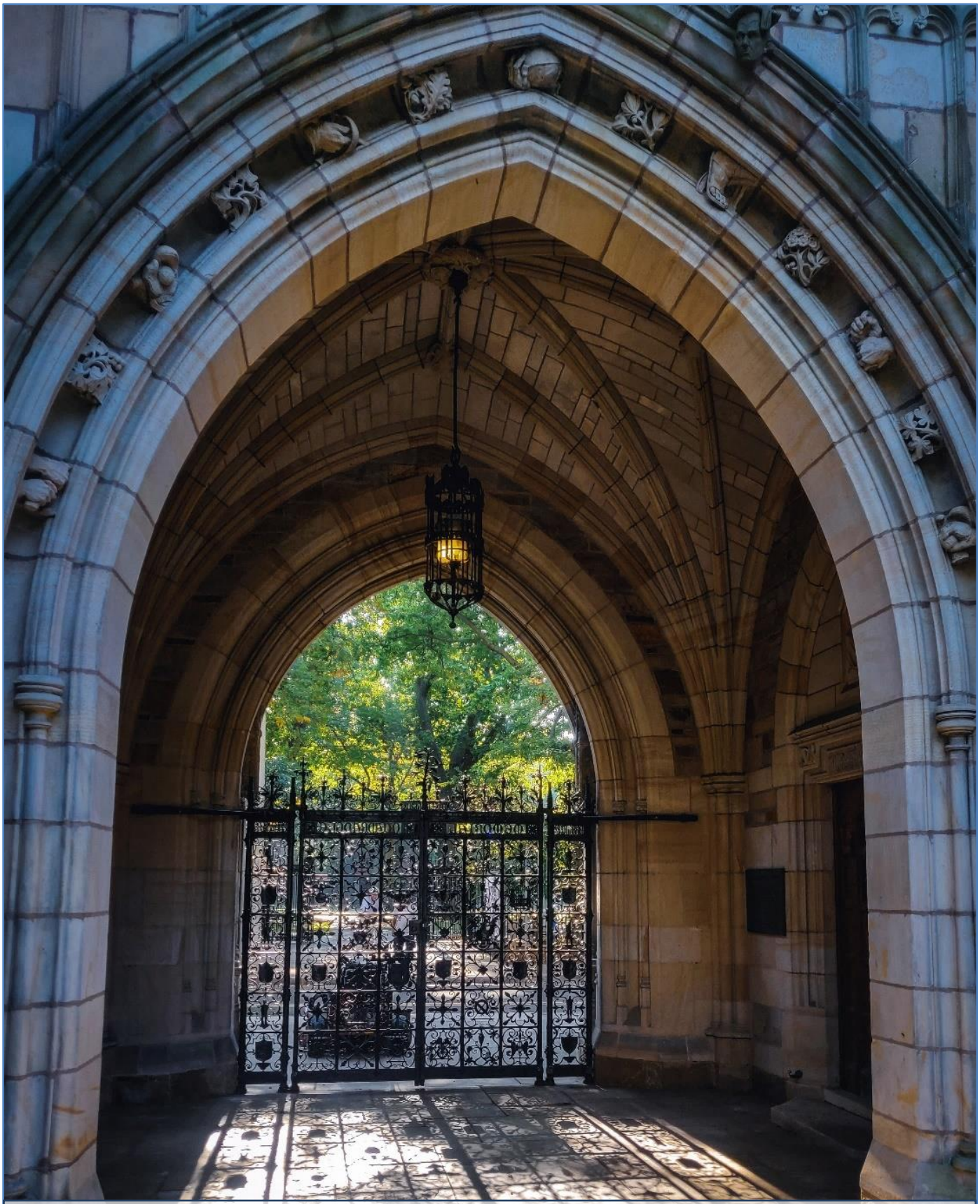

Buddhist Life at Yale

# Meditation Handbook

*An Introduction to Mindfulness and Metta Practice*

Buddhist Life at Yale
Chaplain's Office
Yale University
Bingham Hall, Entry D
PO Box 209078
New Haven, Connecticut 06520 USA
Buddhistlife.yale.edu

*Meditation Handbook: An Introduction to Mindfulness and Metta Practice*
© 2022 by Sumi Loundon Kim

Line drawings in Getting Started by Sumi Loundon Kim
Illustrations by Chairin Kim, Yale College '20
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*Getting Started* ..... *5*

***Part I: Mindfulness Meditation*** ..... ***16***

*Lesson 1: Senses* ..... *17*

*Lesson 2: Breath* ..... *24*

*Lesson 3: Body* ..... *31*

*Lesson 4: Walking* ..... *35*

*Lesson 5: Emotions* ..... *38*

*Lesson 6: Thinking* ..... *44*

*Lesson 7: Bringing It All Together* ..... *49*

*Guided Mindfulness Meditations on Youtube*

***Part II: Metta (Loving-Kindness) Meditation*** ..... ***54***

*Lesson 1: Overview; Benefactor* ..... *55*

*Lesson 2: Kindness for Oneself* ..... *61*

*Lesson 3: The Friend and the Neutral Person* ..... *65*

*Lesson 4: Anger* ..... *67*

*Lesson 5: Forgiveness* ..... *70*

*Lesson 6: The Difficult Person* ..... *72*

*Lesson 7: All Beings* ..... *75*

*Practicing Metta* ..... *79*

*Guided Metta Meditations on Youtube*

***Part III: Beyond the Basics*** ..... ***84***

*Further Learning* ..... *85*

*Useful Analogies to Understand Meditation* ..... *89*

*Stress: Four Perspectives* ..... *93*

*Backdoor to a Deeper Meditative Experience* ..... *96*

*Trauma-Sensitive Meditation* ..... *103*

*Breathing Techniques for Calming the Nervous System* ..... *110*

*Beyond Meditation* ..... *112*

*About the Author* ..... *113*

*About the Illustrator* ..... *113*

# Getting Started

Let's start with a mystery.

Over thirty years of solid scientific research, from thousands of studies in research institutes around the world, confirms *some* the following benefits of meditation:

| **Physical Health** | **Brain Function** | **Mental Illness** | **Life Skills** | **Values/Qualities** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Reduces/Lowers* | *Improves* | *Reduces/Manages* | *Improves* | *Increases* |
| Asthma<br>Blood pressure<br>Brain aging<br>Chronic pain<br>Diabetes<br>Heart disease<br>Increases immunity | Attention<br>Cognition<br>Emotional regulation<br>Learning<br>Memory | ADHD<br>Anxiety<br>Depression<br>Insomnia<br>OCD<br>Personality disorders<br>PTSD<br>Substance abuse | Healing<br>Self-awareness and knowledge<br>Emotional balance<br>Relationships<br>Resilience<br>Good choices<br>Reduces stress | Compassion<br>Contentment<br>Gratitude<br>Inner peace<br>Integrity<br>Intimacy<br>Joy<br>Kindness<br>Wisdom |

How can this be? How can something as simple as sitting down to follow the breath and becoming aware of what's happening in the present moment lead to so many positive outcomes? How puzzling!

Yet, there is a straightforward answer.

There is one part of us that not only perceives what we are experiencing but also determines how we think and feel about it. What is that one part? *The mind*.

We can reason that if meditation works directly with your mind, and your mind is the interface between you and the world, then meditation will have an impact on every aspect of your life.

That said, meditation isn't likely to solve or cure all your problems. Meditation, however, can be an invaluable *ally*—a companion to therapy, medication, medical intervention, and so on—in the process of healing and cultivating well-being.

### Meditation Works Like Your Cell Phone

One way to think about how meditation works is to think about your cell phone. The device is comprised of three components: apps (mail, social media, calendar), the operating system beneath that (iOS, Android), and the hardware (Samsung, iPhone). We too are like the cell phone: we have our apps (school, career, health, relationships), our operating system (the mind and heart), and our hardware (body, brain, digestion).

Most people start meditation thinking that they are working on an app in their life: "I'm meditating to become a better student; meditation will help me with stress." But really what meditation is doing is that it's working at the operating system level—it's working on our mind and on our heart.

What happens when you update your operating system on your phone? All the apps get updated, too: they run more efficiently, have fewer errors, don't break down as often, and are faster. Likewise, meditation is "updating" our heart-mind. Therefore, *all* the apps in our life—our work, our friendships, our health metrics—begin to operate more efficiently and beautifully, with fewer breakdowns and bugs. This explains why meditation is so powerful and why, in time, it changes everything in our lives.

## What's Ahead

While meditation is as simple as just sitting and becoming present, *learning* meditation can be undertaken in a progressive and structured way. The following lessons introduce foundational mindfulness skills step-by-step, including how to follow the breath, develop mindfulness, and work with our body. You will also learn how to practice mindfulness with emotions, states of mind, and thinking, as well as how to manage and reduce stress. Throughout, we look at ways to bring formal practice time from the meditation cushion into our daily lives, integrating mindfulness in all activities of life.

### How Long Does It Take to Learn to Meditate?

Learning meditation is akin to learning how to drive a car or to swim. It's much easier than learning the play the violin but harder than putting together Ikea bookshelves.

Many meditation programs are six to eight weeks long, with the expectation that the student is practicing on their own for 20 or more minutes several times a week, and up to daily. As with learning any new skill, there is a direct correlation between duration and regularity of practice to results. Anyone can learn to meditate: there are zero special qualities one needs to undertake meditation.

### How Much Effort Yields Results?

To estimate effort to results, draw on your experience of the correlation between how much exercise you do and your state of health. All doctors will tell you that even a few minutes of exercise a day is better than none and even has some mild benefits. The same is true for meditation: a few minutes of meditation will provide a helpful reset. Generally speaking, a baseline amount of exercise—around 20 minutes, three times a week—will help you maintain a baseline level of cardiac and muscle fitness. The same time and frequency of meditation will help you maintain balance, stay attuned to yourself and others, support emotional regulation, and give you some smaller insights into yourself. Now, take this up a notch: an exercise devotee or athlete who trains for an hour or more a day and performs in games or matches tends to have superior health, well above average. Likewise, a dedicated meditator operating at the same level will have unusual levels of equanimity, significant personal and spiritual insights, and be exceptionally skilled at dealing with stress and suffering. And then if we look at Olympians, well those are your Zen masters. The problem is that most of us put in a basic level of effort, akin to taking a walk a few times a week, but we expect enlightenment! Meditation is not an exception to the 10,000-hour rule (that it's estimated it takes around 10,000 hours to master high-level skills.) Make sure you adjust your expectations to your effort as you undertake this program.

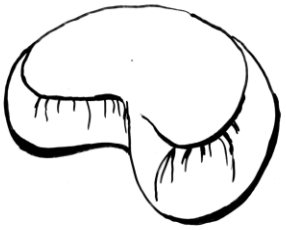
## Equipment, Positions, and Setup

### Equipment

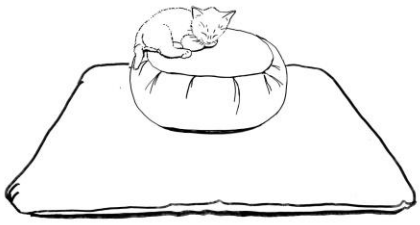
Although meditation doesn't require anything but your body, mind, and breath, a little bit of equipment like the following can be supportive.

*DIY meditation set*. As retail meditation cushions and mats can be costly, a zero-cost option is to make use of what you have at home. To cushion your knees and ankles, create a mat by folding a blanket in four. Then create a cushion to lift your bottom above your knees by folding another blanket so that it's four to seven inches high. Use blankets that create a firm set, such as a quilt or wool rather than fluffy comforters.

*Cushion*. Also called a *zafu*, this round cushion raises the bottom above the knees in sitting meditation, thereby lifting and supporting the back. The cushion is stuffed with either kapok or buckwheat. Kapok feels like cotton and can be quite firm until broken in after a few months. Buckwheat cushions are heavier and more adjustable. The cushion can be turned sideways for use with a kneeling position. These cushions come in a range of heights, and it is advisable to try some out before making a purchase. It also comes in a crescent shape.

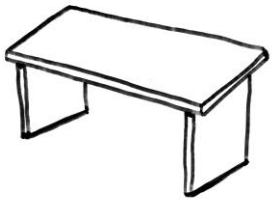


*Mat*. Also called a *zabuton*, this rectangular pad goes on the floor under the cushion or bench to provide a softer landing for the knees and ankles.



*Supports*. Small, flat pillows or folded towels may be needed for extra lift or support.

*Seiza bench*. This short, wooden bench is used with a kneeling posture. Some come with a small cushion, some not. This bench is good for tall people or those with stiffness in the hips and knees.



*Chair*. A straight-backed chair that provides sufficient height for your hips to be at the same height as or slightly above the knees.

*Loose clothing*. Wear pants that are relaxed around the waist and throughout the legs. A comfortable shirt that doesn't restrict breathing is also nice.

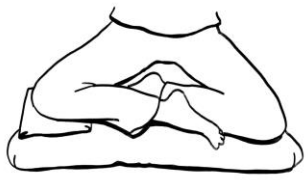
## Positions

While meditation can be done in any posture—sitting, standing, walking, or lying down—a seated position provides the right balance of relaxation and alertness. Standing tends to lead to fatigue, while lying down leads to sleepiness. Whether on a chair, cushion, or seiza bench, sitting is the perfect balance of meditation postures. That said, for some people it's necessary to meditate lying down or using other postures.

### Seated Positions

*Cushion or bench with mat.* The cushion is placed toward the back half of the long edge of the mat. Sit on the forward half of the cushion with your legs folded before you, creating a triangular base with your buttocks and legs. Adjust the cushion so that your hips are above the knees. For most people, the cushion needs to be at least four to seven inches thick (the taller you are, the thicker the cushion). This tripod allows the weight of the torso to travel down the spine, to the buttocks, and then be distributed through the legs to the knees and calves. It's important that your knees touch the mat to properly receive the weight of the upper body without strain, so tuck a flat pillow or towel under any knee that is raised up.

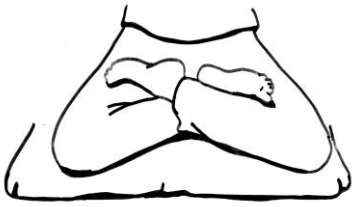
*Legs.* The cross-legged style that children sit in at school is not recommended for meditation, as the crossed ankles lead to circulation problems after five to ten minutes. The following are a few traditional postures that will allow you to sit comfortably for longer periods of time.



*Burmese style.* Cross your legs so that the tops of both feet rest on the floor.

*Quarter lotus.* Place one foot up on the *calf* of the other leg, tucking the lower leg under. This position is a little bit asymmetrical so a cushion under the upper knee may be necessary.

*Half lotus*. Place one foot up on the *thigh* of the other leg, tucking the lower leg under. This position is even more asymmetrical so a cushion under the upper knee may be necessary.



*Full lotus*. Though classic and ideal because of its stability and symmetry, this position is tough even for those with a regular hatha yoga routine. It requires considerable flexibility in the knees and hips. Here, each foot is placed onto the opposite thigh. If you have to force yourself into this position even a little, don't use this position.

*Kneeling position*. Here the legs are folded under the body. A seiza bench or meditation cushion takes weight off the calves, but one can also go without and just kneel. If you use a cushion, try turning it sideways to create greater height. In general, increased height helps the spine stay straight and reduces pressure on the lower legs. It might be helpful to position yourself toward the back edge of the mat so that the tops of the feet drape over the edge, allowing the feet to curve naturally.

*Chair*. There's nothing sacred about sitting on the floor; using a chair is equally supportive. You might use a pad under your bottom to provide extra lift if you're tall or under the feet if they don't reach the floor naturally. Rather than lean back in the chair, sit closer toward the front to help your back stay upright and elongated. If you need back support, use a cushion on the lower back. Place your feet flat on the floor and create a slightly opened L-shape with the torso to thighs and another L-shape from thighs to shins.

## Posture

*Back*. So that the breath can move fully and naturally, create length in your back by gently reaching for an imaginary point above the head. Then relax slightly from that stretch. You want to be neither slouched nor rigidly upright. The lower back will have a slight arch that supports the upper body. Tuck the chin in very slightly to create a little length along the back of the neck.

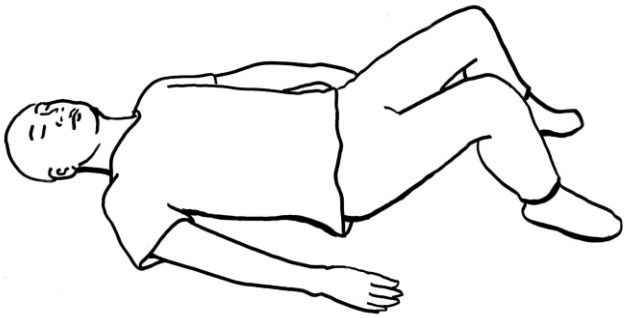
*Hands*. Place your hands around midthigh, palms down, on your legs. If the hands are too close to the hips, your shoulders will get tired. If too close to the knees, then you'll feel overstretched before long. If you feel some strain in your shoulders, arms, or back, it can help to rest the hands on a pillow in the lap.

*Mouth*. Unless your nose is stuffed up, breathe through your nose and keep the mouth closed. You might find yourself swallowing a lot during the beginning, but that will eventually subside. Create a vacuum in your mouth by taking a solid swallow and letting the tongue remain lightly pressed against the top of the mouth.

*Eyes*. Generally, it's recommended to keep the eyes closed, but sometimes it's useful to open them (such as when you're sleepy) or meditate an entire session with them open. If you prefer to meditate with eyes open, let the eyes rest on a spot a few feet ahead of you with the eyelids partially lowered.

*Legs falling asleep*. In the beginning, it's common that the legs will fall asleep but with practice that will decrease. That said, the feeling may be the result of too much pressure on the sciatic nerve running down the back of the legs. (The feeling is not, as many think, from a lack of blood flow.) Ensure there are no points pushing into the sciatic nerve by adjusting your seating. You may find it helpful to lift the bottom up a bit higher: insert a wedge or small cushion just behind the bottom or use a crescent-shaped meditation cushion instead of a round one.

### Lying Down



The lying-down posture should only be used by those who have consistent pain or extended and distracting discomfort with seated positions. Yes, it's relaxing at the end of a yoga class, but it is the least conducive to an alert meditation. Nonetheless, some people truly do need a lying-down position. If so, ensure there's not too much pressure on the lower back. Use a mat or pad if the floor is hard. To gauge whether you have become sleepy, keep the legs slightly apart or keep one of your forearms perpendicular to the floor. If you begin to drift off, your knees or forearm will move and wake you up.

### Discomfort

All positions, even lying down, have the potential to lead to some discomfort. But so long as it is mild, comes on later in a session, and disappears upon changing position or ending the sit, then the discomfort is another thing to work with in the meditation. Stay with the discomfort for as long as you can, investigating it (Body lesson) before moving. If you do decide to move, do so as mindfully as possible. Bear in mind the specific needs of your body, however, and provide appropriate, compassionate support for pre-existing conditions.

### Yoga or Exercise before Sitting

One way to reduce physical discomfort as well as prepare the body for meditation is to practice five to twenty minutes doing yoga or stretching, or even exercise, before meditation. Physical activity is tremendously supportive for seated meditation. Physical activity helps bring energy into the body if we are tired, releases stress built up in the body, and reduces mental restlessness by grounding our energy in the body.

## Setup

***Where:*** Find a place that is as free of distraction as possible. Don't meditate in bed. Try to sit in the same spot each day, so that your mind associates the space with the practice.

***When:*** Think through your daily routine and mentally schedule in twenty minutes for meditation. Try to meditate at the same time each day so that your mind associates the

time with the practice. Many find that the only way to ensure they will practice is to do it first thing in the morning after waking up. Evenings are also a good time for some, though many find they are tired by the end of the day. It's preferable to avoid sitting after meals, as a full stomach leads to drowsiness. Don't get hung up on finding the perfect time of day: restlessness, drowsiness, and other states of mind will happen no matter what time you meditate. It is better to meditate at the same time of day than it is to ceaselessly pursue the perfect time.

***Timer:*** Mobile phones usually have an alarm application with a timer function and a selection of chimes or bells. Choose a pleasant sound to ring at the end of each session so that you are not anxious about getting startled by an unpleasant alarm. There are also free meditation apps available for download. You can also just use a clock or a watch and keep track of the time yourself. You also don't necessarily have to meditate for a set amount of time or use a timer at all.

***How long and frequently to sit:*** Start small, perhaps just sitting for a few minutes, to begin building it into your schedule. Once you can meditate each day for those few minutes, on average about five times a week, then increase the time by a few more minutes. Again, once this is a habit, increase the duration a little more. If you find you stop practicing because it's too long, then revert to the previous duration until you are ready to lengthen it again.

Some research has shown that the minimum one can meditate in order to see benefits is ten minutes a session, on a daily basis, for several months. In my experience, this is about right, because it takes at least five minutes, usually a bit longer, for one to settle down, work through sleepiness, and find a more balanced energy with which to concentrate on the breath or become mindful for the remaining minutes. That said, a full twenty minutes allows more time to more carefully attend to what's happening in the present moment. For this reason, I highly recommend twenty-minute meditations. Generally speaking, making meditation a daily habit results in greater insight and transformation, but I have seen students still develop nicely by practicing three to five times a week.

## Determining Your Habit Type

The brilliant writer and thinker Gretchen Rubin realized that people's ways of making, developing, and keeping habits followed four different patterns, which she terms "The Four Tendencies." As follows:

> **Upholders** respond readily to outer and inner expectations
>
> **Questioners** question all expectations; they'll meet an expectation if they think it makes sense
>
> **Rebels** resist all expectations, outer and inner alike
>
> **Obligers** meet outer expectations, but struggle to meet expectations they impose on themselves

For each of these four, there are notably different approaches to working with habits. It can be entirely worthwhile to figure out which tendency you have, because you'll not only learn the best ways to develop a habit of meditation but also understand what works best for you for all other demands in your life. Take 15 minutes to visit her website gretchenrubin.com, take the self-assessment quiz at https://quiz.gretchenrubin.com/, and learn about strategies for developing habits for your type.

Regarding meditation, an example of a great strategy for an Obliger type is to find a meditation buddy. I have two friends who are Obliger types who text each other every day just to say, "I meditated today." This inspires the other to follow through, because they don't want to let their buddy down. A good strategy for the Rebel type is to work with the need to have an identity: one Rebel I know tells herself that "I'm a meditator," and this motivates her to do what fulfills that identity. What all this should tell you is that there are few, if any, pieces of advice on how to develop a meditation habit that would work for *everyone*. You'll need to find what works for you.

## Putting Down the Device

Many will attest to the inverse relationship between online connectivity and in-person connectivity. The more we are connected to friends, news, and entertainment online (and we'll include cell phone use—texting, surfing, and talking), the less we are attuned to the people around us. One of the biggest obstacles to becoming present is the pervasive, continuous use of connected devices, including mobile phones, pads, tablets, and laptops. We all know that when our eyes are glued to the screen, our mind is

completely sucked into another world and is disconnected from the people and environment surrounding us. We can be physically next to a friend, but if we are on a device, our mind can be miles away.

As obvious as this seems, one way to increase mindfulness is very simply to turn off your device or put it away. Just setting aside that distraction will automatically increase your ability to be mindful. You don't have to do anything—except resist temptation!

## What the Buddha Taught

This is the path where all things come together as one, to purify sentient beings, to get past sorrow and lamentation, to make an end of pain and sadness, to reach the way, to witness nirvana; that is, the four kinds of mindfulness meditation.[1]

# Part I: Mindfulness Meditation

# Lesson 1: Senses

We'll begin our meditative journey by practicing mindfulness of what our senses—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin—experience. Typically, meditation workshops begin with mindfulness of the breath. However, the breath is a relatively subtle physical movement, and it can be hard for someone new to meditation to initially connect to it in a vivid way. Our senses, on the other hand, offer sharp, easily observed, clear experiences that we can more easily land our attention on. In this lesson, we will learn about cultivating mindfulness through three meditation exercises based on hearing, tasting, and seeing. The lessons learned from this exercise can be extended to touch and smell, as well. By developing our ability to sustain our attention and to observe the subtleties of what we experience through our senses, we'll prepare ourselves for working with the breath in the following lesson.

## Meditation Exercise: Hearing

When I was twelve, my father held a contest to see which of his four children could hear the greatest number of sounds in a minute. I remember being surprised by how many sounds I could hear when I really listened intently. I'd like to invite you to try this for yourself.

Before we start, please get a pen and paper. Fold your paper in half. Find a place to sit where you can hear many different sounds, such as an outdoor area or balcony. As you're listening, mentally make a list of what you are hearing. For example, "honking, airplane, wind in trees." After the minute is finished, you'll write down every sound that you heard.

Set your device's timer for one minute. If you're comfortable, close your eyes and bring your awareness to your ears. Begin listening to the sounds around you, both nearby and far away, and in the mid-distance. When the timer chimes, open your eyes, and write down each sound that you heard in a list. Now number the list down the side, 1, 2, 3, 4 etc. How many sounds did you hear? 5? 10?

Try this exercise a second time. This round, you can both listen for the same sounds you heard a moment ago, but also discover whether you can hear new sounds. At the end of this minute, we'll be writing down everything we heard in a list, just as before. Again, I invite you to close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so and bring your awareness to your ears. Begin listening for sounds around you. When the minute ends, write down the

sounds you heard on the other half of your paper. Again, number the list down the side. How many sounds did you hear this time? Was it more than you heard the first time?

Many people find that they noticed more sounds the second time they listened. Most often, the increase is not because there were suddenly more sounds happening just a moment later. Rather, the reason you heard more sounds the second time is that your ability to notice the sounds increased. You got better at listening. You see, attention is very much like a muscle: the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. Just as if you lifted weights ten times every day your arm muscles would strengthen, so too if you practice paying attention for ten minutes, your ability to pay attention will strengthen. As you can imagine, this mental strength can benefit your studies, learning piano, playing soccer, or completing a project for work. We go to the gym to strengthen our bodies. Likewise, meditation is like a gym for the mind.

## Meditation Instructions on Mindfulness of Hearing

In the meditations ahead, we'll continue to incorporate listening to sounds because it's an easy, accessible way to bring us into the present moment. Let's do a short meditation on hearing so that you know how to incorporate listening in later sessions. This meditation can be especially engaging to do outdoors and in nature.

- After settling yourself into a comfortable position, close your eyes or lower your gaze. Bring your attention to your ears. Begin by listening in an open way, allowing sounds to come to you rather than seeking them out.

- Notice the quality, duration, volume, and silence between sounds. Listen to the sounds close by, those in the mid-distance, and to those as far out as you can discern.

- Listen as well to the thoughts that may arise in reaction to sounds. "Oh, that's a beautiful sound," or "I wish that harsh sound would stop." As thoughts have sound, too, you can listen to the thoughts as part of the soundscape around you or as if there's a radio playing in the background.

- Notice how sounds may have an impact on the body and breath, causing you to tense up or to soften, or to breathe more deeply or more shallowly.

- To close the meditation, listen to the chime or bell until it fades.

You can practice mindfulness of hearing any time by just shifting your attention to listening when you have a moment.

## Meditation Exercise: Tasting

We've learned how to practice mindfulness with our ears. Now we come to practicing with our sense of taste by eating a small piece of food as a meditation. Believe it or not, you Yale students tell me that this is your favorite, most memorable and instructive meditation. And I believe you, because when I learned this meditation at the age of seven at a yoga camp for children, it was the first time I truly understood mindfulness. Back then, we used a peanut and slowly dissected that peanut in our mouth for about ten minutes. Nowadays, since many people are allergic to peanuts, we use a raisin. Please get a raisin for this meditation. However, you can also use a grape, any small piece of dried fruit or nut, or even an M&M.

This meditation works well with our eyes closed so that our full attention is on the sensations of taste, but you're welcome to keep your eyes open—either way. Before we start, let me share that you'll be able to work with your raisin—or nut or M&M or whatever you have—for a longer time if you hold it between your front teeth on the top and the bottom. Cradle the raisin with the tip of your tongue and the back of your lips, so that the raisin is held at the front of the mouth. Set your timer for 12 minutes.

Holding the raisin in your fingers, close your eyes or lower your gaze, and bring your awareness to the inside of your mouth. Notice the shape of your tongue, hardness of the teeth, saliva, and even the taste of your own mouth. Feel how your lips are touching each other. Notice how your mouth creates more saliva in just the thought of food—you haven't even put anything in your mouth yet. Isn't it amazing that a thought in your mind can create this reaction in your body? Also notice your thoughts and preferences such as, "I'm not sure I like raisins" or "I wish I had a different piece of food."

Slowly bring the raisin to your mouth and hold it between your front teeth. Let your hand return to a resting position and close your lips together. Let the tip of your tongue explore the outside of the raisin, as if it were a rover exploring the surface of Mars, sensing craters and ridges and contours. Also notice the initial flavor, or lack of flavor. As

the raisin spends time in this warm, moist environment, notice how it begins to change shape and soften.

When you're ready, use your front teeth to pinch the very edge of the skin of the raisin. Notice how your teeth cut through the skin and contact each other. Listen to the sounds that occur with this action. And then notice the release of flavor from the inside of the raisin as it hits the tongue. Feel the texture, the slimy, stringy flesh, of the raisin's insides. Very slowly continue to dissect the raisin at your own pace, as if you're putting the raisin under a microscope of mindfulness. What is the tiniest particle of tasting the raisin that you can get? Continue to observe the movement of the parts of your mouth, the sounds of chewing, and moisture. Notice as well what thoughts, memories and feelings may be happening. You might hear yourself thinking, "I didn't know a raisin was so sweet," or feel yourself longing for another raisin or remembering a time when you had raisins in your lunchbox in grade school.

When the timer chimes, swallow whatever remains of the raisin, taking care of be mindful of the motions of the tongue and coordination of your mouth. As the raisin slides down the back of your throat, feel yourself swallowing, and continue to trace the movement of the raisin as it goes down the esophagus. Trace the raisin down as far as you can feel it, maybe even as it gets to your stomach. Then bring your awareness back to your empty mouth. Notice what you feel there now. And when you're ready, you can open your eyes.

If I had asked you before we did this meditation to describe a raisin, you might say, "It's a sweet, dried piece of fruit" based on your concept of a raisin. *Now* if I asked you to describe a raisin, you could go into great detail based on your carefully observed experience of it. This illustrates an incredibly important point: there is a gap between our concept of something and the experience of it. Another way of saying this is that there's a difference between what we *think* something is, and what it *actually* is. You can easily transpose this point onto many other, more complicated matters. For example, we might have a preconceived idea about someone we know—and then there's the reality of who they are. For the most part, we tend to live in our heads, working from our concepts of the world around us. Much of mindfulness practice is to help us see through our simplified, often incorrect conceptualization of the world to the direct reality of it in all its richness and fullness. Very importantly, when we are more aware and more observant, we get much better, clearer information about a situation or person. And from this clearer information, we can make better, more informed decisions.

This meditation also reveals to us how much of experience we miss out on due to inattention, to a lack of careful observation. When we take time to attend to something fully, we often find a tremendous richness and enjoyment, which leads to greater contentment with simple things. We don't need as much to make us happy because we know how to enjoy the simple things in life. For example, when we're taking a walk, often we're lost in thought. But with mindfulness, we can feel the warm sun on our shoulders, enjoy the smell of the rain drying from the grass, and notice our feet landing on the earth step by step.

## Meditation Exercise: Seeing

We've practiced mindfulness with our ears and mouth, so now we'll practice mindfulness with our eyes. Let your eyes look outward to the horizon in front of you. Allow your eyes to gaze at the scene, taking in what you see close to you, in the middle distance, and far away. You can make a mental note of each thing you see; for example, "desk, plant, window, tree, building." Now, very slowly start looking toward your left, allowing your head to turn with your eyes. Keep noting what you see, taking in each object as you see it. Slowly, slowly continue looking around, over your left shoulder, and then behind you. If you need to twist around to see directly behind you, that's fine. Now slowly, slowly allow your gaze to circle back over your left shoulder, continuing to notice what you see. When you're back at center, slowly move your sight to the right side. Keep looking attentively as you look over your right shoulder, continuing slowly, slowly. Twist around to keep looking to the right and all the way behind you. And now slowly, slowly let your gaze circle left, back over the right shoulder, and back to center. Allow your gaze to rest on what you see in front of you. And now rest for a moment.

This mindful seeing practice actually comes out of a system of therapy for trauma called Somatic Experiencing. The technique itself is called "Orienting" because, using our vision, we're orienting ourselves in relationship to our environment. Let's practice orienting again in a slightly different way. As before, allow your eyes to look out in the space in front of you. This time, choose one color and look for all the objects that have this color. Let's say the color is green. You might see a green cup, green pen, green in the artwork on the wall, and green leaves. Now slowly, slowly allow your eyes to move left, looking for more objects with the color you chose. Continue over your left shoulder, and then back to look behind you, 180 degrees from the start position. And slowly, slowly circle back to the center. Now let your gaze look to the right, over the right shoulder, and

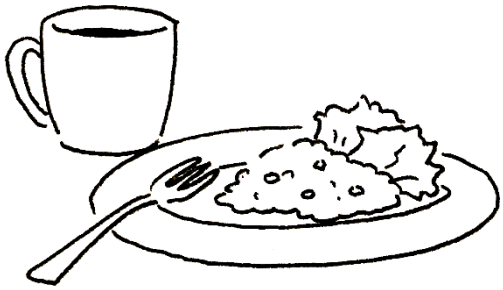
all the way the space behind you. And slowly, slowly circle back over your right shoulder, continuing to see objects with the color you chose. And back to center. Allow your gaze to rest and enjoy the sights in front of you. And now relax.

This practice gives you a sense of how to practice mindfulness of seeing wherever you are. At any time, you can bring awareness to your eyes and then allow whatever is present before you to be seen. You can use a quiet mental note for each object you're looking at, as well as carefully observe color, light and shadow, texture, contour, depth, the space around the object, and so on.

## Other Senses

We bring the same depth of attention from hearing, tasting, and seeing mindfully to smell and touch. For example, when we listen to music, is it with half our attention while we think about other things, or do we really hear it in its fullness? When we take a walk, are we lost in planning or a memory, or are we connecting with the smells of the place we are in, the temperature, and the breeze? When we look at a family member, are we just letting their image hit our eyes, or are we really seeing them clearly and fully? When I was a graduate student at Harvard many years ago, I loved to practice smelling meditation as I walked around Cambridge to do errands. Ah, the smell of baking bread, now the smell of someone's perfume as they pass by, the smell of urine from where homeless people had slept overnight, then the smell of car exhaust. I would also observe my reactions and thoughts, "I like this, I don't like that, why can't that be cleaner," and so on. This is a very fascinating meditation and I invite you to try it next time you're out for a walk. We'll do more with touch and physical sensations in a later lesson.

## Daily Life Practice



**Coffee, Tea, or Meal Meditation:** Having practiced with one raisin, can you imagine applying full attention to an entire meal?! Indeed, you can practice meditation with your breakfast, lunch or dinner. Take time to observe temperature, texture, flavors, aromas, steam, the sensation of your utensils, movement of your arm and hand, swallowing, the feeling of food in your belly, your thoughts, judgments, and desires, and so much more. To practice, you might want to find a time and location where there are few distractions and it's quiet so you can really settle in and take your time. If you wish, you can set your utensil down between bites and focus fully on what's in your mouth. If your mind wanders off into planning other meals or thinking about your day, bring your attention back to noticing eating in the present moment. All these notes apply equally to drinking coffee or tea or even chewing gum.

## What the Buddha Taught

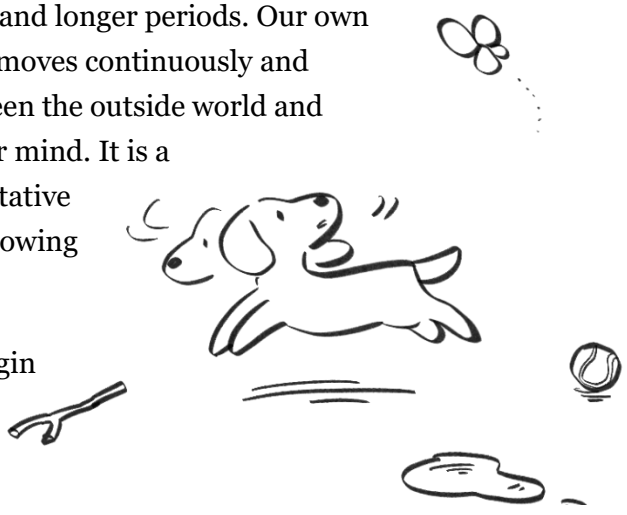
*Situational Awareness:* Furthermore, when going forward and returning, he makes himself fully alert, when looking toward and looking away… when bending and extending his limbs…. When eating, drinking, chewing, and savoring… when urinating and defecating… when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert.[2]

# Lesson 2: Breath

Some years ago, I was helping my young daughter with a math problem. We were sitting at the dining room table. She was staring hard at the question—12 minus 7—trying to figure it out. Suddenly, she looked up and said, "Oh, look, the cat walked in!" "Yes, yes," I said, "now let's look at this math problem again." She stared at it and started to think about solving it from base 10. Suddenly, she lost her focus, looked at her thumb and said, "Oh, I have a hangnail—it hurts." "Yes, yes," I said, "we'll clip it later. Now let's think again about 12 minus 7." Again, she started to work on the problem, but again she became distracted, this time by the sound of an airplane overhead.

As you can see, in order for my daughter to learn, she needed to be able to pay attention for a sustained period of time. The same principle holds true for our own life: **to learn about ourselves and the world around us, we have to be able to pay attention.** But the reality of it is that we're highly distractible creatures. We might begin to observe ourselves or sit quietly in nature or take time to reflect on the nature of things, but our attention is quickly pulled away by memories, imagining the future, or more commonly, by our own cellphones, other devices, and social media. Thus, we remain in a state of constant distraction, which over time leads us to feel stressed, empty, and lost.

In the meditation world, we call this perpetual distraction "puppy mind," just as a puppy chases after balls, sticks, and butterflies, unable to sit in one spot. But the good news is that, like puppies, our mind can be trained to sit in one spot and not get distracted. To do this, we use our own breath as the training spot, bringing our attention back to the breath repeatedly until it can stay there for longer and longer periods. Our own breathing is always with us and, though constant, moves continuously and changes. It is a source of life, the connection between the outside world and our bodies, and a bridge between our body and our mind. It is a beautiful object for concentration, and many meditative traditions, Buddhist and otherwise, begin with following the in- and out-breath.



We'll now do a 12-minute guided meditation to begin training that puppy mind.

## Meditation Instructions for Mindfulness of Breathing

Turn off devices or put them on silent or airplane mode to minimize distractions. Meditation of this type, which is intended to develop awareness and insight, does not use background music and is not meant to help you fall asleep. In fact, it is to help you be more awake and aware of yourself and your life.

If you're sitting, I welcome you to gently lift through your spine, opening up the belly and chest areas and bringing length to the back, neck, and up through the top of the head. Gently pull your shoulder back. And now allow your body to relax a little. This upright but relaxed posture allows your breathing to move freely. At your own pace, take a deep, gentle breath in through the nose, breathing into your abdomen, and up through the ribs, into the lungs, to the top of the throat. And long, gentle exhale in reverse. Try to exhale very slowly so that it's longer than the inbreath. Allow your body to relax a little more with the outbreath. Again, a second deep, slow breath in, beginning down in the belly, up through the ribs and chest, to the top of the throat. And long, slow exhalation, extending the outbreath, slowly, slowly.

And now allow your breathing to return to its natural in and out, its natural rise and fall. We're not regulating or controlling the breath at all: we're just letting it come and go, trusting that the body knows how much air it needs. You'll observe that sometimes your breath is short, and sometimes long. Sometimes it's shallow, and sometimes deep. There can be small pauses in the breath, too. It's all natural—there's lots of variation in each breath. Allow it to be as it is.

As your attention settles and becomes more refined, bring awareness to the place in your body where the breath is most distinct, where you feel it the most clearly. That may be in the abdomen, in the chest, in the nose, or at the tip of the nose. Feel the physical sensations and movements.

Use a quiet mental note to help connect with what's happening as well as to keep track of where your attention is. With the in-breath, note "in," and with the out-breath, note "out." If attending to the belly or the chest, use the notes "rising" or "falling."

When you get lost in thought, simply let the thoughts go and, with a gentle and nonjudgmental attitude, return to the breath. This may happen dozens or even hundreds of times throughout the meditation. If judgmental thoughts come up, just notice that there's judgment; let that go as well and return to the breath.

If there are sounds that call your attention, listen to them mindfully. Use the mental note "hearing, hearing" for the moments you are mindful of sounds. Notice any internal dialogue or judgment that comes with hearing sounds. When the sound is no longer drawing your attention away, then come back to the breath.

When your timer chimes, notice where your attention is at that particular moment. Lost in thought? On the in-breath? On the out-breath?

To close the meditation, bring your palms together before your heart and bow slowly. Maintain mindfulness as you transition from the cushion to your next activity.

## Becoming Aware

Each time that you notice you are distracted is the key accomplishment of meditation. Following the breath continuously is not the goal; rather, noticing *that* you were distracted is. Instead of striving to get good at staying with the breath, aim for increasing the number of times you become aware of distraction.

## Letting Go

Once you become aware that you are distracted, let go of the distraction quickly. Don't linger. You might be remembering something pleasant when you notice that you're not watching the breath, and at that point be tempted to continue with the reminiscence. Instead, make the decision to let go of those thoughts and return to the breath.

## Responding Gently and Nonjudgmentally

Very typically, once people notice they are distracted and have yet again "failed" to follow their breath, strong judgments or other mental commentaries come up. We might think, "Aaargh!" or "I'm sure everyone else can do this except me." These thoughts are actually quite important, and we will get into them later. But for now, be aware of that judgment, let go of the judgment, and shift to a gentler, kinder, nonjudgmental response: "Oh, I'm distracted again; back to the breath."

Do these skills—becoming aware, practicing letting go, and cultivating non-judgment—seem like they could apply elsewhere in our lives? The answer is *yes*! Many of us could stand to have greater ability to notice when we are so lost in thought that we've lost touch with the situation around us, or to let go of being rigidly attached to our point of view, or to be less judgmental about our performance.

## Help! I Can't Empty My Mind

Nearly everyone beginning to learn meditation thinks that the goal is to empty their mind of thoughts. However, the objective of mindfulness meditation is not to stop thinking or to get rid of thoughts. In fact, our mind is built to think, just as our stomach digests food and our heart pumps blood. Thinking keeps us alive and safe. Rather, the objective in meditation is to step back from the thinking and watch the mind. When we are aware of what we are thinking, we learn an enormous amount about how our thoughts and emotions operate. For now, place thinking in the background and put your breath in the foreground of your attention. We will learn about how to work with thinking in Lesson 6.

## Concentration Supports Mindfulness

Imagine a microscope in which the arm holding the lens is somewhat loose at the base—perhaps a screw is loose. If you look through the lens at the object below and the arm is wobbly, you won't be able to take a good look at your specimen. If you tighten the screw, then the arm becomes stable, and you'll be able to study the object. Likewise, if we have a few screws loose and our attention is wobbly, moving distractedly around, we won't be able to see clearly what's happening in our mind, heart, and the world around us. Developing concentration through breathing meditation stabilizes our attention so that we can become mindful of experiences in the present moment without getting swept away, lost, or distracted.

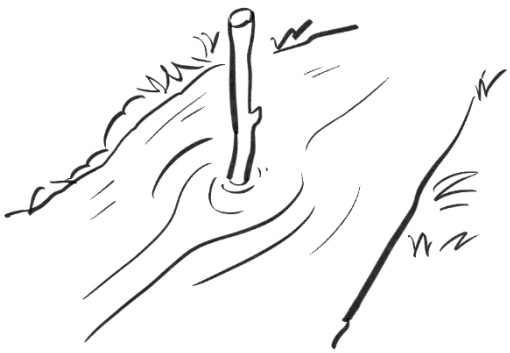
## The Role of the Breath in Meditation

One might believe that a "successful" meditation is one in which we've followed the breath continuously, without distraction, for the full time. In the style of meditation, we are learning here, however, the breath functions as an anchor. In the same way that an anchor keeps a boat from floating out into the blue waters beyond, the breath serves as a way of keeping us anchored to the present moment so that we don't drift too far for too long. Here are two other images that help us understand the role of the breath in meditation practice.

### The "You Are Here" Star on the Map[3]

Working with the breath in meditation has multiple dimensions, one of which is to establish a reference point so that we know where we are. Once we have found a home in the breath, then it's easier to measure where our mind is wandering to, how far we will go in a certain train of thought, and how identified and wrapped up we can get with particular stories. It's as if our breath is the "you are here" star on the map at the mall. From this perspective, excelling at following one breath after the other is less important than regularly touching into the breath so that you know what's happening in your mind.

### Stick in a Stream[4]



Imagine you are walking through the woods when you come across a clear, quiet stream. Perhaps the ground is so level that it's hard to tell whether the stream is flowing or still. To determine the current, you place the stick upright in the stream, and in so doing, the water ripples around the stick. You can now see the direction the stream is flowing, how fast it's moving, and how deep it is. Placing our attention on the breath is like putting a stick in the stream, a fixed point by which we can better see the flow of our thoughts, their direction, rate of flow, and more.

## Using Noting to Track What's Happening

Mental noting is a way of acknowledging what's happening without reacting to it. This technique involves using a quiet mental label to identify what's going on. Usually, it's a small set of words used repeatedly. The note can be about what is happening, such as thinking, hearing, smelling, restlessness, or sleepiness. The note can describe what you

observe, such as tingling, warmth, or pressure. Noting what's happening helps us observe our experience more carefully as well as not get too caught up in it, as if we were field researchers describing in purely observational terms what we are noticing. There's no need to get fussy about finding exactly the right word—just use whatever comes to mind. Avoid words that pass judgment, such as "good," "bad," "like," or "exciting," and opt for value-neutral language. The mental note should be very quiet, as if in the background of your mind. Watch the tone of voice; if the tone is resentful, shift to a more accepting voice.

Noting practice helps identify larger patterns and states of mind that arise during the meditation itself or over a longer period of time. Practicing noting during meditation also carries over into daily life. If we are in the habit of noting, then we begin to identify patterns in our behavior or speech, and other aspects of ourselves we might not necessarily be conscious of.

### Breath: Full Inhale, Extended Exhale

Although we primarily work with the natural, unregulated flow of our breath in meditation, an intentional, deep, and long breath can help calm us down. Such a breath taps into the parasympathetic nervous system, that part of the nervous system that manages "rest and digest" functions (versus the sympathetic nervous system, which deals with "fight, freeze, or flight"). In moments when you are overwhelmed, distressed, or confused, take a full, deep breath in and slowly exhale (ideally at least twice as long as the inhale). You might even do three of these breaths (full inhale; long exhale), if time allows. You can also perform this breathing technique any time during a formal meditation to help reset your attention and bring greater ease and calm to the mind.

## Daily Life Practice

*Connect with the breath*. To begin integrating your formal, seated meditation practice with your daily life, start noticing your breath throughout the day. Some of the best times to connect with your breathing are when you are waiting. You might be waiting for class to begin or waiting in line in the dining hall. Instead of distracting yourself from this seemingly dull moment by pulling out your mobile phone, take a moment to do a mini meditation. You don't need to close your eyes or do anything different. Simply turn your attention inward and feel the movement of your breathing. It might be for just a few

breaths. Notice as well what it is like to do this versus other habits of restlessness. Do you feel more connected, centered, or grounded?

Another way to build meditation into your day is to pick one routine activity and connect the breath to that. For example, before reading a message, you might pause to follow three breaths.

Believe it or not, these mini meditations begin to carry over into our formal sitting practice. You may find it's a little easier to settle into meditation because you've been developing your concentration in smaller ways throughout the day.

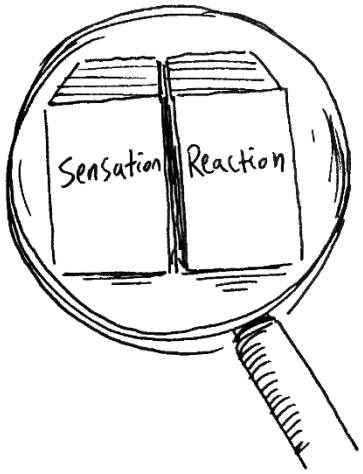
## What the Buddha Taught

*Mindfulness of Breathing*

> Having gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty place, [one] sits down with one's legs crossed, keeps one's body erect and one's mindfulness alert.
>
> Ever mindful one breathes in, mindful one breathes out. Breathing in a long breath, one knows, "I am breathing in a long breath"; breathing out a long breath, one knows, "I am breathing out a long breath"; breathing in a short breath, one knows, "I am breathing in a short breath"; breathing out a short breath, one knows, "I am breathing out a short breath."
>
> "Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus one trains oneself. "Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus one trains oneself. "Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus one trains oneself. "Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus one trains oneself.[5]

# Lesson 3: Body

In this lesson we expand mindfulness to sensations in our body. When a sensation, such as an itch, twitch, or sore muscle, draws your attention away from the breath, bring your full investigatory powers to what the body is experiencing. In the same way that we observed a raisin under a mindfulness microscope, we now observe sensations in the body. First notice the sensations themselves. Is there tingling, coolness or warmth, movement, or pressure? Is the sensation one block of feeling or does it consist of multiple sensations? Is the sensation changing? Second, notice your thoughts or reactions to the sensation. For example, if you feel some tightness in your lower back, you might think, "It's because I worked out too hard this morning. I knew I shouldn't have pushed it. Sheesh, I'm such a Type A personality. Well, that's why I'm learning meditation . . ." Meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg calls these thoughts "add-ons," in that they are the inner dialogue and commentary we *add on* to the actual experience.




When we practice with bodily sensations, we begin to see that each experience is actually comprised of two components: the sensation itself and our judgment, evaluation, or reaction to it. Usually, these are so intertwined that we think they are one. But upon closer examination, we begin to notice there's a small gap between the two. It's in this gap that we have an opportunity to make different choices, so that we shift from being merely reactive to the world to having more mental space from which we can make conscious responses.

## Meditation Exercise: Palms Together

To bring mindfulness to how our bodies move, we'll do a simple movement and track the sensations. Begin with your hands resting on your knees. Then very slowly, let your hands float up and come together, the left palm touching the right palm, before your chest. Take note moment by moment of the experience: the warmth of the palms on your hands on your lap, cool air on the top of the hands, biceps contracting, lifting, cool air under the palms, quivering ring finger, softness of sleeve cuff moving on the wrist, elbows against the ribs, tingling as the fingers touch, and so on. Take 10 to 15 minutes, or as long as you like, to do this meditation exercise.

## Meditation Instructions for Mindfulness of Physical Sensations

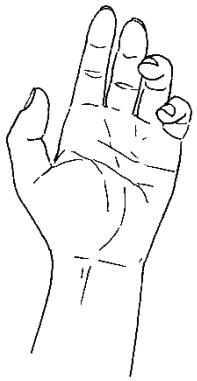
- Sit in a comfortable, relaxed, but upright way so that your breath can move freely.
- Begin by taking a gentle, full breath in and exhaling slowly, welcoming your body relax. Repeat one or two more times.
- Then allow your breathing to return to its natural rhythm.
- Spend the first few minutes following the breath, developing concentration, and calming the mind. Use a quiet mental note, such as "in" and "out."
- When a sensation in your body calls your attention, allow your awareness to travel to that area. Take note of the predominant sensation, whether it's "itchiness," "tightness," "warmth," or the like.
- Now bring the sensation under a mindfulness microscope and begin to explore the components of the sensation. What other qualities are present? You may notice temperature, pulsing, or movement. Is the sensation staying the same or is it changing? Use notes that are neutral and descriptive in nature, as if you were describing the sensation to someone who's never felt it before.
- Notice what thoughts and feelings are added to the physical sensation. What kinds of thoughts are happening? Do you feel judgments or emotional responses? Again, observe these reactions with interest and a nonjudgmental attitude—just watch the whole mind-body process play out. If you find yourself getting involved in a narrative, step back and observe the storylines coming up, just as they are.

• As the sensation dissipates, also become aware of the absence of the sensation.

• Bring your attention back to the breath. Stay with the breath until another sound or sensation again calls your attention. Move in a relaxed and open way among the primary objects of your attention. However, if you find yourself getting scattered or restless, take some time to reestablish a degree of concentration by returning to the breath.

• To close the meditation, bow slowly and mindfully.

## Body Scan Meditation



Some people find a progressive body scan to be a powerfully grounding practice. The scan begins by attending to sensations from the top of the head and moving slowly to the very tips of your toes, or vice versa. It is also marvelous for truly reconnecting with our body, because we so often lose track of our body when we become wrapped up in our thoughts, conversations, or work. To do this practice, simply bring your full attention to each part of the body, noticing pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral sensations, such as tingling, movement, temperature, pressure, itchiness, and so forth. Tune your attention to microscopic levels. Notice both surface sensations and, to the extent possible, interior sensations. Direct tight muscles to relax and soften; but if an area remains tight, allow it to be as it is and become mindful of that sensation of tightness.

Notice as well what kinds of judgments or comments come up in response to what you are noticing. Again, shift your inner tone of voice away from harshness or criticism toward acceptance and gentleness. You may find areas that are tender emotionally or psychologically, places where you have stored pain or defense mechanisms from the past. Be especially respectful and gentle with areas of trauma and suffering.

### Where's My Inner Peace, Damnit?!

Many of us come to meditation in search of inner peace, only to find ourselves sitting with a wild mind. In fact, we might feel *less* peaceful during meditation than we do throughout the course of a normal day. What's going on is that in taking time to become

present to what is, we're actually seeing our hot mess of a mind more clearly. The mind was already agitated—we just didn't know it until now.

Once we see this agitation, most of us then spend much of our meditation time trying to fix things, adjusting to find the perfect posture, ignoring our thoughts, or pushing away the incessant planning, complaining, and sleepiness. But this becomes a game of whack-a-mole: as soon as one problem is batted down, another pops up. At some point, meditation becomes an exhausting exercise of micromanagement.

In reality, meditation is learning to maintain balance even in the presence of disturbance, to abide with whatever is happening. We learn that it's not so terrible to have an ache in our shoulder, that we can endure restlessness, and that we can be calm and even loving when difficult memories surface.

We will never be able to arrange our lives so that they are just so; there will always be disruptions, dissatisfaction, and disappointment. The true skill is knowing how to respond to these disturbances, how to stay grounded, clear, and open in the face of difficulty. After all, what's more useful: being peaceful when everything is smooth sailing, or maintaining calm in the face of an emergency or adversity? That's where we are going with meditation. Again, when we practice this skill in meditation with smaller things like sounds and bodily sensations, we are developing ourselves for larger encounters in our life.

## Daily Life Practice

*Mindfulness with routines*. In the week ahead, experiment with bringing mindfulness to one routine activity that you do every day with your body. This could include activities brushing your teeth, making your bed, or packing your backpack As you move, really connect to the sense experience of the activity. For example, feel the tingle of the toothpaste and sweep of the bristles; notice how your arms lift and move as you fold laundry; listen to the water as you fill your bottle. It's helpful to reduce outside distractions—by turning devices, for example—and to let go of any concern about results or finishing quickly. Performing the task in slow motion will help you observe the activity and connect to it in greater detail. Remain in the present as best you can, noticing thoughts and feelings and then letting them go. When the mind wanders, simply come back to doing the activity.

# Lesson 4: Walking

Did you think that formal meditation practice was only sitting on a cushion? There's good news, especially for those who need some movement to alleviate restlessness, drowsiness, or physical discomfort: there's walking meditation! This practice is also an excellent bridge between formal sitting practice and mindfulness in daily life, because our day usually consists of at least some walking, if not quite a bit of it.

## Meditation Exercise: Standing & Shifting

To get a sense of how, exactly, walking meditation is practiced, let's begin with a simple exercise. Stand up and place your weight evenly on both feet. (If you can remove your socks and shoes, even better.) Now let your attention travel from your head down into the soles of your feet. Feel how the bottoms of your feet make contact with the floor: pressure, temperature, weight distribution, softness and hardness, and more. Also notice spaces where your feet are not making contact with the ground or where your toes are not touching each other. Now very slowly, almost imperceptibly, begin shifting your weight to your right foot. Become finely tuned to increasing pressure, adjustments in the muscles, and so forth in the right foot and up into the ankle and calf. Allow the left foot to remain in contact with the ground, continuing to notice the sensations of both feet as you continue to shift your weight onto the right foot. Then slowly begin shifting back to center, with the same detailed awareness and slowness. Once at center, with your weight distributed evenly between both feet, begin shifting the weight to your left foot. Then come back to center and stop, feeling yourself at rest.

I remember doing this exercise for the first time at a meditation retreat as a teenager. I was blown away by just how many sensations were available for observation in just that tiny movement. I was also struck by how peaceful it felt to move the body, the inner silence and simplicity of only doing that. This exercise also revealed to me how exactly one could practice mindful movement in all other activities.

## Meditation Instructions for Mindful Walking

- Find a quiet place between ten and thirty paces long that has as few distractions as possible. You'll be walking back and forth in this space.
- It's ideal to walk barefoot or in socks, but shoes are fine, too.

• The meditation begins with a pace somewhere between a brisk walk to an easy stroll. Bring attention to the movement of your body, especially in the lower legs and feet.

• When you reach the end of the space, bring both feet together and stand still, noticing your whole body. Then, turn mindfully to face the other direction and go back.

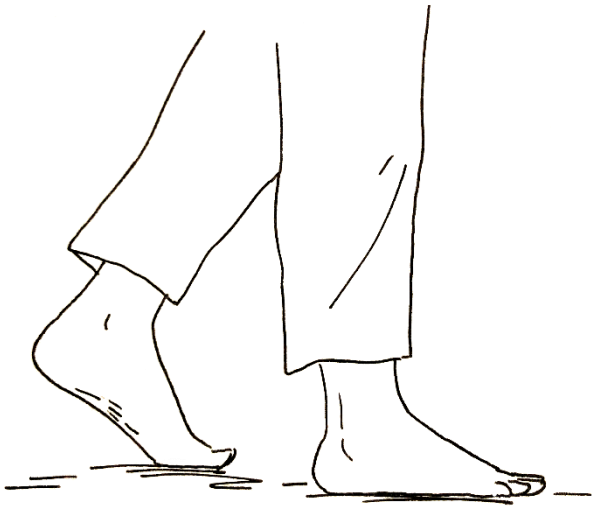
• Use the mental note "stepping" with each step. Walk like this for a few minutes or until you feel ready to downshift to a slower pace.

• Now spend a few minutes or more walking at a slower pace, using the mental notes "lifting, placing," and noticing the sensations in your legs.

• When you're ready and your attention feels more refined, downshift yet again to an even slower pace, using the mental notes, "lifting, moving, placing."

• Even slower, you can use the mental notes, "lifting, moving, placing, shifting."

• Finally, slow down to the point that you can notice every tiny little sensation. Bring your awareness into the very bottoms of your feet, noticing the contact with the floor and the micro-movements of muscles. It can help to close your eyes, but if you feel unbalanced, a soft gaze at a reference point brings stability.



• If you discover you've lost your concentration, pick up the pace to restore a connection to walking and slow back down as you wish.

This meditation can also be done while walking in a public space but do so at a normal pace. Bring further attention to sights, sounds, smells, and so forth.

## Daily Life Practice

*Walking*. Think about a short walk that you do regularly, such as going from your dorm to class or down the hall to the laundry room. Choose, preferably, a walk on which you are unaccompanied and have as few distractions as possible. Designate that walk as your mindful walking practice. Walk at a normal pace, or slow down slightly if you wish. You are welcome to practice in a more concentrated way, bringing attention to your feet or your lower body, or in a more expansive way, taking note of what's happening with all the senses. When the urge comes up to anticipate, plan, or ruminate, let it go and come back to simply walking.

## What the Buddha Taught

*The Postures*

> When one is **walking** they clearly know "I am walking"; when **standing** they clearly know "I am standing"; when **sitting** they clearly know "I am sitting"; and when **lying down** they clearly know "I am lying down." Whatever posture their body is in, they clearly know it.
>
> In this way they meditate by observing an aspect of the body inside; they meditate by observing an aspect of the body outside; they meditate by observing an aspect of the body inside and outside.[6]

# Lesson 5: Emotions

Mindfulness is essential to identifying and managing emotions. While we may or may not have been taught the skills needed to understand and regulate our emotional world in childhood, meditation has the potential to greatly expand our emotional intelligence as adults. That said, a few have been puzzled by the thought of working with emotions during meditation, and said to me in class, "I don't have emotions." It may be that for some the word *emotion* means intense feelings only, such as rage, grief, or exhilaration. But in this context, an emotion is really any kind of feeling, from a subtle mood to these more explicit expressions. Take a moment to look over the list of emotions below. Can you identify one or several that you have felt at some point? If so, then you have had an emotion. For most people, emotions are happening throughout the day, even though we may not be aware of them.

All our emotions are accompanied by physiological responses. Of course, when we are sad, tears well up in the eyes. But there are also times when we aren't necessarily in touch with emotions in the same way. In those instances, connecting to what's happening in the body helps us to learn more. For example, we might notice tightness in the belly and shallow breathing, and then realize that we are feeling a little bit anxious. To start understanding your emotional world, keep coming back to what's happening with your body.

## Repress or Refuel

Once an emotion is in play, for the most part we take one of two paths: we either *repress* it or *refuel* it. For example, we might get angry about something, think we aren't justified in feeling this way, and then stuff it down. Or we might start feeling quite righteous about our anger and then keep running over the situation in our mind, getting ourselves worked up about it. Both strategies can have harmful effects. If we keep denying or suppressing our emotions, they sit below the surface, stewing, festering, and determining our behaviors in unseen ways. Then, over the smallest thing, we might burst into tears or lash out angrily. If we refuel our emotions through developing stories about what happened and telling them to ourselves repeatedly, that too can lead to overreaction, a lack of perspective, or to holding grudges well past their expiration date. As we become more attuned to our emotions, we can ask: *Is there a third path?*

## The Third Path

Instead of repressing or refueling our feelings, we become mindful of them. We hold that emotion gently in our awareness, even becoming curious about it and seeing more clearly what's going on. In this balanced, non-judgmental space, we will see that this is just an emotion happening in the same way that itches, sounds, and breathing are happening. We also often gain some insight into the deeper dynamics at play.

All emotions are available for mindfulness practice. There are the big emotions, such as anger, fear, grief, anxiety, and hate; there are also quieter emotions such as worry, impatience, numbing out, regret, and pettiness. We need not be mindful only of negative emotions, either: mirth, joy, delight, happiness, contentment, and love can also be objects of mindfulness.

## How to Work with Emotions

One process for exploring an emotion during meditation is to recognize, accept, investigate, and non-identify—or RAIN for short.

### Recognize

So, you are following your breath one after the other for like a hundred breaths in a row (kidding!), minding your own business, when you notice the pitter-patter of irritated thinking playing in the back of your mind. At this point you make a quiet mental note, "irritation" or "anger." Once you've done this, you can decide to let it go and get back to the breath. Or, if it feels like something is calling your attention, then maybe you'll want to take it up as a new object of meditation. This first step, to recognize our emotions, goes hand-in-hand with the noting practice we learned earlier.

### Accept

At first, you might experience some resistance to being present with the feeling that's coming up. This can be true even for positive emotions. We might think we're not supposed to be feeling anything during a meditation and try to downplay or whisk the feeling aside. Thus, just after you recognize what it is you're feeling, turn to being present with that emotion, to accepting it. As you learned earlier with observing thoughts nonjudgmentally, generate an overall disposition of acceptance.

### Investigate

Next, begin to investigate the qualities of the emotion in the same way that you do with sensations in the body. It is especially helpful to begin with the emotion as it is present in the body. Has the breath changed? What's happening in the abdomen? Are the muscles around your eyes and in your jaw tense? Use adjectives to note what's happening in the body, such as "heavy," "light," or "fluttery." See if the emotion is comprised of other threads of emotion. Sometimes anger is accompanied by resentment, or fear has a thread of anxiety. Notice if the emotion is changing or moving; it might begin as one emotion and shift to another or fade away or intensify. And lastly, notice what kinds of responses you are having to the emotion: are you wanting it to go away, longing for more of it, or recalling any memories? As you can see, we investigate emotions in the same way we investigate physical sensations in the body.

### Non-Identify

As meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg puts it, if we hit our elbow we don't say, "I am a sore elbow." Yet, for some reason, if anger comes up, we say, "I am angry." Nonetheless, emotions arise in the same way as itches, the breath, thoughts, hearing, and more. Particularly with the emotions, it is helpful to shift our perspective so that we are not so deeply identified with it. Instead of saying, "I am angry," rephrase it as "anger is arising." This rhetorical shift gives us a lot more mental space around the emotion. Our sense of self is bigger than just this emotion. We are not *only* feeling this emotion; we are also breathing, thinking, sensing, in relationship, and more. When we take an emotional state less personally, we have the chance to be cool with it, to just hang out and not get so upset that we are upset.

Although RAIN is presented in a structured way, actual meditation with emotions is more emergent and dynamic. There's no need to be especially methodical about using all of these steps in order. However, this process—to recognize, accept, investigate, and non-identify—may be useful in helping you work with your emotions in meditation.

### Is This Therapy?

In therapy, the backstory, the history behind the emotions, is important and is articulated and analyzed carefully. In meditation, however, we generally do not get involved in the narrative. The stories we tell ourselves might come up, but they are simply something to become mindful of: "Ah, this is what I tell myself about why I feel this way." If you find yourself getting involved in the narrative or thinking discursively about why you are feeling a certain way, step back and shift to a more observational mode. (And, exploring your past with a skilled therapist can facilitate significant breakthroughs, understanding, and healing, particularly when paired with mindfulness practice.)

## Meditation Instructions for Mindfulness of Emotions

• Begin with following your in- and out-breath for a few minutes, or as long as it takes to start to settle in.

• Stay with breathing meditation until an emotion takes center stage. Then take the emotion up as your new object of attention.

• Use a mental note to **recognize** the emotion overall, such as "anger, anger." Often with noting, we repeat it twice to convey that it is actively happening, rather than say it once, as this may objectify the thought. Also note the tone of your inner voice: if it's strident, then soften it.

• **Accept** that the emotion is now the new object of meditation today.

• Check in with your body and notice the physiological aspects of the emotion.

• **Investigate** how the emotion, as well as your reactions to the emotion, has various qualities and component parts.

• Try rephrasing how you talk to yourself about the emotion to see if that assists you in shifting to a position of **non-identification**. Change "I am ____" to "____ is present in me," or, "____ is arising." *I am anxious → Anxiety is arising. I am angry → Anger is present in me.*

• You can always use the breath as a refuge. If the emotion starts to get overwhelming, then come back to the breath until you feel you can return to being present with the emotion.

• And importantly, when the emotion fades away, notice what it feels like when the emotion has gone. The absence of an emotion is also something to be mindful of.

## List of Emotions[7]

Acceptance
Aggression
Anger
Amusement
Annoyance
Anticipation
Anxiety
Apathy
Appreciation
Arrogance
Aversion
Bitterness
Blame
Bliss
Calmness
Caring
Cheerfulness
Compassion
Contentment
Courage
Craving
Creativity
Curiosity
Delight
Depressed
Desire
Despair
Desperation
Determination
Discouraged
Dissatisfaction
Embarrassment
Empathy
Encouragement
Energized
Enthusiasm
Envy
Equanimity
Excitement
Fear
Forgiveness
Friendliness
Generosity
Gladness
Gratified
Gratitude
Grief
Guilt
Happiness
Hate
Helplessness
Hopelessness
Hostility
Humiliation
Hurt
Impatience
Interest
Jealousy
Joy
Kindness
Laughter/Humor
Loneliness
Loss
Love
Lust
Panic
Passion
Peace
Pity
Possessiveness
Pride
Regret
Rejection
Renunciation
Resentment
Righteous indignation
Righteousness
Sadness
Self-pity
Self-righteousness
Shame

## Daily Life Practice

*Emotional check-in*. As you go about your day, check in with what's happening emotionally. You can do a review just as you are waking up in the morning, at lunchtime, and before bedtime. If at first it feels like there is nothing to pay attention to, look more carefully for subtler emotions or states of mind. Remember to include pleasant emotions, such as contentedness, or less obvious ones such as disinterest or dreaminess. If you have the opportunity to sit quietly and observe, all the better. If a strong emotion comes up during the day, if possible, find a moment to pause and tune in. Alternately, practice becoming mindful of what's happening emotionally as a conversation, argument, or interaction is taking place. Remember that this is a *practice* and that it will take some time to become more skilled. Eventually, it will become easier to be aware of an emotion while simultaneously interacting with others.

## What the Buddha Taught

*Observing the Mind*

> And how . . . does one meditate by observing an aspect of the mind?
>
> Here, one clearly knows mind **with lust** as "mind with lust." They clearly know mind **without lust** as "mind without lust" . . . mind **with anger** as "mind with anger" . . . mind **without anger** as "mind without anger" . . . mind **with delusion** as "mind with delusion" . . . the **contracted mind** as "contracted mind" . . . the **scattered mind** as "scattered mind" . . . the mind **grown great** as "mind grown great" . . . the **surpassed mind** as "surpassed mind" . . . the mind **in samadhi** as "mind in samadhi" . . . the **freed mind** as "freed mind" . . . the **unfreed mind** as "unfreed mind."[8]

# Lesson 6: Thinking

From the moment we wake up until we drift off to sleep at the end of the day, we are constantly thinking. Sometimes our thoughts are articulate and concerted; at other times they're like a radio set at a low volume. Because we are always thinking, and because thinking plays a substantial role in what we say and what we do, we believe that we *are* our thoughts. We identify so completely with what we're thinking that we likely take on the Cartesian view of existence that "I think, therefore I *am*."

Yet from a meditative and Buddhist perspective, thinking is just another aspect of our experience. In the same way that we are breathing, hearing, feeling sensations in our bodies, and so forth, we are also perceiving thoughts—this is to say, thinking is happening, thoughts are arising. Thus, the Buddhist perspective would have it that, "I am, therefore I *think*. I am, therefore I am breathing, hearing, feeling itchy, and experiencing this emotion." Thus, we can become mindful of our thinking in the same way that we practice mindfulness with any aspect of our experience. Sometimes, however, other objects of mindfulness can be easier to identify than thoughts because they present themselves in more discernible, discrete ways. There is silence, then a sound occurs, and then the sound goes away. We aren't feeling any emotion in particular, then regret comes up, then the regret subsides. Mindfulness of thoughts, however, is much trickier because we're always thinking, and because the view that we are what we think is deeply embedded.

## Watching the River

One analogy that provides a way to understand mindfulness of thoughts is to picture a lovely river with a quiet, shady spot along the bank.[9] One pleasant afternoon you take a rest under a shady tree beside that quietly burbling river, just watching the river flow by. This is your mindful place. Then, out of the corner of your eye, you see a bright and

showy casino boat upriver, with entertaining music and flashing lights. Before you know it, somehow you are aboard, enthralled with winning games and watching shows onstage. At some point, you become aware you've gotten distracted and long for the cool, quiet spot under the shady tree. You magically make your way back to that mindfulness spot. After resting for a bit, another ship comes by. This one has angry soldiers who want to fight the enemy to defend their country. You get swept up in their cause and join them, rabidly searching for the enemy so you can shoot them down. Full of anger and fear, you ride this boat for some time until you remember your place under the shady tree. And so on—you can imagine all the "boats" that pass by. During meditation, we simply watch our thoughts float on by without climbing aboard. Of course, it's so easy to get carried along by the swift currents, but with practice we learn to stand on the sunny banks. Once we see rivers of thought for what they are, we have a choice about what we want to pursue. Our habit is to either get swept away by streams of thought or push them away, but here we are staying even and balanced.

## States of Mind

We can also become aware of states of mind, moods, or attitudes. States of mind tend to comprise both thoughts and emotions, to various degrees. States of mind, moods, and attitudes are broad patterns of thinking and feeling that take place over time, sometimes over many hours or the course of a lifetime. They can be hard to see because they are the lenses through which we see things. Often, we've worn these lenses so long that we no longer know that they are different from our actual eyes. However, it is also in this area that some real insights can occur, as we may see aspects of ourselves that determine a tremendous amount of our experience.

Because identifying mind-states or attitudes requires new knowledge, we will not be able to gain insight through our usual, intellectual thinking to figure out why this or that is so. We must relax and open up, creating a space for something new to emerge. We create the conditions for those insights to come forth by staying grounded in the breath and developing a gentle awareness. By attending to the breath, we are clearing away a lot of junk, creating a big, open space. By being mindful, we know what is entering that space.

To become aware of states of mind during meditation, once you're settled, make your awareness very large. Look at your mind from a bird's-eye view. What are the weather patterns of your mind? How are you relating to the meditation? What kind of states predominate: Aversion? Desire? Restlessness? Sleepiness? If you find yourself getting lost or feeling uncertain, then just come back to concentrating on the breath, or let the

breath be a point of reference as you become aware of the activity of your mind. An attitude of curiosity and openness allows for this broader perspective.

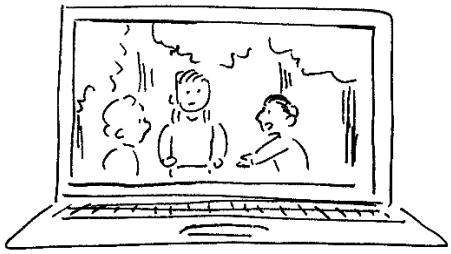
Importantly, keep this larger awareness present as you move throughout your day and notice some big-picture patterns in your relationships. We may notice agitation during meditation, and then notice agitation in daily life. Or we might notice that we have a pattern of self-criticizing, or a pattern of disengagement. Noticing these patterns is the first step in affecting meaningful change in our behaviors.

## Common States of Mind, Moods, Attitudes[10]

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Agitated | Enlarged | Patient |
| Amused | Equanimous | Peaceful |
| Angry | Excited | Persevering |
| Anxious | Expanded | Relaxed |
| Appreciative | Fearful | Released |
| Averse | Foggy | Resigned |
| Calm | Friendly | Resistant |
| Cheerful | Generous | Restless |
| Clear | Grateful | Restricted |
| Clinging | Happy | Sad |
| Compassionate | Insecure | Scattered |
| Concentrated | Irritable | Self-critical |
| Confident | Kindly | Shrunken |
| Confused | Lethargic | Sinking |
| Contracted | Lighthearted | Spacious |
| Depressed | Lonely | Tense |
| Determined | Loving | Tight |
| Distracted | Low energy | Wanting |
| Eager | Mindful | |
| Energetic | Passionate | |

### Thinking is Like Netflix

The most common mistake beginners make is to believe that meditation is about emptying the mind of thoughts. Perhaps this view derives from popular culture: Bruce Lee, wiping his nose with his thumb, would say, with eyes widening, "Empty your mind." As such, students exert tremendous effort to stop their thoughts and, failing that, try to at least quiet them down. But such an endeavor is futile. The mind is built to generate thoughts and it's just doing what it should. In the same way that we can't stop our heart from beating or intestines from digesting, we can't really stop our brain from operating—nor should we.



The trick of meditation is not to stop thoughts but to know that thoughts are happening. It's akin to our experience with watching a good show on Netflix on a device. While we are taken through the story of the episodes, we're fully absorbed, experiencing the delights and sorrows of the characters. When we're really caught up, we completely lose track of where we are and even of our own self: we're just "in" the drama. But, at any time, we can pop out of that story. We can lean back and see, "Oh, this is my laptop, this is the Netflix app, and this is the drama I'm watching." We can open even further: "And this is my body, sitting on the couch, in this room, with sounds around me, warm air, the smell of food." And so on.

Likewise with our thoughts: generally, we're so identified with our thinking that we take it as reality. Meditation is that opportunity to pop out of that trance and see that thinking is occurring in a larger reality or context—that thinking is just one event playing out among others. Now, many people believe that meditation is saying that thoughts aren't real. That's a mistake. The drama on Netflix is real, but it's not *reality*. Likewise, meditation gives us the proper perspective on our thinking: we acknowledge that our thoughts are real, but we don't mistake them for reality.

## Meditation Instructions for Mindfulness of Thinking

• As with mindfulness of emotions, stay with the breath as your home or anchor. When a thought arises, at first note, "thinking, thinking," and then return back to the breath.

• If the thoughts are more persistent, then note it more precisely, such as "planning, planning."

• Observe how thinking has an impact on the body, such as how thinking causes changes in the breath.

• See if you can let go of thoughts.

• If that's not possible, then either listen to it or watch it. Some people have an inner ear and experience thinking aurally, while some people have inner eyes and experience thinking visually; others have both.

• Notice also your reactions to thoughts, such as wishing you would stop so you can feel peaceful or feeling drawn toward it.

• At what moment do you lose mindfulness of thinking?

• Remember that at any time you can always return home to the breath.

## Daily Life Practice

Become aware of thought patterns throughout the day. You might want to tether becoming mindful of thinking with particular activities or regular occurrences. For example, become aware of what you're thinking as a class is about to begin, or as you are getting dressed or cleaning up.

## What the Buddha Taught

All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,
And suffering follows
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.

All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind
And happiness follows
Like a never-departing shadow.[11]

# Lesson 7: Bringing It All Together

Up until now, we have been learning the building blocks of a meditation practice. One might get the impression, therefore, that each meditation would have a theme or designated object. In reality, breath, the senses, physical sensations in the body, emotions, and thoughts are interconnected. For example, a train of thought triggers an emotion, which plays out in the body and affects the breath; changes in the breath clue us into feelings of worry. Other times, a distant sound will provoke a memory that then stimulates a train of thought. Bring awareness to the dynamic connections among your body, mind, and heart, as well as how the environment around you is a part of the meditation.

Having learned a range of meditation techniques, we now practice the art of meditation. Just as an artist learns techniques that they apply to their own, unique artistic expression, so too in meditation do we bring the techniques together to find what works best for us over time. While there are standard meditation instructions and recommended methods, this does not mean that meditation itself is mechanical, nor that one way works for all students. Each person may need different things at different times. One person might live in their head all the time, in which case spending time in the body provides balance and greater insight. Another person might be fighting judgment and criticism, in which case investigating that mind-state and bringing kindness to it is needed. Yet another person may be great at developing concentration on breathing, so much so that it becomes a way to avoid feeling emotions; in this case practicing mindfulness is encouraged. Another might find the breath a source of anxiety, in which case a more open style of meditation is helpful, such as feeling points of contact in the body, touching into the breath, and listening to sounds.

## Meditation Instructions for Bringing It All Together

What kinds of things are happening in the present moment that we can become mindful of? There's the breath, of course, as well as contact between the world and our senses. So, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, sensations in the body, and seeing: these are all occurring in the present moment. All of our emotions and thoughts happen in the present moment, as well. Even if we're thinking about the past or the future, the thinking itself happens now. States of mind such as sleepiness or restlessness take place in the present moment, too. We can become mindful of all these during meditation.

The following instructions bring together the individual meditation techniques we have learned so far.

- Begin your meditation using whatever technique works for you: being attentive to sounds, taking several deep and long breaths, doing a quick body scan, relaxing the body, working with posture, setting an intention, or ringing and listening to a bell.
- Eventually, find your way to the breath and spend some time collecting your attention here. You may choose to continue developing concentration through following your breathing exclusively or choose to use it as an anchor and practice mindfulness of thoughts or emotions. Bear in mind that mindfulness of the present moment also includes the breath, as your breathing is among the many things happening in the present moment.
- If something comes up that calls your attention, choose whether you want to investigate that or to come back to the breath. If you find yourself becoming lost or swept away by that object, then restore your capacity to pay attention by returning to the breath for a few moments. Then come back the object or move on to another if one has presented itself.
- At a certain point, you may want to tune in to a meta-awareness, a larger awareness of your meditation, observing overall mind-states, moods, or flows of thought and feeling.
- When the bell rings or your meditation timer app chimes, make note of where your mind is: on the breath, lost in thought, in a certain feeling, anticipating the bell itself? Use the bell as a reminder to note the present moment.
- As you come out of the meditation, do so slowly and be mindful as you transition to your next activity and beyond. Also notice the moment when you are no longer being mindful.

## Advanced Meditation: Choiceless Awareness

Up until now, we have directed our attention toward specific topics or objects, such as the breath, the body, emotions, thoughts, and mind-states. The meditation has been more actively directed in nature. But it is also possible to practice in an undirected way, simply sitting with open awareness and being mindful of whatever arises and passes away as it is happening. A helpful way to frame this is that rather than “doing” meditation, one is “being” meditation (the often-repeated phrase is that we are not

human *doings* but human *beings*). I find this meditation useful when I am restless. I simply stop, breathe, and be. This meditation is helpful for letting go of outcomes generally, and for reducing striving and perfectionism around meditation itself.

## The Five Hindrances

There are five challenges that come up for all meditators. These are called *hindrances* in that they *hinder* one's ability to pay attention to the breath or other objects of mindfulness. Hindrances themselves can become arenas for mindfulness, and we can work with them in the same way that we investigate anything in the present moment. In the end, we may discover that they are not even hindrances. They are just something else to become mindful of and to welcome into experience.

***Sleepiness****,* also known as sloth and torpor, is perhaps the foremost hindrance for many of us. Particularly in the beginning, sleepiness is likely a result of being tired. Yes, it's that simple! If you feel drowsy during meditation, take this as an opportunity to learn that you need more sleep at night or a less demanding workload. But be aware that sleepiness can also arise for many other reasons, such as avoidance, unwinding stress, insufficient energy, and lack of curiosity. Strategies for working with sleepiness include the following:

- taking a few deep breaths
- opening the eyes
- straightening one's posture
- practicing standing meditation
- counting the breath
- making sleepiness the object of mindfulness
- increasing one's interest in the breath

Despite these tactics, you may find yourself struggling with sleepiness frequently. In that case, it might be wise to just allow yourself to take a catnap while meditating. When you wake up, you may feel a little more refreshed and have enough energy to place attention on the breath. Personally, as a very busy person, I have found the catnap strategy to be

the most effective. It feels like I am rebooting my computer so I can start fresh with the meditation.

***Restlessness*** is the opposite of sleepiness, when our mind is all over the place, we're thinking about a lot of things, or the body feels jittery, unable to sit still. Restlessness is a little harder to identify because our mind is so scattered that it barely has the wherewithal to note what state of mind is present. The good news is that once we make the mental note "restlessness," restlessness tends to abate naturally. That said, it might take a bit of effort to quell the restlessness. You can try to diligently follow the breath, but don't fight too hard. If it doesn't work, then become mindful of the restlessness. I have found studying what is behind the restlessness to be fruitful. You may ask yourself: Why am I planning so much? Do I really need to do that right now? Is it actually because I'm anxious? What is this anxiety about? As you allow those questions to inform your meditation, do so lightly; let the questions arise without ruminating on them.

Another strategy is to imagine a beautiful place in the ocean. The surface of the water is disturbed by wind, waves, sunlight, boats, and all the other activities of the surface while deeper down toward the floor is a calm and quiet area. Bring your attention down into your abdomen, like at the bottom of the ocean, and looking up toward your mind you can see the ripples—the restless thoughts—playing on the surface. This image allows restlessness to be present as it is, while helping your awareness remain quiet and observant.

***Desire*** is a pattern of thoughts around wanting something or somebody. You might be going on a mental shopping trip, playing out a romance with someone in your imagination, or longing for certain results or accomplishments. As with any of the hindrances, becoming mindful of desire will not only deprive desire of mental energy but also may bring about some insight into why your mind is going there. It's possible to be present with mind-states of desire without becoming involved with them.

***Aversion*** is the opposite of desire, when the mind may be filled with dislike, irritation, frustration, negativity, and judgment. Often, when aversion arises, further judgmental feelings about the object of your frustration will come up, doubling the aversion you feel— "I can't stand how judgmental I am!" Particularly with this hindrance, it's important to arouse kindness as a buffer between oneself and the state of aversion. So instead of letting these thoughts reverberate, look upon aversion with humor, warmth, and curiosity. As with the other hindrances, becoming mindful of and investigating aversion can lead to significant insights.

***Doubt*** is one of the trickiest hindrances to identify because it sounds so rational at first. These are thoughts along the lines of "I'm not sure about this meditation stuff. Would my time be better spent exercising?" or "This isn't a good time of day to do this. I'm not in the right place in my life to pick up meditation." Doubt can be the mind's attempt to throw up confusing walls to prevent you from seeing what's actually going on. That doesn't mean you should blow past doubt; maybe some part of you is not yet ready to open up to seeing something, particularly if it is difficult. Often just noticing that you have doubt will do. When this occurs, settle yourself down and return your attention to the breath. This isn't to short-circuit any reflection on the merits or problems of meditation. By all means, think critically and thoughtfully. But you can request of yourself that you do so *after* the meditation session has concluded.

## What the Buddha Taught

*The Hindrances*

Here, one who has **sensual desire** clearly knows "I have sensual desire"; when they don't have sensual desire they clearly know "I don't have sensual desire"; and they clearly know how sensual desire that has not arisen comes to arise; how sensual desire that has arisen comes to be abandoned; and how the abandoned sensual desire comes to not rise again in the future.

When they have **ill will** they clearly know "I have ill will"; [as above] . . .When they have **dullness and drowsiness** they clearly know "I have dullness and drowsiness"; . . . When they have **restlessness** and remorse they clearly know "I have restlessness and remorse"; . . . When they have **doubt** they clearly know "I have doubt"; . . .[12]

# Part II: Metta (Loving-Kindness) Meditation

# Lesson 1: Overview; Benefactor

In Part I on mindfulness, you were invited to pay attention in a nonjudgmental, gentle, and accepting way—but perhaps this was easier said than done. How do we actually cultivate a kinder quality of attention if much of the time we have a critical or fault-finding voice in our heads? The Buddha offered a marvelous meditation that fundamentally shifts our disposition so that we can meet all experiences and people, including our own selves, with kindness, friendliness, and benevolence. In English, this practice is called *loving-kindness meditation*. The classic Buddhist word for this is *metta* (pron. *meh' tah*).

When practiced alongside mindfulness, metta meditation transforms the tone of our attention from one of judgment to one of real warmth. Metta also expands the heart so that there's more space to receive what we are seeing, so that we don't contract around the pain that presents itself in meditation. In the context of our daily lives, metta softens and opens our hearts so that we approach others, even people we find difficult, with genuine goodwill. Developed fully, this kindheartedness extends to all beings, without discrimination, in a manner that is unconditional.

**In the same way that mindfulness meditation trains the mind,**
**metta meditation trains the heart.**

### Is Kindness Wimpy?

We may meet the idea of becoming kinder with some resistance, particularly if we think that kind people are pushovers who end up getting hurt or taken advantage of. But kindness that comes out of fear of making other people angry is not real kindness. True kindness can take the form of preventing harm, setting boundaries, or staying away from someone who is acting out. Far from being permissive or making us weaker, metta develops fearlessness and strength so that we respond appropriately to aggression.

## Metta Phrases

Metta meditation consists of the heartfelt repetition of three to four phrases, the most common of which are:

May I/you/all beings be happy.

May I/you/all beings be healthy.

May I/you/all beings be safe.

May I/you/all beings live with ease.

Here, happiness refers to a kind of happiness that is joyful, contented, and enduring, more akin to inner peace than to short-term happiness derived from pleasure. The second phrase on health is an aspiration to have a body, heart, and mind that are free from illness and pain and that are full of vitality and energy. The third phrase brings attention to the fundamental need to feel safe and free from harm. The last phrase, "living with ease," conveys the wish that one's life proceeds smoothly, with few obstacles, that one's day unfolds peacefully.

## How to Use Metta Phrases

These phrases are repeated using our inner speech, with the intention of our heart and mind behind them. In general, the phrases are said in order and consistently in one's mind, though it can be helpful to say them aloud quietly if you are practicing alone. Later in this lesson series, we will learn how to adapt these phrases or use alternate language.

In its fullest form, metta meditation works with six categories of beings, generally in the following order:

1. Oneself
2. Benefactor
3. Friend
4. Neutral person
5. Difficult person
6. All beings

The idea behind metta meditation is to develop a felt sense of kindness by invoking the memory and presence of those near and dear to us, and then radiate that feeling outward to include increasingly more challenging categories of beings. We begin by sending metta to the person it's easiest to feel kindness for: traditionally, that person is oneself. However, many people today find it hard to feel love for themselves at the start. As such,

contemporary teachers often begin metta practice with the benefactor category, which is a person in our lives who has loved and supported us unconditionally. For many, a benefactor has been a grandparent, teacher, mentor, or elder. If no one comes to mind, then reflect on someone who inspires you and invokes feelings of warmth and appreciation. You can even think of a beloved pet. In short, pick someone for whom a sense of love and joy arises naturally when you think of them. It's generally advised that whomever you choose, this person (or animal) is alive today; otherwise, feelings of grief or sadness may complicate your meditation. Once we've invoked this warmth for someone it is easy to feel affection toward, we then move to ourselves.

For our first meditation, we'll begin with the benefactor and then send metta to ourselves, but you are welcome to begin with yourself if you prefer. In the following lessons, we'll continue to add categories.

## Reflection and Imagination

While the use of imagination does not come into play in mindfulness meditation, imagery and recollection can play a strong role in metta meditation. For example, we might feel or picture a warm light in our heart that expands as the meditation progresses. When we bring people to mind, we can draw up memories of their eyes, smile, and personality. We might actively remember something kind that the person did for us or that we did for them. You can picture the person right in front of you where you are, or in their natural environment, such as in their home, garden, or workplace. It's perfectly fine to use images of light, energy, and memory, though the main objects of our attention are the phrases themselves.

## Intention

The sincerity and heartfelt-ness with which we repeat the metta phases is far more significant than generating a *feeling* of kindness during the meditation. When we bring our full attention to the phrases themselves, a force of good intentions builds up gradually. Metta meditation is not primarily about invoking an emotional feeling of love. That might happen, but it's not the goal. Our feelings can be variable, but our intentions tend to endure across situations. Thus, the aim is to generate a strong intention of kindness. In fact, during the meditation we might have a flat, resistant, or even somewhat irritated feeling tone. Don't worry about that—just put your full attention on each phrase. That said, it's not uncommon for the meditation to have a strong aftereffect.

Later in the day or the next day, you might feel more resilient or joyful, and that people are friendlier with you.

### New Pathways in the Heart

A great image for how intention works in the heart is to think of a field of tall grass between a house and a lakeshore. The first time you walk from the porch to the lake, you can hardly see the path you cut. The second time, the grass is bent lower down, and the path is clearer. If you walk that path every day, eventually the grasses part and you've created a clear, wide, and easy path. Likewise, our minds and hearts make certain journeys quite regularly, sometimes of resentment, guilt, or shame. With metta meditation, we are widening the pathway of kindness. The more we practice metta, the easier it becomes to go down that open, well-traveled path.

### Metta

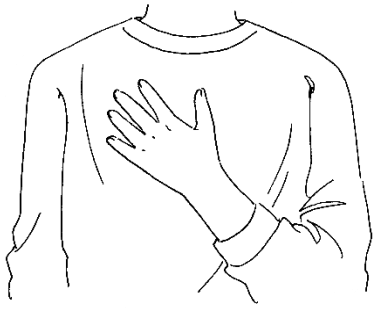
In Sanskrit, the word for *metta* is *maitri*, which means "friend." The best, closest translation of *metta*, therefore, is friendliness. This friendliness, however, is not simply collegiality but a sincere care, love, and regard for another, without expectation of return. In that way, metta is unconditional love, benevolence, and goodwill. Another closely related Sanskrit word is *mitra*, which can mean "sun." We can say that metta is a quality of warmth and radiance that flows in the hearts of all living beings.[13] Or, we can think of metta as the sunlight that shines on all beings without discrimination, in that the sun doesn't selectively give its light to some but not to others.

## Meditation Instructions on Metta for a Benefactor

Read through the meditation instructions here to get a sense of how metta is practiced, and then try it on your own. For this first session, we will spend most of our time practicing metta for a benefactor, and then dip our toes into metta for ourselves at the

end. If, however, metta for yourself comes easily, you are welcome to begin with yourself, followed by the benefactor.

Find a seated position that is comfortable but keeps you alert. If physical discomfort begins to intrude on your attention during the session, then adjust your posture mindfully so that you're more at ease. With this meditation, we're not working with physical discomfort as part of mindfulness. Begin by taking a gentle, full breath in and exhaling slowly, welcoming your body relax. Repeat one or two more times. Take a few minutes, following the natural rhythms of the breath, to settle your mind.



Bring awareness to the area around your heart. You might put one hand over your heart. Imagine or request that this area become relaxed, soft, and open. Let the breath relax your heart. You can picture a warm, bright light in your heart that increases with each in- and out-breath until it radiates throughout your chest and into your body. If these images don't work for you, that's fine, as these are not essential to the meditation.

Bring to mind someone who invokes the feeling of warmth and kindness when you think of them, your benefactor. Perhaps recall the special moments of care and encouragement this person expressed for you. Remember this person in detail, possibly imagining them in their favorite setting, relaxed, happy, and at ease. If you want to smile at that person, go ahead. When you have them firmly in mind, say to this person with your inner voice:

"May you be happy."

Pause and really let the intention of that wish take root. Remember a moment in which your benefactor looked especially content and joyful or picture this person smiling radiantly at you. Elaborate on this wish with further phrases such as, "May you be filled with peace. May you be content." It can be helpful to say that person's name.

Then wish for this person, "May you be healthy." Picture their body and mind in full health. You may also elaborate with additional phrases, such as, "May you be free from illness or injury. May your mind be strong and healthy." Allow this intention to enter your heart. Then wish for your benefactor, "May you be safe." Take a moment to be with this intention, as described above. Finally, say your last phrase of good intentions for this person: "May you live with ease." Bring forth the wish that this person can proceed with their day smoothly, with few obstacles. Again, stay with this phrase for a moment.

Repeat the phrases over again, allowing a few moments to pass between each one and placing your attention fully on each phrase. If there are particulars about this person's life you want to address, you are welcome to add other phrases. For example, if the person has a health issue, you might wish that they have comfort or freedom from pain.

Now think of your benefactor looking at you and notice what this person sees in you that is lovable. If it's hard to say metta phrases for yourself directly, then imagine your mentor or benefactor sending you loving-kindness, as they probably have in their own way all along. This person can use exactly the same phrases, beginning with "May you be happy." Alternately, you can say these phrases for yourself: "As this person would wish for me, so too do I wish for myself, 'May I be happy, may I be healthy.'"

Again, don't worry about actually feeling love and kindness for yourself—just place your attention and intention on each phrase. You can coordinate the phrases with your breathing or repeat them at your own pace. It is preferable not to repeat them too quickly, as one would a mantra, but to carefully and deliberately mentally speak each phrase.

Notice what kind of resistance or judgments come up as you consider sending yourself metta. Are there other voices commenting on your worthiness? Are there ways in which you discount yourself? Just notice these for now and accept them as part of the meditation.

To end the meditation, let go of these phrases and simply sit quietly for a few minutes. Make note of how you're feeling and of your state of mind.

## What the Buddha Taught

*The Advantages of Metta*

1. You will sleep easily.
2. You will wake easily.
3. You will have pleasant dreams.
4. People will love you.
5. Devas [celestial beings] and animals will love you.
6. Devas will protect you.
7. External dangers [poisons, weapons, and fire] will not harm you.
8. Your face will be radiant.
9. Your mind will be serene.
10. You will die unconfused.
11. You will be reborn in happy realms.[14]

# Lesson 2: Kindness for Oneself

Metta traditionally begins with the person for whom it's easiest to feel love, so the standard instruction is to begin with metta for oneself. For some, developing loving-kindness for oneself may come quite naturally. Individuals may feel, as they begin extending metta to themselves, a sense of recognition, as if they are coming home to themselves. This latent appreciation for oneself can be awakened through metta. If this is the case for you, you are absolutely welcome to begin the metta progression with yourself, followed by your benefactor.

Yet, many people find that the *hardest* person to feel love for is themselves. Some have needed to build a fortress around their hearts in order to survive violence and transgression; others have internalized shame from outside voices; still others are taught to put others before themselves at all costs or to view love for oneself as selfish.

Despite these painful issues, as we are developing metta we cannot bypass giving love to ourselves and only send metta to others. Without a solid foundation of affection for oneself, low self-regard or shame distorts our relationships. For example, we might be generous and caring with others in part to receive their approval, thereby relying on others to boost our self-esteem. This conditional love can take us on a roller coaster ride of superficial self-worth. Conversely, if we are rooted in unconditional love and kindness for ourselves, our kindness to others expects nothing in return and thus is more stable and reliable.

From a Buddhist perspective, we are all interconnected: no one is nearly as separate as they think they are. As such, the state of our own heart and mind has a profound impact on those around us. The brightness, clarity, and love that we embody are of immense blessings to others and to ourselves. When we know how to take care of ourselves, then we know how to take care of others.

## Strategies

If it's not easy to send loving-kindness to yourself, try one or several of these strategies.

### Envision a Circle of Kindness

Picture yourself sitting in the middle of a circle of people you admire and respect, as well as those who love you. Imagine each person one at a time, or all the people in the circle at once, sending you metta.

### Remember Your Goodness

Recall at least one thing, perhaps more, that you have done that was kind or thoughtful in the recent past. The gesture can be as simple as holding the door open for someone or refraining from saying something crabby to a family member because it would ruin their mood. Or you might remember something from the past few days or months that revealed some aspect of yourself that was admirable or lovely.

### See Yourself as a Child

Bring to mind yourself as a young child and look at yourself from your own adult eyes. No matter what you were told about who you were, a young child is unquestionably innocent and worthy of love. Perhaps imagine yourself, as an adult, sitting next to child-you, or holding the child-you in your lap or the baby-you in your arms. Is it possible to send metta to this baby or child?

### Build a Fire

Ajahn Brahm, a well-known Buddhist monk based in Australia, instructs people do metta for themselves at the very *end* of the meditation. He likens building the heart of metta to building a fire. He begins with small, dry kindling that easily bursts into the flame of love; for him, this means imagining a small homeless kitten, which he takes into his arms and promises to care for and love. Then, he recommends one add sticks to this small fire that are harder to light, but nonetheless will catch fire easily from the kindling and logs: these are analogous to friends. With a stronger fire started, then one sends metta to neutral people, then to difficult people, like wet logs, and then finally, when the fire is roaring, we can add, like a wet and sappy stick, our own selves.[15] Practicing metta in this reverse order is an excellent strategy for those struggling with self-loathing or feelings of unworthiness. (See Practicing Metta.)

## Alternate Phrases

While the majority of our meditation rests with the primary three or four phrases that we use for all categories, at times it may feel appropriate to adjust the phrasing or address something in particular. Some alternate phrases are:

> May I accept this _____ as it is.
>
> May the power of loving-kindness support me.
>
> May I accept / let go of / be free from this anger/fear/resentment/shame.

May I be free from danger. May I be protected.

May I feel ease of heart.[16]

May I be held in compassion.

May I be free from pain and sorrow.

May I meet fear with courage and an open heart.

May the force of love transform my fears.

May I be happy just as I am.

May my body relax.

May I show myself the same kindness I would show to a loved one.[17]

When adapting your phrases, bear in mind that these are not meant to be prayers. As we are simply cultivating an inclination, it's understood that in metta practice we are not trying to make anything happen or petition anyone with our wishes. When we say, "May I be healthy," we are not saying, "I *will* be healthy," or "I *should* be healthy," or "I wish this awful back pain would go away." Rather, we are creating a pathway in our heart toward health. For this reason, the phrases don't express specifics, like "may I get a new car" or "may my mother approve of me"—and certainly not "may so and so get their comeuppance!" Rather, these are universal aspirations that apply to anyone.

## Trust the Practice

Our hearts can be like the bud of a flower, with the petals tightly wrapped. With sufficient warmth, sunlight, moisture, and fertile ground, the petals will unfurl on their own. But if we forcibly pull the young petals away from the center, we damage the flower. In the same way, we cannot *force* our heart to open: to do so is, in a sense, a form of violence. Metta provides that sunlight, warmth, water, and nourishment that in time allows our hearts to open. In this way, it's important to entrust ourselves to loving-kindness practice, even if we don't necessarily feel emotionally what we think loving-kindness should be.

## Meditation Instructions for Kindness for Oneself

• Begin the meditation by following your breathing for a few minutes.

• Turn to metta for your benefactor.

• Following this, either use one of the first three initial reflections above (envision a circle of kindness; remember your goodness; see yourself as a child) or begin just as you are.

• Extend metta to yourself for the duration of the meditation.

• If difficult emotions or judgments come up, you may need to shift your phrases, as suggested above.

• Close the metta session by extending phrases to a group of those you care about, such as friends, fellow parents from school, colleagues at work, or your neighborhood.

• Sit quietly for a few minutes before ending.

## Daily Life Practice

*Anytime metta*. We can return to the phrases, sending metta to our benefactor or own self, at any time our attention isn't needed for a specific task. While folding laundry, walking to class, or waiting for someone, you can take a moment to send metta. Perhaps find one specific activity to take up as an informal metta meditation time, such as taking a shower or while riding the bus.

## What the Buddha Taught

Having gone around in all directions with the mind,

There is surely no one found who is loved more than oneself.

In the same way others each love themselves,

Therefore, one who cares for oneself should not harm another.[18]

# Lesson 3: The Friend and the Neutral Person

The English word *kind* gets to the heart of metta: *kind* is related to the word *kin*. When we are kind to someone, we treat them as if they are a member of our family (assuming we feel good about our family members!) When we practice metta, the idea is to regard all beings as our family, without distinction between friend and stranger.

Building on the metta we cultivated for our benefactor and for ourselves, we now include kindness for a friend and for someone for whom we have neutral feelings. Once we build warmth for these two categories of beings, we'll extend our kindness to more challenging categories in later lessons.

## Friend

For many of our friends, especially those we have known for many years, we have a mixture of love and judgment. For the purposes of this exercise, choose someone for whom you have quite a bit of affection, but for whom there may be a little bit of conditionality to your friendship. Avoid choosing someone that you feel attracted to, as it can be easy to confuse desire with loving-kindness. In many friendships there are moments when we feel hurt or offended, when we've observed actions, we don't agree with, or when we've wished our friend were a little more of this or less of that. (Undoubtedly, they have similar feelings about you.) In metta practice we are challenging ourselves to shift, as much as possible, to regarding our friend with unconditional love. Along the way we may find areas in which we have expectations or a sense of *quid pro quo*; metta practice helps us see these areas and to grow beyond them. When disappointment and difficulties in your friendship arise in this practice, it may be helpful to put these into perspective by considering how you would feel about this person if they faced serious endangerment or death. This reflection helps us discover our deeper connection to them.

## Family Members

You are welcome to practice loving-kindness for family members with whom you have a positive relationship. Yet with familial relationships in particular we want to keep an eye out for feelings of neediness, expectation, conditional love, and desire, which can be stronger than those of average friendships. If you have some complicated or difficult relationships in your family, save those for the Difficult Person lesson.

### Neutral Person

After practicing metta for a friend, we next move to the category called the neutral person. This doesn't mean the person themself is neutral; rather, *neutral* means we don't feel strongly about the person one way or another. Generally, we choose someone we don't know well or don't know at all. This could be someone we see in passing on a regular basis, such as a groundskeeper, administrator, or student on the far side of the classroom. It can be helpful to reflect on the ways in which this person's life is more encompassing than the one role or position that you encounter them in: they may be caring for an aging parent, volunteering at a local food bank, have financial burdens, enjoy gardening, or be struggling with a health issue. Imagining the ways in which they are more than just the category we assign to them helps us connect to their humanity.

Although at first it may feel awkward to extend good wishes to someone you don't know and shouldn't, from a conventional perspective, necessarily care deeply about, practicing in this way expands our capacity for loving-kindness. In the meditations ahead, stick with the same neutral person without switching to a different person each meditation. In time, you may find that the so-called neutral person is no longer neutral to you and that you care for them. This helps us see that really no one, not one being, is less worthy of our kindness than any other.

## Meditation Instructions on Metta for Neutral People

- Begin the meditation as you have for the past two lessons, with metta for the benefactor and yourself.
- Next, bring to mind a good friend and extend metta phrases to them.
- In the next part of the meditation, offer metta phrases to your neutral person.
- Finally, extend loving-kindness to a group or community of those you care about, followed by sitting quietly for a few minutes.

## Daily Life Practice

*Stealth metta*. One way to develop a habit of goodwill is to continue to send metta in the company of others. While traveling on a bus, plane, or train, you can silently send metta to individuals around you. During a class, you can send metta to fellow students and instructor. There's no need to look different or do anything different, and certainly you want to keep your wits about you and stay safe. Wherever you are, send metta to everyone you see. Don't be surprised if people are more open and friendly as a result!

# Lesson 4: Anger

In the Buddhist meditative system, metta has what is termed a "near enemy," which is something that mimics it, and a "far enemy," which is its direct opposite. The near enemies of metta are desire and attachment, which are states of mind that can look and feel like metta but are actually undergirded by self-interest. Attachment can be distinguished from loving-kindness if we feel disappointed when another person doesn't live up to our expectations or resentful when they do something that hurts our feelings. The far enemy of metta, the state of mind that is the direct opposite of loving-kindness, is aversion. Aversion can take a number of forms, from anger to hatred to guilt. In this lesson, we focus on anger in particular because many of us struggle with this negative emotion somewhat regularly. This lesson, along with the lesson on forgiveness, prepares us for practicing metta with difficult people.

Anger is a natural and human response to situations that are threatening, unjust, or inappropriate, or in which we feel powerless, demeaned, or afraid. As such, anger is an important signal from our mind and body that tells us there's something we need to pay attention to. The purpose of our practice therefore is not to eliminate anger, but to learn how to listen to it and respond in ways that don't result in further harm. In meditation we learn that we are not our thoughts, but we are responsible for them. Likewise, we are not our anger, but we are responsible for it. Over time, through understanding and practice, we move away from destructive reactions toward more skillful responses.

Mindfulness and meditation play a key role in becoming aware of and understanding deeply the roots of destructive emotions like anger (see Emotions lesson). Metta meditation likewise reveals places in which we may be holding on to resentment or anger and provides a valuable tool for working with these emotions. Interpersonally, metta lowers the temperature of our disagreements and creates a safe, well-intentioned space for resolving matters.

## Recognizing the Suffering of Anger and Letting Go

The fifth-century Buddhist monk and scholar Buddhaghosa wrote succinctly about hurting others out of anger:

> By doing this you are like a man who wants to hit another and picks up a burning ember or excrement in his hand and so first burns himself or makes himself stink.[19]

When you are holding on to anger, ask yourself whom it hurts more: you or the other person? Identifying and really seeing clearly how hanging onto anger is painful helps us to let it go more easily. To practice releasing anger with metta meditation, you can use phrases such as “May I let go of this anger easily” or “May I be free from anger.”

## Changing the Anger Habit

We get better at anything that we practice regularly. Thus, if we practice getting angry and letting our anger consume us, it becomes easier to react angrily in the future. Metta practice counters the mental and emotional pathways of anger that we may have traveled hundreds or thousands of times in our lives. It creates new pathways so that our responses can change. When anger comes up, if we are mindful, we can pause to ask whether we want to strengthen our anger habit by running through the old, familiar narratives about who’s right and who’s wrong. Or do we want to create a new, healthier habit that is less destructive to ourselves and others?

## Loss of Connection

When we become angry, we lose our empathy and connection to another person’s humanity. The distance between ourselves and the other person can become very wide, to the point that we may believe the other person is horrible or incapable of goodness. Our image of the person becomes one-dimensional, narrow, and loses complexity. When we practice loving-kindness we restore care for that other person, even as we may disagree with them or feel hurt by something they said or did. We might even be able to understand where that person was coming from, even if we feel they were severely misguided or misinformed. Loving-kindness practice reminds us that all beings need love and recognition. We may not be able to give it right then and there, but we will at least remember that we share this need with the other person.

## Holding the Anger with a Big Self

Imagine you have a cup of water and then add a big spoonful of salt. The water would be salty and undrinkable. Then imagine adding that same big spoonful of salt to a lake. The water would hardly taste different, and indeed would be drinkable.[20] In the same way, when we expand our sense of self beyond just our own mental world—when we understand ourselves as interconnected with others and the

world around us—the anger is held in a much vaster arena. Metta practice creates a bigger, more open space in our heart and mind. When difficulties get thrown our way, there are no walls for them to stick on to; they just sail through to the beyond.

### Meditation: Phrases for Anger

Responding harshly to anger compounds it, whereas responding to anger with kindness helps defuse it. With this in mind, one way to work with anger during meditation is to say, "Thank you, anger, for coming. Thank you for letting me know you're here." You can then imagine bowing respectfully to the anger.[21]

Some phrases for working with anger in meditation are:

> May I accept my feelings as they are.
> May I take care of my anger with compassion and ease.
> May this situation teach me about the true nature of life.
> May I see clearly what is here, and respond wisely.
> May I be free from so much anger and blame.
> May I find the resources to understand and not judge myself or others harshly.[22]
> You give me your anger. I do not accept it. The anger still belongs to you.
> May I respond to anger with kindness.[23]

## Daily Life Practice

*Walking metta*. Just as with mindfulness, metta can be practiced at any time and for a range of circumstances. One beautiful way of integrating metta into daily life is to practice while walking. If you're alone, then follow the phrases and sequence as you normally would in sitting meditation. If there are other people or animals in your environment, then include sending metta to them.

## What the Buddha Taught

> Never indeed is hatred stilled by hatred; it will only be stilled by non-hatred—this is an eternal law.[24]

# Lesson 5: Forgiveness

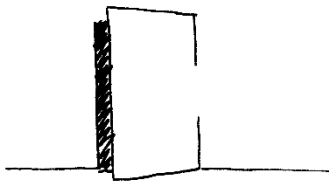
Metta practice shines a light on places in our heart where we are holding on to pain, resentment, and anger. As we discover these knots, we need to loosen them up so that loving-kindness continues to develop. Just as it is impossible to hold our breath and breathe deeply at the same time, likewise if the heart is constricted around places of suffering, the heart can't breathe with metta

**Forgiveness is the practice of letting go of our pain, resentment, and anger.** It is a process that takes time, sometimes years and decades, through a recurring visitation to the place of difficulty. With gentleness, kindness, and deepened understanding, we slowly come to a place of forgiveness. This forgiveness is more of a gift to ourselves than it is for the offending party, as it is a recognition that holding on to resentment drags the original offense into the present and allows past pain to continue to afflict us.

Forgiveness is one of those aspects of relationships that many struggle to understand. Hasty forgiveness, in an effort to relieve pain, can feel as if we are condoning the harm others have done, or excusing or rationalizing the harm we have done to others. "To forgive and forget" easily shades into denial or suppression of one's true needs. Intuitively, we know that this is a short-term fix, and that anger about unresolved grievances will arise again. Sometimes we think we've forgiven someone, but if they repeat the trigger behavior, we find ourselves right back to square one.

We tend to think of forgiveness as something that we do or say directly. Rather, forgiveness is the result of several other processes. Sometimes, we might not even realize that we have forgiven someone until we encounter that person and find that we no longer harbor animosity. We will notice instead the *absence* of hard feelings.

So, what are these processes or conditions that give rise to forgiveness? Foremost, we have a deep and full understanding of why and how things happened the way they did. That deep understanding includes the ability to see the other person as more than their aggressions, to see the good in them as well as hold their complexity in a larger picture. There is the recognition that hanging on to anger and resentment is painful for ourselves and leads nowhere. By gently relaxing our heart, whatever pain was locked up in there finds the opened door and exits.



Spending some time in meditation to become mindful of difficult feelings will lead to greater understanding. In this way, we pair mindfulness meditation with forgiveness meditation to facilitate our understanding and our ability to let go. But forgiveness meditation is not meant to resolve everything right away. Rather, it establishes the aspiration or intention to forgive, and thus prepares the ground for forgiveness to arise. Forgiveness meditation also takes us to the edge of what is acceptable[25] and helps us to soften and open, expanding that edge.

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that it's wise to reestablish relations with a person who has harmed us, nor does it mean we have to tell them they've been forgiven. In some cases, particularly when the difficult behavior is ongoing, it's better for both parties to keep a distance or to go separate ways.

## Meditation Instructions on Forgiveness

Forgiveness meditation has three parts: asking for forgiveness from those you may have harmed, offering forgiveness to those who have harmed to you, and offering forgiveness to yourself. As your meditation unfolds, difficult feelings may come up. With kindness and with ease, breathe and relax, allowing those feelings to be as they are. You may want to become mindful of the feelings, exploring and understanding what they are, and then return to the phrases.

Begin the meditation by finding a comfortable posture and settling in on your breath. Then, offer this sentence either out loud or internally:

> "If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask their forgiveness."

Memories or images may arise. As they do, offer the shorter phrase, "I ask your forgiveness." Say the phrase carefully and deliberately each time.

Then shift to asking for forgiveness to those who harmed you.

> "If anyone has hurt or harm to me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive them."

Again, images or memories may arise, and for each offer the shorter phrase, "I forgive you." In the last part of the meditation, we offer forgiveness to ourselves for the ways in which we may have been harsh, demanding, or disappointed with ourselves. We offer forgiveness for our perceived failings and shortcomings.

> "For the ways I have hurt or harmed myself, knowingly or unknowingly, I offer forgiveness."

As memories or images arise, offer the shorter phrase, "May I forgive myself."

# Lesson 6: The Difficult Person

In this lesson, we extend metta to those traditionally called the "enemy." These days, we use the phrase "difficult person." The word *difficult* here doesn't mean that the person is inherently difficult (though at the moment perhaps you think so!) Rather, it means that we ourselves have difficulty with that particular person. When you first practice sending metta to a difficult person in your life, pick someone with whom you only have mild problems. This might be someone that you might find irritating or challenging to work with. Don't pick your worst enemy or the person who may have caused you deep suffering. We'll save the best for last.

It's important to know that by sending metta to someone difficult, we are not condoning the ways in which their behavior has been a source of distress for ourselves and others. Rather, by distinguishing between the person and their actions, we can find a way to connect with this person as a fellow human being. All people want happiness, love, affection, and approval. Often, their misdeeds are misguided attempts to achieve that happiness, as strange and perverse as the approach they take may seem. We can consider how all beings were once innocent children, cared for by someone at some point. Sometimes imagining a difficult person's childhood helps us to remember their essential humanity and need for kindness.

## Adapting the Metta Phrases

As you progress to increasingly difficult people, you may need to adapt your phrases. Some examples are:

> May you be filled with loving-kindness.
>
> May you have happiness and the causes of happiness, such as clarity and kindness.
>
> May you be free of suffering and the causes of suffering, such as ill-will and envy.
>
> May you be free of anger, enmity, and bitterness.[26]
>
> To the extent that I am able, I wish for you peace.
>
> Knowing that your actions come from a place of suffering, I wish that you be free from suffering.

## Strategies for Strong Feelings

If strong feelings come up, it's completely OK to let go of doing loving-kindness practice for the difficult person and do one of several other practices:

- Turn to doing metta for yourself: "May I be safe and protected. May I take care of myself easily. May I accept these feelings as they are."
- Restore a connection to *intentions* of goodwill by returning to a benefactor, yourself, or a good friend.
- Adjust the imagery you have in mind; try imagining the difficult person at quite a distance, or in another situation that helps you feel safe.
- Practice being mindful of the emotion that comes up, and if it dissipates, return to practicing metta.
- Shift to a forgiveness practice.
- Take time to reflect on the person as a child or recall positive characteristics you may have observed.

## Difficult People as Teachers

Our difficulties with others often reveal the places where we are emotionally vulnerable, immature, cut off, or limited. As a result, the difficult people in our lives provide opportunities for meaningful learning and growth. Some of the people we find most challenging end up being our most valuable teachers. When we let go of our resistance to the difficulty and open ourselves to potentially learning from it, this can shift how we frame our experience. Sometimes asking, "What can I learn from this?" substantially changes how we think about the role our enemies play in our personal development.

## Meditation Instruction on Metta for Difficult People

• Begin your session as you have the last few weeks, with metta for a benefactor, then extensive metta for yourself, a friend, and a neutral person.

• When you feel you possess a reserve of goodwill, then gently turn toward a mildly difficult person in your life. Work with the same person for a week.

• End the meditation with loving-kindness for a group of people you care about, such as your friends and family, neighbors, or meditation community.

## Daily Life Practice

*Repetitive task metta*. Coordinate repeating the metta phrases with a repetitive task, such as putting away clothes or walking up a flight of stairs. The people can be exactly the same as in your formal practice.

## What the Buddha Taught

> I do not see even one other thing on account of which unarisen ill will does not arise and arisen ill will is abandoned so much as the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness. For one who attends carefully to the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness, unarisen ill will does not arise and arisen ill will is abandoned.[27]

# Lesson 7: All Beings

In previous lessons, we practiced metta for small groups of those we feel affection for naturally, such as the communities to which we belong. The next step in metta practice is to gradually expand our circle of concern to include all beings. As we do so, we might run into exception clauses in our metta contract: *really*, do I include murderers? Child traffickers? People who manufacture things that cause harm or kill? Politicians from my opposing political party? Mosquitoes? From the Buddhist perspective, the answer is definitely *yes*. Those who intentionally inflict pain on others do so because they themselves are suffering; and the suffering they cause in turn results in more suffering for themselves, even when they don't understand that. No one said metta practice would be easy!

In the actual practice of sending metta to all beings, however, you don't necessarily have to specify: "May all beings be happy, including oppressive dictators." Really, naming the target of your metta is less important than cultivating a universal, non-discriminating benevolence *in your own heart*.

Expanding metta for all beings expands our heart and mind beyond the confines of our physical being so that we are opened up to infinite love. In the expansiveness of that space, self-interested needs may still exist, but they are no longer of primary importance. Although metta practice may seem artificial at first, generating the intention that all beings have happiness creates pathways in the heart through which the waters of love can flow freely. It washes away the boulders of fear and resentment that block up our heart-channels. While sending metta to all beings may seem like the ultimate act of generosity, on the balance the benefits of the practice return back to us many times over.

## Metta Progressions

When we include all beings in our metta practice, it helps to have a structured progression to mentally hold the vastness of this category. Here are some common progressions, though you can also create your own.

***Geographical**:* all beings in the room, in the building, in the land around me, in the city, state, country, and the earth (and if you wish, the solar system and universe).

***Categories**:* all people, animals, plants, bodies of water, mountains, plains, forests, the atmosphere, the whole earth.

***Directional**:* all beings in front of me, behind me, to the right of me, to the left of me, above me, and below me.

***The Ten Directions**:* east, southeast, south, southwest, west, northwest, north, northeast, above, and below.

***Classical Progressions**:*[28]

1. All females
2. All males
3. All enlightened ones
4. All unenlightened ones
5. All whose lives are largely happy
6. All whose lives are a mixture of pleasure and pain
7. All whose lives are largely painful

## Who Are *Beings*?

In this practice, the question may arise as to what exactly we mean by *beings*. Would that include plants? Rocks? Viruses? Amoebas? Some Buddhists use the adjective *sentient* to indicate that a being has a consciousness or an awareness of itself and possibly others. But how do we know what has awareness and what doesn't? Modern science has revealed that many living things we once thought were without consciousness may indeed be sentient on some level. Mushrooms, plants, and trees seem to be considerably more responsive to environmental stimuli than we ever understood before. Other Buddhists use the term *living* as a qualifier for which beings are included in their practice.

In the context of the climate crisis, I recommend that when we think of all beings, we include absolutely everything. Even water, the simple compound of hydrogen and oxygen, is completely interconnected with our own welfare: the way we treat water resources has a great impact on our health. Additionally, the way we interact with the air determines whether our lungs are healthy or not. The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh uses the categories of animals, plants, and minerals in his teachings, with minerals ranging from actual minerals that are the building-blocks of the physical world to the habitats created from minerals, such as mountains and soil. When we extend loving-kindness to the natural world, we set a positive intention for global well-being, which in turn may influence how our daily choices impact the health of the planet.

## Meditation Instruction on Metta for All Beings

• Begin the meditation by settling on the breath and then turn toward sending metta to either yourself or a benefactor.

• Follow this with extending loving-kindness to the alternate: yourself if you began with a benefactor, or the benefactor if you began with yourself.

• Then send metta to a friend, neutral person, and difficult person.

• Expand your loving-kindness outward to groups familiar to you.

• In the final part of the meditation, offer metta to all beings, using the progression of your choice.

• You can use all the imagery you want, whether you bring to mind the details of specific categories or imagine that your loving-kindness is a wave or radiant light that is flowing outward.

• Allow yourself plenty of time for the practice so you can truly connect to each category.

• At the end of the practice, it is lovely to just sit in that open space of the heart without doing anything, not even necessarily following the breath.

## Daily Life Practice

*One act of kindness a day*. Perform one deliberate act of kindness each day of this week. It can be a small thing, such as complimenting someone, or something larger, such as cleaning a hallway you walk frequently or taking a walk with someone going through a difficult time. There's no need to broadcast your efforts to get attention or approval; just do these acts of kindness quietly.

## What the Buddha Taught

Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born—
May all beings be at ease!

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.[29]

# Practicing Metta

Now that you've learned how to practice metta meditation in full, from metta for yourself through to metta for all beings, how should you integrate the practice into mindfulness meditation? The answer is that there is no set protocol or universal advice. Different teachers, centers, and even styles of mindfulness have different approaches. These include:

- Beginning or ending a mindfulness meditation with a few minutes of metta practice.
- During a mindfulness meditation, switching to metta as an antidote to aversive states of mind.
- Dedicated a meditation session once a week to metta.
- Practicing metta for many days or weeks and then switching back to mindfulness.
- Doing a metta retreat, ranging from a full day of practice to nine days.
- Practicing metta when it feels like one needs to.
- Practicing metta when it's a helpful response to or preparation for a situation.
- Practicing metta throughout the course of one's day.

As you can see, that's quite a range! You find what works for you. As a general rule, when metta is somewhat hard to do, that can be a sign that it could be interesting to *gently* lean into actually practicing metta.

## Different Styles

The version of metta you've learned here is a style of meditation develops concentration, the ability to sustain attention on one object. Just as you bring your attention back to the breath in mindfulness meditation, with metta meditation you bring your attention back to the phrases. (You may even find that after practicing metta extensively, it's very easy to follow your breathing.) From this perspective, one would primarily use the same set of phrases. That said, as universal as the four phrases we've learned thus far are, they may not always fit a particular individual or category. In addition, other phrases, wishes, or inner speech may emerge as natural expressions of metta. For this reason, many teachers include alternate phrases and encourage students to adjust the phrases to the particulars of their situation, as needed.

It's also important to know that there are other styles of metta practice entirely. I share them to give you a sense of how you can adapt the practice. The following passage is one version from senior Sri Lankan Dharma teacher and monastic Bhante Gunaratana:

> May my mind be filled with the thoughts of loving friendliness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. May I be generous. May I be gentle. May I be relaxed. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy. May my heart become soft. May my words be pleasing to others. May my actions be kind.
>
> May all that I see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think help me to cultivate loving friendliness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. May all these experiences help me to cultivate thoughts of generosity and gentleness. May they all help me to relax. May they inspire friendly behavior. May these experiences be a source of peace and happiness. May they help me be free from fear, tension, anxiety, worry, and restlessness.
>
> No matter where I go in the world, in any direction, may I greet people with happiness, peace, and friendliness. May I be protected in all directions from greed, anger, a version, hatred, jealousy, and fear.
>
> Let each and every one of us imagine that our minds are free from greed, anger, aversion, jealousy, and fear. Let the thought of loving friendliness embrace us and envelop us. Let every cell, every drop of blood, every atom, every molecule of our entire bodies and minds be charged with the thought of friendliness. Let us relax our bodies. Let us relax our minds. Let our minds and bodies be filled with the thought of loving friendliness. Let the peace and tranquility of loving friendliness pervade our entire being.
>
> May all beings in all directions, all around the universe, have good hearts. Let them be happy, let them have good fortune, let them be kind, let them have good and caring friends. May all beings everywhere be filled with the feeling of loving friendliness—abundant, exalted, and measureless. May they be free from enmity, free from affliction and anxiety. May they live happily.[30]

And here is some sample language from a senior Western Dharma teacher in the Thai Forest tradition, Ajahn Brahm:

I speak to the kitten on my chest: "Little being, never feel alone again. Never feel so afraid. I will always look after you, be your protector and friend. I love you, little kitten. Wherever you go, whatever you do, my heart will always welcome you. I give you my limitless loving-kindness always.

"Dearest friend, I sincerely wish you happiness. May your body be free from pain and your mind find contentment. I give you my love with no conditions. I'll always be there for you. You will always have a place in my heart. I truly care for you. . ..

"Friend, whatever you have done to me, revenge will not help either of us, so instead I wish you well. I sincerely wish you freedom from the pain of the past and joy in all your future. May the beauty of this unconditional loving-kindness reach you as well, bringing you happiness and contentment.

"I wish myself well. I now give myself the gift of happiness. Too long the door of my heart has been closed to me; now I open it. No matter what I have done, or will ever do, the door to my own love and respect is always open to me. I forgive myself unreservedly. Come home. I now give myself the love that does not judge. I care for this vulnerable being called 'me.' I embrace all of me with the loving-kindness of metta."[31]

## The Four Divine Abodes

When our hearts are dwelling in a place of loving-kindness, we feel uplifted, happy, and connected. We might even say we feel as though we were in a divine or sacred heart-space. For good reason, Buddhists call the quality of loving-kindness a "divine abode." Traditionally, there are three other qualities of the heart and mind that bring us to this beautiful home: compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Each of these is an essential quality to cultivate on a spiritual path and, as you can surely imagine, developing these is a wonderful and transformative practice.

If you wish to include these other three divine abodes in your formal meditation practice, there are many ways to do so, and some suggested phrases for each are provided below. I also recommend Sharon Salzberg's essential book *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, which provides substantial instruction on each.

## An Overview of the Four Divine Abodes

| LOVING-KINDNESS (METTA) | **Sharon Salzberg**[32] | **Jack Kornfield**[33] |
|---|---|---|
| Near enemy (mimic states): desire, attachment<br>Far enemy (direct opposite): ill-will, anger | *May you be safe.*<br>*May you be happy.*<br>*May you be healthy.*<br>*May you live with ease.* | *May I/you be filled with loving-kindness.*<br>*May I/you be safe from inner and outer dangers.*<br>*May I/you be well in body and mind.*<br>*May I/you be at ease and happy.* |
| **COMPASSION (KARUNA)** | | |
| Near enemy (mimic states): pity/sorrow<br>Far enemy (direct opposite): cruelty | *May you be free of your pain and sorrow.*<br>*May you find peace.* | *May you be held in compassion.*<br>*May you be free from pain and sorrow.*<br>*May you be at peace.* |
| **SYMPATHETIC JOY (MUDITA)** | | |
| Near enemy (mimic states): exuberance<br>Far enemy (direct opposite): resentment | *May your happiness and good fortune not leave you.*<br>*May your happiness not diminish.*<br>*May your good fortune continue.* | *May you be joyful.*<br>*May your happiness increase.*<br>*May you not be separated from great happiness.*<br>*May your good fortune and the causes for your joy and happiness increase.* |
| **EQUANIMITY (UPEKKHA)** | | |
| Near enemy (mimic states): indifference<br>Far enemy (direct opposite): aversion and greed | *May we all accept things as they are.*<br>*May we be undisturbed by the comings & goings of events.*<br>*I will care for you but cannot keep you from suffering.*<br>*I wish you happiness but cannot make your choices for you.* | *May I learn to see the arising in passing of all things with equanimity and balance.*<br>*May I be open and balanced and peaceful.* |

## Metta and Mindfulness

Though initially it seems that mindfulness meditation is for training the mind and metta meditation is for training the heart, the two practices are in fact both mutually supportive and inseparable. As mutually supportive practices, metta develops the kind of nonjudgmental, accepting, and gentle attention needed to allow for sustained investigation and insight. Metta also brings ease and joy to mindfulness practice, which inspires and sustains our interest in meditation.

Even though the nuts and bolts of these two meditation practices are different, mindfulness and kindness are not. As we practice metta, we become deeply aware of what we are feeling, our thoughts, and our relationships. The concentration developed by metta practice brings calm and steadiness to our awareness. And as we practice mindfulness, we develop affection for what we are observing. I've seen people on meditation retreat start to find even the smallest things, like a cup of tea or the wind blowing, to be absolutely beautiful and amazing.

Someone once asked the renowned meditation teacher Dipa Ma whether one should practice mindfulness or loving-kindness. Dipa Ma answered,

> From my experience there is no difference. When you are fully loving, aren't you also mindful? When you are fully mindful, is this not also the essence of love?[34]

# Part III: Beyond the Basics

# Further Learning

## What's Progress in Meditation?

Sometimes it's hard to know whether we are doing meditation correctly or not, or whether it's yielding results. Here are several characteristics to look for.

**Greater Awareness.** Very simply, you notice that you are more aware of yourself and others throughout the day. Though it may not be consistent, your overall ability to be in touch with the present moment is greater than it is without meditation.

**Different Choices.** As you become more aware, you find yourself making different choices. Rather than reacting out of habit, compulsion, or presumption, you find you're taking a moment to reflect on what just happened and how you wish to respond. There may be a moment in which you evaluate whether that response aligns with your deepest values and best intentions.

**Insight.** From time to time, you might have a significant insight into some of your own problems or issues, a deeper understanding of your life (or life in general), or a fresh perspective on a given situation. These insights can arise either during meditation or outside of it and are not the result of intellectual processing.

**Meditation Becomes Inclusive.** What you consider as part of your meditation becomes more inclusive over time. You may start noticing, for example, that *how* you pay attention is as important as *what* you are paying attention to. What you formerly thought of as difficulties or obstacles you now look at with curiosity and as equal in worthiness to the breath.

**Meditation Becomes Integrated.** Over time, the gap between formal seated meditation and the rest of life narrows, until there is no distinction between the two. You no longer prioritize or value one over the other.

**Graciousness and Gracefulness.** If you find that you are even somewhat more gracious with the faults of others and graceful in the face of difficulties, including your own limitations and difficulties, then indeed your meditation is developing.

These are just a few characteristics of a maturing meditation practice. Please bear in mind that some of these take many months, if not years or decades, to appear.

## Formal Meditation versus Mindfulness in Daily Activities

Throughout the lessons, we have been building up two practices: a formal sitting meditation practice and applying mindfulness to everyday life. While it's ideal to cultivate both practices simultaneously, we don't always find the time or energy. In the midst of busy, often overwhelming schedules, one may gradually abandon a daily sitting practice while attempting to bring more mindfulness to everyday activities, such as washing hands or walking. However, mindfulness in daily life cannot become a substitute for formal meditation in terms of the level of understanding, learning, and insight that formal meditation develops. A regular, seated meditation practice is essential to any substantial transformation or spiritual progress. The following are a few examples of how formal meditation practice cultivates qualities that cannot be readily developed elsewhere.

**Develops a Mindfulness Reflex.** Anything we do repeatedly creates a habitual reflex. Repeatedly returning to the breath during meditation establishes a pathway back to ourselves that comes into play in daily life. Without even thinking about it, we will find ourselves returning back to the next breath. In daily life, we may find that in challenging moments with others we will naturally come back to our breath to reestablish balance and connection.

**Develops a Natural Wellspring of Mindfulness.** In the time that we practice meditation, a pool of mindfulness accumulates. As we proceed with our day, that natural wellspring of mindfulness bubbles up, often at times when we are not deliberately trying to be mindful. You may find all of a sudden you're very aware of what you are doing, even though you weren't necessarily trying to practice mindfulness.

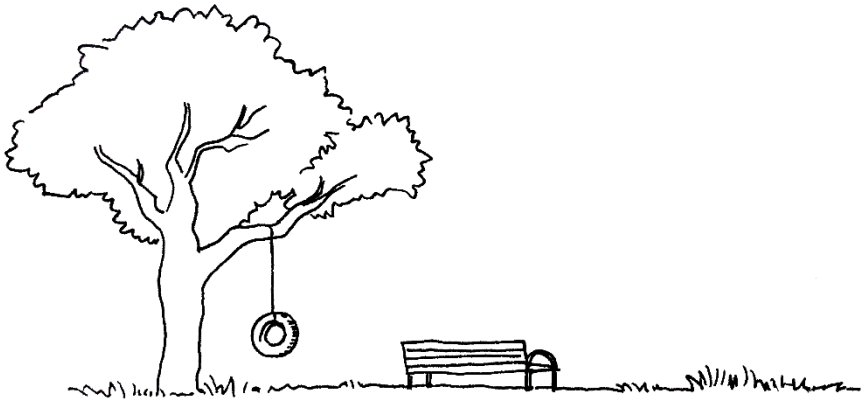
**Focused Practice Is More Effective Than Scattershot Practice.** Imagine trying to learn piano by touching the keyboard for ten seconds and then going off to do something else, returning a few minutes later for another run on the keys. If you did this such that the ten seconds adds up to twenty minutes of practice, very likely you would not have gotten far in your new piece. Conversely, sitting down and practicing piano for twenty *consecutive* minutes yields an entirely different result. Likewise, practicing mindfulness meditation over one dedicated period of time develops and deepens mindfulness in a way that is more difficult to accomplish in short spurts of intermittent mindfulness throughout the day.

**Refines Our Level of Attunement.** In sitting meditation, our minds and hearts slowly settle (even though it doesn't often feel that way because we are noticing just how unsettled we are). One of the great results of formal meditation is that we become more

finely attuned to what is happening internally and externally during the meditation, and this carries forward into the rest of our day. Just to clarify, *attunement* is the depth and subtlety of what we are aware of. We can be mindful in a rudimentary, heuristic way or we can be mindful in a refined way. That attunement makes a huge difference in whether we catch a subtle look of disappointment on a friend's face or notice a quiet feeling in a conversation.

**We See More, and See More Clearly.** When we meditate, we have the opportunity to pay attention to the quietest of voices, the faintest movements of thought. It's almost impossible to see these things moving through our daily lives, at least until we have a sustained formal practice. A good analogy is what you see at a local park if you pass by in your car. If you *drive* by, you see the athletic courts and the landscape. If you *walk* through the park, you notice more, like friends playing basketball. If you *sit* down on a bench, you'll notice even more, like the smell of the mulch and touch of the breeze. And if you *sit on that bench for twenty minutes* every day for a month, you'll have learned so much more about that location, the people who come and go, the seasons, the weather and the light, the insects attracted to the trash can, how the leaves blow in the wind. Most of the time we're driving through our lives, whizzing past important moments, events, thoughts, and feelings—it's all a blur. By making formal meditation a regular part of our experience, we'll see and understand so much more about ourselves and our lives.

Of course, bringing mindfulness into all aspects of our lives is a powerful practice as well. It's important not to isolate meditation to the cushion alone, but to integrate it into daily life. And as we develop mindfulness in daily life, that does indeed strengthen the mindfulness muscle, and that will have an impact upon our formal practice.

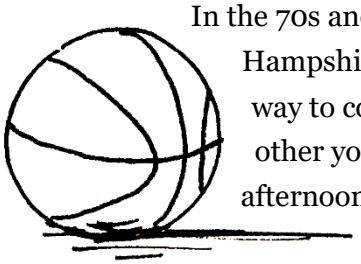


## Community

Because meditation unfolds differently for each person, it's important to learn and practice with a community. Senior practitioners and experienced teachers provide valuable discernment and guidance. Their support can help us improve our understanding and technique so that we spend time in meditation more wisely. If you find yourself in search of a community, know there is considerable variation among meditation groups and Buddhist centers. Explore several communities before settling in with one. Additionally, many excellent and experienced teachers have written on topics you may be struggling with or need extra instruction on, so you may want to find some books to augment your understanding.

# Useful Analogies to Understand Meditation

## Basketball: Practice vs. Performance



In the 70s and early 80s, my parents lived in a Zen community in rural New Hampshire. The main teacher there loved to play basketball and found a way to combine it with Zen teachings. I watched my parents and the other young adults in the community play Zen basketball every afternoon when there wasn't snow covering the court. Because of this childhood experience, basketball easily comes to mind for analogies. As such, I'll use a basketball analogy to consider a common issue about the relationship between formal meditation practice and mindfulness in daily life. Some people put too much emphasis on seated meditation, believing if they meditate long enough, they'll achieve their goal, whatever that may be. Other people skip formal meditation practice and try to squeeze tiny moments of mindfulness into, say, dishwashing or taking a shower. So, what is the right balance?

Basketball consists of many practices that lead up to the performance of a game. During practice, there are drills in which one develops specific skills through consecutive repetition in a concerted effort: layups, dribbling, passing, three-pointers, rebounds. Then, these skills are brought to the game, which is dynamic, fluid, and played with others.

In the same way, our formal meditation practice is about developing specific skills: cultivating attention, building up the capacity to be mindful, letting go, easing judgment, etc. We then bring these skills into the game of life, so to speak, which is dynamic, fluid, and played with others.

If you can imagine only doing basketball practice but never playing a game, then you know you're missing out on the joys of basketball. And if you can imagine only ever playing games: wouldn't it be hard to refine your free throw? To really get the most out of basketball, you need both practice and performance. The same is true for meditation: if you want it to change your life, you need formal, dedicated practice and you need to consciously apply it to your speech, thoughts, emotions, relationships, and actions.

## Calm is Not Like the Surface of a Lake

We tend to think of calm as the absence of disturbance. We know that the calm surface of a lake is still because there's no wind, motorboats, or tide disturbing the waters. Without quite realizing it, we transpose this view of calm onto our meditation: a calm mind must be one without disturbance. "If I could just settle this planning mind down, if I could just let go of all this worrying, if I could just get rid of this chatter, if I could just stop thinking about my day, *then* I'll feel calm during this meditation." As such, we may inadvertently spend enormous energy trying to quell or quash all that mental-emotional activity. In doing so, we actually end up reinforcing habits that are the opposite of what meditation is about: we try to micromanage and control what's happening. Instead, we want to settle back, allow things to play out, and work on our ability to observe and stay present to all the so-called disturbances.

A better image is to think of oneself resting lower down in the waters, perhaps on the soft bed of the lake, where the water is still or simply moves very gently. Looking up from the lakebed, we can see the rippling of the surface, the sparkling of the sun, the kids splashing and diving, a motorboat zooming through. From a place of stillness below, we observe all the so-called disturbances above. We can position ourselves in our own body: place awareness down in the belly and from there "look" up at the emotional and mental movement playing in the heart and head.

This posture is much more in alignment with the kind of calm, or equanimity, that Buddhist practices aimed at. Anyone can be calm when life is going well, when there are no obstacles and things are just fine. The truly powerful person is the one who can abide evenly even when the worst storms of suffering are raging—that's the person we value. Meditation is about practicing with exactly this: can we be lovingly present and calm even when our heart and mind is having a fit? As we get better at this on the cushion, we're training ourselves for the challenges of life.

We should bear in mind that there is a place for a still mind in intensive meditation practice. Indeed, many a Buddhist teaching draws on the image of a still body of water that serves as a mirror to reflect an image back to us so that we see it clearly. The title of Achaan Chah's classic *A Still Forest Pool* is drawn from his instruction:

> Try to be mindful. And let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings—like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful,

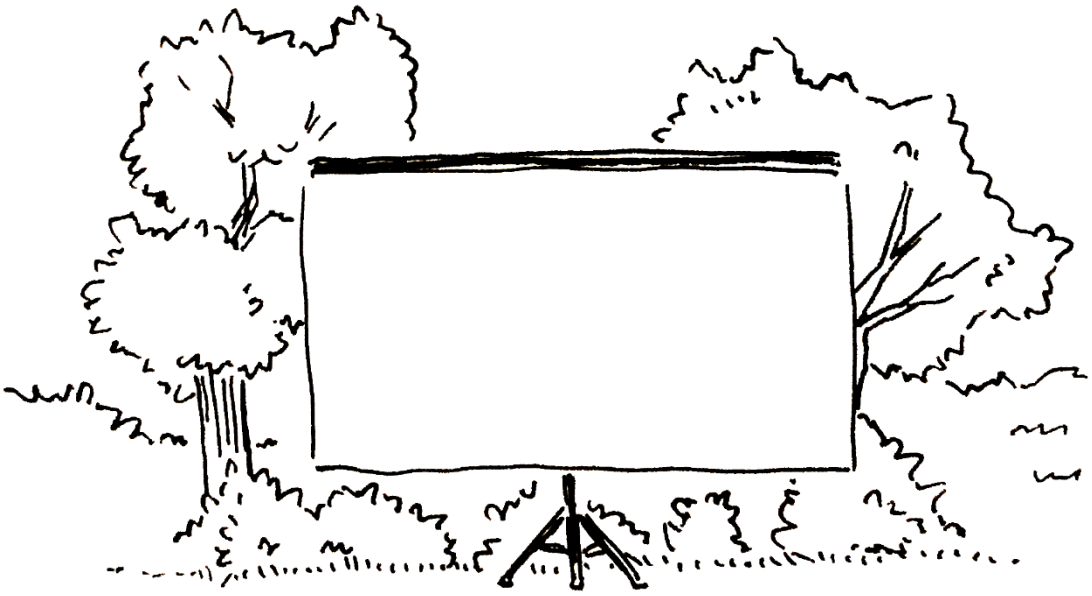
> rare animals will come to drink at the pool—and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

However, this stillness is possible when you're in a monastery or meditation setting, on a retreat, with many days or weeks of continuous meditation practice. For those of us outside such settings—as lay people, as students—sitting short sessions at home, we should stick with the "bottom of the lake looking up" version.

## Mr. Miyagi Moment

In the first *Karate Kid* movie, the teenager Daniel-san wants to learn karate. His teacher and neighbor, Mr. Miyagi, has him begin by painting the fence, learning to move his arm, wrist, and hand in a certain up-and-down motion. Then, as I'm sure you remember, Daniel has to wax the car: wax on, wax off. After an endless amount of this work, Daniel confronts his teacher in frustration and says he doesn't understand how on earth these chores will help him learn karate. Mr. Miyagi nods knowingly and then, without warning, throws a punch. Daniel automatically moves his arm in the wax off motion, thereby fending off the punch.

Likewise, it can often seem like nothing is happening in your formal meditation. Then, after some weeks of practice, life throws you a punch. Unlike your previous responses, which might have been angry, defensive, hurtful, frenetic, panicked, or anxious, you find that this time you have more space in your mind and heart. From a place of greater calm and balance, you respond more appropriately, softer, less judgmentally, and in a way that takes care of yourself as well as others involved. When you begin to respond to challenges more graciously than before, this is a sign that your practice is beginning to work.



## Meditation is Like a Movie Screen

Imagine an outdoor movie that has no screen. As the projector runs the film, you can make out different colored lights and movement, but it's hard to really see what's happening. As soon as the manager gets the screen up, then we can see the projections clearly. "Oh, that's *The Last Avengers*." Likewise, meditation is a big, blank screen onto which we see the projections of our mind, the movies we are making.

Like a movie screen, meditation is a completely neutral thing. Meditation is just sitting there and being aware—nothing more, nothing less. However, when all our neuroses start showing themselves, we make a big mistake and think that it's the meditation that's the problem. *Meditation is making me neurotic. Meditation is making me restless. Meditation is making me bored.* Not so. Meditation is revealing our dispositions. *That's* what we pay attention to.

In my experience, one of the most powerful ways to start understanding your own mind is to look at how you relate to meditation practice itself. Do you spend much of the time beating yourself up for failing? Do you spend much of the time restlessly hoping the session will end? Do you spend a lot of time making excuses and rationalizations as to why you should skip it today? Do you space out and go into la-la land, looking forward to meditation as a time to disconnect from your regular life? How we relate to the meditation is often a reflection of how we relate to everything else in life. Begin to notice that. Watch how you practice meditation itself.

# Stress: Four Perspectives

## Stress from Multitasking

Meditation can help us reduce and manage stress. One major generator of stress is multitasking. When we try to do several things at the same time, our stress levels go way up, and we quickly get drained of energy. This is because our brains are actually built to pay attention to one thing at a time. When we are multitasking, what's really happening is that our attention is rapidly oscillating among things, and each time our attention has to shift from one thing to the next it uses a little bit of energy. Therefore, the more transitional the movement, the more energy is used. Studies have shown that people get more done by doing one thing at a time than by doing several things "simultaneously."

One way that meditation, particularly learning how to pay attention to the breath, reduces stress is that in our practice we are retraining ourselves to *uni-task*. Though it's difficult to keep our attention on the breath, doing so is restful for our poor, overworked brain. Simplifying our internal environment so that we are just paying attention to the breath can be carried over into daily life. If you like, while you are working, try doing just one thing at a time. See what that does for reducing the feeling of being too busy, overwhelmed, and therefore stressed.

Likewise, the relatively new media environment that we now live in is so entertaining that many of us incorporate brief but unbelievably frequent excursions to social media, apps, news websites, blogs, and the like even as we are studying. These distractions set us up to multitask and are enervating even as they are stimulating. No wonder by the end of the day we are so exhausted! When we meditate, we help restore wholeness to our fractured attention. As we gather our attention inward, we find new energy and we return integrity to our mind. I invite you to see what it is like to set aside these distractions while going about your day. For example, try turning off your phone so that you focus exclusively on just finishing the problem set or paper.

## Stress from Our Relationship to What Is Happening

Imagine that you just fell in love, and on that day, you step outside into a heavy rain, but you are without an umbrella or raincoat. How do you experience that rain when you're in love? You might

interpret it as a refreshing blessing. Imagine another day in which things didn't go so well. Maybe you got an unpleasant message blaming you for something or you heard that your roommate actually doesn't like you. Then imagine you step out into that same heavy rain without an umbrella or raincoat. How do you experience the rain when you're having a hard time? It feels unpleasant, inconvenient, and unlucky.

Though the rain itself is not any different one day to the next, your experience of it can vary from enjoyable to awful. What this thought experiment tells us is that it's not really the events, people, or circumstances in our lives that cause stress. Rather, it is our relationship to what's happening that determines whether we perceive it as stressful or not.

When you notice stress coming up during the day, take a moment to ask if there's a different way to relate to what's happening. What happens when you tighten up, try to control or micromanage a situation, or get worried and anxious? How does this differ when you take a deep breath, relax, realistically assess how much control over the situation you have, and let go of anxiety?

## Stress as Resistance

The meditation teacher Shinzen Young writes, "Suffering is a function of pain and the degree to which the pain is being resisted."[35] He provides the following useful formula:

$$\text{suffering} = \text{pain} \times \text{resistance}$$

If you're not certain whether this is true, begin observing how this operates in meditation practice. This might sound familiar: a pain, such as an ache or indigestion, arises in the body, we don't like it, and then we sit there trying to make it go away. What is the result? A meditation filled with suffering.

As many meditation instructors point out, **pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional**. We can begin to work with this during meditation practice. Once we drop the resistance to pain, a certain level of suffering falls away.

## Stress from Expectations

The gap between our expectations and reality can also be a source of stress. For example, we expected a fellow student on our team to prepare a piece of work by a certain date, but they didn't get it done. Moreover, the wider the gap is, the greater the stress. An unfulfilled assignment may create minor stress but think about how we feel when a relative once again messes up or acts out, despite the many years we've provided support and advice.

The solution is to lower or even let go of our expectations, to narrow the gap between what we want to happen and reality. Another way to put this is to accept what is. This doesn't mean we give up our aspirations, stop setting goals, or refrain from working toward something better. What it means is giving up the demand that things have to or should be a certain way and letting go of the belief that our happiness and well-being depend on preordained outcomes. The aim is to loosen up our attachment to particular results, not to let go of trying. Because of the belief that our happiness depends on things being just so, we can get deeply attached to ensuring that our expectations are met. In releasing some of that attachment, we can hold outcomes more lightly and gracefully. We might even become more open-minded about other possibilities and expand our thinking.

Meditation practice works to narrow this gap between expectations and reality. We may expect to have inner peace or be able to concentrate on the breath without distraction. Then there's the reality: our meditation feels like a hot mess! When this disappointment with our practice comes up, ask what it might be like to meditate without expectation for certain outcomes. Relax everything, even the desire to have a good meditation session. Notice how this shift changes the experience of meditating.

# Backdoor to a Deeper Meditative Experience

When I was 16, I went to a summer yoga camp. Along with swimming in the pond and helping bake bread, we teens practiced about four hours of chanting, yoga, and meditation. The very end of a yoga class was my favorite part. After stretching our bodies every which way, we lay down on our back for the final relaxation called "corpse pose." We would tighten the muscles of each part of the body for a few seconds and then let the muscle completely relax, working our way from toes to head. And then we would follow our breath and relax the body so fully that it felt like a puddle on the floor. I admit, sometimes we fell asleep for a few minutes! Then we would gently wiggle our toes and fingers, roll onto our side, and come into a sitting position for a few minutes of meditation. I was often astonished to find that my mind was very quiet and at ease, and that I could stay concentrated on my breathing without any effort. This sequence—of relaxing and stilling the body, followed by a meditation with the breath—really gave me a way to connect to my breathing, as well as showed me how deep and peaceful meditation could be.

Some years later, when I taught meditation to teenagers in Malaysia, Singapore, and elsewhere, as well as to university students and parents, I used this same sequence and found that it effectively provided people with a taste of a meditative experience. Taken together, with a 25-minute relaxation followed by a 20-minute meditation on the breath, this session will take about 45 minutes. I realize you may be a very busy person, and I wish we could accomplish the same level of stillness and quiet in a short, 10-minute meditation. However, if you take time to do this meditation even once, it will provide you with a roadmap for your future meditations, especially for the short ones.

Find a morning or afternoon in which you can set aside an hour just for yourself to do this. Clear your schedule, shut down or even unplug all devices, modems, anything that could distract you. Find a time and place that is quietest and in which you feel safe and can completely relax.

## Full Body Relaxation

Find a clear spot on the floor and lay out a yoga mat or thick blanket. It's best not to use your bed. Make sure the surface of where you'll lie down isn't cold. Get another blanket to put on top of you to make sure you're warm enough. You might want to wear socks to keep your feet warm, too. If it's comfortable for you, lie down on your back with your legs

straight out and your feet about hip-width apart. Let your feet fall to the sides, making no effort to have them point upright. Let your arms rest on the floor slightly away from your body, with your palms facing up. For some, the legs being straight out puts too much pressure on the lower back, so if you prefer, you can bring your knees up so that the soles of your feet are on the mat or blanket and the insides of your knees are gently pressing together. It might also be more comfortable to rest your hands on your belly. In other words, arrange your body so that it can relax and so that you're comfortable for the next 20 or so minutes. Set your timer for 25 minutes.

Begin by closing your eyes. Welcome your body to relax, releasing tension, worry, stress. Take a deep breath in, way down in the belly, fill up through the ribs and to the top of the lungs. And exhale slowly, slowly, breathing out tension, stress, anxiety. Take another deep, long breath in, and exhale slowly, letting go of all your burdens, concerns. Think to yourself, "This is a special time of practice. I'm letting go of everything and will be fully present for each moment." If you want, smile to yourself. "Hello, me." Now feel your ability to be aware: you'll sense this up in your headspace. Imagine that awareness, that ability to know what's happening in you and around you, traveling from your headspace down through your body until it reaches your feet.

**Feet:** Let the awareness rest in your feet. Imagine or sense all the toes, the heels, and the whole foot becoming soft and relaxed. Imagine the small muscles, tendons, bones, and skin completely relaxing, releasing all tension and stress. Picture that tension flowing out of the feet and into the floor below, as if it's draining out of the feet. Let the floor and the earth below receive the stress from your feet, letting go completely. The earth is so vast: she can lovingly receive your worries with no problem.

**Lower legs:** Move your awareness up from the feet and into your lower legs. Imagine or sense the calf muscles becoming soft and relaxed, heavy, melting like butter in the warm sun. Feel all the stress and worry release from the calves into the floor below you and into the earth. Let the shins, the front of your lower leg, become soft and relaxed, heavy, releasing all worry and stress and letting that just melt into the floor and into the earth below.

**Upper legs:** Moving your awareness up, sense the large muscles of your upper legs, the thighs and the knee. Allow the muscles to become soft and heavy, just melting into the floor and into the earth below. Releasing all tension and stress, completely relaxed. Entrusting the weight of your leg entirely to the floor, letting go entirely.

**Hips:** Move your awareness into your hips, pelvis, buttocks area. Allow the muscles to become soft and relaxed, heavy, melting into the floor. Releasing all stress and tension, letting it just drain out of this whole area and be received by the earth below. Completely relaxing, not holding in any way.

**Back:** Move your awareness into the full length and span of your back. Feeling your spine, ribs, shoulder blades, and the many muscles of the back becoming soft and heavy, open, releasing all tension and stress into the floor and into the earth below. Everything melting into the blanket, with no tension remaining. Fully entrusting your back to the floor below you. No stress whatsoever.

**Belly.** Bring your awareness into your abdominal area, your belly, and imagining or sensing all the muscles, organs, digestive system, skin, blood, everything becoming soft and relaxed, heavy, releasing all the emotions, stress, anxiety, fear into the floor and into the earth below. Just let it all drain out, completely relaxing the whole belly area.

**Chest:** And moving your awareness up into your ribs, lungs, heart, collarbone and throat. Imagining everything in your chest becoming soft and heavy, completely relaxed, releasing all anger, shame, distress, resentment, pain, and sorrow, letting that just melt and drain out of you into the floor and into the earth below. Completely letting go. Holding on to nothing. With your outbreath, release a little more until it's all gone. Entrusting your upper body entirely to the support of the floor below you.

**Left arm:** Let your awareness move to your left arm and spread from the upper arm into the elbow, down into the forearm, through the hand and into the fingertips. Imagine all the bones, tissues, muscles, skin and so on, becoming soft and relaxed, letting go of all tension and stress, releasing and melting into the floor and into the earth below. Soft and heavy, no strain whatsoever.

**Right arm:** And then move your awareness over into your right arm, letting the awareness spread from the upper arm into the elbow and then down into the forearm, into your hand, and all the way to the fingertips. Sense all the bones, tissues, muscles, skin and so on becoming soft and relaxed, letting go of all tension and stress, releasing it all into the floor and into the earth below. No holding back whatsoever. Releasing it all and trusting the earth and the floor to hold you.

**Neck:** Move your awareness up the arm and into your neck, both the front, sides, and back, as well as inside your throat. Allow everything in your throat, all your pain, your

sorrows, your anxieties, be released; let it all flow out into the floor and earth below. Feel all the muscles in your neck soften and relax, releasing all tension, and just let it all go.

**Face:** And move your awareness to your face, especially to the muscles in your forehead, around your eyes, around your nose and mouth, and in your jaw. Let these muscles become soft and relaxed, heavy, pulled gently down by gravity to the floor below. Release everything and just let it drain into the earth below. Let your eyeballs become soft and heavy, resting in the skull. Everything totally relaxed.

**Head:** Shift your awareness to the rest of your head, the scalp, skull, brain, and brainstem. Let it all become soft, heavy, and relaxed. Release everything—any remaining noise in your head, all tension and worries—into the floor and into the earth below. Let it all go, completely let it go.

**Whole body:** And then let your awareness flow from the head out into the whole body, from the very inside of the body, through the muscles and tissues, to the skin and to a little space outside the skin so that awareness is permeating every cell and radiating around the whole body. Allow the whole body to let go of any last, remaining tension, completely releasing everything into the floor and into the earth below. The whole body—the belly, the heart, the mind, the psyche—becoming completely relaxed, soft and heavy, no effort whatsoever. Entrusting the whole body into the floor and into the earth below. Completely letting go. And just rest now, rest deeply.

**Transition:** We'll now transition slowly to a seated posture for a meditation on the breath. I'd like you to minimize your movement: your body is now very relaxed and still, so we'd like to maintain that quiet stillness and sustain that into the meditation. Very gently, wiggle your toes—just a little bit, nothing too big. Stop; now very gently and in a very tiny way wiggle a few fingers on each hand. Slowly roll onto one side of your body, draw your knees up a bit, make a pillow with your hands, and place them under your cheek, resting your head on the hands. Just feel your body resting on one side, allowing the floor to support you. Place one hand on the floor and very gently, slowly, push yourself up into a sitting position. Slowly bring your legs in front of you and fold them into a sitting posture. Keep your eyes closed or lowered, not looking around the room. Rest your hands on your thighs or lap. Close your eyes, if you're comfortable. Feel your body resting in this sitting position, letting the floor and the earth support you under your bottom and legs.

## Detailed Mindfulness of the Breath

Set your timer for 20 minutes. Continuing to let your body rest in stillness, move your awareness down into your lower abdomen, letting it rest down at the very bottom of the breath. You might feel or imagine this as a cradle that spans from front to back and side to side, hanging down into the pelvis. Let your breathing come and go naturally—don't do anything to change or regulate the breath. Just trust that your body knows how to breathe on its own, without intervention. To the extent that you can, feel how the inbreath expands this lower abdominal cradle, and how it contracts naturally with the outbreath.

Move your awareness up into the middle of your belly and let that awareness expand out through the organs and tissue to the skin's surface along the front, sides, and back. Feel how your inbreath expands the belly and the outbreath allows the belly to draw inward. Again, we're not regulating the breath at all—we just allow it to flow in and out on its own. Notice how the breath in the belly lifts the lower ribs up and lowers them down. Notice the slight bit of expansion and contraction in the lower back. Again, allow the breath to come and go as it will. There's no need to control the breath. Notice that sometimes the breath is long and sometimes short. Sometimes deep and sometimes shallow.

Now, continuing to let the breath move as it will, bring your awareness up into your chest cavity. Allow the awareness to pervade through the lungs, heart, tissues, ribs, and all the way to the surface of your skin, front, sides, and back. Become attuned to the slight and subtle movements of the body here as the breath arrives and departs. Can you feel how the ribs separate and come back with the breaths? How does the breath move under the armpits or under the shoulder blades? Notice the breath at the base of the throat. You might be able to feel the movement of air here. Notice the drier, cooler air with the inbreath and the moist, warmer air of the outbreath.

Move your awareness up through your throat area, feeling the sensations of air brushing along the sides of the passageways. Bring the awareness up a bit further, to the back of the mouth. And then up the back of the mouth into the nasal cavity at the back of the nose. Trace the sensations of breathing in this area, very fine and subtle, smooth, like the air is gliding. And bring your awareness into your nasal passageways. The sensations might be more acute here. Bring your mindfulness very close in, as if you are observing the sensations of the breath with a microscope. Draw your awareness very close in so that awareness merges with the breath. The breath and awareness coming together as

one, right there. And gently move your awareness forward to the rim of the nostrils, where the outside air first touches the body, and the outbreath has its last contact. Bring you awareness very close in, right alongside the sensations of the breath here. And then let the awareness enter the breath, resting in the breath, breath and awareness as one.

And now let go of making any effort. Relax pointing your awareness in any one place. Allow your awareness to be wherever it wants to be. Completely and totally relax doing anything and just rest in being. Easy and light. No effort whatsoever. Simply being. Let's rest in silence for a few minutes.

Take a slow, gentle, small breath in, down in the belly. Breath in as much as you like, and slowly exhale. One more time: gentle breath in. And as you exhale, you can slowly open your eyes or lift your gaze a little bit. Notice what you see, the taking in of color, light, dimensions, objects. And to close the meditation, I invite you to bring your palms together before your heart and make a small, slow bow to conclude the meditation.

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Why does this meditation work? Notice that we took time to thoroughly relax our body and that this was foundational to then practicing with the breath and the mind. Can you imagine trying to meditate with all your muscles filled with tension, anger, resentment, defensiveness, stress? Not really. This exercise shows us that the mind and the body are not separate. How we feel and what we think expresses itself in the body. Conversely, a tense body cannot give rise to a relaxed, clear mind. But this two-way street also gives us an invaluable tool: if we relax the body, we can release tension in the mind considerably.

This mind-body connection doesn't mean you always have to prepare for meditation with a 20-minute relaxation. Rather, you just want to take at least a few minutes to relax as much of your body as you can. You can do that right at the start of the sitting meditation, or you can do some gentle stretches or yoga. You've also now seen clearly that you can know your mind is tense and worried by looking at your body. If you feel tightness in your abdomen, you can take that as an expression of worry in your mind, or fear, or some other mental or emotional state that is active.

You've also now learned that the experience of breathing is much more complex than simply in and out. There are so many rich and subtle qualities to it! And it is both steady—there's a breath in and a breath out—while also having considerable variation from moment to moment. There is a strong connection among the breath, body, and mind. Your breath can calm the body or the mind, or both. The qualities of your

breathing can tell you how your body is doing or what your state of mind is. These points taken together indicate that the breath can be a central and useful pillar in meditation, and indeed that is why many meditation traditions work extensively with the breath.

You may have noticed that in the later part of the meditation it felt somewhat natural and not so hard to meditate. The reason this happened is that you were building up concentration, and that capacity for concentration supported a natural mindfulness. A good way to think about this is to picture riding a bicycle on a very smooth, flat road. You pedal the bike, harder, faster, gaining momentum. Then, you lift your feet off the bike pedals and raise your legs up. You might have done this when you were a little kid. The bike simply glides forward on its own, carrying you. You feel like you are floating. Isn't that a wonderful feeling? I loved that when I was a kid. In this meditation, you went deeper and deeper into concentration on your breath, building up momentum. Then, you were asked to stop pedaling, to stop making an effort. And then your awareness floated, gliding in the experience of being in an effortless way. You were simply aware of what was happening as it was happening. This is really where we're going with meditation, and now you have some sense of that.

You may have also experienced the difference between *doing* and *being*. Toward the end, when you were asked to let go of making any effort or to direct your attention in any way, you may have had a moment in which you were simply resting and being. We are programmed to always do, do, do, perform, work, accomplish. There's nothing wrong with doing work: it's just that we forget how to stop and rest and enjoy being. We say in English that we are "human beings." But we end up working so hard that we forget how to be. We will even bring this mindset of doing into our meditation, in which we feel like we need to work really hard at meditation or we will fail. It's important to learn early on that such striving ultimately undermines any progress in meditation. Much of meditation is about releasing this striving mentality and learning to relax back into our birthright as human beings.

# Trauma-Sensitive Meditation

It pains me to share this, but in teaching over the last 25 years I have found that *most* people carry trauma. I myself am no exception to the horrifying statistics. According to a survey of people in 24 countries conducted by the World Mental Health Survey Consortium (2016), more than 70 percent had experienced trauma, with events ranging from death threats, serious injury, or sexual violence to the unexpected death of loved ones. Regarding children in the United States, the Department of Health and Human Services found that more than *two-thirds* of children report at least one traumatic event by the age of 16, including psychological, physical, or sexual abuse, community or school violence, and neglect (2019). It takes just a few years for that 16-year-old to enter adult society, which means that at least two-thirds of adult Americans are trauma survivors.

Meditation is, without a doubt, a profound resource for healing. However, meditation can also be double-edged for those with trauma. On the one hand, mindfulness skills are essential to therapeutic techniques. On the other hand, meditation can reactivate and even exacerbate trauma. Some common reactivations for those with trauma include:

- Disassociation
- Becoming flooded with memories
- Flashbacks
- Activation into fight or flight
- Freezing
- Compounded anxiety

What can be especially confusing is that some of these trauma states mimic meditation. For example, a disassociated person can feel calm and floaty, with diminished thinking. This can look and feel like meditation—or what we imagine meditation should be like—but in fact it is not meditation. In a disassociated state a person is actually less aware, less attuned, than in even a normal state. Similarly, a freeze response looks a lot like meditation: the person is sitting stone still, yet in fact they have slipped into a freeze state.

However, mindfulness is so useful to healing that to forego meditation in order to avoid activating trauma would be to lose out on an invaluable resource for therapy. Thus, we need to think about how to meditate so that we're increasing attunement, refining our

ability to pay attention, and learning the skill of nonjudgmental observation but without reactivating trauma responses. Beautifully, a number of pioneers have developed ways of meditating that are called Trauma-Sensitive Meditation or Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness (TSM).

## Do I Have Trauma?

Our most common understanding of trauma comes from war and other sudden events that cause severe physical harm. A car accident, a violent assault, being shot at, surviving a bomb—all of these we immediately grasp as traumatizing. However, there are other things that can happen to us that are neither sudden nor physical that can also cause trauma. For example, severe stress can occur repeatedly over time—months, years, decades—that can lead to what is called "complex trauma." Examples of these include domestic violence or child abuse. Trauma can be caused by events that aren't necessarily physical in nature. For example, emotional abuse, witnessing violence, or the sudden loss of a loved one can all cause trauma. We should also consider that trauma isn't always necessarily about one person hurting another person: being the target of oppression, cruelty, or injustice meted out by society and systems (educational, legal, cultural) can also be traumatizing.

Pat Ogden, a leading trauma specialist, defines trauma this way: Trauma is…" any experience that is stressful enough to leave us feeling helpless, frightened, overwhelmed, or profoundly unsafe."

Please read this definition again, slowly.

Trauma is…" any experience that is stressful enough to leave us feeling helpless, frightened, overwhelmed, or profoundly unsafe."

Note the word *feeling*, which she employs deliberately. What matters is not an objective measure of what is or is not traumatizing but how the *person* felt. This emphasis feeling thereby allows that two different people might undergo the same event but have different experiences of it. It explains why one person might survive a car accident and walk away without trauma and another might struggle for years to get back into a car.

Determining whether one might have trauma from childhood can be difficult, because as children we tend to accept what's happening to us as given and okay. It may take many years, even decades, to go by where we can look back on our childhood and assess that

what happened was not okay. One ready self-assessment test is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) quiz. There are different versions, but a good one can be found here: https://americanspcc.org/take-the-aces-quiz/. The quiz itself can be upsetting, so make sure you're in a steady place internally before you answer the questions. Note that a score of 4 or higher is correlated with substantial challenges for that person as an adult, including health problems, risky behaviors, poor relationships, and more. Again, this quiz is for childhood experiences: one certainly can have experiences as an adult that are traumatizing. And one can have both childhood and adult trauma.

## Two Guiding Principles of TSM

There are two guiding principles to keep in mind as you undertake meditation with regard to a history of trauma.

**Permission to choose:** You need to know that you absolutely, 100% have permission to adjust or end your meditation at any time. One of the characteristics of trauma is that the individual experiences a profound loss of choice, self-determination, or agency. When we undertake meditation with either an inner voice of demand or command or hear the instruction of a teacher that way, it can invoke a feeling of choiceless-ness, which is reminiscent of a traumatic event. Giving ourselves permission to make choices will help avoid triggering trauma. Indeed, experiencing our power to choose, even if it is in something as small as moving our leg to a more comfortable position, restores a sense of ourselves as capable of choosing.

Teachers increasingly incorporate language that directs us to knowing there is a choice: "If it is right for you…"; "When you are ready…"; "I invite you to…." When you hear this, take it seriously—I mean, *I invite you to take the instructions seriously*. Do you see how this rewording instantly changes how you receive my point? You take a moment to think for yourself, "Would I like to take this advice? Will it work for me?" In asking this of yourself, you've reclaimed the power of choosing for yourself. These small acts of empowerment are healing. I remember the first time I heard, "If it is right for you" in a meditation instruction: it was revolutionary. I had to consider, "Is this right for me? I never thought about that. I have a choice? That's amazing." (For the purposes of concision, I generally left these phrases out of the meditation instructions in this handbook.)

**Gentleness**: At all times, it is important to relate to anything we do in meditation with tremendous gentleness and tenderness. Harshness, judgment, or an inner voice of disciplining can, again, invoke traumatic responses. Although an inner voice of harshness might come up, with awareness of it we can shift the tone. The lessons on metta (lovingkindness) meditation provide a training on how to speak to oneself with greater compassion, as well. Indeed, bringing that gentleness to the meditation can be extraordinarily healing itself because it can repattern how we relate to ourselves. Victims of trauma often turn the hatred and aggression from the perpetrator onto themselves, so we need to unwind that in a slow, gentle, and intentional way.

## Practices

### Orienting

Orienting is essentially a mindful seeing meditation that updates our brain to let it know we are in the here and now and that we are safe. Full instructions on orienting are here, Meditation Exercise: Seeing. During meditation, memories can flood the mind or, in the extreme, one can experience flashbacks. Simply opening the eyes can bring you back, informing the brain that it is today, and we are in this space, and it is not yesteryear in a totally different location. Before or after practicing orienting, you might try speaking to yourself with a further update: "Today is Tuesday, April 5th, 2022, and I am in New Haven, Connecticut in the Buddhist Shrine Room at Yale University."

### Hearing

As with visual orienting—a form of mindful seeing—we can also practice audio orienting, or mindful listening. As with the instructions in Hearing, you simply shift your attention to your ears. The advantage of a hearing meditation is that it expands the awareness outward. Trauma reactions can lead to withdrawal or feeling trapped in a tight inner space. Gently expanding the field of attention can help release us from the grip of a trauma reaction. Listening to the environment also both updates our brain (*I'm not in the past, this is what's happening now*) as well as reassures our nervous system that we're safe (*I don't hear a threat nearby; I hear birds and wind*).

### Movement

As mentioned, it is relatively easy for a person with trauma to slip from the sweet stillness of a meditation pose into the fearful frozenness of a trauma state. The two look exactly the same, and even can seem to feel the same internally to the person undergoing

them. In my experience, a tell-tale sign that the stillness of my body is from freezing and not from calm is that if I try to make a small movement, such as lifting one finger a quarter inch up, it feels impossible. It feels like the finger is stuck where it is. You might need to observe yourself closely to learn what your symptoms are and how to distinguish between meditative, relaxed stillness and frozen stillness. A remedy for a freeze response during meditation is to actually slowly move, at first a tiny bit and then a bit more. You're thawing out the nervous system. You could move a finger, you could gently press your hands into your lap, you could massage your feet, and you could even give yourself permission to do walking meditation. It's also possible to shift the meditation to mindfulness of small movements, such as gently turning the head left, bring to center, and repeat on the right. The movement could be so small that someone from the outside wouldn't see it, or it could be larger.

Movement as meditation or during meditation can also downregulate an activated nervous system or address other trauma reactions. I invite you to find what works for you.

### Walking

Of course, walking meditation is another form of movement. In many ways, it's an all-purpose meditation for those with trauma, sidestepping (so to speak) various triggers while providing a way to cultivate useful mindfulness skills. Note that the style of walking meditation provided in this manual is just one of many, and it can be worthwhile to try a few different walking meditation techniques to find what works for you.

### Applying the Brakes

If a meditation session begins to slide into a trauma reaction, here are some ideas for applying the brakes:

- Take a break (seriously).
- Open your eyes.
- Shift attention to something pleasant—an object, a memory.
- Reflect and connect with the ways in which you've been resilient.
- Self-soothe by placing your hand on your heart.
- Take a deep breath and exhale slowly (see Breathing Techniques).

## Adjustments to Classic Meditations

### Breath

While following the breath can have a remarkable calming effect on the nervous system, it's not always a safe or welcome space to touch into. For some, placing attention on the breath can exacerbate anxiety, cause a connection to the area of the body that experienced trauma, or feel challenging. There are several ways to work with this issue:

**Rotate objects of attention:** One way to incorporate mindfulness of breathing without making it the sole focus is to touch into other felt sensations. You might feel your hands resting on your lap, then shift your attention to listening to sounds, then notice your lips contacting each other, then follow one in and out breath, and then cycle back to the hands….

**Choose a different anchor:** Often the breath serves as an anchor in a mindfulness practice. This means that one places attention primarily on the breath until one's attention is called by a sound, thought, etc. But one can choose a different touchpoint or anchor. Any one of the senses can serve as this anchor. For example, you can gently touch a soft blanket or piece of fabric. You can open your eyes and look at an object. You could have a lozenge and connect with taste. As above, one could return attention to the feeling of the hands resting on the lap or to listening to sounds. Overall, the contact should have a pleasant or neutral valence to it. If the contact is unpleasant then choose a different focal point.

### Body Scan

Many meditation programs include either a progressive body scan (from top to bottom, for example) or extensive guidance on becoming present to sensations on this body. These meditations are incredibly tricky. On the one hand, reconnecting with the body is valuable in therapy sessions or for connecting with an emotional truth that is revealed by what's happening somatically. On the other hand, the body stores emotional trauma and may have experienced trauma. Reconnecting with the body can feel unsafe and triggering. One tactic is to only practice with areas of the body that feel safe or well. For some, this might be just one very small area, such as the toes or even a toe. That's fine! Alternately, one can opt out of working with the body altogether and switch to, for example, a hearing practice.

## Further Learning

Our understanding of how to teach meditation to a wide range of people, with special attention to those with trauma, has evolved greatly in the past decades. The notes I've shared here on trauma sensitive meditation are a simple overview to get you started. For more thorough instruction, please read Dr. David Trelevean's book *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*.

Similarly, our understanding of trauma and the healing process has become more sophisticated and effective in the last twenty or so years. While meditation and mindfulness serve as invaluable and probably essential allies in these new methods, they're not sufficient. Addressing how to heal from trauma is beyond the scope of this manual, but to point you in a fruitful direction, read Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score*. The last third of the book details new methods for processing trauma, including Somatic Experiencing, Internal Family Systems, Polyvagal Theory, psychedelic assisted psychotherapy, and more. For short term nervous system regulation, do a search on "nervous system resets." Many instructional videos will provide techniques to help you temporarily downregulate your nervous system to put you on stable footing.

I will confess that meditation has been difficult for me, coming from the extensive childhood trauma that I did. For many years, I didn't even know that the reason meditation was harder for me than for others was because of trauma. However, all those years of meditation turned out to be extraordinarily helpful once I turned toward healing in later adult years, and likely hastened my process considerably. Toward the latter part of this journey, I found myself meditating spontaneously, without making myself do it, and actually enjoying meditation. Waiting for someone to arrive, I began a walking meditation and was surprised to find I could really feel my feet in a truly intimate, cellular way. Why? Because I finally felt safe in my body. I was amazed to find that meditation was so much more enjoyable and easier, once my mind and body were in a more healed place. My own evolving experience, I hope, may give you something to look forward to with your meditation practice.

# Breathing Techniques for Calming the Nervous System

While practices for the breath—*pranayama*—are integral to meditation in the Hindu yogic tradition, meditation practices from Buddhist origins (such as secular mindfulness, as we are learning here) have less instruction on breathing techniques. However, many meditators have found that including breath practices is deeply supportive of meditation, both before and during a sit. Breathing techniques can regulate the nervous system, and therefore influence our state of mind. I include here a number of breathing techniques I have found helpful. For a thorough and absolutely fascinating examination on breathwork, read *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* by James Nestor.

With the following, there are two points to keep in mind. First, be sure to breathe in and out through your *nose* and not through your mouth. (If your nose is clogged, then it's okay to breathe through the mouth.) Second, make sure you breathe into your *abdominal area* at the beginning of an inhalation.

### Extended Exhalation

- Take a full breath in, filling into the belly, then ribs, up to the top of the throat. Doesn't need to be long—just full, as much air as you can get in there.
- Slowly, in a very controlled way, exhale. Try to make the exhalation at least twice as long as the inhalation.
- Again, full breath in…etc.
- The longer you can exhale, the longer you're connecting with the parasympathetic (rest and digest) part of the nervous system.
- If you prefer to count, breathe in for 4 and out for 8, doing rounds for 2 minutes.

This breath is helpful in inducing a relaxation response. I do 3 of these breaths going into a meditation.

### Alternate Nostril Breathing

- On your right hand, tuck the index and middle finger into the palm, leaving the thumb free to press one nostril and the ring finger (and pinky if you wish) to press the other.
- Close the right nostril with the right thumb. Breathe into the count of 4.

- Press the right ring finger to the left nostril, closing both nostrils and hold your breath to the count of 8.
- Release the left nostril. Breathe out of the left nostril to the count of 8.
- Without pausing, breathe into the left nostril to the count of 4.
- Pinch both nostrils and hold for 8.
- Release the right nostril and breathe out to the count of 8. This is one round.
- Practice 5 or more rounds.

### Resonant or Coherent Breathing[36]

- Inhale gently into your abdomen to the count of 5 (or 5.5 seconds to be very precise).
- Exhale gently to the count of 5, emptying as much air as possible.
- Without pausing, breathe into the count of 5. Without pausing, breathe out to the count of 5.
- Breathe this way as if creating a cycle of breath that runs continuously.
- Recommended to do this 10x, or more.

### Box Breathing

- Inhale to the count of 4.
- Hold for 4.
- Exhale to the count of 4.
- Hold for 4.
- (Like a 4-sided box, 4 units on each side.)
- A variation of this that invokes the parasympathetic nervous system response uses a longer exhalation: In for 4; hold for 4; exhale for **6**; hold for **2**.
- Do six or more rounds.

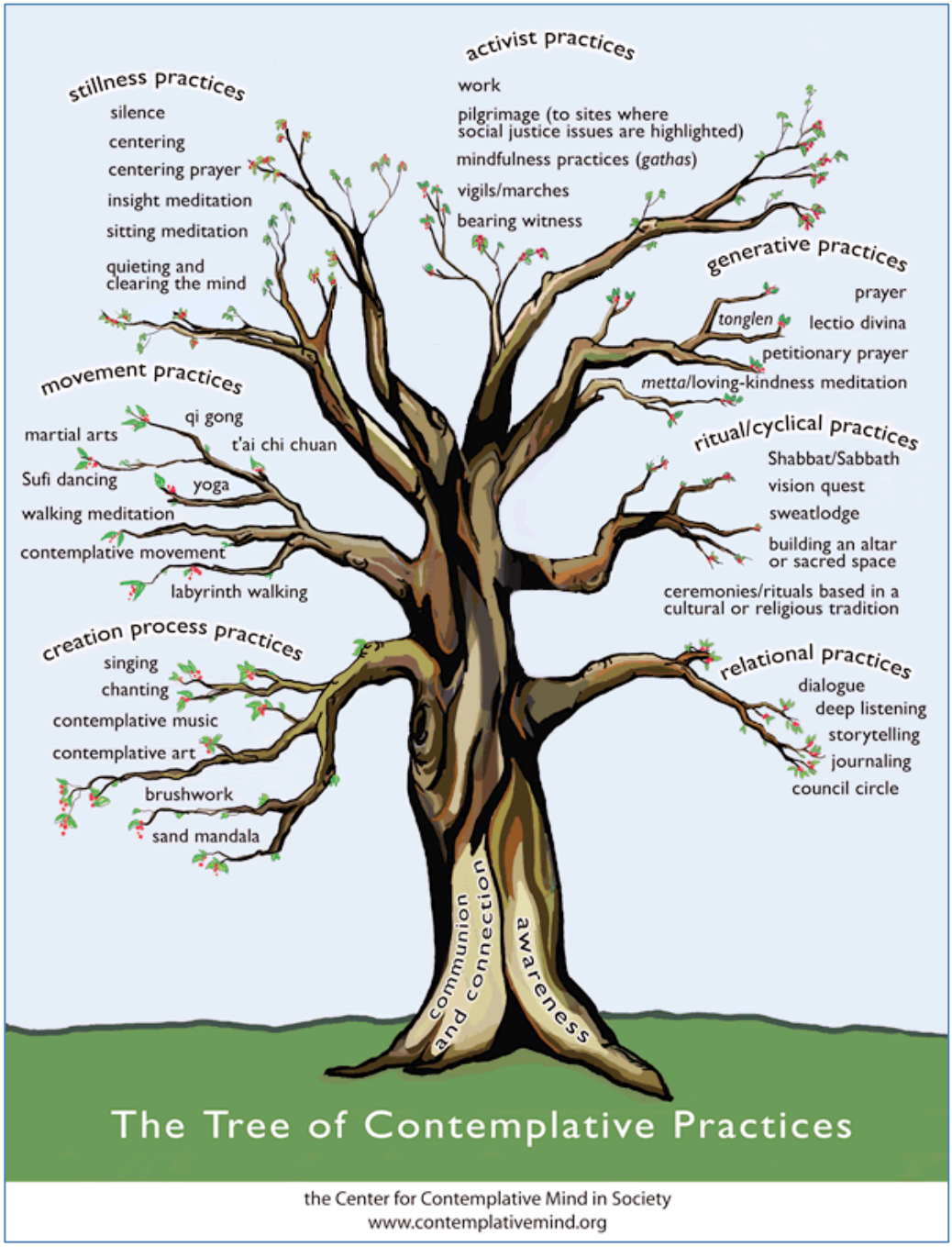
### 4-7-8 Breathing

This technique is most commonly taught for assisting with sleep, but it can be used for relaxation, too.

- Inhale to the count of 4.
- Hold for 7.
- Exhale through the mouth, with lips slightly pursed so that you can hear the sound of your exhale, to the count of 8.
- Repeat for at least 4 cycles.

# Beyond Meditation

I'd like to wrap up by pointing out that mindfulness and metta meditation are just two of a wide range of spiritual practices. Past Yale students have found the *Tree of Contemplative Practices* (created by Maia Duerr) to be helpful in both seeing the diversity of practices one might find in faith traditions as well as expanding possibilities for themselves in what they might explore in the years to come.



# About the Author

**Rev. Sumi Loundon Kim** serves as the Buddhist chaplain at Yale University. Previously, she was the Buddhist chaplain at Duke University, as well as the founder of and teacher for the Buddhist Families of Durham. Following a master's in Buddhist studies from Harvard Divinity School, she was the associate director for the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. She has published *Blue Jean Buddha* (2001), *The Buddha's Apprentices* (2005), *Sitting Together* (2017), and *Goodnight Love* (2023) among many other chapters and articles on Buddhism today. Sumi and her husband, a native of South Korea and professor at Yale University, have two children and live in southern Connecticut.

# About the Illustrator

**Chairin Kim,** *YC '20,* is a marketer by day and writer/cartoonist/activist by night. They met Sumi as a student at Yale, where they studied sociology and participated in the Yale Buddhist community. Chairin is a casual meditation practitioner who is seeking to integrate more mindfulness into their life. Their hope is that this manual will help the readers as much as it helped them.

# Endnotes

[1] Bhikkhu Sujato, trans., “The Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation” (SuttaCentral, http://suttacentral.net), MN 10. Slightly adapted by the author.

[2] Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., “Satipatthana Sutta: Frames of Reference” (MN 10), in *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 2013. Abridged by the author.
[3] Sharon Salzberg from real happiness

[4] Analogy from Gil Fronsdal, *The Issue at Hand* (n.p.: Bookland, 2008), 19.

[5] Nyanasatta Thera, trans., “The Foundations of Mindfulness,” in *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1993, 2013), MN 10. Pronouns edited by the author.

[6] “The Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation,” MN 10. Boldface added and pronouns edited by the author.

[7] Gil Fronsdal and Ines Freedman, *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation: Online Course Materials* (Redwood City, CA: Insight Meditation Center, 2009), 28.

[8] “The Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation,” MN 10. Slightly edited by the author.

[9] *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, 105.

[10] *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, 41.

[11] Gil Fronsdal, trans., *The Dhammapada: A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic with Annotations* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), verses 1–2.

[12] “The Discourse on Mindfulness Meditation,” MN 10. Abridged and pronouns edited by the author.

[13] Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 181.

[14] AN 11.16, “Metta (*Mettanisamsa*) Sutta: Discourse on Advantages of Loving-kindness,” from Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 40–41.

[15] Ajahn Brahm, *Mindfulness, Bliss, & Beyond* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006).

[16] Alternate metta phrases adapted from Sharon Salzberg, *Real Happiness* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2011), 158–66.

[17] Alternate phrases from Mary Brantley, *The Gift of Loving-Kindness* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2008).

[18] Bhikkhu Anandajoti, trans., “The King,” from the Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka text, version 2.2, revised February 2008 (SuttaCentral, http://suttacentral.net), UD 5.1. Pronouns edited by the author.

[19] Visuddhimagga IX, 23. Bhikkhu Nanamoli, trans., "The Divine Abidings: Loving-Kindness," (Buddhist Publication Society, 2011).

[20] Image from Jack Kornfield, *Buddha’s Little Instruction Book* (New York: Bantam, 1994), 21.

[21] Inspired by “bowing to anger” from *The Gift of Loving-Kindness,* 142–43.

[22] First six phrases from Jeffrey Brantley, *Calming Your Angry Mind* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2014).

[23] Last two phrases from *The Gift of Loving-Kindness*, 207.

[24] Ven. K. Piyatissa Thera, trans., Dhammapada 133, from "The Elimination of Anger: With Two Stories Retold from the Buddhist Texts," in *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1994, 2013).

[25] Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness (*Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 76.

[26] *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, 157.

[27] AN 1.2.7. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 92.

[28] Adapted from Sharon Salzberg, *The Force of Kindness* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2005), 56.

[29] Metta Sutta, SN 1.8. Translated from the Pali by the Amaravati Sangha.

[30] *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 183–87.

[31] *Mindfulness, Bliss, & Beyond*, 67–69.

[32] Sharon Salzberg, *Real Happiness* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2011).

[33] Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2002), 118.

[34] Joseph Goldstein, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2013), 359.

[35] Shinzen Young, *Break Through Pain: Practical Steps for Transforming Physical Pain Into Spiritual Growth*, http://www.shinzen.org/Articles/artPain.htm.

[36] Resonant, Box, and 4-7-8 technique instructions drawn from *Breath* by James Nestor.