

MEDITATION:

When someone talks about meditation what is your image? Is it a bearded yogi in orange robes sitting in a lotus position in a cave? Are there minds silent with no thoughts? Do they have a blissful smile? Have they transcended their ego whatever that means! Sounds pretty exotic, inaccessible and totally foreign.

Meditation is something everyone can do!

So what is it? The closest Pali (an ancient Indian text) word that describes meditation is "bhavana" that means "cultivate". What are you cultivating? The answer is ATTENTION, one pointedness or focusing. The purpose of mindfulness is to develop the muscle of attention. It is not done to achieve some altered mind state. This could occur as a consequence of meditating but it is not the prime focus.

Meditation is just a the practice of mindfulness in a formal way. One has set aside time to practice in a deliberate fashion.

There are multiple practices of meditation. The two main ones are CONCENTRATION and INSIGHT.

In concentration a specific object has been chosen to focus one's attention. This could be your breath, a mantra or saying of certain words, visualization of an object.

In insight there is an openness with a focus on any object that is dominant in one's consciousness.

It may be more helpful to start with a concentration practice as this helps to provide some stability of the mind that then allows one to better progress to an insight practice.

I am going to outline a concentration practice based on the breath. It is always accessible for us to focus on.

Mindfulness has both qualities of concentration and insight. Therefore it is a perfect vehicle to practice meditation.

If I was to tell you to focus on your breath you would probably think I am crazy and this is as much fun as watching paint dry!! However there are tremendous benefits in practicing meditation. One of the first things we need to discuss is the BENEFITS of meditation. If you don't believe there is a benefit in doing this you will never persevere and practice.

Meditation has been a part of all religious and secular practice for thousands of years. There must have been some benefit or the practice would not have been done over all these years.

Personally I have seen tremendous benefits. I sometimes experience an hour later after I have meditated the feeling as if the car has shifted into a lower gear. My mind is much quieter. I am present and focused on what I am doing. There is a sense of patience and joy. It seems that it settles the background noise and there is a greater sense of stability and less reactivity that I can approach what I encounter. At times there is a desire to just go back and meditate.

There is now scientific evidence that meditation provides physical and psychological benefits. Meditation helps with high blood pressure, asthma, immunity, psoriasis and the ability to cope with cancer. Meditation helps decrease anxiety, sleep problems, eating disorders and depression.

Western science has finally caught up with this ancient practice. A brain scan called an MRI has demonstrated that meditators have increased activity of their left prefrontal cortex and insula and decreased activity of their amygdala. The prefrontal cortex is important for concentration and attention. The insula lets you feel the experience directly without the overlying commentary from your brain. The amygdala is part of a more earlier brain structure that deals with emotional reactivity and fear.

I like to say that meditation “does you”. You put the effort in to develop attention and changes occur in your brain that affect you in a way that you didn’t know were going to happen.

In order to see results do I need to be an expert and have 10,000 hours of practice? Absolutely not! Benefits from meditation can occur quite quickly. Results can be seen after an 8 week mindfulness based stress reduction course.

In order to be successful remember the “P’s of meditation”.

The following PRELIMINARIES highlights the space you choose to meditate, the timing of when you do it, motivation and planning.

It is important to choose a PLACE to meditate that is quiet and one can keep coming back to. There is no technology that is on in this space. If there are other family members present it is very helpful to let them know that no one is to come into the room or disturb you until your sit is over. You need to establish boundaries to have a sit that is free of intrusions. One creates this association between the place and meditating. You know this is your meditating home.

Everyone has a different rhythm and certain times of the day may resonate more for some individuals. I find that meditating first thing in the morning is the best time. Your mind is still relatively silent as it has not had the barrage of thoughts throughout the day. How many times have you said “I will exercise when I get home

today". There is always something that comes up to interfere and you never do your exercise. If you do your meditation first thing in the morning it gets done.

It can be helpful to PLAN "your day backwards". If you want to meditate 30 minutes in the morning you then decide how many hours of sleep you want. What time do you need to go to bed to wake up in the morning to be able to do your meditation before you start your day? Schedule your day around your meditation.

When you start meditating it can be very difficult to sit along time. One needs to PACE oneself. In order to prevent being frustrated and just give up I would suggest that you start slow and build up. I would start with 5 minutes for a week and then add 5 minutes every week until you reach 30 minutes. If you feel you can move up quicker go at your own pace.

I find that it helps to use a timer to keep track of my time. You don't have to worry about the time and it helps to keep you going until the timer goes. This helps to support a longer sitting time.

PRACTICE is so important. When you go to the gym, learn to play a new instrument, become an expert in your job, learn a new activity it takes practice. It doesn't happen right away. Ideally meditating every day is important. Otherwise do it as often as you can.

Be PATIENT with yourself. You may meditate and say "I can't do this. I am terrible. Everyone else is better!" One has to be kind with oneself. It takes time to develop a steady practice. Everyone moves at their own pace.

This has to become a PRIORITY in your life. If you don't see it as something that is valuable you won't persevere. I have already reviewed the proven scientific physical and psychological benefits. It may be helpful to have some trust and faith in knowing the value this practice has been to so many others. The more you meditate the more value you will see in doing it and it will reinforce your practice.

There are only so many hours in a day and how do you fit in everything that you want to do. You will need to make choices of what is really important and what is not. It may mean giving up some television time or surfing the internet to allow you to meditate.

Have you ever made a new years resolution? It can be helpful to declare to yourself that you will make a commitment to meditate every day, every other day etc. for the next month. This may help inspire you to persevere.

Finding a buddy to support your practice is very valuable. If you can find someone else who meditates to partner with and every day connect with them thru a text, email or phone call to simply say I meditated today for however long you did. Just

knowing that there is some accountability to someone else will encourage you to practice.

Well, how do you meditate?

Let us start with the posture. One can meditate sitting on the ground, sitting on a chair or walking. No one position is better. Certain physical limitations may decide the best way for you.

Sitting on the ground makes you feel quite grounded. It is important to have the hips higher than your knees. Therefore you need to sit up on a support (pillows) under your buttocks. Use enough pillows to elevate the hips and try and get your knees on the floor. Our flexibility varies and if one or both knees don't contact the floor you will need to put a pillow under the knee that doesn't reach the floor to support it.

The simplest position for your legs is to sit cross legged with one foot in front of the other. There are more complicated positions such as a half lotus or full lotus position but they don't offer any more benefit for you.

Your hands can rest on your lap with one hand on top of the other. The palms are face up. Or they can rest on your knees.

Your spine is straight but relaxed.

Your chin is slightly tucked and pulled back.

If you sit in a chair the same principle holds with the hips higher than the knees or at the same level. If you are tall you may need a pillow under your hips. If you are smaller and your feet don't reach the floor put a pillow under your feet.

Your back should be upright but relaxed. It should be away from the back of the chair. You need to keep your back straight without the help of the back of the chair to support it.

It is one thing to have a straight spine but stillness in the body is important and different. One is trying to have a sense of no movement in the body. Stillness in the body supports stillness in the mind.

When meditating close your eyes. This helps to decrease all the distraction from your visible cues.

Now that you have established the position you are going to meditate in let us start the practice.

Initially it helps to mentally state your intention for your practice. What are you trying to do in meditating? As we have learned before the main purpose in

meditating is to develop attention, one pointed focusing. One might say “May I have a continual attention to the movement of my breath”. Choose what you feel exemplifies what you are trying to accomplish in this sitting.

Next as we discussed before a still and relaxed body helps lead to a more relaxed mind. What you want to do is to scan your body. Bring your attention to your feet and slowly move your attention up your body until you reach your head. If you find a place that is tight or uncomfortable bring your breath to this place and continue to breathe into this spot to help support a release of the tension.

Meditation is an attention practice. One is trying to FEEL THE PHYSICAL SENSATION OF THE MOVEMENT OF THE BREATH AT THE TIP OF THE NOSTRILS.

One may experience the movement of the breath at the tip of the nostrils, chest, abdomen or throughout the body. I prefer to use the tip of the nostrils as it is a more focal spot that helps to localize your attention.

It is also a more sensitive spot for the appreciation of both gross and fine movements of the breath.

In order to identify this spot at the tip of the nostrils it may be helpful to sit up straight, close your eyes and take several deep breaths in and out. Bring your attention to the tip of the nostrils. Can you feel the movement of these more exaggerated breaths at this spot. Can you imprint in your mind where you want to bring your attention.

Next I would again ask you to close your eyes and bring your attention to the physical sensation of the breath at the tip of the nostrils. What do you notice about each breath? Is it hot or cold, smooth or irregular, deep or shallow, moist or dry, loud or quiet or short or long? Are any two breaths the same? Is an in or out breath one continuous movement or are there multiple components to any breath?

One can see that each breath is unique. This is the important key to maintaining interest in the breath. We quickly become bored with everything we do. There has to be change in our experiences to keep us interested. If we can look for the unique aspect in each breath we stand a better chance of developing more persistent concentration.

In meditating it is important to not consciously control the breath. One wants to be BREATHED BY THE BREATH. In order to develop a sense of this spontaneous breath movement I would ask that you take a deep breath in and out two times. After the second breath rest in the space at the end of the exhalation without any attempt to do anything. Ultimately your body will start to breathe automatically. Can you just consciously appreciate how it feels to be moved by the breath without any effort on your part?

Feeling the physical sensation of the breath has both active and passive components to it. There are PAUSES in the breath cycle between inhalation and exhalation and exhalation and inhalation. The more pronounced pause is between the exhalation and inhalation. Can you close your eyes and when you come to the pause between the exhalation and inhalation specifically bring your attention to this space. What does the space feel like? Is there any movement? What does stillness feel like?

It is important to maintain continuous attention of the breath through its complete cycle of breathing in, breathing out and the pause. One is trying to maintain attention of the breath at all times.

Resting in this space can also help with the sensation of being breathed by the breath. As you rest in stillness there is just being present to what is without any need to do anything. You have to breathe and your body will take care of that.

There are several REMINDERS one can use to support the meditation practice.

When one breathes in one can mentally say “in”. When one breathes out one can mentally say “out”.

One can use counting to support the practice. The first in breath is 1. The out breath is 1. The next in breath is 2. The next out breath is 2. One continues to breath and count until you reach 10, then start again. The counting is a small component and not what one is trying to fixate on. It is just there in the background to support being with the breath.

One can also mentally ask the following questions “What is new about this breath?” “Can I feel the breath at the tip of the nostrils?” “Is my back straight?”

One can ask oneself these questions randomly whenever you remember. The other option is every time you wake up from another distraction that takes you away from the breath such as thinking, emotions, sounds or physical pain use this as a cue. At that time ground yourself back to your object of meditation by asking one of these questions to focus your attention back to the breath.

Meditation can have this BALANCE of an active and passive process. At times there is a relaxed non doing observing of the breath. However it may be necessary to become more active in developing one’s attention when the mind is constantly wandering. Ideally the practice is relaxed and nondoing but at times one needs a more active intervention by specifically looking for what is unique about the breath.

At the end of the meditation move slowly. Open your eyes to let light and stimulation in. Move your limbs slowly and don’t stand up until you are sure that the normal blood supply and sensation have returned.

Don't get up right away and move around. Allow yourself the opportunity to experience in that moment the sense of stillness and relaxation in your mind and body that you have worked to create.

Resting in this sensation of meditation can be helpful to embody this body and mental feeling that develops from meditation. One can start to create the memory of what it feels like to meditate. This may make it easier to drop into it the next time you meditate.

In allowing yourself to rest in this post meditation experience it may carry on for a longer time as you start to engage in your normal activities.

Acknowledge your accomplishment in having taken the time to meditate in your busy day. Every meditation is helpful whether your mind was still or active. No meditation is a failure. You are laying the foundation for your practice. You are creating the new grooves of concentration in your mind.

To support your practice one might mindfully say to one self at the end of the sit, "I have the ability to meditate. This is important to my wellness. I can bring attention and acceptance to my experiences." To meditate is a wonderful accomplishment and it is great to acknowledge what you have done that will help bring confidence in your ability to do this.

During meditation one may encounter DISTRACTIONS such as sleepiness, restlessness, pain and a thinking mind.

I have done a lot of "vertical sleeping" over my years. One can become very sleepy and start to sleep during a meditation practice. This may just reflect the fact that you are sleepy and the best thing would be to just get some sleep. One can help to stimulate oneself by opening the eyes to let in light and visual stimuli. One can stand up or do a walking meditation. If one is meditating in the evening it may be helpful to shift the meditation to the morning so when you meditate you are rested.

At times our minds can be very restless and it is difficult to settle down. Recognize that no meditation session is the same. Some seem good, others are more difficult. If the mind is really restless counting as another means to focus attention can be helpful.

Pain can arise during a meditation. Meditation is not meant to be a suffering practice. If it is painful move your body, but slowly and mindfully. Be aware of how your body moves to a new position.

This leads us to the most powerful distraction we will have during meditation. That is our thinking mind! As we sit and bring attention to our minds we quickly recognize that our minds are constantly thinking. Everything we encounter is

commented on. Our attention to our breath is constantly been diverted to our thoughts and emotions.

Bringing mindfulness to thoughts and emotions will be explored as we progress. However it is interesting at this point just to be aware of the thoughts and emotions that arise in response to our breath. Our minds might comment “this is boring, I can’t do this, I am a failure, this is so difficult, everyone else is doing this so much better than me, I can’t follow my breath etc.”

In response to pain in the body one’s mind might start to say “This is so painful. Why am I doing this? Why am I torturing myself? I hope my leg doesn’t become so injured with pain damage that I will cause permanent injury?”

The vast majority of time the mind will do what it does best, it just thinks. It thinks about we did in the past and what we plan to do in the future. It doesn’t often rest in the present moment.

When we become aware of a distraction such as a thought, emotion or physical sensation that has taken us away from our breath acknowledge it and come back to your breath. One might acknowledge the distraction by saying “NOW: thinking – planning, criticizing, judging, creating, remembering);feeling (sadness, happiness, anger, frustration); physical sensation (pressure, pulsating, warm, cold, pins and needles).

The other broad observation if the sensation is persisting is to see how one is relating to the sensation. Are you grabbing on, pushing it away, not sure what is happening or being present from a place of acceptance. Become aware of your relationship to this moment of awareness.

It is natural to be distracted by our thoughts, emotions and body sensations. Just the fact that you have recognized the distraction demonstrates that you are successfully practicing mindfulness. This is not a failure to be brought away from your attention of the breath.