

Mindfulness Meditation Introductory class

Week One: Mindfulness of Breathing

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Mindfulness Meditation

The heart of this form of meditation practice is mindfulness, which has two key aspects: knowing what is happening while it is happening, and the cultivation of non-reactivity to what is happening. The quality of knowing what is happening while it is happening is a natural ability that we have as human beings; it is not an obscure or rarified state of consciousness. What is unusual for us, though, is to be able to sustain that awareness, rather than being pulled into our thoughts and reactions about what is happening.

When we sit down to practice mindfulness meditation, the mind falls into habitual patterns of thought and emotions. We may find ourselves planning, remembering, fantasizing, or replaying arguments. We start to see how powerful habitual patterns are when we try to stay in the present moment.

We begin our training in staying in the present by choosing an object to anchor our attention to, to come back to over and over again. The experience of breathing has several qualities that make it a good choice as a training anchor:

- The experience of breathing is always in the present moment.
- The breath is a relatively neutral object, so it doesn't inherently generate reactivity.
- The breath changes, which makes it easier to stay present with than something that is constant.
- It has a cyclic quality, each breath appears and disappears

But it is not easy! When we try to stay with the breath, we initially see just how difficult it is to do. One of the first things we notice when we sit down to meditate is that the mind is out of control. The momentum of habit carries the mind away from the simple task of attending to the breathing.

We are at the mercy of these habits, and they are actually what cause a lot of the suffering of our lives. The practice of meditation helps to cut those habits by redirecting the mind to something more neutral, like the breathing. But, it is not necessary to judge yourself for those habits. They are deeply ingrained, and we all have them. In meditation, we allow ourselves compassion for these habits, we recognize the suffering that they cause us, and as best we can, we let go of them to return to the breathing.

So the first thing we learn about as we start to practice mindfulness meditation is what keeps us from being with the breath. We learn about the power and motivation of the mind, how quick it is to follow a fleeting thought, how quick it is to react. The way the mind works is highlighted because we are trying to do this simple thing of staying with the breath.

We cultivate some concentration, and we see the habitual tendencies of our mind. Over time the mindfulness becomes stronger and creates a space around our habits of mind, our reactivity our emotions, our thoughts, giving us the opportunity to choose how to relate to our habits.

Concentration and Mindfulness practices

Most forms of meditation fall into one of two categories: concentration practices or awareness practices.

Concentration practices use a one-pointed focus on a single object to calm and steady the mind. One of the most commonly used objects for concentration is the breath. Other objects that are sometimes used for concentration include mantras, or images that are formed and held in the mind. The mind becomes absorbed into the object; in deep states of concentration everything falls away but the object of concentration.

Concentration is a very healing practice. It produces very wholesome mental and physical states. The body and mind can become relaxed, calm, joyful, and tranquil.

Mindfulness, or awareness practices cultivate a non-judgmental, open awareness on what is happening, while it is happening.

Most forms of meditation actually bring both mindfulness and concentration into play, but emphasize one over the other. Concentration practices use mindfulness to help us see when we slip from the object. Mindfulness practices use concentration to attend more carefully to the object.

So, while we do focus on mindfulness practice in this class, I also encourage you to develop your concentration, which we usually do by giving some preference to the breathing over other objects of meditation.

Exercises for the Week

If you haven't meditated before, start with 15 to 20 min a day. Then if that works for you, try increasing your length of time by about 5 minutes a week, until you get to 30 minutes a day. I recommend sitting at the same time each day. In the morning the mind is usually pretty quiet, meditation can be very calm. In the evening, you might get to see more of the momentum of your mind! Choose the time that is easiest and most natural for you; choose the time you are most likely able to stick to. Sit whether you want to or not. Some people want to sit only when they feel good; others want to sit only when they feel bad. It is helpful to simply put your body there, and just see what comes up!

Pick an activity that you do each day, such as brushing your teeth, or making your bed, and bring a gentle awareness to the activity, through the sensations of posture and movement. You may find it helpful to put a note up somewhere that will help remind you to do this exercise!

Instructions for Mindfulness of Breathing

Spend a minute or so carefully settling into a posture, try to find a posture that is relaxed but alert. Then gently close your eyes. It is often helpful to start a period of meditation with some "set up" exercises to remind you of your intention to stay in the present moment.

So, start by taking a few long slow deep breaths. On the in breath, connect to the body and to a sense of presence. On the out breath, let go and relax. Use these deep breaths as a reminder of your intention to train the mind to be in the same place as the body (which is always in the present moment.) Then, let breathing return to normal. Mindfulness meditation is not a breathing exercise. We simply try to watch the breath as it is.

As a second set up exercise, it can be helpful to spend a few minutes scanning through the body for any places of obvious tension, and letting go of that tension. Start at the top of the head and scan down through the body letting the attention briefly rest on each part of the body while you relax.

Now take a few moments to feel your body in its entirety, with a wide attention.

Within the become aware that you are breathing. Notice how your body feels the breathing. What sensations of your body tell you that you are breathing? Find the place that you feel the sensations of breathing most clearly, and let your attention rest with those sensations. Feel the rhythm of the sensations of breathing in and breathing out.

The mind will wander! When you notice that it has wandered, take a moment to acknowledge that you have become aware, and what you are noticing: thinking, planning, remembering, etc. Check in with how the thinking has impacted your experience: has tension crept into your experience? If so, relax. Allow the attention to reconnect with the sensations of breathing. There is no need to judge yourself for wandering, or to become frustrated or angry. Just relax and let go. See if you can just let the mind open again to the experience of breathing, rather than trying to force the mind to "come back."