AN INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATION

THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY
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Why Meditate?

People come to learn how to meditate for many reasons. Modern life is busy and we are bombarded with every kind of sensory stimulation. It’s as though our senses are ceaselessly assaulted with different things to see, hear, smell, and taste. We might feel anxious, harried, or simply feel that we have too much going on in our lives. Sometimes it all seems to have got a bit too much. Consequently, we are drawn to the idea of sitting quietly somewhere and just getting our heads back together, if only for a few minutes.

When we teach meditation we find that people come for many reasons, but they stay for one: it works for them. People who come to classes ask many questions,
More important than posture or technique is the attitude we take to our meditation. We don’t practise to get anything – not even peace of mind. Peace of mind comes naturally when we learn to let go of the things that make the mind un-peaceful. The most helpful attitude to adopt is one of gentle curiosity – what’s this all about? Meditation is not about attaining anything, but rather about letting go.
How to meditate in 7 Steps

1. Find a quiet place

2. Find a comfortable stable position

3. Settle

4. Notice the breath

5. Notice the flow of thoughts

6. Come back to the count

7. Take it with you: Daily Life Practice
Find a Quiet Place

This does not have to be on top of a mountain in Tibet or sealed in an underground or sound-proofed chamber. You only need a place where you will not be interrupted for half an hour. If you need to hang a `Do Not Disturb` sign on the door then do so. Turn off phones, messengers and emails. If you use your phone as a timer, make sure that it is set not to receive calls. It is good to decide how long you are going to meditate for before you start. You can use a watch, clock, or timer or if in a group the person leading the meditation will mark the beginning and end of the session by sounding a gong or bell.
Find a Comfortable Position

The aim is to find a good stable seating position that you can maintain for half an hour or longer. A good meditation posture requires a stable base. While it is traditional to sit on a cushion on the floor, it is equally permissible to meditate on a chair. However you sit, try to ensure that your hips are above your knees, so that the pelvis tilts forwards, allowing the spine to straighten itself effortlessly. When sitting on a chair it can be helpful to have your feet flat on the floor. If you are sitting on a cushion, try to have your knees in contact with the floor, otherwise your posture will become unstable and you will probably feel a sense of strain and tension on the lower back and legs.

An alternative is the Seiza posture, where you sit astride the cushion with your knees on the floor and your feet behind.
Once you have settled into a comfortable posture, just relax your back and shoulders. Raise and drop your shoulders a few times and let them find their level. Gently roll your head from side to side, and then to and fro. Let it come gently to rest in the middle. Let your hands fall naturally into your lap, the left palm below the right.

You should be upright but not uptight. The posture might feel a little strange at first, and you might feel some discomfort or slight numbness but this will often pass. Meditation is not about endurance, so if you experience shooting pains, persistent numbness or other serious physical discomfort, stop meditating straight away. It can take some time to establish a good sitting posture, so be patient with yourself. If necessary, ask an experienced meditation teacher to review your posture.
Settle

As you begin to adapt to your posture you will begin to settle. Slowly let your eyelids draw down so that your eyes are half-open, or closed. Notice physical sensations. Feel yourself on the seat, feel your knees or feet on the floor beneath you. Start to feel your body within your clothes. Feel any tension or stiffness and let it go. Slowly let go of the outside world and settle in on yourself.
Notice the breath

As you settle you will notice your own breathing. You do not have to change the breath. If your breath is quick and shallow just leave it be. If you breathe slow and deep from the diaphragm, that is fine. Don’t try to hold your breath or make it fit to a pattern. Just notice the rising and the falling. To help you keep in touch, it may help to add a count to the out breath. On each out breath add One, on the next Two, on the next Three. Continue on until you reach Ten then come back to One. Notice the flow of thoughts

As you settle into counting the out breath, you will notice very quickly that your mind races away to think of ten thousand things. It might happen when you reach Two. You may already be thinking about work tomorrow, a party at the weekend, a family event coming up. You can be assailed by memories pleasant
or unpleasant, wild fantasies or dark imaginings. The idea of meditation is not to get caught up in these thoughts. We might try to stop them but we soon learn that we cannot. We simply notice them come and let them go, without judgement.

Come back to the Count

We let go of thoughts by simply noticing that we are thinking. Whatever the thought is, let it go on its way and just return to the count. Breathe out One….breathe out Two… and so on.

It is not a competition, no one will mind if you reach Ten every time or never. The only task you have to perform is to notice that you have become distracted and return to the count. We might find that counting in a distracted manner, we have reached a count of 25.
No matter. Notice that you have drifted off and then come back to the count and start again at One... Two....Three...Four...

In some approaches you let go of the counting once your attention has settled on the `in-and-out’ flow of the breath. In this case, you constantly return to the natural flow of the breath itself.
Take it with you: Daily Life Practice

It might seem like a few brief moments or it might seem like hours, but eventually your meditation time will be up. Slowly come back in touch with your surroundings. Feel the effect of having meditated, whatever kind of experiences you may have had in a particular session. Avoid rushing directly onto the next thing the moment the meditation is over.

We can practice meditation at any time, any where. But don’t try to shut out the world or close your eyes while doing this! Meditating in daily life is not about walking around like a zombie, falling over and doing harm to ourselves or others. We simply notice the flow of thoughts going through our mind and come back to the breath. And we can meditate like this at home, walking to work, tidying the garden, or sitting on a train. We do not shut out the world, we simply notice it and
move on. We experience thoughts arising within us and let them go.

What next?

This brief outline is all you need to get started. Try to meditate at the same time every day. Some people find the early morning best. Meditation sets them up for the day. Others find last thing at night works well, but it is very easy to be overcome by sleep. Start with 10 minutes a day for 5 days then take a break. The next week try for 15 minutes for 5 days then take a break. Add 5 minutes each week until you have reached 30 minutes. There will always be a little resistance. The sofa is more comfortable, the TV is more fun. There are endless hours to lose engaging with all kinds of distractions. Do not worry about this. Your meditation practice is always there for you. The more you do, the
more it will become part of your life. Remember, you are doing this because you want to, because it works for you.

On lifestyle

It is unlikely that you will develop a calm, peaceful, focussed mind in meditation while you are leading a lifestyle which disturbs, confuses and dulls the mind. For Buddhists morality and meditation go hand-in-hand: each supports the other.