

Simple Guidelines to Meditation for Beginners

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Sitting meditation

Sit in a comfortable posture. Most meditators prefer to sit on a cushion in a cross-legged posture. While the full lotus posture is the firmest and most stable posture, it isn't necessary to sit in full lotus. One can sit in a less demanding posture, such as the half-lotus (one foot resting on the opposite thigh), a quarter-lotus (one foot tucked in between the opposite thigh and shin), or the "easy posture" (both feet resting on the ground). If one cannot sit in any of these postures, one may sit on a straight-backed chair with both feet placed evenly on the ground.

- What is important is not the particular way one holds the legs, but the way one positions the body. The torso (trunk of the body) should be held straight and erect, but not stiff or rigid. It should be supported by the pelvis and legs, not by tightening the muscles of the back.
- The hands should be placed on the lap, the right hand over the left hand, with the thumbs lightly touching.
- The head should be held, first as if looking straight ahead, but then tilted a slight angle downwards, as if you were tucking in the chin. The nose should be directly above the navel. Close the eyes lightly.
- The mouth should be closed, with the tongue resting softly against the roof of the mouth. Breathe in a natural rhythm through the nostrils.
- Once you are sitting in a firm and comfortable posture, let your attention pervade the entire body. Try to feel the entire body as a composite whole, as a physical entity in space. If you notice any tight areas, relax them. If you feel the body isn't properly composed, re-adjust the posture until you feel you are holding it in a way that is both firm and comfortable.
- While your attention is suffused throughout the body, notice how your chest expands and contracts as you breathe in and out. To help settle the mind, mindfully attend to the expansion and contraction of the chest as you breathe in and out. Keep your attention on the expansion and contraction for five or six rounds of in-and-out breathing.
- After five or six rounds, bring your attention to the area around your nostrils and let it rest there. After a few breaths, you will notice that the in-and-out movement of the breath is particularly distinct in one part of this area. This area may be slightly inside the nostrils, or at the rim of the nostrils, or at the "moustache area" just below the nostrils. The breath might be more distinct at one nostril than at another, or it may be equally distinct at both nostrils. Exactly where and how it appears is not important. What is important is to settle the mind on that particular area where the breath is most distinct and keep it focused on that area.
- An alternative place to focus one's attention is the rising and falling of the abdomen as you breathe in and out. When the abdomen rises, be aware of the rising sensation; when the abdomen falls, be aware of the falling sensation. Experiment with both the nostrils and the abdomen for a few minutes in each

place, then choose one and stick with it. Don't vacillate back and forth between one and the other. Whichever place you choose will naturally be clear at times and obscure at times. Don't think that you will benefit from changing the focus of attention.

- Keep your attention fixed on the area where you feel the breathing sensation most distinctly, either the area around the nostrils or the rising and falling movement of the abdomen. Try to be aware of each in-breath and out-breath as it occurs, or of each rising and falling movement as it occurs. Try to keep your attention on the object as consistently and continuously as possible, without distractions.
- The breathing should occur at a normal, natural rhythm. Don't make any attempt to control or regulate the breath.
- In sustaining awareness of the object, you should try to maintain two complementary qualities: firmness and softness. Your attention should be *firm* in so far as it remains continuously on the object, without wandering or drifting off into drowsiness and daydreaming. It should be *soft* in that you do not forcefully "press" your attention against the object, but just let it rest there as if it were "sitting" on the spot where you experience the breath most clearly and distinctly, either at the nostrils or via the rising and falling of the abdomen.
- To help you keep your mind on the object, you can make a simple mental note. If you are focusing on the breath, you can make the mental note, as you are breathing in, "in, in"; as you are breathing out, "out, out." If you have chosen the rising and falling of the abdomen, as the abdomen rises, make the mental note "rising, rising"; as the abdomen falls, note "falling, falling."
- Naturally, as you sit in meditation, the mind will wander away from the object. This will occur often and should not be a cause of distress. Whenever you notice the mind wandering, simply recognize this, as soon as possible, and then bring your attention back, firmly but softly, to the object: either the breath entering and leaving the nostrils or the rising and falling of the abdomen.
- Similarly, if you hear sounds from outside and your attention strays from the breath to the sounds, simply make a mental note "hearing, hearing" or "sound, sound." Then let go of the sounds and bring your attention back, firmly but softly, to the object.
- If you feel pain or discomfort, don't hasten to change the posture. You want to hold the posture as long as possible before moving. Thus, if a pain arises (for example, in the legs, knees, or buttocks) simply note "pain, pain," and then bring the mind back to the primary object. If some discomfort arises, just note "discomfort, discomfort," and return to the primary object. If the pain becomes more persistent, you can drop the primary object and focus on the pain. If the pain becomes extremely severe, you can slowly and mindfully readjust the posture. You will find over time that, as you grow more accustomed to sitting in meditation, you can sit longer without being disturbed by pain.
- The same applies to sensations like itching, flushing, biting, heat, cold, etc. When such sensations arise, do not scratch or feel your body. Meditation often brings up strange sensations; these will subside once you settle into the object. When such sensations arise, simply note "itching, itching," or "biting, biting," etc. and bring your mind back to the primary object, the breath around the nostrils or the rising

and falling of the abdomen. If the sensation becomes very insistent, you can drop the primary object and simply observe the sensation as it persists. You will see how the sensation is constantly undergoing its own process of increasing and diminishing in quality and strength. When the sensation subsides, return to the primary object.

- To end the meditation session, rub the palms of the hands together a few times, then rub the face, the top of the head, the back of the head, the back of the neck, the back around the kidneys, and the buttocks. Then rub down the legs—thighs, shins, feet, and toes—to stimulate the circulation. Finally, extend thoughts of loving-kindness for a few minutes, wishing that all living beings be well and happy. Then you may rise from your seat.

Walking meditation

- Walking meditation simply extends to the act of walking the same mode of attention that you use to follow the breath. While many meditation teachers teach students to break each step into phases, beginners should simply be aware of each step in its entirety.
- Choose a walking area 25 or 30 paces in length. First be aware of the body in the standing posture about to begin mindful walking. Then, as you take each step, be aware of the entire step, from the moment that you lift the foot from the ground, through the entire duration of the step, till the moment that you have completed pressing it against the ground at the end of the step. Then be aware of the opposite foot.
- Continue in this way until you reach the end of the walkway. Then be aware of stopping, standing, and turning around. Then be mindful of each step as you walk back.
- If the mind wanders, treat it in the same way that you do when practicing mindfulness in the sitting position. Recognize that the mind has wandered, let the thoughts go, and bring your attention back, firmly but softly, to the act of walking.

When beginning meditation, you should start with a half-hour session. Ideally, you should try to create time for two sessions per day, in the early morning and in the evening. After you have become accustomed to sitting for a half-hour per session, you might want to increase this, first to forty minutes per session, then to fifty minutes. If you can manage to sit two fifty minute sessions per day, this would be excellent. But at minimum you should sit for a single half-hour session daily. To sustain a meditation practice requires determination and commitment, but when you recognize the benefits that come from practice, your determination will become firm.