

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation | Class 1 – Mindfulness of Breathing

Adapted with permission from handout by Gil Fronsdal, at our sister center, Insight Meditation Center

Introduction

Insight meditation, or *vipassana*, is one of the central teachings of the Buddha. It has continued as a living practice for 2500 years. At the heart of insight meditation is the practice of mindfulness, the cultivation of clear, stable and non-judgmental awareness. While mindfulness practice can be highly effective in helping bring calm and clarity to the pressures of daily life, it is also a spiritual path that gradually dissolves the barriers to the full development of our wisdom and compassion.

During this course the basic instructions in insight meditation are given sequentially, each week building on the preceding one. The first week focuses on the basics of meditation and on mindfulness of breathing. The second week discusses mindfulness of the body and expands the area of attention to include all our physical experiences. The third week introduces mindfulness of emotions, the fourth week mindfulness of thinking.

Insight meditation is not mysterious. It is developing our ability to pay attention to our immediate experience. We are often preoccupied with thoughts about the past or the future or with fantasies. While sometimes such pre-occupations may be innocent and harmless, more often they contribute to stress, fear and suffering. Mindfulness practice is learning how to overcome preoccupation so that we can see clearly what is happening in our lived experience of the present moment. In doing so, we find greater clarity, trust, and integrity. Mindfulness relies on an important characteristic of awareness: awareness itself does not judge, resist, or cling to anything. By focusing on simply being aware, we learn to disentangle ourselves from our habitual reactions and begin to have a friendlier and more compassionate relationship with our experience, with ourselves and with others.

Mindfulness is the practice of being attentive and present. It is called a practice in the same way that we say that people practice the piano. Being attentive is a skill that grows with practice. It develops best if we set aside any self-conscious judgements or expectations of how our meditation is developing. The practice is simply to relax and bring forth an awareness of what is happening in the present moment.

To develop the skill—and experience the joys—of non-reactive presence, daily meditation practice is helpful.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Insight Meditation usually begins with awareness of breathing. This is an awareness practice, not an exercise in breathing; there is no need to adjust the breathing in any way. We simply attend to the breath, getting to know it as it is: shallow or deep, long or short, slow or fast, smooth or rough, coarse or refined, constricted or loose. After we get distracted by sounds, thoughts or emotions, we simply return awareness to physical sensations of breathing. If breathing is problematic for you, please talk to the teacher.

As the mind tends to be scattered and easily distracted, we use sensations of breathing as an anchor to the present. When we rest in the breath, we counter the forces of distraction. We train the mind, heart, and body to become settled and unified on one thing, at one place, at one time. If you are sitting in meditation and your mind is remembering what you did earlier, then your mind and body are not in the same place at the same time. Fragmented in this way, we all too easily lose touch with a holistic sense of ourselves.

Mindfulness of breathing is a powerful ally in our lives. With steady awareness of inhaling and exhaling, the breath sensations can become an equanimous constant through the ups and downs of daily life. Resting with, even enjoying, the cycles of breathing, we are less likely to be caught up in the emotional and mental events that pass through us. Repeatedly returning to the sensations of breathing can be a highly effective training in letting go of the identification and holding which freeze the mind and heart. It also develops concentration.

Mindfulness Exercises for the First Week

You will get the most benefit from this course if you engage with the practice between our class meetings. During the first week please try the following practices:

- Sit one twenty-minute session of meditation each day. For this first week, focus on staying aware of the sensations of breathing as described in the next section of the handout. Begin and end each sitting with a few moments of conscious reflection: At the start, clearly remind yourself that you are about to devote yourself to being mindful and present. As best you can, let go of any concerns, remembering that you will have plenty of time to take them up again after meditation. At the end of the meditation session, reflect on what occurred. There is no need to judge what happened; you just want to strengthen your mindfulness through a brief exercise in recollection.
- Choose one routine activity that you perform most days and experiment with doing it mindfully. This means doing just this single activity - not listening to the radio at the same time, for example - and resting your awareness on the sensations associated with that activity. It is also best to let go of any concern about the results or in finishing quickly. Remain in the present moment as best you can. When the mind wanders, simply come back to the activity. Activities you might choose include brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, or some routine act of driving or walking.
- For one half-hour period during the week, maintain attention to your posture as you go about with your normal activity. Without straining, assume a posture that is alert and upright. Notice what happens to your mood, thoughts, feelings and degree of mindfulness as you do this exercise.

Meditation Instruction – Mindfulness of Breathing

Sit in a comfortable and alert posture. Gently close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths, and, as you exhale, settle into your body, relaxing any obvious tension. Then, breathing normally, bring awareness to your body, sensing for a bit how the body is. There is no “right” way to be; just notice how you are now.

Then, from inside the body, become aware of sensations of breathing, however they happen to appear. There is no right or wrong way to breathe while practicing mindfulness meditation; the key is to simply notice how it actually is right now. Let the breath breathe itself. Allow it to simply be. Notice where in your body you feel the breath most clearly. It may be the abdomen rising and falling, the chest expanding and contracting, or the sensations of the air passing through the nose or over the upper lip. Wherever the breath appears most clearly, allow that area to be the anchor, the center of your attention.

Keep your attention connected with the inhalations and exhalations, sensing the physical sensations of them. Let go of any surface concerns of the mind. Whenever the mind wanders away, gently come back to the sensations of breathing. There is no need to judge when you notice that the mind has wandered. Just simply, kindly, return your awareness to breathing.

To help maintain contact between awareness and breathing, you may use a label or mental note. Softly, like a whisper in the mind, label the in-breath and out-breath. You can label inhalations and exhalations as "in" and "out," or "rising" and "falling" for the movement of the abdomen or the chest. Don't worry about finding the right word. Use simple words that will help you stay connected.

There is no need to force the attention on the breath; to strengthen your ability to become mindful and present, use the gentle power of repeatedly, non-judgmentally returning to and resting with the sensations of breathing.