

Sitting and Walking Meditation

A minute to learn, a lifetime to master: This simple slogan (borrowed from the game Othello) accurately describes how sitting meditation works. There are only three rules:

- 1. Sit up straight**
- 2. Follow your breath**
(More about rule 3 later)

The main reason we like sitting meditation is that lying down is too comfortable (you tend to fall asleep) and that standing is too uncomfortable. It's as simple as that. To be able to follow your breath for a long period of time is good practice for day-to-day mindfulness.

To sit up straight:

Good posture is important. Probably the best way to do this is to visualize your spine as a stack of coins. Or imagine that there is a taut wire attached to the crown of your head at the bottom and the ceiling at the top. Your legs may be folded in a lotus, half-lotus or just cross legged. You may also kneel, using a cushion turned sideways or a bench. You may also sit in a chair, keeping your feet resting firmly on the floor. (If necessary, sit perched near the front the chair, instead of slouching against the back). As long as your spine is straight, where you sit does not matter. If you are a beginner, you may want to experiment with a variety of cushions and positions. The goal is to sit quietly with minimal movement for 20 minutes or more. Another reason for this posture is to allow full expansion of breathing. Think "Strong back, soft front."

To follow your breath:

There are many ways to notice the breath, so choose one which fits with your own body and personal style. Here are four possible techniques. Choose the one that works the best, but then stick with it for a given period of meditation. Do not flit from one to another when you get bored. Boredom is an essential stage of the practice!

1. Notice your breath in your belly: abdominal breathing.
2. Notice the breath as it passes across your lips and nostrils.
3. Notice the breath as a volume of air, entering your lungs, filling your chest, and then leaving your body and dissipating into the space in front of you.
4. Just notice the out breath, leaving your body over and over again.

Following the breath in the belly (abdominal breathing) has a lot of benefits; the breath here is so sensuous and easy to find. Perhaps the best way to get in touch with belly-breathing is to lie on your back. Notice how the belly rises in the in-breath and falls back to the spine on the out-breath. When meditating there is no need to exaggerate the motion of the abdomen. Merely observe. But a curious thing happens. Just by giving bare attention, your breathing becomes slower, smoother, and the abdomen gets more involved.

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So, that's it. Sit up straight and follow the breath. Simple

Taking care of some problems:

What do I do with my hands? You may fold them in your lap, or put them on your thigh, either casually or in a formal gesture. But the real question should be, What do I do with my elbows? Allow your arms to just fall straight down once you have attained your sitting position. Then without moving your elbows (that is, keep them close to your body), put your hands wherever you want. The point is to keep undue stress off your shoulders, and thereby preserve your upright posture.

What do I do with my eyes? Whether you keep your eyes open or closed is a personal choice. For some people, closed eyes invites drowsiness or a racing mind. For others, open eyes invites distraction by the world around you. If you keep your eyes open, the gaze should be soft and focused about 4 to 6 feet in front of you. You may also simply look at a wall. Experiment with eyes open and shut, and use the technique that keeps mental distraction to a minimum.

What do I do if I become uncomfortable? In our tradition, it is perfectly allowable slowly to adjust your posture. If you are too restless, however, realize that it's probably your mind, not your body.

What do I do with my mind? This is, of course, the most important question. Mere observation of the breath is all that is required, yet our mind seems unable to settle. It goes from thought to thought, thinking about the past, the future, worries, projects, etc. It swings like a monkey from branch to branch, never staying anywhere for long (that's why we call it the "monkey mind"). So even though we are given this simple task (just follow the breath), we have difficulty and get lost in random thought. Don't get discouraged! We all drift along with random thoughts. When you find that you have moved away from the breath, silently say to yourself **with great gentleness**, "Oh, I was thinking," and return to your breath. If your mind is especially full of thoughts, you can try counting your breath or using phrases to help focus on the present moment.

Please realize that losing yourself in thought and getting away from your mindful breathing is very common and very human. In fact, the returning again and again to the breath is the most important part of meditation. It is also what we do to enjoy the present moment in our day-to-day lives. The essence of mindful living is the same as the fundamental reminder for meditation: return to what is right in front of us in the face of a busy and worried mental state. ***To return to the breath again and again, with no judgment and no commentary, is the essential technique of meditation.***

How long should I meditate? How often? My rule of thumb is to gently push yourself. Often, when you start the practice, you feel antsy and anxious after a short period of time. So if five minutes is about all you seem stand, do six. If you can sit ten minutes comfortably, try for twelve. But daily practice is very important. It is better to do five minutes a day, every single day, than sixty minutes once a week.

Finally....

Rule 3: Smile

Meditation should be a pleasure, a mini-vacation. It should be light and airy, not heavy and ponderous. So much of what our minds are about is reflected in our body. We can tell whether someone is happy or angry or sad just by his or her expression. What is not well appreciated is that the reverse is true. Even if you do not feel happy, a half smile will lighten your mood. Consider this action as “mouth yoga.”

Walking Meditation:

Walking meditation is another simple and wonderfully accessible tool for mindfulness. It is simple: coordinate your breathing with your step. Indoors, you can usually take one in-breath for the first step, and one out-breath for the second step. Or you can take your in-breath while raising your foot and moving it forward, and the out-breath while placing your foot back on the ground. Experiment to find out the right way for you to calibrate your breath with your footsteps. Try to step slowly and really feel your feet massage the earth. When walking indoors slowly, it is okay to wobble.

Outdoor walking meditation (sauntering) is very enjoyable. Every time we walk to our car, to the store, on the street, wherever, we can do it. In fact, you can do sauntering when you are indoors as well. Instead of one step for an in-breath and one step for an out-breath, you may take three or four steps per breath. Or you can take three steps for an in-breath and four for an out-breath. Do whatever feels comfortable; do whatever feels natural. If you tire of sitting meditation, interspersing it with walking is a great way to maintain a meditative state.

The essential technique of sitting and walking meditation is the same. ***Whenever you realize you are lost in thoughts, just notice your next breath and step.*** Keep the technique absolutely simple: notice that you are having a thought, and then notice the next breath and step, and let the distracting thought fall away on its own.

Sitting and walking meditation are merely tools to living the mindful life. There are not an end in themselves. But learning mindfulness in this manner will hopefully carry over and help us lead happier and more productive lives. These mindfulness practices nurture our inborn capacity to wake up and appreciate the freshness of the present moment and the fundamental goodness of our human nature.