

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation and Overview of the Teachings of the Buddha

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The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha taught one thing and one thing only - that suffering exists and how to end it. Or in other words, he taught us how to be happy. This is exemplified in the title of the Dalai Lama's book, "The Art of Happiness". By suffering, the Buddha was referring to the suffering that comes from mental anguish. We create our own suffering by agitating in our minds over things that are happening or not happening. I am sure that you have observed how the same calamity can happen to different people and how some appear unruffled by it and others appear destroyed by it. The teaching of the Buddha points the way to being unruffled by the ups and downs of life. This is the state of equanimity or serenity. The Buddha's teaching on suffering and its end is known as The Four Noble Truths. These truths are:

1. Suffering exists - we all know this from experience.
2. There is a path to suffering - this is the law of cause and effect. The effect (suffering) has discernible causes which we will learn about.
3. There is an end to suffering - this is the good news!
4. There is a path to the end of suffering - we will learn how to do this.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is one of the key skills that is developed on the path to end suffering. There are 4 different bases or foundations of mindfulness. These are:

1. The body - one aspect of the body is the breath. We will focus on mindfulness of the

breath in this first session. In later sessions we will cover mindfulness of other aspects of the body.

2. Feelings - sensations in the body categorized as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral that arise in response to sensory awareness. In Buddhist teaching, along with the eyes, ears, tongue, nose and body, the mind is considered a sensory organ and thoughts are what it senses.
3. The mind - referring to consciousness and its emotional colourings.
4. Dhamma categories, Dhamma referring to the teachings of the Buddha.

Preamble to Sitting Meditation

I am starting off meditation instructions with sitting meditation as this is what you will first encounter if you come to a meditation group. Because established groups have many long term meditators in attendance, their peaceful energy "carries along" new people who are not used to sitting silently and still for 30 minutes or so.

However, once a "new" meditator attempts this at home, alone, it may feel too agitating to do sitting meditation. In my own case, I was first introduced to meditation at a weekend workshop. The only meditator in the room was the teacher. The rest of us were green. After some explanations we closed our eyes for a 10 minute meditation. Prior to this moment I had seen myself as a well adjusted, happy, no major problems person. Before the 10 minutes were up I discovered I had an out of control mind. It's too long ago to remember what I was thinking, but I vividly remember wanting to run, screaming out of the room. I had never met this mind before because I had never sat in stillness. I was always incredibly busy.

Thankfully, after the sitting meditation, we did walking meditation. We were instructed to walk slowly from one end of the room to the other, turn slowly and walk back. I felt like a beautiful ballerina. Focusing on walking totally calmed my mind. And the focus on my body allowed me to experience the beauty of movement. I wasn't going anywhere, I wasn't trying to accomplish anything. I was simply walking....and loving the sensation!

In the following 2 weeks, I had 3 life changing experiences that "hooked" me on meditation. The first experience was of walking from the hospital, through a park, to the train station to get to my afternoon clinic. Prior to the meditation workshop, I NEVER saw that park. I was always focused internally post hashing the patients I'd seen that morning or pre hashing the patients I would see in the afternoon. But on that first day after the workshop, I put my learnings into practice. I was "in the moment". The only details I can still remember are seeing the trees and the interesting seed pods they held and then noticing a bald eagle flying overhead. And I remember feeling joy at the vibrant beauty of my surroundings.... and feeling astonishment that I had missed this beautiful daily walk for 9 years!

In brief, the second experience was of not getting my expected transportation to a conference. I went into panic. But I then remembered what I'd been taught in the meditation workshop and turned my attention from my distressed thoughts, to my breath.

I could literally feel the panic drain out of my body, through my feet, into the ground. Of course, it was back again shortly. But each time it returned, I returned my attention to my breath and then re-experienced the feeling of calm. In the moments of calm, I could think clearly and made a plan as to how I was to get to the conference.

I was thrilled with the calm that I had created myself. But the biggest surprise was once I was in the lecture hall. I had arrived just in time for the first speaker. I listened carefully and took notes. About half way through the lecture I suddenly realized that I was LISTENING to the speaker! Of course, that was my goal: to get to the conference on time and listen to the speakers. But in the past, if something distressing had happened to me, I would NOT have been listening to the speakers. I would have been post hashing my "trauma".

The third experience was of preparing dinner for some friends. As usual, I hadn't left enough time for all the preparation, so started to agitate. The agitation was the cue that caused me to remember the meditation instructions. So, instead of focusing on the fact that I wouldn't have dinner ready when the guests arrived, I focused on what I was doing in the moment. I was peeling carrots. The peels were making beautiful spirals. I really "got off" on their beauty. Next, I was mixing a cake and the oil and other liquids were making a beautiful, changing pattern. I "got off" on that too! When the company arrived, I felt relaxed and invited them into the kitchen to chat while I finished the preparations. In the past, in a similar situation, I would have felt like a limp dishrag and been too exhausted from stressing out to enjoy my company.

These three experiences showed me how simple the meditation technique was, yet how profound it's positive consequences.

I wanted to continue to study meditation. However, sitting in silence was still hard for me. I no longer remember what my mind was thinking, but it was agitated. The above 3 experiences were successful because my mind had something else to focus on that was strong enough to keep it's attention. The breath, initially, wasn't strong enough. So, I started my daily practice with 35 minutes of walking meditation and 5 minutes of sitting meditation. Once I could handle the 5 minutes of sitting, I gradually increased until I could do the entire 40 minutes sitting.

For those of you who also are starting with an agitated mind, you may wish to skip ahead to lesson 2 where walking meditation is discussed.

Several monastic teachers are now encouraging us to relax our physical body before we start to focus on the breath. In their experience, this creates a short cut to stillness of the mind. And when they do move from the body to the breath, they start with a whole body awareness of the breath before narrowing the focus down to a small point. The 3 teachers discussed below teach this new way. The notes that pertain to body relaxation are found in Lesson 2 under "Body Scan". It's easy to see, from this little example, how everything is interconnected. So it is hard to write linear notes about an interwoven experience.

Sitting Meditation and Mindfulness of the Breath

There are 2 aspects of meditation: (1) calming and (2) insight into the Four Noble Truths. Both of these aspects are needed to relieve ourselves of suffering. However, we

cannot truly separate these 2 aspects. They are like opposite ends of the same stick or the opposite sides of a coin. But we can lean our practice towards one or the other.

It's hard to gain insight if the mind is not calm. So we will start by focusing on a calming meditation technique.

a) Focus on your body:

Make sure that you are in a comfortable posture. If sitting on a chair, have your feet touch the floor or a support. Have your back away from the chair back, to promote wakefulness. If sitting on a cushion, make sure that your hips are level with or higher than your knees and that your knees are supported. Have your spine straight, chin slightly tucked and shoulders relaxed. If you rock back and forth on your sit bones, this helps you to find your point of balance. Come to rest at this point and you can sit effortlessly compared to sitting in a slightly off-balance position. If you have back problems and have to meditate lying down, one suggestion is to bend your knees so your feet are flat on the floor and to raise one forearm straight up, with your elbow on the floor. This will help you maintain wakefulness.

Eyes can be open or closed. If closed, leave them shut unless you get sleepy. Then opening your eyes is one way to arouse wakefulness. If you start with them open, have a soft focus onto the floor a few feet in front of you. Do not look around. If after awhile, they want to close on their own, let them do so. Other than these changes, don't be switching from open to closed and back again as this will disturb your your developing stillness.

Once you have adjusted your posture, take a minute to focus on the places (one at a time) where your body touches another part of your body, the chair, cushion or bench and the floor. Notice the characteristics of the touch. If there is any discomfort, adjust your posture. This is a mini practice in helping you increase your mindfulness of your body.

For some further comments on preparing yourself to do sitting meditation, see the appendix.

b) Set your intention:

In your own words, say:

- (i) what you intend to do,
- (ii) what you intend to avoid (i.e. your main distraction from stilling the mind) and
- (iii) remind yourself to be gentle with yourself.

A sample intention: "I intend to joyfully focus on the beautiful breath. When thoughts arise, I intend to let them go by returning my attention to the breath. And I intend to do this in a loving manner. State your intention silently 3 times so that your mind has clear instructions of what it is to do.

Intentions help to inform what is to follow. They aren't a guarantee, but they help. And they are different from expectations, which are in the future. Intentions are here in this moment.

c) Focus on your breath

If you have a cold or sinusitis, it is helpful to clear your nasal passages prior to meditating with the use of a neti pot (available in Canmore at Nutters) or a NeilMed sinus rinse (available at Pharmacies).

There are many different teachings on how to watch your breath. Don't be confused by this. They are all just skillful means to allow our minds to calm down, for happiness to arise and for insights into the true nature of reality to arise. Different methods are helpful for different people, or for one person at different times. What follows are two ways to watch the breath. If they aren't your cup of tea, ask me for other suggestions or read some books from the library or listen to talks on the internet. Or, best of all, visit a monastery and receive instructions from a monastic.

The **first** method I'm going to share with you is from my teacher, Ajahn Sona of Sitavana/Birken Forest Monastery near Kamloops, BC. He came up with this method after reading all the teachings of the Buddha on the breath. So he feels this method is as close as is known of what the Buddha taught. The resources page directs you to a link of Ajahn giving a guided meditation using this method.

While being mindful of your breath, use effort to let go of unwholesome mind states that arise and enhance wholesome ones that arise. The reason to watch the breath is to prevent discursive thoughts (conversations in our head!). Watch the breath at the nasal cavity.....the place where you feel the breath. It feels like your head is hollow. Let go of scientific reality....just experience what the breath feels like....free, light, airy, hollow etc.

After awhile, let this feeling of lightness spread to your entire body. You can image yourself sitting under a tree by a river, a gentle breeze caressing your face....just like the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree by the Neranjera River just before he realized Awakening. It feels so beautiful your mind doesn't want to be anywhere else but right here with the beautiful breath. Enjoy the cool swirl of the air in that spacious place. Check your body, making sure it is at ease. Wish that this never ends, it is so pleasant. No place to go, nothing to do. Just this wonderful opportunity to be with the beautiful breath.

Notice the length of the breath....short or long. Just notice. No control. If you're drifting away, just come back to the banks of the river and enjoy the cool breeze. Try to stay with every second of each breath. Let the airiness spread to the entire body. Induce it by suggesting it to yourself. Light, untroubled. Adjust your posture if you're uncomfortable. Check yourself over for any signs of tension, worry lines. Let that go. There's nothing to do. It's free, no responsibilities. Complete vacation.

Now the Buddha says, "I shall breathe in experiencing rapture, gladness, joy. That's up to you to bring that forth. Enjoy yourself. Create come joy in each breath. Freedom, peace, the benefits of meditation. Raise gladness and joy. Experiencing rapture I breathe in, experiencing rapture I breathe out. Free and light. Now can you become even quieter, more serene. "Breathing in I calm the mind, breathing out I calm the heart".

Stay with the sweet coolness of the in breath, pervading the whole body. The head

is full of air like a room with all the windows open. If there are any inner visuals eg. of twinkling lights, just ignore that. Just stay with the sweet coolness of the breath, the air. Find your way to a very, very private place where you are alone. There is no time there. A private, sacred place. Breathing in stillness, breathing out stillness. Each breath is free from worry, free from impatience, restful.

Reflect that time has gone by, your breath has changed, your mind has changed this way and that way, the feeling of your body has changed. These inner states are flowing, changing, transient. Gazing at the endless, flowing change. Reflecting on that. The day has gone by. Direct your mind right into the centre of yourself. An empty room. No one there, just the breeze blowing through. Very peaceful when there's no one there.

In the Resources pages is a link to an audio of Ajahn Sona giving a guided meditation on this method.

The **second** method I'm going to share with you is called a body scan or sweeping. This particular routine of scanning the body is from Bhikkhu Thanissaro of Metta Forest Monastery near San Diego, California.

Bring your attention to your navel. See it in your mind's eye. Feel the breath there. Notice if there is any tension there. If there is, lovingly breathe into the tension and allow it to dissolve. After a few breaths, move your attention to where your right hip joins your pelvis. Again, see it in your mind's eye. Feel the breath energy there. Notice if there is any tension there. If there is, lovingly breathe into the tension and notice if it dissolves. After a few breaths move to the next spot and follow the same routine as above. Here is Bhikkhu Thanissaro's list of spots to notice, using the above steps with each spot.

- area where the left hip joins the pelvis
- solar plexus (at the bottom of the breast bone)
- right flank (the side of the chest where the arms touch it)
- left flank
- heart centre
- area where chest meets the right shoulder
- same on left
- base of the throat
- the middle of the head. Gently feel the breath energy coming into this area through your nostrils, eyes, ears, top of head and the back of your head.
- feel the breath enter the base of your neck and flow down your right and left arms on the in breath, and exit the fingers on the out breath
- feel the breath enter the base of the neck, flow down the spine to the tailbone on the in breath and radiate out into the air on the out breath
- feel the breath enter the small of your back and flow down your legs on the in breath and out your toes on the out breath
- feel the breath energy entering the tailbone and flowing down the pelvis and legs to the

feet and then flowing out the toes on the out breath

This is one cycle through the body. If you don't feel settled down, repeat the scan. Once you are settled, gently notice where in your body your breath feels the most comfortable, the most beautiful. Now rest your attention on this place. From this place allow your awareness to spread out, encompassing your whole body. Feel the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Your awareness will have a tendency to shrink. So with each breath, ensure you are aware of your whole body the whole way through the in and out breath.

This is a centred, full body awareness. Your attention is centred on the place where the breath feels beautiful and your peripheral awareness experiences the breath in the whole body, feeling each in breath and each out breath. This is important. Several of us in the group shrunk our attention to focus on just one spot. It led us to a very still, quiet place where nothing developed over months and years of practice. There was no movement of joy in this place. It's important for joy to arise. This is a necessary condition for deeper states of stillness to develop and eventually for insight to arise.

Ajahn Brahm has his own, beautiful style of teaching body relaxation and breath meditation. Please see the Resources page for lesson one to be directed to an audio of a 10 day retreat led by him. Also see the link on the Resources page for a guided meditation by Ajahn Brahmali that is very beautiful.

Although each of these skillful teachers has his own flavour of breath meditation to share with us, what they have in common is the goal of using the breath to lead us to a state of joy and stillness. From this stillness, insight can arise. Insight into how we are creating our suffering. As the Buddha said, once we clearly see how we are doing this, it is like feeling a hot coal in our hand. We immediately drop it. We don't have to talk ourselves into it. It's burning us! We drop it instantly. This is the result of true insight. It differs from intellectual knowing. We "know" what a healthy diet is but continue to be tempted by tasty, unhealthy food items. When "insight" arises, we would no longer be able to eat those food items as we would really know the damage they are doing.

There are 3 parts to calming meditation:

- Part one: Focus on your breath.
- Part two: When your mind is distracted from your breath by a thought or a sound etc, you gently and without judgment notice the distraction.
- Part three: And then you let the distraction go by gently returning your attention to your breath.

There are many ways that you can help increase your focus on your breath. These include labeling, eg. "breathing in - breathing out", or "in - out", or "rising - falling". In part 2, where you notice that your attention has wandered away from the breath, you can label what has arisen, eg. "oh, listening", or "oh, feeling", or "oh, thinking" etc. Other methods are saying the metta phrases (which you will learn later) or counting breaths or

saying a mantra. Examples of these are in the appendix.

How much time should one do sitting meditation?

Larry Rosenberg in his book “Breath by Breath”, suggests sitting for 15-20 minutes to start and then to work up to 45 minutes or more. But the time spent is less important than the regularity, even if it’s for only 5 minutes a day! It is good to sit a little more than you want to, so you can see the part of your mind that resists practice - but you don’t want to torture yourself. It is important to sit on days when you don’t want to sit. If you sit only when you want to, you will know only the mind that likes to sit. People who say they don’t have time to do sitting practice have not yet experienced the true value of sitting. Once they do, they are more likely to find time for it.

The intensive practice you do on retreats is extremely valuable. It will deepen your practice as nothing else can.

It is helpful to practice with other people as their presence encourages you.

4. The Sound of Silence

Ajahn Sumedho discovered another form of meditation that uses the Nada sound instead of the breath. When you are very still, you become aware of a sound similar to that heard when you hold a sea shell to your ear. Once you become skilled, you can hear this sound despite very noisy surroundings. You focus your attention on this sound in order to develop stillness. See the resources page for some books on this method.

5. Clear Comprehension

Basically this refers to the awareness that what you are doing at the moment is appropriate. We will go into detail about this skill in a later session.

There is a story by Ajahn Chah that explains the difference between mindfulness and clear comprehension: A monk was leading the other monks on their alms round to the nearest village. They had to walk on the dikes between the rice paddies. The lead monk was very mindful of each of his steps. He was so focused on his walking that he was not aware of the turn-off to the village and just kept walking ahead on the dike until another monk alerted him. He was lacking clear comprehension, i.e. being aware of why he was walking (to get to the village for food) and where he was walking (noticing the turn-off). We need to have both factors present together, mindfulness and clear comprehension. This is especially important when you are practicing moment by moment mindfulness during the day.

6. Moment by Moment Mindfulness Throughout the Day

(Adapted from Larry Rosenberg’s book: Breath by Breath)

a) Continuing mindfulness of the breath.

Our goal is to be mindful of every breath all day long. But outside of sitting meditation practice, mindfulness of the breath drops to the background and mindfulness of what you are experiencing at the moment is in the foreground. As a guideline, put about 25% of your attention on your breath and 75% on the activity of the moment. The idea is to bring a gentle attentiveness to whatever you are doing. Do not lament the past or crave the future, but maintain yourself, moment by moment in whatever arises. Everyone has time for this practice.

Mindfulness of breathing is meant to be an aid to mindfulness of daily life, not an impediment. The breath is used as an anchor to keep one in the present moment. There might be times in the day when it might be inappropriate to be mindful of breathing eg. when doing an intricate task. The right thing might be to give your full attention to the task. If breath awareness helps you stay attentive to the requirements of your situation, use it. If it doesn't, drop it. But you can't really know until you make a sincere effort.

As a way to get started with continuous mindfulness, bring mindfulness to one routine activity per day. As you feel the benefits of doing so, you'll be encouraged to bring mindfulness to other things.

Mindfulness of breath while doing activities is not a strain. It eliminates extra effort and makes the activity easier. The idea is to bring a gentle attentiveness to whatever you are doing.

b) When possible, do just one thing at a time.

If the situation you are in is chaotic and confused, be with the confusion. Take a hard look at the confusion. This may bring up some anxiety but you have a better chance to come to clarity than if you do some action to distract yourself from it. The breath can be helpful by acting as a brake on the mind's tendency to act impulsively. You don't need to be strict about focusing on just one thing at a time. At a family dinner you can move from focus on one person or one bite of food to a wider focus, on a number of people - less precise in detail but fully alive to the situation.

c) Pay full attention to what you are doing.

Having aversion to the task you are doing, or thinking of something else while doing a task, separates you from what you are doing. This leads to being less than fully alive. Giving our whole body and mind to a task, being undivided and intimate in our action is giving life to life. This is doerless doing, as profound as Awakening itself - the awakened mind in action. This is the equivalent of part one of mindfulness meditation of the breath, explained earlier. Only now, instead of just focusing on your breath, you drop your mindfulness of your breath into the background and in the foreground, focus on what you are doing at the moment.

d) When your mind wanders from what you are doing, notice this and bring it back.

Thinking is burned up in the laser beam of mindfulness and you are left just doing

what you are doing. This is the same as part two and three of mindfulness of the breath, explained earlier.

e) Repeat step (d) several billion times.

It is important to come back from your wandering gently and without blame. The practice is not just being with the object. It is seeing that you have wandered away and then coming back gracefully.

f) Investigate your distractions.

If your mind keeps wandering to something over and over, take a look at what keeps coming up. It might be trying to tell you something that you need to do, or stop doing. Life has a way of breaking into our awareness when our response to it isn't adequate. Make the distraction the object of your focus for awhile before returning to your primary task.

The art of bringing practice into daily life is learning to be supple and transferring your focus of attention as needed.

The art of mindful living requires keen interest and a lifetime of gentle and determined effort. Don't do it in a grim, joyless, ambitious way. Mindfulness should make your mind lighter and freer.

You find real satisfaction not by the incessant longing after newer and newer goals but by taking joy in the small things that actually make up your life.

Appendix

1. Creating skillful conditions for meditation practice

2. Mindfulness of breathing

3. Methods to help you stay focused on your breath

4. Some final words

1. Creating skillful conditions for meditation practice

Our goal is to decrease suffering. We are going to use meditation as a means to achieve this goal. Everything is subject to the law of cause and effect, known in

Buddhism as Dependent Origination. Therefore, if we put effort into creating good conditions for our meditation practice, the causes, we will just naturally reap the benefit of decreased suffering, the effect. So our focus is on creating causes, not on the outcome (effect). The outcome just comes naturally if we focus on skillful causes.

First we need to take care of the conditions necessary for life i.e. food, clothing, shelter and medicine.

1. Food: Eat healthy food and not bait. Food nourishes life. Bait is eaten for the sake of deliciousness. It makes us unwise and causes us to eat foolishly, just like bait on the hook that snags foolish fish. Eating bait impairs our mental abilities.

2. Clothing: Wear clothing that is convenient, simple and a sign of our culture.

3. Shelter: Should be adequate and modest and as close to nature as possible.

4. Medicine as needed.

Secondly, we need to take reasonable care of our body so that it can be as free as possible from disease and pain. Yoga or Tai Chi/Qi Gong are helpful health practices.

Thirdly we need a kalyana-mitta, a good friend, who can point the way along the path that ends suffering. But the kalyana-mitta can only point the way, not do it for us. We still need to make the effort to create the skillful causes for the ending of suffering.

Now, to specific conditions for sitting meditation:

Remove yourself from familiar settings which are generally set up as places of craving and attachment. Find a place in your home that is free of your usual distractions and is quiet and peaceful, a place that can become habitual. This is especially helpful for the new meditator. You can't always have a suitable place, so choose the best location and accept it, even if it is noisy etc. If you limit our meditation practice by insisting that conditions be perfect, you may never meditate! So be flexible and accept what is. The same comments apply to time. Try to choose the most suitable time to meditate, eg. when rested and not distracted. If you are distracted by thoughts of what has to be done, write out a list of what to do for the day and then meditate, or take care of tasks that are preying on your mind before meditating. But if that is not possible, learn to meditate at any time.

How much time to sit? Try to work up to at least a 40 minute practice a day. We need time for stillness to develop. If we don't sit long enough, stillness may never occur. And the Buddha recommends that we do an intensified meditation practice once a week on Moon Days (full, half and new moons). These days are called Uposatha, days of observance. The Buddha taught that the Uposatha day is for "the cleansing of the defiled mind," resulting in inner calm and joy. On these days, we make a conscious effort to

keep the moral precepts. The precepts will be discussed in lesson 6.

When you are ready to sit, find a stable, comfortable sitting posture. Sit like a mountain which has a solid base and cannot fall over. Sit upright with calmness and dignity and strive for the complete absence of movement. Once in a stable posture, arouse mindfulness. Follow the instructions for one of the methods of breath meditation given in the lesson.

2. Mindfulness of breathing

The following are some pointers to add, when it feels skillful, to the methods of breath meditation mentioned in the lesson.

First you bring your mindfulness to breathing in and out at your chosen place. You may be aware of the breath elsewhere, in the periphery of your awareness, but keep the center of your attention on the chosen spot. It is like sawing wood...you keep your eyes on where the teeth of the saw contact the wood, even though your peripheral vision is aware of the rest of the saw.

Let the breathing continue comfortably and normally. Some teachers say to not interfere with it in any way. But Bhikkhu Thanissaro, in the tradition of his teacher's teacher, Ajahn Lee, encourages us to alter our breath if it is not comfortable. This advice can be very skillful.

Even though you are trying to stay with your breath, inevitably thoughts will come - analyzing, commenting, judging, condemning, comparing. Acknowledge these and come back to the breath. If you stay with the thoughts, you become a slave to your mind. By coming back to the breath you lead the mind. Your mind can get involved with thoughts either emotionally or intellectually. Let either of these go and return to the breath. When thoughts come, don't struggle with them. Remain calm, observe the thought and let it go, not by fighting with it but by simply returning your attention to the breath. This takes effort.

Once you have achieved a simple awareness of breathing, start to note the qualities of the breath - short, long, rapid, slow, easy, laboured, regular, irregular etc.

It's important to not meditate with the idea of gaining something. We do have a goal (stillness) but the paradox is that the way to get **there** is to be fully **here**. Remember the advice of taking care of the causes, not focusing on the outcome.

When your attention wanders from the breath, come back without blame or judgment or a sense of failure. Wandering is not a problem unless you make it one.

Each moment of mindfulness is a seed that increases the likelihood of future mindfulness. Life is a series of alternations between various states.

Much of life is routine and repetitive. Our tendency is to go on automatic pilot, which means we miss out on a lot of life. Mindfulness teaches us to stay fresh in the midst of this; to really live our lives.

After noticing the quality of each breath, start to notice exactly when each breath starts, notice as it continues and then notice when it ends. Notice if there are gaps between the in and out breaths or if they are continuous. There isn't a right or a wrong way. You are just noticing.

By being mindful of the breath, the breath will automatically become deep and smooth and then the whole body relaxes. When breathing is agitated and hurried our bodies and minds are restless and uncomfortable. The breath, the body and the mind condition each other because they are all one unity, not separate. The mind and body meeting at the breath are powerfully affected by mindfulness.

As you pay attention to the breath it becomes deeper, finer, more enjoyable and the body starts to relax. But you can't strive for this relaxation. If you try too hard you prevent it from happening. The Buddha gave an analogy of the tuning of a stringed instrument. If you tighten the strings too much, it sound bad. If you don't tighten them enough, it sounds bad. It's the same with the effort we put into our meditation practice. We have to use some effort to be mindful. But if we use too much effort, we block the process.

Eventually your breath will become so calm that you will no longer be able to feel it. Just keep your attention on the spot that you remember feeling the breath. Ajahn Brahmavamso has a beautiful teaching on this. He talks about being aware of the "beautiful breath" and once you no longer feel the breath, all that's left is the "beautiful" and you focus on that. This beautiful feeling of steady calmness means you are on the way to experiencing the jhanas which are profound states of stillness. We will learn about these in a later session.

Once you have finished your formal sitting practice, you are ready to continue with the rest of your day. Sitting practice and moment by moment mindfulness of daily life are equally important. The practice of sitting and daily life should be seamless, i.e. no decrease in mindfulness when you get up from your meditation cushion to continue your daily routine. So be mindful of arising from your seated position and be mindful of walking to your next activity. Review the notes on "Moment by Moment Mindfulness Throughout the Day".

3. Methods to help you stay focused on your breath

a) Counting

Adjunct techniques have been developed over the centuries to help with mindfulness of the breath. The purpose of counting is simply to focus the mind on the breath. Once your mind is focused on the breath, give up counting. All counting is done mentally...not out loud. Following are several counting methods taken from Bhante Gunaratana's book, "Mindfulness in Plain English". Pick one that suits you and use it for your present sitting. Try out some other methods on subsequent sittings. What you don't want to do is switch from one method to another in the same sitting. This leads to agitation when our goal is stillness. It is important to be gentle with yourself...not to get down on yourself for losing track of the counting. When this happens, gently note it has happened and gently return to counting the breath. Make it playful.

Sharon Salzberg has a nice analogy of walking into a dark room and turning on the light. At that moment, it doesn't matter if the room had been in the dark for a century or for only a few minutes, because at that moment the room is in light. It is the same with

your mindfulness of breath. If your attention has wandered and then you realize that you were away from the breath but are now back, it doesn't matter if you were distracted for 10 minutes or 2 seconds, because at this moment you are again mindful of your breath.

So when you "reawaken" to your breath and counting countless times in a sitting practice, focus on the fact that you are now mindful again of your breath, rather than focusing on the fact that in the past you weren't mindful for a time. Focus on the light being on in the room. Focus on the cup half full rather than the cup half empty. Once your mind is calm and steady, you can let go of counting and just focus on the breath. Later, if your mind wanders again, you can restart the counting as long as needed. Remember, it is a tool, not a requirement.

Methods of counting:

1. While breathing in, count 1, 1, 1, etc. until air entry stops.
While breathing out, count 2, 2, 2, etc. until air entry stops.
Continue adding a number with each in and out breath until you reach 10, then start again.
2. Count rapidly to 10 on the in breath, and rapidly to 10 on the out breath, and repeat with each in and out breath.
3. Count 1,2,3,4,5 on the in breath and 1,2,3,4,5,6 on the out breath. Then count 1 to 7 on the next in breath and 1 to 8 on the next out breath and 1 to 9 on the next in breath and 1 to 10 on the next out breath. Repeat.
4. After the in breath is complete, count 1. After the out breath is complete, count 2. Continue until you reach 10. Then count from 10 to 1. Repeat.
5. After a complete in and out breath, count 1. After a second complete in and out breath, count 2. Repeat til you reach 5. Then count from 5 to 1. Repeat.

b) Mantras/Gathas

These are another method to help you stay focused on your breath. The phrases are said in time to the breath moving in and out. The left and right columns are 2 different gathas. Try them out on different sittings.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

Breathing in, I see myself as a flower.

As the in breath grows deep

Breathing out, I feel fresh.

The out breath grows slow.

Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain.

Breathing in makes me calm.

Breathing out, I feel solid.

Breathing out brings me peace.

Breathing in, I see myself as still water.

With the in breath I smile.

Breathing out, I reflect all that is. (Reflecting)

With the out breath I release.

Breathing in, I see myself as space.

Breathing in there is only the present moment.

Breathing out I feel free.

Breathing out it is a wonderful moment.

Once you feel yourself growing calmer and you are remaining focused on the phrases, you can switch to just saying the underlined words. And, as with the counting, when your mind is steady and calm you can stop saying the phrases and just be with the breath.

Another mantra is Buddhho, Bud- on the in-breath and -dho on the out-breath. I also like to use “I’m home” when I’ve been in trance and “wake up”. It emphasizes the positive; that I’m again in mindfulness.

4. Some final words

This is a quote from Ayya Khema’s book, “I Give You My Life”: “People who come to hear (the teachings of the Buddha) do not have to be or to become Buddhists. The Buddha never used this word. He said, we are practitioners, practitioners in the realm of knowledge.

Whether a person is a Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jew or Hindu is a matter of indifference to me. I don’t divide people into such affiliations, which separate them from each other even more than they are already. As long as we think, 'I’m this one thing, and you are another,' we are not together. But this is a false path. In reality we are all together in the great family of humanity.

The Buddha only had one interest: to show every human being how he or she can become absolutely happy. He never sought disciples and followers. This is my approach also. If (students who come to me) are seeking the inner way, I want to help them to find that which lives in all of us - pure peace, pure happiness.

Religion is not confined to any set of traditional cultural or social customs. Such customs are sometimes helpful to people, but they are not the essence of religion.

Religion is an inner revelation, a response to the need for perfection that we carry within us”.

May you be well and happy