



Introductory Meditation Course

Week 1



1. Commitment and patience

If you are really interested in seeing changes to your life we recommend that you try the following things.

- to come to the whole of the course;
- to meditate 6 out of 7 days a week - even if this is just for 10 minutes a day.

You could see it as your treat - to give yourself permission to sit and allow the mind to settle; to allow yourself space in which to let go of some of the business of the day. There will probably be times when you come up against some resistance to meditating - you may not feel like it or you may think "What's the point?". This is where patience is required, seeing that to change ourselves takes time and consistent effort. It is helpful to commit to the practice and allow this commitment to take you through the ups and downs.

2. What is meditation?

Meditation is the practice of mindfulness. We sometimes define mindfulness in this way:

- Being aware
- In the present moment
- Without judgment

3. The three qualities of mindfulness

a. Being aware

An image for awareness

You could liken awareness to light. Sometimes the light is dim, sometimes it is bright. It is what helps us to see clearly and to experience what is going on in a fuller way.

Aware of what?

There are many things that we can be aware of; for example ourselves, other people and our environment. In terms of ourselves, we can become increasingly aware of our bodies, as well as our thoughts, feelings, emotions and motivations. We can become aware of what is coming in through the senses - sights, sounds etc. - and we can also be aware of how these things affect our state of mind.

With awareness comes choice

Over time we can see what our mind dwells on. What kind of thoughts, feelings and emotions occupy us? In meditation we can notice what we are thinking about and build a sense of where such thoughts will lead, in terms of the mental states that they will produce. This is the first step towards dropping the patterns of thought that lead us into negative mental states.

b. In the present moment

Moment by moment, we can cultivate awareness. This awareness isn't in the past and it isn't in the future. It is right here, right now.

Simplicity

To be in the present moment is to live simply. When we wash we feel the water on our bodies. When we eat we taste our food. We are with the experience we are having.

As the poet David Whyte says in his poem 'Enough':

*Enough.
These few words are enough.
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.*

*This opening to life
We have refused
again and again
until now.*

However, how often is this the case? How often, when we are doing a task, are we thinking about something else? This can lead to our energy being scattered, to a state of alienation or a sense of being separate from our bodies. How, then can we become more 'embodied', more alive to the present moment? A large part of the answer is that we can cultivate awareness of the body in general, and specifically of the breath. The body only experiences the present moment - it is thought that keeps leaping to the past or future.

If we are meditating and we begin to replay an argument we had at work we emotionally respond as if we are actually present at work. We need to start by recognising this - thoughts, images and emotions come and go, so we can just allow them to do so.

The difficulty with being in the present moment is that our minds are always moving, looking for stimulation. If we find something boring we wish to distract ourselves from it. There are many things in our lives that are potentially like this. We can sometimes experience our lives as an endless round of chores; things we need to get done before we can relax. If this is the case then we might spend much of our lives running away from our present experience. If you recognise this, you could try giving yourself fully next time you perform a task that you would usually find a chore. If you are washing up, become aware of the sensations of the soapy water. Feel its temperature and, at the same time, watch your mind and emotions. Notice what 'story' you tell yourself about this experience.

c. Without judgment

Not judging our experience means that we bring a kindly attitude to whatever arises. Judgment tends to close down our experience; it limits us, fixes us and cuts us off from what is actually going on.

We judge our experience by having opinions about how we are. This leads to a tendency to want to experience something other than what is actually going on. This can happen both within, and outside of, our meditation practice. We will notice this happening when thoughts arise such as "I can't do this", "I'm no good, I keep on getting distracted", or "My mind won't settle". We may also get into thinking in a way that compares ourselves to others. It's important to recognise here that these thoughts always arise and pass away - we don't have to go along with them. We can acknowledge our thoughts, then gently and patiently bring ourselves back to the object of the practice (the body or the breath).

Our judgements come from our pre-conceived ideas about how things should be: "I should be breathing deeply", "My mind should be blank" or "I should be more aware". Instead of this, it is important to approach your experience with a sense of openness and curiosity. Our experience is what it is, this is our starting point and that is fine. What's more, every time we notice that our awareness has become absorbed in thoughts is a moment of awareness - so give yourself a pat on the back! In a sense, what is needed here is to befriend ourselves so that, when we bring ourselves back to the body or the breath, we do so with a sense of kindness.

4. Posture

We must first learn how to sit well for meditation. There are two main principles to posture:

- That you are upright and stable;
- That you are comfortable and relaxed.

Bearing this in mind you can sit in a chair or on the floor using cushions to find the right posture. On cushions you can use a cross-legged or astride posture. However you decide to sit, remember that the two principles above are the ones that count!

If you are sitting on the floor, consider:

- Cushion height;
- Knee support (if sitting cross legged) - remember that, ideally, the knees need to be lower than the hips;
- Hand support, to prevent the weight of the arms from dragging the shoulders down;
- Ankle support (if you are sitting astride the cushions and your ankles ache).

In sitting on a chair, consider:

- Back support
- Hand support
- Feet flat on the floor or cushion

5. Recommended reading:

Change your mind – by Paramananda

The Breath – by Vessantara

If you would like to be led through the practices when you are alone you could consider buying the led CDs – ‘Body Scan’ and the ‘Mindfulness of Breathing’.

6. Homework

- To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week
- To bring your awareness to a daily task such as washing up or cleaning your teeth. Try to experience the sensations that arise, the water on your hands as you wash up, its temperature. Also notice what thoughts arise whilst doing the task. Do they take you away from the task? Are they drawing you into the past or future? Just notice these and come back to the bodily experience of whatever you are doing.