdomen most of the time, even while asleep.

The benefits of abdominal breathing

Abdominal breathing is also known as diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is a large muscle located between the chest and the abdomen. When it contracts it is forced downward causing the abdomen to expand. This causes negative pressure within the chest forcing air into the lungs. The negative pressure also pulls blood into the chest improving the venous return to the heart. This leads to improved stamina in both disease and athletic activity. Like blood, the flow of lymph, which is rich in immune cells, is also improved. By expanding the lung's air pockets and improving the flow of blood and lymph, abdominal breathing also helps prevent infection of the lung and other tissues. But most of all it is an excellent tool to stimulate the relaxation response that results in less tension and an overall sense of well being.

Abdominal Breathing Technique

Breathing exercises such as this one should be done twice a day or whenever you find your mind dwelling on upsetting thoughts or when you are experiencing pain.

- Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. When you take a deep breath in, the hand on the abdomen should rise higher than the one on the chest. This insures that the diaphragm is pulling air into the base of the lungs.
- After exhaling through the mouth, take a slow deep breath in through your nose imagining that you are sucking in all the air in the room and hold it for a count of 7 (or as long as you are able, not exceeding 7)
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 8. As all the air is released with relaxation, gently contract your abdominal muscles to completely evacuate the remaining air from the lungs. It is important to remember that we deepen respirations not by inhaling more air but through completely exhaling it.
- Repeat the cycle four more times for a total of 5 deep breaths and try to breathe at a rate of one breath every 10 seconds (or 6 breaths per minute). At this rate our heart rate variability increases which has a positive effect on cardiac health.

Once you feel comfortable with the above technique, you may want to incorporate words that can enhance the exercise. Examples would be to say to yourself the word, *relaxation* (with inhalation) and *stress or anger* (with exhalation). The idea being to bring in the feeling/emotion you want with inhalation and release those you don't want with exhalation.

In general, exhalation should be twice as long as inhalation. The use of the hands on the chest and abdomen are only needed to help you train your breathing. Once you feel comfortable with your ability to breathe into the abdomen, they are no longer needed.

Abdominal breathing is just one of many breathing exercises. But it is the most important one to learn before exploring other techniques. The more it is practiced, the more natural it will become improving the body's internal rhythm. If practiced over time, the abdominal breathing exercise can result in improved energy throughout the day.

Source: American Medical Student Association <http://www.amsa.org/healingthehealer/breathing.cfm>

Panic Attacks

Panic can strike people unexpectedly. Looking for reasons “why?” could be fruitless.

In fact, many students feel overwhelmed by panic and anxiety. But, panic can be beaten. It need not be a lifelong sentence.

Some things to do when you panic:

1. Tell yourself that the feelings are normal bodily reactions
2. They are not harmful – just unpleasant.
3. Wait for the fear to pass. Do not fight it or run away – accept it.
4. Slow down, take slow deep breaths. Learn to breathe properly.
5. Stay in the present. Stop “what if?” thoughts.
6. See, smell, listen, touch.
7. Hum a tune.
8. Let this pass. It will go away.
9. Remind yourself of past successes in beating panic.
10. Praise yourself when the wave passes – you have beaten it.

Thought Stopping

Thoughts can cause panic. Learn to monitor your thoughts and then you can learn to control panic attacks.

The second a negative or anxious thought appears in your conscious mind, send it packing with a resounding sub-vocal “STOP.” You do not have to think positively – but you do have to stop thinking negatively. *A positive thought does not cancel a negative thought.*

“What if”...”STOP”

“But”...”STOP”

“I will never”...”STOP”

“It is not good enough”...”STOP”

Stay in the present. Stop looking ahead and catastrophizing.

Prevention

Preventing panic and anxiety is not hard if it becomes part of your lifestyle.

- Exercise – it reduces muscle tension, lowers blood pressure, gets you breathing deeply and maintains good circulation.
- Relax, meditate, participate in yoga, aerobics, martial arts.
- Eat the foods you know are good for you.
- Take time to play. Just have fun. Make yourself do it.
- Develop regular sleep patterns.
- Manage your time so you don’t have to rush anywhere.
- Do not be afraid to say no.
- Be realistic about perfection.

- Express your feelings

Quick Relaxation Tips

These can be done anywhere, anytime. Practice them until they come automatically.

- Get comfortable
- Remain passive – whatever thoughts come into your mind are okay. Do not work at it – just let it happen.
- Take note of the sounds around you and let them pass.
- Focus inward on your breathing as a natural, easy process.

Whole Body Tension

- Tense everything in your whole body, stay with the tension, and hold it as long as you can without feeling pain
- Slowly release the tension and visualize it leaving your body
- Repeat this three times

Imagine Air as a Cloud

- Focus on your breathing
- Just feel the breathing without forcing it
- Put your hand on your stomach. When you breathe in your hand should rise
- As your breathing becomes regular, imagine the air that comes to you as a cloud – it fills you and goes back out. Color the cloud.

Pick a Spot

- With your head level and your body relaxed, pick a spot to focus on (eyes open). When ready, count 5 breaths backward. With each breath out allow your eyes to close gradually.
- When you get to 1 your eyes will be closed. Focus on your body. Feel it relaxing more and more.

Counting Ten Breaths Back

- Allow yourself to feel passive and indifferent, counting each breath slowly from 10 to 1
- With each count allow yourself to feel heavier and more relaxed
- With each exhale imagine tension flowing out of your body

Shoulder Shrug

- Try to raise your shoulders up to your ears
- Hold for a count of 4
- Now drop your shoulders back to a normal position
- Repeat 3 times

Shoulder Rotation

- Rotate your shoulders back, down and around, first one way, then another
- Do one shoulder then the other
- Now do both at the same time

Cat S-T-R-E-T-C-H

- Stand – feet slightly apart
- Take a deep breath as you stretch your arms overhead
- Slowly exhale as you lean forward, bringing arms and head down
- Do slowly and gently 5 times

Adapted from Student Counselling Services at the University of Queensland

SIX TIPS TO BEAT TEST PANIC:

Some practical steps that will help you exercise your anxiety demons during exams

Who is happy about taking a midterm?. Or an exam to qualify for a job or promotion? After all, there is so much at stake, and the nagging fear of failing the darn thing only adds to the mounting pressure. Well, countless persons not only are not happy in such situations, they actually get sick. Their palms sweat. There is a tightening in the stomach (those proverbial butterflies). Their heartbeat and breathing rate speed up. They may have diarrhea, or vomit. A few test-takers have even slumped over their desks in a dead faint.

But the worst of it, according to psychology researchers, is that those who suffer paralyzing anxiety over exams often score lower than they should. They feel such “painful, apprehensive uneasiness of minds, as the dictionary defines anxiety, that they cannot function at the level of which they are capable.”

“I could not remember a thing once I got there,” is a common complaint. Many actors and athletes know the feeling well. They are up tight until the action begins. Retired pro basketball star Bill Russell has confessed he regularly became nauseated before each game. But once in the arena, these professionals can go on and perform at their best. Facing tests of their involvement in the action also helps speed the passing of anxiety.

Many of the rest of us just stay shook up during the critical period. Yet young people particularly need to be able to stay cool and relaxed because they are subject to a battery of tests: school exams, psychological or aptitude tests in applying for jobs or college, advancement exams, especially in Civil Service.

“To begin with, a little anxiety is not necessarily bad,” says Dr. Marsh Linehan, assistant professor of psychology at Catholic U. “Up to a point, it can promote a greater state of alertness because it sets the adrenal flowing.”

“But many research studies show that high anxiety typically interferes with one’s performance in any kind of complex activity. Specific studies have traced the effects of anxiety on academic performance, high anxious students earn poorer grades than do low anxious students.”

And the principle holds true down to the test level.

“There are no hard statistics yet,” says Dr. Linehan, “but we are convinced from our clinical research and from interviews with volunteers that many who take tests are so upset and nervous they do not score as well as they could.”

Adds Dr. Marvin Goldfried, “anxiety definitely slows down our thinking process.”

“Anxiety takes its toll in reduced efficiency. But its most destructive effect is mental blocking. The mind is so paralyzed. It cannot deliver information you know perfectly well.”

“The anxiety, or quite simply fear, is sometimes felt long before the actual exam is taken,” says Dr. Linehan. “Some individuals are so apprehensive about a coming test that they cannot even prepare for it. Instead, they run away, and often go out in search of a good time to relieve their minds of their worry and nervousness.”

A psychologist begins from the premise that test fear is a learned response. You learned by experience. Let’s say, for example, that you have already flunked or done poorly on one or more exams, and been engulfed by the sickening feeling of not measuring up; you have been chewed out by parents, chided by friends. Now you are afraid that if you goof off again, the consequences might be even worse. Such feelings, notes Dr. Goldfried, may sometimes threaten our most basic sense of security and our ability to survive in the world. The anxiety may not even stem from personal experience. You may have watched others falter or fail and become terrified that the same thing will happen to you.

“People have to unlearn their negative response to a test,” explains Dr. Linehan.

The researchers believe that following certain steps carefully will help most people reduce anxiety – and improve their performance – in test situations. Here are the basic principles:

1. **ANALYZE WHY YOU ARE WORRIED:** Ask yourself some questions: Is there sound reason to be tense? If I have prepared for the exam, why shouldn’t I do at least acceptable well? Why do I find it threatening? What could happen that is so bad?

“Recognize that you are studying for intrinsic reasons,” advised Dr. Linehan. “You want to gain the knowledge or the opportunity. The test is not the goal. It is just something the establishment required. Keep in mind that other factors are usually taken into consideration in determining your grade for an academic course or your fitness for a job.”

Even more important to remember – you will still be an okay person even if you do poorly. The test is not a measure of your worth as an individual.

“It is recommended that test-takers practice “hindsight before the fact.” Years afterwards we can always see that a certain event was not as earth shaking as it seemed at that time. Having failed a course or failed to get a certain position – does not seem like a disaster five years later. Try to be aware of this now. We all have limitations. And we can always try again, or try something different.

2. **NOTICE ANXIETY EARLY:** Get in the habit of recognizing the signals of mental distress. Then something about them. So often, we just let anxiety take us over.
3. **LEARN TO RELAX:** The thing to do is to train yourself to stay calm. The methods of yoga may work here – deep breathing, concentrating on relaxing. Repeated the word “calm” slowly and softly. Mentally review every part of your body. If any part seems tense, make it loosen up. Wiggle your fingers, stretch your neck. “Each person must find his own best way to keep cool,” Dr. Linehan observes. “But you do not have to be scared if you don’t want to be.”
4. **PRACTICE:** Learning anything requires practice. Start by practicing staying calm in the face of minor annoyances. Work up to the test scene. Even practicing relaxing when you are not tense. Practice is the most important part of the process.
5. **PREPARE WELL:** Remember that if you fail to put in adequate study, you are just adding to your change of flubbing.

6. PUT ANXIETY IN PERSPECTIVE: Recognize that you are not mentally ill simply because you are shook up over exams, as a surprising number of people tend to believe.

Besides an inherent predisposition to get rattled in stressful situations like test-taking, several physiological factors – such as fatigue or poor diet – can also boost one’s anxiety level, according to Dr. Thornton A. Vandersal. “Thus, our ability to cope is impaired. We then cannot be comfortable in stressful situations. We feel anxious, even overwhelmed.”

“When we are tired, for example, we cannot respond briskly, and we sense this quickly and grow nervous” “Drugs, too, have a negative effect. Many have tried taking amphetamines to overcome fatigue and produce an “up” sensation. Pills may work briefly,” says Dr. Vandersal, but he cautions, “before long the effect will be sedation and numbing of the brain/”

Poor nutrition and vitamin deficiency also make one more anxiety-prone, so may smoking. “Specifically designed tests have shown a high correlation between excessive smoking and anxiety,” Dr. Vandersal notes.

Meditation for Beginners: 20 Practical Tips for Quieting the Mind

Meditation is the art of focusing 100% of your attention in one area. The practice comes with a myriad of well-publicized health benefits including increased concentration, decreased anxiety, and a general feeling of happiness.

Although a great number of people try meditation at some point in their lives, a small percentage actually stick with it for the long-term. This is unfortunate, and a possible reason is that many beginners do not begin with a mindset needed to make the practice sustainable.

The purpose of this article is to provide 20 practical recommendations to help beginners get past the initial hurdles and integrate meditation over the long term:

1) **Make it a formal practice.** You will only get to the next level in meditation by setting aside specific time (preferably two times a day) to be still.

2) **Start with the breath.** Breathing deep slows the heart rate, relaxes the muscles, focuses the mind and is an ideal way to begin practice.

3) **Stretch first.** Stretching loosens the muscles and tendons allowing you to sit (or lie) more comfortably. Additionally, stretching starts the process of “going inward” and brings added attention to the body.

4) **Meditate with Purpose.** Beginners must understand that meditation is an ACTIVE process. The art of focusing your attention to a single point is hard work, and you have to be purposefully engaged!

5) **Notice frustration creep up on you.** This is very common for beginners as we think “hey, what am I doing here” or “why can’t I just quiet my damn mind already”. When this happens, really focus in on your breath and let the frustrated feelings go.

6) **Experiment.** Although many of us think of effective meditation as a Yogi sitting cross-legged beneath a Bonzi tree, beginners should be more experimental and try different types of meditation. Try sitting, lying, eyes open, eyes closed, etc.

7) **Feel your body parts.** A great practice for beginning meditators is to take notice of the body when a meditative state starts to take hold. Once the mind quiets, put all your attention to the feet and then slowly move your way up the body (include your internal organs). This is very healthy and an indicator that you are on the right path.

8) **Pick a specific room in your home to meditate.** Make sure it is not the same room where you do work, exercise, or sleep. Place candles and other spiritual paraphernalia in the room to help you feel at ease.

9) **Read a book (or two) on meditation.** Preferably an instructional guide AND one that describes the benefits of deep meditative states. This will get you motivated. John Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go, There You Are* is terrific for beginners.

10) **Commit for the long haul.** Meditation is a life-long practice, and you will benefit most by NOT examining the results of your daily practice. Just do the best you can every day, and then let it go!

11) **Listen to instructional tapes and CDs.**

12) **Generate moments of awareness during the day.** Finding your breath and "being present" while not in formal practice is a wonderful way to evolve your meditation habits.

13) **Make sure you will not be disturbed.** One of the biggest mistakes beginners make is not insuring peaceful practice conditions. If you have it in the back of your mind that the phone might ring, your kids might wake, or your coffee pot might whistle than you will not be able to attain a state of deep relaxation.

14) **Notice small adjustments.** For beginning meditators, the slightest physical movements can transform a meditative practice from one of frustration to one of renewal. These adjustments may be barely noticeable to an observer, but they can mean everything for your practice.

15) **Use a candle.** Meditating with eyes closed can be challenging for a beginner. Lighting a candle and using it as your point of focus allows you to strengthen your attention with a visual cue. This can be very powerful.

16) **Do NOT Stress.** This may be the most important tip for beginners, and the hardest to implement. No matter what happens during your meditation practice, do not stress about it. This includes being nervous before meditating and angry afterwards. Meditation is what it is, and just do the best you can at the time.

17) **Do it together.** Meditating with a partner or loved one can have many wonderful benefits, and can improve your practice. However, it is necessary to make sure that you set agreed-upon ground rules before you begin!

18) **Meditate early in the morning.** Without a doubt, early morning is an ideal time to practice: it is quieter, your mind is not filled with the usual clutter, and there is less chance you will be disturbed. Make it a habit to get up half an hour earlier to meditate.

19) **Be Grateful at the end.** Once your practice is through, spend 2-3 minutes feeling appreciative of the opportunity to practice and your mind's ability to focus.

20) **Notice when your interest in meditation begins to wane.** Meditation is hard work, and you will inevitably come to a point where it seemingly does not fit into the picture anymore. THIS is when you need your practice the most and I recommend you go back to the book(s) or the CD's you listened to and become re-invigorated with the practice. Chances are that losing the ability to focus on meditation is parallel with your inability to focus in other areas of your life!

Meditation is an absolutely wonderful practice, but can be very difficult in the beginning. Use the tips described in this article to get your practice to the next level!

EDITOR'S NOTE: THIS IS A GUEST POST FROM TODD GOLDFARB AT THE WE THE CHANGE BLOG.

Mindfulness Meditation for Pain Relief

By Cindy Reyes | Medically reviewed by Pat F. Bass III, MD, MPH

Mind over matter isn't just your grandmother's expression. You really do have the power to harness your mind to overcome troublesome issues, both emotional and physical.

The technique is called mindfulness meditation, and it's designed to focus your entire awareness in the present moment. You just have to learn how to release it to benefit from its healing potential (it does take some practice — more on that later). According to the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, you can use mindfulness meditation to ease chronic pain and learn to better manage your pain. Mindfulness might even help with anxiety, depression, stress, gastrointestinal distress, headaches, and even high blood pressure. And you can learn it without getting out of your favorite chair.

What Is Mindfulness Meditation?

Mindfulness meditation has its roots in Buddhist tradition. One form of mindfulness is to focus on the in-and-out flow of breath from your body, paying attention to the present moment without judging it or reacting to it. Slowly, your thoughts, stress, and emotions become balanced and accepted.

"The concept of mindfulness is simply moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, bringing your focus of attention on what's here in this moment," says Steven D. Hickman, PsyD, director of the University of California at San Diego Medical Center for Mindfulness and an associate clinical professor in the UCSD psychiatry department. "We do this by a variety of methods, primarily meditation. It's really a way of being that reduces stress, helps you make clear decisions, and helps you react based on the facts of the situation."

How can something so simple be so effective? According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), meditation could work in several ways. One explanation is that it affects both your sympathetic ("fight or flight") nervous system and your parasympathetic ("calming") nervous system: It decreases the activity of the sympathetic system and increases the parasympathetic activity, resulting in a lower respiratory rate, a lower heart rate, and improved blood flow. Another possibility is that meditation simply helps the mind pay better attention.

The Mind and Body Connection

Hickman uses a lemon as an example of how the mind can influence the body's reactions. Imagine looking at a bright yellow lemon, he says. Now picture yourself cutting a wedge of it. Mentally raise it up to your eyes and look at it. Then, imagine squeezing the juice into your mouth. By doing this, "100 times out of 100, people say they start salivating — so there's a connection between the mind and body we take for granted," he says. "A sequence of events happened in your body as a result of something that didn't even touch your body and only existed in your mind, yet it affected your body."

Mindfulness Meditation for Pain

According to the NIH, an estimated 70 million people in the United States live with chronic pain. In the last 10 years, scientists have uncovered several benefits of mindfulness meditation such as better attention, decreased sensitivity to pain, and a drop in levels of emotional reaction.

Recently, researchers at Wake Forest University conducted a pain study by applying heat to the back of the legs of volunteers. Pain intensity was measured before and after meditation. The study participants reported 40 percent less pain and 57 percent fewer unpleasant feelings when stimulated after meditation. Interestingly, imaging studies of the brain showed more activity in areas associated with pain awareness and less activity in parts of the brain tied to emotional reactivity to pain.

"There is an emotional component to [pain]," Hickman says. "People with chronic pain often worry about how long it's going to last or if it's going to get worse. By staying in the present moment with the pain, you can release the attachments to what it will be like the next day or one year from now... it becomes more manageable."

Getting Started With Mindfulness Meditation

Many medical centers now offer 8-week mindfulness meditation training classes, and according to a study done at the Center for Mindfulness that used images of the brain, that's enough time for changes to occur in gray matter that have wide-reaching benefits, such as enhanced learning, less stress, and more positive emotions. But you can get started on your own in just one session:

- First, choose a quiet space and sit on a chair or the floor. Spend the first few minutes just sitting. After a while, start paying attention to your breath and feel it coming in and out of your body. Just let your breathing be normal. Don't try to change it.
- You may notice many intrusive thoughts while meditating. Don't judge the thoughts — just see them as neutral. Refocus on your breath. You should not try to wipe out all your thoughts. Just take notice of the thoughts. A blank mind is the opposite of what you're trying to accomplish.
- At first, practice this for about 10 to 15 minutes. In time, progress to 30 minutes and then ultimately to 45- to 60-minute sessions.

Keep in mind that by performing mindfulness meditation, you aren't trying to change how you are. Don't expect immediate results. If your mind wanders (and it will), bring it back to the present (it takes practice). Try to be present with whatever is going on in the moment, regardless of what it is.

When you constantly focus on your pain, you are making it an everlasting experience. Be with your pain instead of struggling to overcome it. Mindfulness is a non-judgmental type of attention to your experiences.

"Mindfulness meditation is the flip side of what most people think psychologists do with pain," says Hickman. "I say, just look at what's here. See it for what it is."

What Does Mindfulness Meditation Do to Your Brain?

By Tom Ireland | June 12, 2014 | 19

As you read this, wiggle your toes. Feel the way they push against your shoes, and the weight of your feet on the floor. Really think about what your feet feel like right now – their heaviness.

If you've never heard of mindfulness meditation, congratulations, you've just done a few moments of it. More people than ever are doing some form of this stress-busting meditation, and researchers are discovering it has some quite extraordinary effects on the brains of those who do it regularly.

Originally an ancient Buddhist meditation technique, in recent years mindfulness has evolved into a range of secular therapies and courses, most of them focused on being aware of the present moment and simply noticing feelings and thoughts as they come and go.

It's been accepted as a useful therapy for anxiety and depression for around a decade, and mindfulness websites like GetSomeHeadSpace.com are attracting millions of subscribers. It's being explored by schools, pro sports teams and military units to enhance performance, and is showing promise as a way of helping sufferers of chronic pain, addiction and tinnitus, too. There is even some evidence that mindfulness can help with the symptoms of certain physical conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome, cancer, and HIV.

Yet until recently little was known about how a few hours of quiet reflection each week could lead to such an intriguing range of mental and physical effects. Now, as the popularity of mindfulness grows, brain imaging techniques are revealing that this ancient practice can profoundly change the way different regions of the brain communicate with each other – and therefore how we think – permanently.

No fear

MRI scans show that after an eight-week course of mindfulness practice, the brain's "fight or flight" center, the amygdala, appears to shrink. This primal region of the brain, associated with fear and emotion, is involved in the initiation of the body's response to stress.

As the amygdala shrinks, the pre-frontal cortex – associated with higher order brain functions such as awareness, concentration and decision-making – becomes thicker.

The "functional connectivity" between these regions – i.e. how often they are activated together – also changes. The connection between the amygdala and the rest of the brain gets weaker, while the connections between areas associated with attention and concentration get stronger.

The scale of these changes correlate with the number of hours of meditation practice a person has done, says Adrienne Taren, a researcher studying mindfulness at the University of Pittsburgh.

"The picture we have is that mindfulness practice increases one's ability to recruit higher order, pre-frontal cortex regions in order to down-regulate lower-order brain activity," she says.

In other words, our more primal responses to stress seem to be superseded by more thoughtful ones.

Lots of activities can boost the size of various parts of the pre-frontal cortex – video games, for example – but it's the disconnection of our mind from its “stress center” that seems to give rise to a range of physical as well as mental health benefits, says Taren.

“I'm definitely not saying mindfulness can cure HIV or prevent heart disease. But we do see a reduction in biomarkers of stress and inflammation. Markers like C-reactive proteins, interleukin 6 and cortisol – all of which are associated with disease.”

Feel the pain

Things get even more interesting when researchers study mindfulness experts experiencing pain. Advanced meditators report feeling significantly less pain than non-meditators. Yet scans of their brains show slightly more activity in areas associated with pain than the non-meditators.

“It doesn't fit any of the classic models of pain relief, including drugs, where we see less activity in these areas,” says Joshua Grant, a postdoc at the Max Plank Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany. The expert mindfulness meditators also showed “massive” reductions in activity in regions involved in appraising stimuli, emotion and memory, says Grant.

Again, two regions that are normally functionally connected, the anterior cingulate cortex (associated with the unpleasantness of pain) and parts of the prefrontal cortex, appear to become “uncoupled” in meditators.

“It seems Zen practitioners were able to remove or lessen the aversiveness of the stimulation – and thus the stressing nature of it – by altering the connectivity between two brain regions which are normally communicating with one another,” says Grant. “They certainly don't seem to have blocked the experience. Rather, it seems they refrained from engaging in thought processes that make it painful.”

Feeling Zen

It's worth noting that although this study tested expert meditators, they were not in a meditative state – the pain-lesening effect is not something you have to work yourself up into a trance to achieve; instead, it seems to be a permanent change in their perception.

“We asked them specifically not to meditate,” says Grant. “There is just a huge difference in their brains. There is no question expert meditators' baseline states are different.”

Other studies on expert meditators – that is, subjects with at least 40,000 hours of mindfulness practice under their belt – discovered that their resting brain looks similar, when scanned, to the way a normal person's does when he or she is meditating.

At this level of expertise, the pre-frontal cortex is no longer bigger than expected. In fact, its size and activity start to decrease again, says Taren. “It's as if that way of thinking has become the default, it is automatic – it doesn't require any concentration.”

There's still much to discover, especially in terms of what is happening when the brain comprehends the present moment, and what other effects mindfulness might have on people. Research on the technique is still in its infancy, and the imprecision of brain imaging means researchers have to make assumptions about what different regions of the brain are doing.

Both Grant and Taren, and others, are in the middle of large, unprecedented studies that aim to isolate the effects of mindfulness from other methods of stress-relief, and track exactly how the brain changes over a long period of meditation practice.

“I’m really excited about the effects of mindfulness,” says Taren. “It’s been great to see it move away from being a spiritual thing towards proper science and clinical evidence, as stress is a huge problem and has a huge impact on many people’s health. Being able to take time out and focus our mind is increasingly important.”

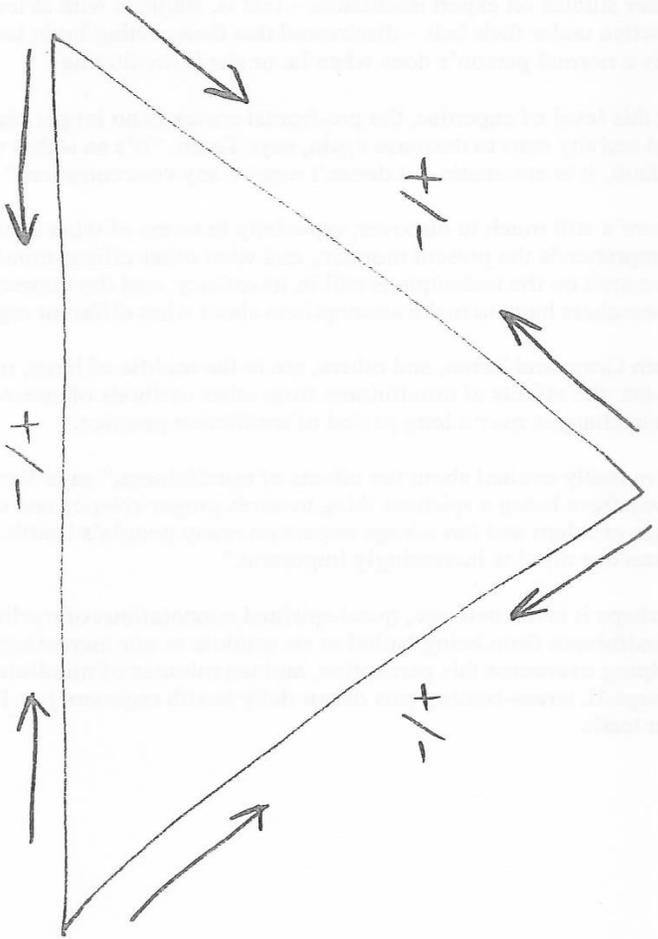
Perhaps it is the new age, quasi-spiritual connotations of meditation that have so far prevented mindfulness from being hailed as an antidote to our increasingly frantic world. Research is helping overcome this perception, and ten minutes of mindfulness could soon become an accepted, stress-busting part of our daily health regimen, just like going to the gym or brushing our teeth.

Scientific American | <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/what-does-mindfulness-meditation-do-to-your-brain/>

FEELINGS/
EMOTIONS

BODY
SENSATIONS

THOUGHTS



From "A Path With Heart" by Jack Kornfield

Chapter 5

TRAINING THE PUPPY: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

Concentration is never a matter of force or coercion. You simply pick up the puppy again and return to reconnect with the here and now.

A story is told of the Buddha when he was wandering in India shortly after his enlightenment. He was encountered by several men who recognized something quite extraordinary about this handsome prince now robed as a monk. Stopping to inquire, they asked, "Are you a god?" "No," he answered. "Well, are you a deva or an angel?" "No," he replied. "Well, are you some kind of wizard or magician?" "No." "Are you a man?" "No." They were perplexed. Finally they asked, "Then what are you?" He replied simply, "I am awake." The word Buddha means to awaken. How to awaken is all he taught.

Meditation can be thought of as the art of awakening. Through the mastering of this art we can learn new ways to approach our difficulties and bring wisdom and joy alive in our life. Through developing meditation's tools and practices, we can awaken the best of our spiritual, human capacities. The key to this art is the steadiness of our attention. When the fullness of our attention is cultivated together with a grateful and tender heart, our spiritual life will naturally grow. As we have seen, some healing of mind and body must take place for many of us, before we can sit quietly and concentrate. Yet even to begin our healing, to begin understanding ourselves, we must have some basic level of attention. To deepen our practice further, we must choose a way to develop our attention systematically and give ourselves to it quite fully. Otherwise we will drift like a boat without a rudder. To learn to concentrate we must choose a prayer or meditation and follow this path with commitment and steadiness, a willingness to work with our practice day after day, no matter what arises. This is not easy for most people. They would like their spiritual life to show immediate and cosmic results. But what great art is ever learned quickly? Any deep training opens in direct proportion to how much we give ourselves to it.

Consider the other arts. Music, for example. How long would it take to learn to play the piano well? Suppose we take months or years of lessons once a week, practicing diligently every day. Initially, almost everyone struggles to learn which fingers go for which notes and how to read basic lines of music. After some weeks or months, we could play simple tunes, and perhaps after a year or two we could play a chosen type of music. However, to master the art so that we could play music well, alone or in a group, or join a band or an orchestra, we would have to give ourselves to this discipline over and over, time and again. If we wanted to learn computer programming, oil painting, tennis, architecture, any of the thousand arts, we would have to give ourselves to it fully and wholeheartedly over a long period of time—a training, an apprenticeship, a cultivation.

Nothing less is required in the spiritual arts. Perhaps even more is asked. Yet through this mastery we master ourselves and our lives. We learn the most human art, how to connect with our truest self.

Trungpa Rinpoche called spiritual practice manual labor. It is a labor of love in which we bring a wholehearted attention to our own situation over and over again. In all sorts of weather, we steady and deepen our prayer, meditation, and discipline, learning how to see with honesty and compassion, how to let go, how to love more deeply.

However, this is not how we begin. Suppose we begin with a period of solitude in the midst of our daily life. What happens when we actually try to meditate? The most frequent first experience—whether in prayer or chanting, meditation or visualization—is that we encounter the disconnected and scattered mind. Buddhist psychology likens the untrained mind to a crazed monkey that dashes from thought to memory, from sight to sound, from plan to regret without ceasing. If we were able to sit quietly for an hour and fully observe all the places our mind went, what a script would be revealed.

When we first undertake the art of meditation, it is indeed frustrating. Inevitably, as our mind wanders and our body feels the tension it has accumulated and the speed to which it is addicted, we often see how little inner discipline, patience, or compassion we actually have. It doesn't take much time with a spiritual task to see how scattered and unsteady our attention remains even when we try to direct and focus it. While we usually think of it as "our mind," if we look honestly, we see that the mind follows its own nature, conditions, and laws. Seeing this, we also see that we must gradually discover a wise relationship to the mind that connects it to the body and heart, and steadies and calms our inner life.

The essence of this connecting is the bringing back of our attention again and again to the practice we have chosen. Prayer, meditation, repeating sacred phrases, or visualization gives us a systematic way to focus and steady our concentration. All the traditional realms and states of consciousness described in mystical and spiritual literature worldwide are arrived at through the art of concentration. These arts of concentration, of returning to the task at hand, also bring the clarity, strength of mind, peacefulness, and profound connectedness that we seek. This steadiness and connection in turn gives rise to even deeper levels of understanding and insight.

Whether a practice calls for visualization, question, prayer, sacred words, or simple meditation on feelings or breath, it always involves the steadying and conscious return, again and again, to some focus. As we learn to do this with a deeper and fuller attention, it is like learning to steady a canoe in waters that have waves. Repeating our meditation, we relax and sink into the moment, deeply connecting with what is present. We let ourselves settle into a spiritual ground; we train ourselves to come back to this moment. This is a patient process. St. Francis de Sales said, "What we need is a cup of understanding, a barrel of love, and an ocean of patience."

For some, this task of coming back a thousand or ten thousand times in meditation may seem boring or even of questionable importance. But how many times have we gone away from the reality of our life? — perhaps a million or ten million times! If we wish to awaken, we have to find our way back here with our full being, our full attention. St. Francis de Sales continued by saying:

Bring yourself back to the point quite gently. And even if you do nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your heart back a thousand times, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed.

In this way, meditation is very much like training a puppy. You put the puppy down and say, "Stay." Does the puppy listen? It gets up and it runs away. You sit the puppy back down again. "Stay." And the puppy runs away over and over again. Sometimes the puppy jumps up, runs over, and pees in the corner or makes some other mess. Our minds are much the same as the puppy, only they create even bigger messes. In training the mind, or the puppy, we have to start over and over again.

When you undertake a spiritual discipline, frustration comes with the territory. Nothing in our culture or our schooling has taught us to steady and calm our attention. One psychologist has called us a society of attentional spastics. Finding it difficult to concentrate, many people respond by forcing their attention on their breath or mantra or prayer with tense irritation and self-judgment, or worse. Is this the way you would train a puppy? Does it really help to beat it? Concentration is never a matter of force or coercion. You simply pick up the puppy again and return to reconnect with the here and now.

Developing a deep quality of interest in your spiritual practice is one of the keys to the whole art of concentration. Steadiness is nourished by the degree of interest with which we focus our meditation. Yet, to the beginning student, many meditation subjects appear plain and uninteresting. There is a traditional story about a Zen student who complained to his master that following the breath was boring. The Zen master grabbed this student and held his head under water for quite a long time while the student struggled to come up. When he finally let the student up, the Zen master asked him whether he had found breath boring in those moments under water.

Concentration combines full interest with delicacy of attention. This attention should not be confused with being removed or detached. Awareness does not mean separating ourselves from experience; it means allowing it and sensing it fully. Awareness can vary like a zoom lens. Sometimes we are in the middle of our experience. Sometimes it is as if we sit on our own shoulder and notice what is present, and sometimes we can be aware with a great spacious distance. All of these are useful aspects of awareness. They each can help us sense and touch and see our life more clearly from moment to moment. As we learn to steady the quality of our attention, it is accompanied by a deeper and deeper sense of stillness—poised, exquisite, and subtle.

The art of subtle attention was learned by one meditation student while she and her husband lived in a remote community in the mountains of British Columbia. She had studied yoga in India, and some years later she, with the help of her husband, gave birth to a baby boy, alone, without doctor or midwife. Unfortunately, it was a long and complicated breech delivery, with the baby delivered feet first and the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. The baby was born quite blue, and he could not start to breathe on his own. His parents gave him infant artificial respiration as best they could. Then they would pause for a moment between their breathing into his lungs to see if he would begin to breathe by himself. During these excruciating moments, they watched for the tiniest movement of his breath to see if he would live or die. Finally, he started to breathe on his own. His mother smiled at me when she told this story, and said, "It was at that time that I learned what it meant to be truly aware of the breath. And it wasn't even my own breath!"

The focusing of attention on the breath is perhaps the most universal of the many hundreds of meditation subjects used worldwide. Steadying attention on the movement of the life-breath is central to yoga, to Buddhist and Hindu practices, to Sufi, Christian, and Jewish traditions. While other meditation subjects are also beneficial, and each has its unique qualities, we will continue to elaborate on the practice of breath meditation as an illustration for developing any of these practices. Breathing meditation can quiet the mind, open the body, and develop a great power of concentration. The breath is available to us at any time of day and in any circumstance. When we have learned to use it, the breath becomes a support for awareness throughout our life.

But awareness of breathing does not come right away. At first we must sit quietly, letting our body be relaxed and alert, and simply practice finding the breath in the body. Where do we actually feel it—as a coolness in the nose, a tingling in the back of the throat, as a movement in the chest, as a rise and fall of the belly? The place of strongest feeling is the first place to establish our attention. If the breath is apparent in several places, we can feel its whole movement of the body. If the breath is too soft and difficult to find, we can place our palm on our belly and feel the expansion and contraction in our hand. We must learn to focus our attention carefully. As we feel each breath we can sense how it moves in our body. Do not try to control the breath, only notice its natural movement, as a gatekeeper notices what passes by. What are its rhythms? Is it shallow or long and deep? Does it become fast or slow? Is there a temperature to the breath? The breath can become a great teacher because it is always moving and changing. In this simple breathing, we can learn about contraction and resistance, about opening and letting go. Here we can feel what it means to live gracefully, to sense the truth of the river of energy and change that we are.

Yet even with interest and a strong desire to steady our attention, distractions will arise. Distractions are the natural movement of mind. Distractions arise because our mind and heart are not initially clear or pure. Mind is more like muddy or turbulent water. Each time an enticing image or an interesting memory floats by, it is our habit to react, to get entangled, or to get lost. When painful images or feelings arise, it is our habit to avoid them

and unknowingly distract ourselves. We can feel the power of these habits of desire, of distracting ourselves, of fear and reaction. In many of us these forces are so great that after a few unfamiliar moments of calm, our mind rebels. Again and again restlessness, busyness, plans, unfelt feelings, all interrupt our focus. Working with these distractions, steadying the canoe, letting the waves pass by, and coming back again and again in a quiet and collected way, is at the heart of meditation.

After your initial trial, you will begin to recognize that certain external conditions are particularly helpful in developing concentration. Finding or creating a quiet and undistracting place for your practice is necessary. Select regular and suitable times that best fit your temperament and schedule; experiment to discover whether morning or evening meditations best support the silent aspects of your inner life. You may wish to begin with a short period of inspiring reading before sitting, or do some stretching or yoga first. Some people find it extremely helpful to sit in a regular group with others or to go off to periodic retreats. Experiment with these external factors until you discover which are most helpful for your own inner peace. Then make them a regular part of your life. Creating suitable conditions means living wisely, providing the best soil for our spiritual hearts to be nourished and to grow.

As we give ourselves to the art of concentration over the weeks and months, we discover that our concentration slowly begins to settle by itself. Initially we may have struggled to focus, trying to hold on to the subject of our meditation. Then gradually the mind and the heart become eased from distractions, and periodically we sense them as purer, more workable and malleable. We feel our breath more often and more clearly, or we recite our prayers or mantra with greater wholeness. This is like beginning to read a book. When we start, we will often be interrupted by many distractions around us. But if it is a good book, perhaps a mystery novel, by the last chapter we will be so absorbed in the plot that people can walk right by us and we will not notice them. In meditation at first, thoughts carry us away and we think them for a long time. Then, as concentration grows we remember our breath in the middle of a thought. Later we can notice thoughts just as they arise or allow them to pass in the background, so focused on the breath that we are undisturbed by their movement.

As we continue, the development of concentration brings us closer to life, like the focusing of a lens. When we look at pond water in a cup, it appears clear and still. But under the simplest microscope it shows itself to be alive with creatures and movement. In the same way, the more deeply we pay attention, the less solid our breath and body become. Every place we feel breath in our body can come alive with subtle vibrations, movement, tingles, flow. The steady power of our concentration shows each part of our life to be in change and flux, like a river, even as we feel it.

As we learn to let go into the present, the breath breathes itself, allowing the flow of sensations in the body to move and open. There can come an openness and ease. Like a skilled dancer, we allow the breath and body to float and move unhindered, yet all the while being present to enjoy the opening.

As we become more skillful we also discover that concentration has its own seasons. Sometimes we sit and settle easily. At other times the conditions of mind and body are turbulent or tense. We can learn to navigate all these waters. When conditions show the mind is tight, we learn to soften and relax, to open the attention. When the mind is sleepy or flabby, we learn to sit up and focus with more energy. The Buddha compared this with the tuning of a lute, sensing when we are out of tune and gently strengthening or loosening our energy to come into balance. In learning concentration, we feel as if we are always starting over, always losing our focus. But where have we actually gone? It is only that a mood or a thought or doubt has swept through our mind. As soon as we recognize this, we can let go and settle back again in this next moment. We can always begin again. Gradually as our interest grows and our capacity to sense deepens, new layers of our meditation open. We will find ourselves alternating, discovering periods of deep peace like an undisturbed child and strength like a great ship on a true course, only to be distracted or lost sometime later. Concentration grows in a deepening spiral, as we return to our meditation subject again and again, each time learning more of the art of inner listening. When we are listening carefully, we can sense new aspects of our breath all the time. One Burmese meditation teacher

requires his students each day to tell him something new about the breath, even if they have been meditating for years.

Here, notice if you can, is there a pause between your breaths? How does it feel when your breath just starts? What is the end of the breath like? What is that space when the breathing has stopped? What does the impulse to breathe feel like before the breath even begins? How is the breath a reflection of your moods?

At first when we feel the breath, it seems like only one small movement, but as we develop the art of concentration, we can feel a hundred things in the breath: the subtlest sensations, the variations in its length, the temperature, the swirl, the expansion, the contraction, the tingles that come along with it, the echoes of the breath in different parts of our body, and so much more.

Sticking with a spiritual training requires an ocean of patience because our habit of wanting to be somewhere else is so strong. We've distracted ourselves from the present for so many moments, for so many years, even lifetimes. Here is an accomplishment in The Guinness Book of World Records that I like to note at meditation retreats when people are feeling frustrated. It indicates that the record for persistence in taking and failing a driving test is held by Mrs. Miriam Hargrave of Wakefield, England. Mrs. Hargrave failed her thirty-ninth driving test in April, 1970, when she crashed, driving through a set of red lights. In August of the following year she finally passed her fortieth test. Unfortunately, she could no longer afford to buy a car because she had spent so much on driving lessons. In the same spirit, Mrs. Fanny Turner of Little Rock, Arkansas, passed her written test for a driver's license on her 104th attempt in October 1978. If we can bring such persistence to passing a driving test or mastering the art of skateboarding or any one of a hundred other endeavors, surely we can also master the art of connecting with ourselves. As human beings we can dedicate ourselves to almost anything, and this heartfelt perseverance and dedication brings spiritual practice alive.

Always remember that in training a puppy we want to end up with the puppy as our friend. In the same way, we must practice seeing our mind and body as "friend." Even its wanderings can be included in our meditation with a friendly interest and curiosity. Right away we can notice how it moves. The mind produces waves. Our breath is a wave, the sensations of our body are a wave. We don't have to fight the waves. We can simply acknowledge, "Surf's up." "Here's the wave of memories from three years old." "Here's the planning wave." Then it's time to reconnect with the wave of the breath. It takes a gentleness and a kind-hearted understanding to deepen the art of concentration. We can't be present for a long period without actually softening, dropping into our bodies, coming to rest. Any other kind of concentration, achieved by force and tension, will only be shortlived. Our task is to train the puppy to become our lifelong friend.

The attitude or spirit with which we do our meditation helps us perhaps more than any other aspect. What is called for is a sense of perseverance and dedication combined with a basic friendliness. We need a willingness to directly relate again and again to what is actually here, with a lightness of heart and sense of humor. We do not want the training of our puppy to become too serious a matter.

The Christian Desert Fathers tell of a new student who was commanded by his master that for three years he must give money to everyone who insulted him. When this period of trial was over, the master said, "Now you can go to Alexandria and truly learn wisdom." When the student entered Alexandria, he met a certain wise man whose way of teaching was to sit at the city gate insulting everyone who came and went. He naturally insulted the student also, who immediately burst out laughing. "Why do you laugh when I insult you?" said the wise man. "Because," said the student, "for years I've been paying for this kind of thing, and now you give it to me for free!" "Enter the city," said the wise man. "It is all yours."

Meditation is a practice that can teach us to enter each moment with wisdom, lightness, and a sense of humor. It is an art of opening and letting go, rather than accumulation or struggle. Then, even within our frustrations and difficulties, a remarkable inner sense of support and perspective can grow. Breathing in, "Wow, this experience is interesting, isn't it? Let me take another breath. Ah, this one is difficult, even terrifying, isn't it?" Breathing

out, "Ah." It is an amazing process we have entered when we can train our hearts and minds to be open and steady and awake through it all.

ESTABLISHING A DAILY MEDITATION

First select a suitable space for your regular meditation. It can be wherever you can sit easily with minimal disturbance: a corner of your bedroom or any other quiet spot in your home. Place a meditation cushion or chair there for your use. Arrange what is around so that you are reminded of your meditative purpose, so that it feels like a sacred and peaceful space. You may wish to make a simple altar with a flower or sacred image, or place your favorite spiritual books there for a few moments of inspiring reading. Let yourself enjoy creating this space for yourself.

Then select a regular time for practice that suits your schedule and temperament. If you are a morning person, experiment with a sitting before breakfast. If evening fits your temperament or schedule better, try that first. Begin with sitting ten or twenty minutes at a time. Later you can sit longer or more frequently. Daily meditation can become like bathing or toothbrushing. It can bring a regular cleansing and calming to your heart and mind.

Find a posture on the chair or cushion in which you can easily sit erect without being rigid. Let your body be firmly planted on the earth, your hands resting easily, your heart soft, your eyes closed gently. At first feel your body and consciously soften any obvious tension. Let go of any habitual thoughts or plans. Bring your attention to feel the sensations of your breathing. Take a few deep breaths to sense where you can feel the breath most easily, as coolness or tingling in the nostrils or throat, as movement of the chest, or rise and fall of the belly. Then let your breath be natural. Feel the sensations of your natural breathing very carefully, relaxing into each breath as you feel it, noticing how the soft sensations of breathing come and go with the changing breath.

After a few breaths your mind will probably wander. When you notice this, no matter how long or short a time you have been away, simply come back to the next breath. Before you return, you can mindfully acknowledge where you have gone with a soft word in the back of your mind, such as "thinking," "wandering," "hearing," "itching." After softly and silently naming to yourself where your attention has been, gently and directly return to feel the next breath. Later on in your meditation you will be able to work with the places your mind wanders to, but for initial training, one word of acknowledgment and a simple return to the breath is best.

As you sit, let the breath change rhythms naturally, allowing it to be short, long, fast, slow, rough, or easy. Calm yourself by relaxing into the breath. When your breath becomes soft, let your attention become gentle and careful, as soft as the breath itself.

Like training a puppy, gently bring yourself back a thousand times. Over weeks and months of this practice you will gradually learn to calm and center yourself using the breath. There will be many cycles in this process, stormy days alternating with clear days. Just stay with it. As you do, listening deeply, you will find the breath helping to connect and quiet your whole body and mind.

Working with the breath is an excellent foundation for the other meditations presented in this Book. After developing some calm and skills, and connecting with your breath, you can then extend your range of meditation to include healing and awareness of all the levels of your body and mind. You will discover how awareness of your breath can serve as a steady basis for all you do.