

Mindfulness Meditation

By Ken Walkama

Meditation is learning to be fully present, awake to what is.

Meditation is paying attention. Attention holds the key to expanding our sense of self and deepening our connection to life. Meditation teaches us how to bring attention to our life and how to open to the fullness of each and every moment. It also teaches us how to free ourselves from the unnecessary suffering that thought creates. Meditation does this not by creating new or special experiences but by allowing us to be fully present to each moment as it is. We don't change or improve things so much as we wake up from our thoughts and judgments and wake up to life as it is for life is not what we think.

The two essential guidelines of meditation

Meditation practices differ by what they choose to focus on, but all meditations have in common two essential guidelines. These guidelines create the conditions that allow us to be present and awake.

1. Meditation is expanding awareness beyond thought.

There is more to awareness than thought. In meditation we learn we can become aware of our thoughts without getting caught up in them, without believing them, without feeding or fighting them. Meditation is noticing we are thinking and looking beyond our thoughts and becoming aware of what is already present in this moment.

2. Meditation is awareness without adding thought.

Looking beyond thought we notice what is already there: sights, sounds, and sensations. We allow things to be as they are without adding on thoughts, opinions or judgments. We are aware, present, not looking for something, but just looking. Direct awareness is enough; thoughts, we realize, pull us away, obscure our relationship to what is. When things are not obscured by thought, they "shine with their own light." They get through to us, renewing our connection to life.

Mindfulness Meditation: Allowing what is

Mindfulness meditation has as its focus whatever arises in the present. Mindfulness meditation is the practice of being fully present to whatever happens in the present. It is the simple act of giving full attention to what is already there, allowing it to be as it is without adding thought to it. It is staying present, moment after moment, allowing in whatever arises. It is learning to live in the present, not in thoughts.

Normally we notice things and go back to thinking; in mindfulness meditation we notice our thinking and go back to being aware.

Mindfulness meditation is not about stopping thoughts, but not stopping at them.

Thoughts will arise. Thoughts are not something to get rid of but just another thing to observe. It is our identification with thoughts that causes us grief, not the thoughts themselves. A thought can be observed and allowed to pass by, much as we would notice a cloud floating by. We can be the sky, not the cloud; we can be the spaciousness of awareness, not the thought. When thoughts are not identified with, they are just part of what we experience and don't obstruct our clearly seeing what else is there. Thinking then becomes a tool, not our identity. We can pick it up and use it and put it down when we are through.

Freedom and completeness

By not reinforcing our habitual identification with thoughts, meditation allows us to experience freedom from thoughts and self-images. Thoughts constrict and even pain us when

we identify with them. We experience spaciousness and freedom when we let them go. We are not our thoughts. Knowing that the constriction of thoughts is unnecessary, we realize we don't have to think our way out, we can just let go. We know our selves then through our connection to the present not through our connection to thoughts.

Each time we pay full attention to life, we discover that moment is complete in itself with nothing lacking. Lack and incompleteness are just thoughts.

Why practice?

We don't meditate to create a particular experience, but to provide a space for any experience. We don't meditate to fix or change things, but just to see things the way they are. Meditation is not escaping from life, but learning how to stay open to it. Through meditation we learn to let more in and let more go. We notice, but don't buy into thoughts and judgments about life and our selves. When thoughts don't bind or hinder us, life opens up, or rather, we open to life. We discover our natural openness and spaciousness.

Meditation Instructions

Sitting meditation practice (zazen)

The practice of sitting meditation is the heart of a meditation practice. By simplifying what we do and what is happening around us, sitting meditation becomes the place where we can most clearly see how the mind works. Watching the mind wake up from thought and get lost in thought, over and over again, we learn first hand what it feels like to be present and what it feels like to be lost in thought. Without a regular meditation practice it is hard to resist the pull of thoughts.

1. Assume a comfortable position where the back can be erect. You can sit on a chair or cross-legged on the floor on a firm cushion (zafu) about four to six inches high.
2. Have the hands folded on your lap, palms up, left hand on top of the right, with thumbs touching.
3. Eyes can be closed or half-open, softly focused on the floor about three feet in front of you.
4. Take a couple of deep breaths to settle the body. Restrain from moving, if possible, during the period of sitting by dealing with pain or itching by directing attention towards it.
5. Mindfulness meditation starts with awareness of breathing. Breathing is something we always have with us; it is always in the present and is a neutral, non thought-provoking object. Bring your attention to your breathing, usually in the abdomen area. Follow the movements of the abdomen as you breathe in and out normally. Become intimate with the breathing, allowing it to take up more and more of your awareness. Notice the sensations associated with the breath, without judging or commenting on them. Simply be present and aware.
6. In the beginning it can help the mind stay focused to count the out breaths from one to ten. If you lose count, start again at one.
7. If thoughts arise, as they will, just notice them and gently bring your attention back to the breath. If your mind wanders for awhile, as soon as you notice it, wake yourself up and bring yourself back to the breath.
8. Labeling thoughts can be helpful. When a thought arises, say softly to yourself, "thinking, thinking," or "having a thought about _____." This allows you to acknowledge the thought without trying to push it away. Trying to get rid of a thought just makes it stronger. Anything you resist, you give more energy. Wanting to do something about a thought is just another thought.

9. Besides labeling thoughts, you can also label feelings, sensations and perceptions as they arise. Use labels like “sadness” or “anger” rather than “I am sad” or “I am angry.” Observe the feeling rather than identifying with it.
10. When a feeling arises, rather than getting caught up in the thoughts and stories about the feeling, bring your attention to the bodily sensations that accompany the feeling. In other words, relate to the feeling directly rather than through the stories the mind weaves.
11. As you are able to stay present to the breath for longer periods of time, you can drop the counting and just stay focused on the sensations of breathing. You can also begin to add more sensations you attend to, like bodily sensations, sounds, etc. This is choiceless awareness. Whatever arises is allowed in, without comment or judgment, and allowed to go.
12. It is through the continual process of waking ourselves up from thoughts, over and over again, and bringing ourselves back to the breath that we strengthen our ability to stay fully present without getting caught in thoughts.
13. When you first start a meditation practice, sit for five to ten minutes a day and gradually build up to 20 to 30 minutes. Set a timer so you don’t have to keep consulting a watch. Sit every day, even if it only for a few minutes. It is the daily practice that makes the most difference.

Mindfulness during other activities

Walking meditation: bring your attention to the walking itself. Be aware of the lifting and placing of the foot. You can use labels like, “stepping, stepping,” or “lifting, placing.”

Mindfulness can be practice at any time and during any activity during the day. Bring full awareness to what you are doing, not letting the mind wander off. Practice mindful walking, cooking, eating, cleaning, etc.

The Fruits of Meditation

Choosing to be free

Normally we just follow our thoughts and moods with little sense of any other option. We think that the way out of a problem or story is to think our way out, to find some solution. Through meditation we learn that we have another choice. We learn that the way out of a thought that grips us is to see the thought as a thought, to acknowledge the thought without feeding it and then to bring our attention back to the present. The thought may stay around for awhile but it loses its hold on us when we see it as “a thought,” not “my thought.” Thoughts lose their grip on us when we let go our grip on them, when we don’t feed them or identify with them. We don’t solve the problem, but rather dissolve it by realizing we are not the victim of our thought and not defined by the thought but are larger than the thought.

This moment is enough

Normally we spend a lot of our time waiting for special moments to come along so we can have a reason to pay attention. We wait because we think this moment is lacking and that things are better some other place, some other time. We end up waiting to live. Through meditation we learn that what makes any moment special or complete is how we pay attention. Anytime we drop our judgments about a moment and give full attention, that moment is experienced as enough just as it is. There is no thought or need to be elsewhere. Lack is in the thought, not in the present. There are no obstacles in the way of our being open and awake to this moment right now. There are no obstacles in the way of this moment being whole and complete. When we don’t let thoughts define us or this moment, then the completeness of this moment is evident.

Spaciousness: Host vs. Guest

Normally when we identify with a story running through our mind, it feels like the story takes charge (becomes the host) and we are just a character, pushed and pulled around in the story (we are the guest). We weave a story and trap ourselves in it. Through meditation we learn when we see a story as just a thought, we become the host and the story is just a thought (guest) passing through. The thought is in us; we are not in the thought. We experience spaciousness around the thought or story. We are not a character in a story and thus can respond with greater freedom and creativity if a response is called for.

Take time to smell the roses, AND, take time to notice your thoughts

Just adding moments of direct awareness to our day is only half the practice. It is not enough to smell the roses and then rush back into the dramas of the day. Seeing through the supposed solidity and urgency of our thoughts and stories is what frees us. We need to see the thoughts and beliefs that run our life. Anytime we feel pushed or driven, burdened or stressed, we can know that we are in the grip of a thought or expectation that we have not become conscious of yet. It is not enough to take a break or distract ourselves. Become conscious of the thought that is running your life. Look at it; realize it is just a thought and is unnecessary and not binding. When we let go our grip on the thought, it lets go its grip on us. We can then play more lightly and creatively with the various roles and obligations of our life without feeling burdened and trapped by them.

Compassion

When we begin to see through the beliefs and opinions we carry around, we begin to dissolve the barriers we erect within us and between us and life. Our compulsion to judge each moment, our selves and others lessens. We no longer trust our stories to tell us who we are; we learn to trust awareness, this present moment. We are not so quick to judge, but are able to spend more time listening, looking, letting in. We become less reactive, less defensive, less needing to protect and promote some image of ourselves. We discover our innate kindness and our connection with life that was there all along. We stop hurting others and ourselves.

Pointers for Daily Life

1. Wake yourself up now and then throughout the day. Step outside your thoughts and the role you are playing. Just be aware of what is around you. Breathe. In the “gaps” of your day, between meetings or activities, spend the time being mindful just walking, just sitting, etc.
2. Begin to balance being in your thoughts with being in the present by having some of your attention on your breathing as much as you can. You are less likely then to get trapped by thoughts. When you do allow yourself to think about something, continue to have some of your attention on your breathing. This allows you to keep one foot in the present.
3. During times of stress or when you are feeling preoccupied or disconnected, come back to your breath. Take a mindfulness break. Let this moment in; let thoughts recede. You don't have to go anywhere different to be in the present and whole. When you are feeling rushed, know that you are caught in a story. When you drop the story, you find yourself in the present. You will still get to where you want to go but you will be awake for the whole journey.
4. Practice taking time just to watch your thoughts rather than being swept away by them. Get to know how the mind works, how it takes you away from the present with plans, worries, memories, judgments, etc. and creates dissatisfaction with the present. All such dissatisfaction is something we add on to the present; it is not part of the present.
5. At least once a day sit down and take a few minutes to settle into your body, being aware of the tensions that may have built up. Scan through your body, noticing whatever sensations arise without judging them. Re-member yourself. Bring all of your parts back together by the simple act of paying attention to them.
6. At least once a day sit down and take a few minutes to notice without commenting, what thoughts and worries you have been carrying around. Start by being aware of your breathing and then just notice what thoughts and concerns arise. Acknowledge each one without getting caught up in trying to solve or fix it. When you give each one room to be, you are taking stock of your concerns rather than escaping or ignoring them
7. Choose some daily activity during which you will regularly practice being mindful, like washing the dishes, walking from your car to your office, brushing your teeth, etc. Pay attention to each movement and sensation, not letting the mind wander off.
8. When you wake up in the morning, rather than letting the mind rush in to pick up the thoughts and plans from the day before, allow yourself to just be aware of your body, your breathing and the room around you. Don't be so quick to reassemble your identity. You are more than your thoughts. Start the day with your awareness expanded beyond your thoughts.
9. Consider joining a meditation group for support and encouragement.
10. You now have an alternative to being lost in thought and worries. You can choose to be open to the present. By doing so, thoughts and worries will slowly lose their hold on you.
11. Turn to the present, not to your thoughts, to find your way.