



# Introductory Meditation Course

## Week 3



### 1. The Mindfulness of Breathing practice

Last week we began to look at the mindfulness of breathing practice. In this practice we are cultivating awareness of the breathing process.

#### Starting with body awareness

It's really important that the starting point of the Mindfulness of Breathing is a period of body awareness, of exactly the sort that we've been looking at over the first two weeks. If our mindfulness is weak because we are 'living in our heads' and distracted by thoughts, we need to make a conscious effort to bring our awareness down into our body, preferably into our abdomen. Having taken up a suitable posture that is both relaxed and alert, we can spend a little while reflecting on how we are stably, safely supported by the whole mass of the Earth beneath us. We can also reflect that our upright spine is reaching up into space, encouraging feelings of spaciousness and expansiveness.

#### The breath emerges

From this well-established contact with your body in general, allow your breathing to come into the fore, perhaps starting with a few deliberately deep breaths. After doing this, however, you need not try to breathe in any particular way – you might consider that the breath 'breathes itself'. It comes in and goes out naturally and you don't need to change it. Remember one of the qualities of mindfulness is to be with your experience non-judgmentally, so however the breath is, that's fine. It may be long or short, shallow or deep, rough or smooth – the practice is just to notice exactly how it is.

#### Stage 1

You can now begin stage one of the formal practice. In this stage you allow your awareness to rest with the breathing and, as the outward breath reaches its end, you silently count "one". Your breath comes in again, then goes out and you count "two". Try to continue in this way up to a count of "ten" then, after the subsequent breath, begin at "one" again. Allow the breath to follow its own rhythm and try to keep the counting soft and light. Remember that counting is just an anchor in the practice that allows you to notice more fully a specific point in the breathing process (in this stage the ends of the out-breaths).

## **Counting and attitude**

It can be interesting to notice how we are counting. What does our internal dialogue sound like? This can tell us a lot about how we are and how we are approaching the practice. For example, does the counting sound bored – are we feeling sleepy or dull, have we lost interest in the breath so that the counting has become mechanical? Alternatively, does it sound like a drill sergeant counting out press-ups – has our approach become tight and forced? Does the counting have a particular emotional sound to it – for example sad, frustrated, anxious or worried?

We can work with whatever we find in these observations. The internal sound of the counting should ideally be light, soft, kind and attentive, and this can give rise to the accompanying emotion.

### **Stage 2**

In stage 2 the breath continues to follow its own rhythm, but we make the quite subtle change to counting at the beginning of the in-breaths. So we count “one”, breathe in and breathe out. Notice the slight gap between breaths, then count “two”, breathe in and breathe out. Again, we continue in this way all the way up to “ten”, then back to “one”. The reason for the slight change of emphasis is that, whereas the technique for stage one has a calming, pacifying effect, placing our count at the start of the in-breath provides energy for or developing awareness of our breathing.

### **Stage 3**

In this stage we simply let go of the counting, as it has served its purpose. Left alone with our breath, we try to experience all aspects of it from the point of view of the body. It's not just the obvious parts of the body, like the lungs and the rib cage, that are breathing – try to notice the much more subtle effects of the breath in places like your back, legs or even fingers! As ever, if you find that your awareness has risen up to things that are happening in your head, make an effort to bring it down again, into the breathing body.

### **Stage 4**

In the last stage we work to refine the focus of our attention and to make it more sensitive. Typically, we can do this by paying attention to the subtle sensation at the point at which the breath first enters the body (perhaps at the tip of your nose or the upper lip). It may seem difficult to hold this more subtle awareness – the key is to stay with it in the context of a well-established background awareness of the whole body, steady and reassuringly solid.

As well as remembering not to force the breathing, it is also important to realise that we are not trying to block out sounds or blank our mind. We can't stop our sensory awareness or thoughts, but we can try not to let them occupy the centre of our awareness, leaving plenty of room for our attention to our breathing. Although the breath is the focus of the practice, to which we return

again and again, this doesn't exclude the rest of our experience. At times we may find ourselves with other things like sounds, thoughts, feelings, emotions and images. This is entirely natural - we can just note their presence, then gently come back to the awareness of the breath.

### Finishing the practice

To end the practice you could stop making any effort and just sit with your experiences as they come and go. Allow your awareness to move slowly outwards - pay attention to the sounds outside and experience the weight of the body. As you finally bring the meditation to a close, try to resolve to carry into the rest of your life any awareness that you have cultivated during the practice. If possible, don't rush into anything immediately after the meditation.

## 2. Path and Scenery

A path and the surrounding scenery make a good analogy for our experience in meditation. This is another 'model for meditation' that may help us to understand how our cultivation of awareness in through the Mindfulness of Breathing doesn't (in fact, can't possibly) happen in isolation, just as we can't walk a path in complete ignorance of the scenery it goes through.

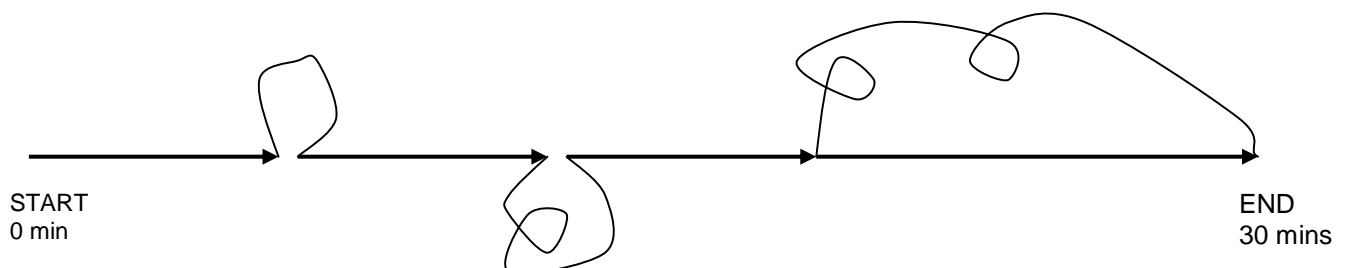
### The Path

The path stands for the 'formal' practice of mindfulness. To stay on the path involves some concentration, just as to stay with the breath requires some effort. We start the meditation with a purpose, which is to use the four-stage structure of the practice as a vehicle to help develop our overall awareness. This is analogous to taking a certain path in order to experience an enjoyable walk in the park or the countryside.

### The Scenery

The scenery that surrounds the path is an analogy for all the experiences surrounding the meditation. There are typically a mixture of 'real' sensations like sounds and physical feelings and 'internal' ones like thoughts and emotions. The main point is that *you can't have the path without the scenery*. The path belongs in the scenery and, of course, there's always something going on in the scenery. Just as a path can't exist without the scenery it passes through, we can't stop our experiences while we're meditating. So, we're trying to stick to the path and we have all this scenery around us – it's pretty obvious what will happen....

We become distracted!



We are most usually distracted by thoughts; thoughts triggered by other thoughts, by emotions or by feelings. This is completely normal – in fact, it's only when we start meditating that we realise the scale of it, and perhaps feel that it's out of control.

Each distraction (or, rather, chain of distractions) happens when the scenery becomes more interesting than the path. Occasionally this may be valid – we're on fire or we see something really important about our lives – but more often than not the distractions are relatively unimportant and not concerned with the present moment. Of course, you will need to see this for yourself!

### **Can we do anything about it?**

Yes - we can try to stay aware of whatever experience unfolds, and to notice what happens even when go off the path. When we realise that this has happens we can congratulate ourselves for noticing our deviation from the 'path' then simply return with a non-judgmental awareness. To put it another way, we don't 'beat ourselves up'!

With practice, we should find that meditating regularly generates more mindfulness and more concentrated awareness. A really good description of this can be found in *Change Your Mind* by Paramananda (Windhorse Publications):

*"For a moment, imagine doing something you really enjoy, and that you have all the time in the world to do it. What is the quality of feeling that this evokes? It probably feels quite bright and expansive. It is not at all similar to what we think of as 'concentration'. It is very different from the sort of forcibly fixed attention we might employ in order to complete a rather demanding but unexciting task. It doesn't have the contracted and hard feeling we perhaps associate with concentration.*

*Mindfulness is a bright and expansive mental state. Sometimes it is said that a concentrated mind is a happy mind, and this happily concentrated mind is a relaxed type of concentration. It is mindful-ness. Mindfulness includes a strong element of interest and pleasure. There is a sense of expansion to it, a sense of opening up rather than narrowing down. At the same time, there is a sense of clarity and purpose. The mind is balanced, poised, and full of creative energy.*

*In meditation we consciously cultivate this state, so that it becomes much more likely to be available to us in daily life. You could say that this mindful state is the mind's natural state, in that it is the state of mind from which we can act most effectively. It is the mental equivalent of the physical elegance of a cat. The mind is relaxed and flexible, ready to engage fully and positively with anything."*

### **3. Homework**

To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week.

Alternate (a) Body Scan and (b) Mindfulness of Breathing stages 1 to 4.