

Buddhist Meditation: a brief guide

Introduction

Buddhist meditation includes any method of meditation that has Enlightenment as its ultimate aim. Buddhist meditation practices are designed to provide us with a grounding in certain basic human qualities, to help us to become a happy, healthy human being - a necessary foundation for any deeper spiritual practice. From these we can deepen into 'insight' meditations.

This leaflet summarises two central Buddhist practices: the Mindfulness of Breathing, and the Metta Bhavana, both of which are taught at Triratna Buddhist Community centres worldwide. These lead us naturally into deeper, more reflective, states of mind that may help us develop insight into the true nature of reality. Both go back to the time of the Buddha and have been practised ever since by millions of people of all types across the world. In essence, meditation teaches us to take full responsibility for our own states of mind, and offers us a means of transforming negative and reactive patterns in our minds into positive and creative ones. Such change can have a deeply transformative effect, and lead to new understandings of life.

The secret of success for any meditation is good preparation and regular practice. Preparation includes both setting up our meditation posture, finding a suitable place for meditation, and - if we are to go at all deeply into meditation - leading an ethically simple and uncompromised life. To practise regularly we need confidence in the practice and in our own ability to change. As we go on, this confidence becomes more and more deeply rooted in our own personal experience.

The Mindfulness of Breathing: developing calm and concentration

This practice helps us to develop a calm and concentrated mind. We learn to pull together the many scattered fragments of our emotional and mental energy into a single unified whole, with the natural consequence that our minds become more energised, focused, and wholehearted, and therefore, that our experience of life becomes clearer and more vivid, our choices more conscious and more meaningful. Some traditions say the Buddha was doing this practice as he became Enlightened.

This practice makes a very good companion to the Metta Bhavana. Both were taught and strongly recommended by the Buddha. We suggest that anyone developing a serious meditation practice alternates them equally.

Summary of the four stages of the practice:

Begin by setting up your meditation posture and sitting quietly for a minute or two, to relax and settle yourself. Check your body for tension, and become aware of its general level of energy. Check the overall tone of your energy, emotions, and mental activity, acknowledging these as your starting point for this particular session of meditation.

1 Feel the sensation of the breathing as it flows naturally in and out of the body. Just after each breath leaves the body, mark it with a (mental) count of 'one', then 'two', etc. Count ten breaths, then start again at one.

2 After doing this for a short while (say 4-5 minutes) start counting each breath just before it enters the body, counting in the same way as before.

3 After a few minutes of stage 2, stop counting altogether, and simply follow with your mind the whole flow of your breathing.

4 Finally, direct your attention to the point where you most clearly feel the air entering and leaving the body. Focus your attention on the subtle sensations made by the air stimulating that point.

To end the practice, relax your effort and sit quietly doing nothing for a minute or two, absorbing the effects of the practice, and gradually allowing your attention to expand out again into your surroundings. It is important to end slowly and sensitively. Take time to reflect on how it went.

Throughout the practice, keep an overall perspective on how it is going, and look for ways to move into deeper states of concentration. These include adjusting your posture to balance energy that is too sluggish or too excited, consciously developing interest in your experience, and looking for enjoyment in the practice.

Metta Bhavana: the development of loving-kindness

Metta is almost impossible to translate adequately, but refers to strong, even passionate, feelings of love, friendliness, and compassion towards all life - feelings felt equally towards all, and completely free from emotional self-interest or grasping. It is sometimes referred to as 'universal loving-kindness'. It is a fundamental attitude of positivity and love that will express itself spontaneously and appropriately in action: as compassion towards the suffering, joy at others' good fortune, help where help is needed, generosity towards the needy, and so on.

Summary of the five stages of the practice:

Begin as for the Mindfulness of Breathing, checking your overall energy, emotions, and mental activity, acknowledging these as your starting point.

1. As you become more fully aware of yourself, develop a response of friendliness, interest, and kindness towards yourself, wishing yourself "happiness and the causes of happiness, freedom from suffering and the causes of suffering, growth and development". One approach is to repeat a suitable sentence to yourself over and over, listening for the resonances in your heart. Another way is to remember a time when you felt this way, and feed that memory with awareness, thereby bringing it into life in the present. Another is to imaginatively give yourself a gift - a flower, jewel, or flame, symbolising self-metta.

2. Move the focus of your awareness onto a good friend and work creatively to contact, develop, and deepen metta towards them, using similar methods to stage 1. Avoid choosing someone for whom you feel sexual or parental feelings.

3 Bring to mind a 'neutral' person, someone for whom you have no clear like or dislike. Look for ways to contact metta for them and then develop and deepen it. This may mean 'bringing them to life' in your mind, reflecting on what you have most deeply in common, or simply taking an imaginative interest in them.

4 Turn your attention to a 'difficult' person. Experience how you actually feel towards them, and try to cultivate a fresh and more metta-full response, perhaps looking for a deeper understanding of them.

5 Lastly, bring to mind all four people and develop metta equally towards all of them. Broaden out to include those around you, in the local area, the country, the world - other forms of life - all life. Develop strong, impartial, universal metta towards all life.

To end, as in the Mindfulness of Breathing, relax your effort, and gradually expand your awareness outwards slowly and sensitively.

Working in Meditation: going deeper

Once you have learnt the basic practice, there are many ways to take your experience deeper. The art of meditation is always to find a creative way to take your practice one step deeper.

Posture

The three keys to a good meditation posture are to be comfortable, relaxed, and alert. Experiment to find what suits you. Your knees should rest firmly on the ground to give you stability, your hands supported in front of you, your buttocks at the correct height, your head balanced, and your muscles relaxed.

The hindrances

Broadly speaking, we may suffer from too little energy available for our meditation or from too much unfocussed and distracted energy. Working with posture is the first thing to try: sitting up straighter or opening our eyes if our energy is low, bringing our attention down into our stomach or relaxing our muscles if it is too high and scattered.

Beyond this we may use the traditional list of the Five Hindrances:

- Sloth and Torpor
- Doubt and Indecision

both states of too little energy: stimulate mind and body

- Sense-Desire
- Restlessness and Worry
- Ill-Will

all excess/unfocussed energy; reduce distraction, calm the mind

Work with these by naming them, thus acquiring a perspective on them; cultivating the opposite; considering the consequences of living forever in them; or - if all else fails - allowing them to pass in their own time by adopting a 'sky-like mind'.

Daily practice

A daily meditation practice is essential for real progress in meditation. Finding a place and time that suit you, meditating with others, keeping a meditation journal, reading and learning more about meditation - all these may help you to develop a regular practice. Keep your practice clear, bright, and creative. Enjoy!