

How to do Mindfulness

If we are going to perform to our potential, regardless of the endeavor, we must have a mind that is able to stay in the present moment. In practicing mindfulness, we are trying to achieve a mind that is stable and calm. Through practice, we continue to develop and strengthen our ability to be fully present and peaceful without struggling. An important point is that when we are in a mindful state, it's not as if we blank out. Sometimes people think that a person who is practicing mindfulness doesn't know what's going on—that it's like being asleep. In fact, it is quite the opposite. When we are mindful, we are open to and very aware of all that surrounds us, both internally and externally.

Creating a Favorable Environment

There are certain conditions that are helpful for the practice of mindfulness. When we create the right environment it's easier to practice. The place where you practice, even if it's only a small space, should not be too noisy or distracting. Ideally it should be a peaceful setting. If you are disturbed or irritated, then your practice is going to be affected.

Beginning the Practice

Initially it is best to begin practicing for very short periods of time—five or ten minutes perhaps once in the morning and again in the evening. Training the mind should be very, very simple, however we do not just plop ourselves down and let the mind take us wherever it may. We have to create a personal sense of discipline. When we sit down, we can remind ourselves: "I'm here to work on my mind. I'm here to train my mind." It's okay to say that to yourself when you sit down, literally. During this time, you are active, concentrating and focused. When you are finished, then you just stop, get up, and go.

Posture

Your practice can be done in a chair, sitting upright with feet flat, firmly touching the ground. If you sit on the ground try to use a cushion. Find a comfortable position with legs crossed and hands resting either palm-down on your thighs or comfortably in your lap. You should have a feeling of stability and strength.

The body is erect, the spine is straight. Think of a string pulling you up from the top of your head and your spine like a stack of coins one on top of the other. We're not sitting up straight because we're trying to be good schoolchildren; our posture actually affects your thought process and your mind. We use this posture in order to remain relaxed and at the same time wide awake. When we sit down the first thing we need to do is to really have a sense of our body. Often we sort of prop ourselves up and pretend we're practicing, but we can't even feel our body; we can't even feel where it is. Instead, we need to be right here. So when you begin, spend a minute settling into your posture. Again, feel that your spine is being pulled up from the top of your head so your posture is elongated, and then settle. You should be very much awake even though you are calm. If you find yourself getting dull or hazy or falling asleep, check and adjust your posture.

Gaze

Some practice with their eyes open, not staring but with a soft gaze. I recommend gently closing your eyes but being sure that your head remains level. With your eyes closed, direct your gaze toward the end of your nose.

Breath

When we do our practice, we become more and more familiar with our mind, and in particular we learn to recognize the movement of the mind, our thoughts. We do this by using an object of focus to provide a contrast or counterpoint to what's happening in our mind. As soon as we go off and start thinking about something, awareness of the object of our focus will bring us back. While we could put a rock in front of us and use it to focus our mind, we instead use our breath as the object of focus because it relaxes us.

As you start the practice, you have a sense of your body and a sense of where you are, and then you begin to notice the breathing. The whole feeling of the breath is very important. The breath should not be forced, obviously; you are breathing naturally. The breath is going in and out, in and out. With each breath you may feel yourself becoming relaxed but it is important you remain awake and aware.

Thoughts

Initially, while focusing on your breath you should also try to be aware of your surroundings. At the same time be aware of your posture and how your body feels. You might feel a bit uncomfortable, don't fight it, just make note of it and let it be. Thoughts will inevitably come into your head. At times they may come fast and furious or you might get caught up in a single thought. Your goal is to notice the thought, give it recognition and then refocus on your breathing. You may want to focus on your chest rising with each breath and lowering with each exhale. You may focus on the sensation of your breath entering your nose on each inhale and then leaving your nose with each exhale. If you are having a particularly hard time refocusing on your breath you might want to count "One" on your inhalation and "Two" on your exhalation until you feel refocused on your breath. No matter what kind of thought comes up, just watch it, as if listening to a distant conversation. Then say to yourself, "That may be interesting or a really important issue in my life, but right now is not the time to think about it" and go back and refocus on your breath.

Everyone gets lost in thought sometimes. You might think, "I can't believe I got so absorbed in something like that," but try not to make it too personal. Just try to be an unbiased observer. When we have a thought—no matter how wild or bizarre it may be—we just let it go and come back to the breath, come back to the situation here. In the beginning the most important lesson of meditation is seeing the speed of the mind. Each practice session is a journey of discovery, increasing our awareness of our thoughts, reducing their influence on how we feel and ultimately on how we perform our life's tasks.