



MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

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MEDITATION BACKGROUND

In order to start to meditate you need to only do two things. Firstly, you choose the posture you are going to meditate in then find a suitable meditation object. In essence, meditation is built around two simple core principles which over the centuries have proliferated and diversified through teacher-student transmissions into a bewildering array of practices. Nevertheless, all these diverse practices have two core techniques as a foundation:

- 1) concentration
- 2) mindfulness

In essence concentration means focusing attention onto a single object and mindfulness is awareness of thoughts and feelings. In order to help people with a variety of different temperaments and life situations many meditation techniques that aim to develop mindfulness, concentration, supramundane powers, tranquillity, and insight have been developed. There are also misconceptions that have no basis in Buddhist meditation such as meditation is about living in the present moment.



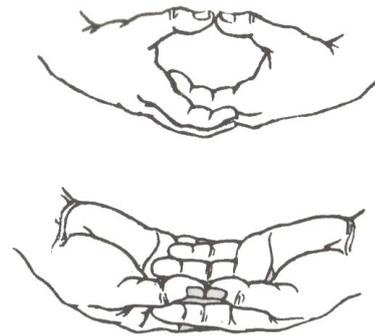
MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

POSTURE

The first thing to do is choose the position you feel most comfortable in. There is absolutely no esoteric significance to the different positions and what is most important is what you do with your mind and not what you do with your feet or legs. Remember it is pointless to worry about looking good and then finding you can not maintain your position. Be realistic. Experiment and find out what is best for you.

HAND POSITIONS

The classic hand position is known as the 'meditation-position' or 'dhyana-mudra' where the right hand rests on the left with the thumb tips lightly touching. This position is said to offer a "meditation effort meter" where your thumbs drift apart whilst daydreaming or push to together while straining.



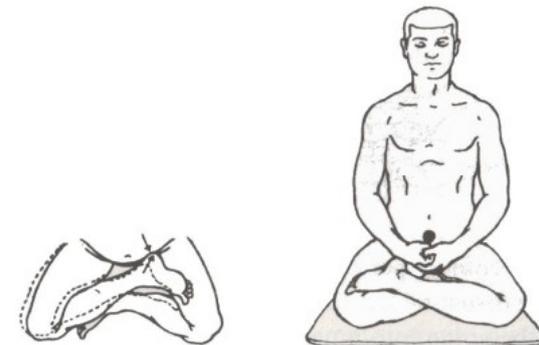
POSTURE: FULL LOTUS

For those who are flexible enough the most stable position is the full lotus, where each foot is placed up on the opposite thigh. This is very solid and perfectly symmetrical.



POSTURE TWO: HALF LOTUS

In the half lotus the left foot is placed up onto the right thigh and the right leg is tucked under. When using this position you should make a habit of alternating which leg you bring up in order to stretch the spine both ways since this position forces one to slope slightly to one side.





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POSTURE: BURMESE POSITION

The simplest position while sitting on the floor is the Burmese position where your legs are crossed and both feet rest flat on the floor. Knees should also rest on the floor. To help your knees drop to the floor we often sit on a small cushion called a zafu. Keep your spine upright while keeping a slight curve in your lower back region. In this position, it takes very little effort to keep the body upright.



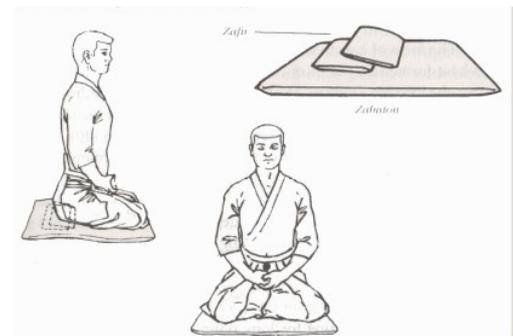
POSTURE: CHAIR POSITION

It is also fine to sit on a chair. The posture you will keep is almost identical to the position you would have whilst sitting at a computer desk with your feet flat on the floor, spine straight and vertical.



POSTURE: CUSHIONS

Sitting on the floor can become uncomfortable so a mat to cushion your knees from the floor is advisable where possible. A small cushion is used to sit on to raise you off the floor in order to keep your back straight and help your knees touch the floor.



EYES: WALL GAZING

Zen meditation is sometimes called 'wall-gazing' as in order to minimise distractions it is advisable that you face a wall and have your eyes half-closed.



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MEDITATE: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING (Ānāpānasati)

Mindfulness of breathing refers to several techniques where awareness is kept on the process of inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

EXERCISE ONE: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING (Ānāpānasati)

In the first stage it's advisable to use counting to stay focused on the breath. After the out-breath you count one, then you breathe in and out and count two, and so on up to twenty, and then count backwards to one and then start again.

Breathe naturally through your nose and have your eyes half-closed. As you engage in this exercise you may find that your mind wanders, caught by thoughts or by noises in the room, or bodily sensations. When you notice that this happens, know that this is okay, and simply notice the distraction but gently bring your attention back to the breath.

EXERCISE TWO: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING (Ānāpānasati)

In the second stage you subtly shift where you breathe, counting before the in-breath, anticipating the breath that is coming, but still counting from one to twenty and then back again.

EXERCISE THREE: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING (Ānāpānasati)

In the third stage you drop the counting and just watch the breath as it comes in and goes out.

EXERCISE FOUR: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING (Ānāpānasati)

In the final stage the focus of concentration narrows and sharpens, so you pay attention to the subtle sensation on the tip of the nose where the breath first enters and last leaves the body.



MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

WHEN THOUGHTS ARISE

It must be stressed that the aim of meditation is **not** to stop thoughts and the subject of thinking is one of the most confused topics in meditation. The confusion probably occurs because in advanced states of concentrative meditation thoughts do not arise but this state cannot be forced and one certainly should not try.

It is inevitable that until obtaining mastery of advanced concentration that thoughts will arise and this is as it should be. A successful meditation session is one where you stay concentrated on your meditation object for at least some of the time. In fact, every second you remain forced on your meditation-object is a cause for celebration as you are doing great despite what else is going on in your mind (no matter if your mind is singing you a song, or insisting you've got better things to do, planning a conversation, worrying about your dead-leg, or creating dinner).

If you manage to keep your mind on your mediation-object despite the distractions you are doing fantastically well and building up your meditation skill and resilience. Even when you have completely lost concentration just bring your mind back to your mediation-object. Even in loosing concentration one can rejoice since in noticing and regaining concentration you are again doing wonderfully well.

The focus is the thing. If you concentrate for one second well-done, and two seconds even better and the more you practice the easier it will become. Perhaps next time you'll be able to concentrate for five seconds, or even five minutes. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that the aim at this stage is not to stop thinking or reside in some transcendental state but to keep focused on your meditation object for as long as possible. With this non-judgemental attitude your mediation skills will improve and eventually you will succeed in quietening your mind-making and the scatteredness will give way to focus. When this happens any pain, numbness and itching that arises will not bother you or draw your attention, and neither will passing moods, feelings or emotions, but all in good time.

The bottom line is that thinking is not a problem and you goal is to build up your skills of concentration and the rest will come in due time.



MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

MEDITATION-OBJECTS (beyond the breath)

Although the breath is the most common meditation object there are many others that can be used to develop meditation skill such as meditating on coloured disks (kasinas), foulness, goodness, perceptions, immaterial states, and many others besides. These different meditation techniques are meant for different situations and temperaments. It is highly recommended that most of these advanced meditation objects are done under the guidance of an experienced teacher. As an example, mediation on foulness is supposed to be an antidote to greed while loving kindness mediation is meant for people who are stuck in a cycle of anger and hatred.

Some meditation techniques are useful for developing concentration or mindfulness and some, moreover, develop both concentration and mindfulness. An excellent example of a practice that develops concentration and mindfulness is 'mindfulness of breathing' (ānāpāna) making it one technique that can be a complete path to enlightenment. As it is a complete path meditation of breathing it is extremely popular in the Tibetan, Zen, Tiantai, and Theravada schools of Buddhism, as well as western-based mindfulness programs.



MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION ORIGINATES IN BUDDHISM

Mindfulness originates from the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. Buddha taught that Mindfulness is a process of observing, and retrospection. In the words of the Buddha (SN 48:10):

“And which is the faculty of sati [mindfulness]? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones has sati, is endowed with excellent proficiency in sati, remembering and recollecting what was done and said a long time ago. He remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and having sati—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves... the mind in and of itself... mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and having sati—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. This is called the faculty of sati.”

It is possible to be mindful of things that will occur in the future such as death. From the Pali-cannon (AN 6.19):

“The Blessed One said, “Mindfulness of death, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit and great benefit. It gains a footing in the Deathless, has the Deathless as its final end. Therefore you should develop mindfulness of death”.

The reason one can be mindful of future events is because sati is best described as remembering and thus bringing to mind in remembrance inevitable future events is a legitimate mindfulness [sati] practice.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* the term *sati* means to remember the dharmas, whereby the true nature of phenomena can be seen (Sharf, 2014, p 942) and is what causes the practitioner to "remember" that any feeling she experiences exists in relation to a whole variety of feelings that may be skillful or unskillful, with faults or faultlessness, inferior or refined, dark or pure (Sharf, 2014, p 942) (Gethin, 1992).

As stated above mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpāna*) is a common practice. Anapanasati is described in detail in the *Anapanasati Sutta*:

Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' Or breathing in short, he discerns, 'I am breathing in short'; or breathing out short, he discerns, 'I am breathing out short.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.'



MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

KOAN/ HWADU

There is some debate within the Zen community whether Koan's are a better mediation object than the breath with some masters insisting that it is the fastest way to enlightenment. The advantage of taking a koan is that one can easily practice no matter what one is doing making it an excellent practice for people who do not have the luxury of being able to take lots of time to do seated meditation.

In some Zen traditions students work through a syllabus of koans trying to solve them whereas in Korean Zen one focuses on a single Hwadu (such as, "who am I?") until one frees one's mind of all divergent thoughts. Other Masters take a different approach and teach that you must focus on a Hwadu such as keeping '*don't know*' mind or that life itself is a Hwadu that needs to be solved and the question must come from within.

The essential thing to realise with Koans is that they are paradoxical and transcends the logical or conceptual. A koan cannot be solved by reason, but only by accessing another level of comprehension that takes the student to a world beyond logical contradictions and dualistic modes of thought.



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MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

It is entirely possible that while in meditation and afterwards mystical experiences occur such as outer body experiences, projections of many kinds, meeting ghosts, and other spiritual beings. Whatever one thinks about these experiences it remains true that these are not in anyway related to the goal of Buddhist meditation practice. The best thing to do regarding any experiences you have is to discuss them directly with a Buddhist teacher or other people on the path. It is a mistake to get caught up in them in anyway.

BAD EXPERIENCES WHILE MEDITATING

The importance of having an experienced, knowable and trustworthy teacher is nowhere more evident in the often ignored topic of bad experiences during meditation. After all during meditation you will access the inner recesses of yourself some of which you've been hiding from yourself lifelong. Without some kind of support network if things start to go dark then it is possible to face a lot of unnecessary suffering for yourself.

ADVANCED MEDITATION

Advanced meditation progresses seamlessly from the basics as outlined above. The 'Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment' outlines thirty-five ways in which enlightenment is gained, but starts off by saying that it is possible to gain it via only concentration, and also only mindfulness and then talks about another thirty-three ways that mindfulness and concentration can be combined to reach the same goal. In other words despite being simple the practices outlined above encompass everything you need to know in order to progress along the path of meditation. Sure, as you go deeper you'll discover more, but that is actually all you need and it is a matter of practice.

FURTHER READING

I highly recommend a book by the Japanese Monk Omori Sogen called "An Introduction To Zen Training" which is a translation of Sanzen Nyumon. This book addresses most of the opportunities and issues in meditation such as breathing, pain, posture, drowsiness and how to maintain concentration when sitting and not sitting.

I also recommend the brilliant book and audiobook by Ajahn Brahm called "Mindfulness, Bliss and Beyond".

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