



tricycle

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

COMMIT

TO SIT



A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

We don't have to remind you how toxic our lives can be. Stress at work, arguments with loved ones, poor diets, and too many hectic weekends conjure daydreams of Himalayan caves—guaranteed not to have cell phone reception. But in reality, even that retreat you've been planning for years feels like an impossible commitment.

Balancing a commitment to becoming more compassionate and wise with the responsibilities of a family, a career, and a checking account is a near-constant dilemma for many practitioners. To help, we've teamed up with one of the West's foremost Buddhist teachers, Sharon Salzberg, to create an intensive meditation program designed for your busy schedule. No steep retreat fees, no putting newspaper delivery on hold, no out-of-office replies required.

Our twenty-eight-day Commit to Sit challenge puts that daydream of an intense daily practice to the test. How different will you feel when you meditate every day for a month? What happens when you commit to the five traditional Buddhist vows for laypeople, including refraining from intoxicants and minding your speech? The meditation instructions provided here come out of the Vipassana tradition, which can be traced directly to the way the Buddha himself practiced. The program schedule is based on Vipassana retreats popular in the West and has been constructed to encourage and support your practice.

Whether you have months of retreat under your belt or have never been able to keep up a regular meditation practice, the simple structure

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of the program and accompanying instructions will help you to deepen and reinforce your practice. We have combined introductory teachings with guided meditations and a simple practice schedule so that anyone can participate in the challenge. However, people with an extensive daily regimen already in place may want to practice for longer periods than recommended, or include elements from their regular practice.

Begin whenever you want. Everything you need to experience this at-home retreat is contained here, but further teachings and resources are available at tricycle.com/blog and tricycle.com/retreats. Good luck, and remember: this is a challenge. It is a structured four-week program intended to give you a taste of the benefits of intensive meditation training. Everyone will struggle to follow the program perfectly. Do not let missed meditation sessions or broken vows discourage you. Just return to the practice. As Sharon Salzberg often tells her students, it's the coming back that deepens our practice.

—Alexandra Kaloyanides

Many of the teachings included in this program (specifically, Ch. 7-13) have been adapted from *Insight Meditation: A Step-by-Step Course on How to Meditate, with Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein*, an interactive learning program from Sounds True.

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THE FIVE PRECEPTS

We begin our retreat by taking the five “precepts,” the principles that lay Buddhists have taken for over twenty-five hundred years to express their commitment to everyday morality. We will make this commitment for the entire twenty-eight-day period. The precepts are simply training tools that help us to stay focused while we cultivate mindfulness. As many people on retreat have realized, the most purifying components of the experience are often the precepts. Our culture rarely provides us with occasion or motivation to relinquish alcohol for a month, and we all struggle with the consequences of the things we say. Taking twenty-eight days to pay special attention to what goes into our bodies and what comes out of our minds is a rare opportunity to live in accordance with our ideals. The five precepts we undertake are expressions of our good-heartedness, our care for ourselves, and our care for others. Consider them skillful means designed as tools for practice, not markers for self-judgment.

The first precept is a commitment to refrain from killing or physical violence. The idea is to use each day, each encounter, as an opportunity to express our reverence for life. This approach counters the tendency to feel separate and apart, objectifying other living beings to such an extent that we’re actually capable of hurting them. The first precept includes all sentient beings—people as well as bugs and animals.

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The second precept is a commitment to refrain from stealing—or literally, from the sutras, “to refrain from taking that which is not offered or given.” This means having a sense of contentment; being at peace with what we have; not taking more than we actually need; being grateful for what we have; and so on.

The third precept is refraining from sexual misconduct. This means we resolve not to use our sexual energy in a way that causes harm or suffering to ourselves or others. When we don't know how to deal with our sexual desire in a skillful way, there are endless possibilities for abuse, exploitation, and obsession. The third precept includes not harming ourselves, in the sense that instead of being driven by our desires, we're able to make conscious choices.

The fourth precept is about using the power of speech in an ethical way. Traditionally, we commit to refrain from lying, but actually this precept also covers harsh or idle speech and slander. We recognize that our speech does, in fact, have tremendous power. Words don't just come out of our mouths and disappear. Rather, they're a very important means of connecting and have lasting effects and consequences. We need to be mindful of how we speak.

The last of the five precepts is a commitment to refrain from taking intoxicants that cloud the mind and cause heedlessness, meaning drugs and alcohol (but not prescription medication). This precept is a traditional way of detoxifying our bodies and minds, but can be challenging at social events where alcohol is considered a means of social connection and relaxation. However, if we are dedicated to maintaining this commitment, these situations often prove to be less awkward than we had feared, and

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the benefits of keeping the vow turn out to be even more fruitful than we had hoped.

When you find that somehow you've broken a precept, the important thing is to take it again. Castigating yourself, or seeing the broken precept in light of the failure or an irredeemable character flaw, is pointless and counterproductive. Instead, you might see the beauty and joy in living in harmony, and use that inspiration to repair the fabric of wholeness in your life.

THE MEDITATION

People have practiced some form of meditation, or quieting the mind, since the beginning of recorded history. All major world religions (and many lesser-known spiritual traditions) include some contemplative component. Vipassana, the type of meditation included in this program, is characterized by concentration and mindfulness. Also known in West as "insight meditation," Vipassana is designed to quiet the mind and refine our awareness so that we can experience the truth of our lives directly with minimal distraction and obscuration.

The practice of Buddhist meditation can be said to be nontheistic—that is, not dependent on belief in an external deity. Buddhism simply reflects back to us that the degree of our own liberation is dependent on the extent of our own effort. So the Buddha's style of meditation is compatible with any spiritual path, whether theistic or nontheistic. The practice of mindful awareness is an invaluable tool to anyone seeking spiritual awakening, mental clarity, or peace of mind.

The first pillar of meditation is concentration. Concentration is the development of stability of mind, a gathering in and focusing of our normally scattered energy. The state of concentration that we develop in

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meditation practice is tranquil, at ease, relaxed, open, yielding, gentle, and soft. We let things be; we don't hold onto experiences. This state is also alert—it's not about getting so tranquil that we just fall asleep. It's awake, present, and deeply connected with what's going on. This is the balance that we work with in developing concentration.

The other main pillar of meditation is the quality of mindfulness. That means being aware of what is going on as it actually arises—not being lost in our conclusions or judgments about it, or our fantasies of what it means. Rather, mindfulness helps us to see nakedly and directly: “This is what is happening right now.” Through mindfulness we pay attention to our pleasant experiences, our painful experiences, and our neutral experiences—the sum total of what life brings us. The Persian poet Rumi said, “How long will we fill our pockets like children, with dirt and stones? Let the world go. Holding it, we never know ourselves, never are airborne.”

There are five guided meditations in this Commit to Sit challenge that give specific instructions for developing the skills of concentration and mindfulness. The techniques they suggest are meant to be read, considered, and then gently and intentionally implemented into meditation periods.

CULTIVATING A DAILY MEDITATION PRACTICE

The emphasis in meditation practice is on the word “practice.” It's a life-long journey, a process of learning to come back to clear, unobstructed experience. Checking in daily with this profound practice will yield the greatest impact throughout your life.

Just as painful habits take time to unravel, helpful habits take time to instill. Here are some suggestions to help you establish a daily medita-

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tion practice. None of these ideas is a hard and fast rule; try using them instead as tools to support your intention.

Plan to meditate at about the same time every day. Some people find it best to sit right after they get up, while others find it easier to practice after a shower and coffee; your second practice could be in the afternoon or at bedtime. Experiment to find out what times work best for you.

Find a quiet place to meditate. It could be in your bedroom or living room, in a basement or attic, or on a porch. Wherever you sit, pick a place where you can be relatively undisturbed during your meditation sessions. Try to keep your space free of clutter. If you can't dedicate this space exclusively to meditation, make sure you can easily carry your chair, cushion, or bench to and from it each day.

Some meditators like to bring inspiring objects to their meditation space: an image, some incense, or possibly a book from which you can read a short passage before beginning.

Keep it simple. The purpose of your practice is not to induce any particular state of mind, but to bring added clarity to whatever experience you're having in the moment. An attitude of openness and curiosity will help you to let go of judgments, expectations, and other obstacles that keep you from being present.

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WEEK ONE: THE BREATH

For the first week, our main focus is the breath. Awareness of the breath is the fundamental technique of insight meditation. By focusing our attention on our inhalations and exhalations we calm the mind and create the conditions for insight to arise. Twice a day this week we will meditate for twenty minutes, focusing on our breath. The following guided meditation will introduce you to this most basic and important practice.

GUIDED MEDITATION: BREATHE EASY

In breath meditation, the mind can be relaxed and spacious; we don't have to fabricate anything. Take a few deep, easy breaths and release them. Allow the breath to become natural so you're not trying to force or control it in any way. Notice the place where you feel the breath most distinctly. It may be the in-and-out movements of the air at the nostrils. You may feel tingling or vibration, or changes in temperature. You may feel the breath most distinctly with the rising and falling of the chest or the abdomen: Stretching . . . pressure . . . tension . . . release. Wherever you feel it most natural, most easy, allow your mind to rest in that place and feel the breath. As you feel the breath, you can make a silent mental note to sharpen the concentration: "in" as you feel the breath go in; "out" as you feel it leave your body. Or "rising, falling" with the sensation in your chest or belly. Very gently, very quietly in your mind, just sup-

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port the awareness of the actual sensations. You don't need to make the breath special. It doesn't have to be long or different from however it is, however it changes. It's happening anyway, so simply be aware of it, one breath at a time.

You may feel your attention wandering. You may realize that you've been lost in thought, planning, remembering, whatever. Perhaps it's been quite some time since you last felt the breath consciously. It doesn't matter. You don't have to judge or analyze, or try to figure out how you've got to where you've got to. Don't worry. See if you can gently let go of whatever the distraction has been and simply begin again. Gently let go and return the attention to the actual feeling of the breath. This act of beginning again is the essential art of meditation practice; over and over and over, we begin again. You may find your attention wandering constantly. It doesn't matter. The mind has been trained to be distracted. In a very relaxed and patient manner, just let go, reconnect, come back to the feeling of the breath in this very moment, the natural, uncontrived, normal breath. You don't have to worry about even the breath you've just taken, or the very next one to come. There's no comparison, no anticipation—it's the breath right in this moment, as it's happening. You can settle the mind there. Feel it. Don't try to hold on to the breath. You may discover that there's a pause or a gap between the inbreath and the outbreath, or between the outbreath and the next inbreath. If you find such a pause, you can allow the attention to settle in the body. Simply feel your body sitting there. Then allow the next breath to come naturally. End the session by gently opening your eyes. Listen to sounds, feel your body, and see if you can bring some of this quality of presence and connection to the next activity you perform in the day.

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Monday–Friday: Meditate for twenty minutes in the morning and in the evening, focusing on the breath.

Weekend Challenge: Devote two hours this weekend to contemplation of the breath. Sessions should be at least thirty minutes long. Spend the entire two hours in silence, alone or with other practitioners.

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WEEK TWO: THE BODY

This week we will continue to work with the breath and begin to incorporate other sensations in the body into our meditation practice. For this second week, you are asked to meditate for twenty minutes twice a day and to practice walking meditation for twenty minutes once a day. Instructions follow for working with sensations in the body during seated meditation and for walking meditation.

WORKING WITH PAIN

We can develop the liberating gift of relating skillfully to physical pain. It is important to learn how to open to pain, because how we relate to pain in meditation is symptomatic of how we relate to all the unpleasant things in our life. The Buddha reminded us of a great and obvious truth when he taught that being born results inevitably in growth, decay, and death. If we have a body, we can be certain that at times we will also have pain and illness, and we know for sure that our body will die. Much of meditation practice is opening to this reality in a very immediate way—not merely thinking about it, but experiencing it directly and deeply.

When physical pain predominates in your practice, you can try different strategies of awareness. First, notice the general area of sensation—for example, the knee or back. Simply be aware of the whole area, letting your mind relax and settle into the physical sensations. Second,

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observe precisely the particular nature of the sensations. Do you feel burning, pressure, searing, tightness, piercing, twisting, or some other variant of bodily feeling? Noting the particular quality of what you feel will help your mind to become more concentrated.

After you recognize just what is actually there, the third step brings you even deeper. Allow your awareness to pinpoint the area of greatest intensity. Notice what happens. Usually the sensation—either pain or discomfort—will change in some way, and the point of intensity will shift. Then move your attention to that point, and then to the next—something like “following the dots” of intensity.

When your mind becomes tired, come back to awareness of the whole area, or even back to your breath. It is usually better to go back and forth between the breath and the pain for intervals of several minutes at a time, because our mind has a tendency to pull back, to become tired, and lose focus during long periods of intense unpleasant feeling. Unless we work skillfully with pain, it can exhaust us, and then mindfulness and energy decrease. Alternating between the breath and the pain keeps us more alert and energetic.

The value of altering our relationship to pain goes far beyond how and where we sit. Times of discomfort teach us how to practice freedom in all those life situations that make us uncomfortable. How are we relating just now, in this moment, to discomfort, pain, not getting what we want? It will be interesting to see, over and over again, how in those situations we think are intolerable, it is often our own resistance that makes them intolerable. The problem lies not in the situations but rather in our inability to just be with them, just to open to them.

But we also need to recognize our limits in certain situations. Sometimes experiences are too overwhelming to open up to all at once. We may need to back off for a while, or to approach them gradually. Learn-

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ing this balance is the key to so much of our practice. How much can we accept in a soft and gentle way before we close off, before we say, “This is too much”? Extending our limits makes us strong. Through this simple practice we develop a power of mind, a great capacity to be with painful situations. That strength transforms how we live our life.

This week, practice working with sensations in this way. Although pain is often the type of sensation that cries the loudest for attention, it is also beneficial to learn to experience pleasant sensations in this direct way, and perhaps more difficult, as it is so easy to become lost in the pleasant.

GUIDED MEDITATION: WALK THE WALK

Walking meditation is the application of bare attention in movement. It becomes a model for being mindful in all the movements we make throughout the day.

Find a place, inside or outside, about ten or twenty steps in length. Stand at one end of this path for a moment and settle the attention in the body with a body scan—the practice of sending your attention to every part of your body starting on one end and moving all the way through to the other.

We’ll divide the walking period into three sections. During the first section, walk back and forth at a slightly slower-than-normal speed. As you’re doing this part of the walking practice, you can use a very simple mental label with each step. Note “left, right, left, right” or “stepping, stepping” each time the foot touches the ground.

The primary emphasis in the practice is to stay centered in the body, feeling the actual sensations of movement. The mental noting should be very soft, in the background. Use it simply as a way of helping to keep

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the mind connected to what's going on.

As you're walking at near-normal speed, feel the movement of your body. Feel the movement of the legs and the feet. Be relaxed in your body with the quality of bare attention. It's alert, it's receptive, it's noticing the sensations in the movement of walking.

Notice when your mind wanders. When you notice that you are lost in a thought, simply be aware of this and come back to the step.

After walking back and forth at a speed just a little slower than normal for about ten minutes, begin to slow down. Now we'll divide the step into two parts. Begin to note the lifting and placing, lifting and placing. Feel the specific sensations associated with each of those parts of the step. As you lift, what is it that you feel in the foot and leg? As you place, what sensations are arising? See how carefully you notice what is going on—"lift, place, lift, place." Or you might note "Up, down, up, down." Feel the specific sensations with each part of those steps.

After some time, slow the walking practice down even further. Now you can divide the step into three parts: "Lift, move, place" or "Up, forward, down." Finish one step completely before lifting the other foot. Settle back into the very slow and easy rhythm, with careful attention to the sensations of lifting, the sensations of moving forward, and the sensations of lowering the foot and touching.

The rhythm of this slow walking is quite different from the way we usually move. It may take a short while for you to get used to this rhythm, where you finish one step completely before lifting the other foot. Continue at this speed, settling back into the movement, settling into your body with bare attention, feeling the subtlety of sensations with each part of the step. Try to keep the mind and body relaxed. There need not be any kind of struggle or forcing.

Feel free to experiment with the speed at which you move, keeping

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in mind that the guideline is mindfulness. For most people, this means starting at a somewhat faster pace, and then gradually slowing down as the mind becomes more focused and concentrated. If you find that the mind is wandering a lot, you can change the speed to a faster pace.

Generally, you place the emphasis on the sensations in the foot and leg as you move. At times, though, you can also be with the sensations of the whole body. Feel the whole body as it moves through space.

Sometimes, in the evening, if you're feeling full of energy or restless and tired, you might find that the walking practice is actually more helpful than the sitting. Because the movement is quite obvious and tangible, people often find it easier to focus their attention in the walking. If you are struggling in your seated meditation periods in the evenings, feel free to replace them occasionally with periods of walking meditation.

Monday–Friday: Continue practicing seated meditation for twenty minutes in the morning and in the evening. This week, add a twenty-minute walking meditation session each day.

Weekend Challenge: Devote three hours this weekend to contemplation on the body in sessions of at least thirty minutes. Spend a minimum of one hour practicing walking meditation. If you are able to practice for three solid hours, try alternating between seated and walking meditation in thirty-minute periods with one half-hour break for tea. During breaks, maintain silence if possible and move carefully without rushing,

paying special attention to the sensations in your body.

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WEEK THREE: EMOTIONS & HINDRANCES

Halfway there! Until now, you have been experiencing emotions and hindrances during your meditation periods, but the instructions have been to focus on the breath and the body. This week you will devote more attention to these emotions and hindrances and become more skillful in dealing with them. In order to do this, we investigate the nature of these experiences as they happen. This week, as your daily time commitment increases to two thirty-minute meditation sessions and two walking periods, you will continue to work with the breath and the body while putting particular attention on emotions like anger and hindrances like restlessness. The following guided meditations provide instructions for working with the hindrances and emotions.

GUIDED MEDITATION: HANDLING HINDRANCES

One of the keys to a skillful relationship with the five hindrances is being able to name them or to make a mental note of them. The five classical hindrances to meditation practice are desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. We practice noting very softly, giving about 95 percent of our attention to actually being with the experience, to sensing it completely. Only 5 percent of our energy goes into the soft, gentle

naming of it.

We use mental noting with the hindrances to bring us into a direct relationship with them, as opposed to elaborating or judging or creating a story about what's going on. If aversion, or anger, arises, for example, we would note it as "anger, anger." This brings us close to the exploration of anger itself. What is anger? What does it feel like? What is its nature?

Mental noting takes us in a very different direction from getting lost in a story: "Oh, this anger is so miserable; I am such a terrible person because I'm always angry; this is just how I will always be," and so on. Instead, we simply say to ourselves, "anger, anger"—and cut through all of that elaboration, the story, the judgment, the interpretation.

As you note the particular hindrance, you can also be conscious of what happens to it. How does it behave? Does it intensify? Does it fade away? Pay particular attention to whether or not it manifests in the body. If so, how does it feel? What parts of the body are affected by the arising of this force in the mind? The chest, the stomach, the head, the eyes, the breath—where are you feeling it?

What does it feel like in the mind, in the heart, as a mood, as a coloration, as an experience? Do you feel open, or do you feel contracted when this hindrance is present? Do you feel closed off and separate, or do you feel connected? Whatever it is, explore and discover without judgment. Simply pay attention. Watch and see the nature of this hindrance in the moment and observe how it changes. Is it growing stronger? Is it growing weaker? Is it changing into something else?

Listen to the voices that come along with the hindrances. What are they saying to you? What are they saying about you and what you're capable of? Very often with the hindrances, and especially with the forces of desire or anger, we get so lost in the object that we forget to pay any attention to the feeling itself. We fixate so much on what we want, or

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what we want to keep, or what we hate and want to push away, that we don't spend much time feeling the nature of desire or of anger itself. So ask yourself now: what do they feel like? See if you can let go of that fixation on the object of the feeling. Relax. Abide in the feeling. It's an act of discovery. It's as though somebody were to say to you, "What is desire? What is anger?" Not "Why are you feeling it?" or "Is it right or is it wrong?" Just "What is it?"

The hindrances are going to arise. We don't have to be upset or afraid about that. We don't have to feel disappointed because of it. We can come to understand a great deal about our experience—about our own suffering and our release from suffering—just from coming to understand these hindrances better.

GUIDED MEDITATION: HOW DOES IT FEEL?

We've talked about working with the mind states of the hindrances as they arise in meditation and in our lives. We also want to become aware of the entire range of emotional life. The various emotions that arise in sitting practice and in walking—we want to bring this awareness to all of these, and then beyond that to the emotions we experience in the world every day. As you sit, feeling the breath, feeling sensations, noticing the hindrances as they arise, be aware of different emotions as they appear in your experience. There might be the feeling of happiness or sadness; there might be the feeling of joy or depression. You might feel quite light or buoyant. You might feel heavy or despairing.

Each one of these states can be opened to, noticed, and noted. The practice is to be aware of them without identifying with them; not taking them to be "I" or "self" or "mine," but seeing them as a constellation or experience arising out of conditions. We see them lasting for some

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time, changing, disappearing, in the form of sensations in the body; particular thoughts or images associated with the emotion; or as a certain texture or coloration of the mind. Each emotion has its own particular flavor. We want to investigate all of these aspects.

The first step in working with an emotion is to recognize what it is. It's very helpful to use mental noting to bring forth clear recognition: "This is happiness, this is sadness, this is loneliness, this is excitement, this is interest, this is boredom." Clear recognition can be very helpful. If other thoughts rush in to associate with the naming, practice returning, again and again, to the simple naming.

When an emotion is arising strongly in your experience, it's useful to notice the different aspects or constituents of the emotion. Feel the specific sensations in the body. Is there heat? Is the body contracted? Is it open? Is it soft? Notice whether there are particular images or thoughts associated with the emotion, and notice the mind flavor of the particular feeling. Each emotion has its own flavor, the flavor of sadness or happiness or joy or love or anger. Open to the subtleties in the mind and body as each of these feelings arises.

Sometimes you may not be able to recognize exactly what the emotion is. There's no need to spend a long time trying to analyze it; you can simply open to the feeling with the general note of "feeling" or "emotion" until what it is becomes clearer to you.

So the first step is recognition. The second step is acceptance. There's often a tendency to resist or deny certain emotions, particularly if they're unpleasant. There are certain emotions that we don't like to feel. These can be different for each of us. For some people, there is a resistance to feeling anger or sadness or unworthiness. In our meditation practice, we want to recognize what's arising and be accepting of whatever it is. Acceptance is the key to the third step, which is nonidentification with

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the emotion. The understanding is that this constellation of experience is arising out of conditions and then passing away. It is nonpersonal. There's no one behind them to whom they are happening.

This may take some practice to understand. It's a very subtle and difficult point, because often what we most personalize, what we most identify with, are the emotions. They're what we're most likely to take ourselves to be.

Monday–Friday: Practice seated meditation for thirty minutes in the morning and in the evening. Include two periods of walking meditation, of any length, in the course of the day. Pay particular attention to emotions and hindrances, working with them according to the instructions above.

Weekend Challenge: Devote four hours this weekend to silent meditation in sessions of at least thirty minutes. Practice being mindful of emotions and hindrances as they arise this weekend, both during and outside of your formal meditation periods.

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WEEK FOUR: THOUGHTS

You've made it to the final week. Acknowledge your hard work and recognize the joy that comes from following through on a commitment. In this final week we will further develop the skills we have worked on over the last twenty-one days and will expand our realm of focus to include thoughts.

WORKING WITH THOUGHTS

For the purpose of meditation, nothing is particularly worth thinking about: not our childhood, not our relationships, not the great novel we always wanted to write. This does not mean that thoughts will not come. In fact, they may come with tremendous frequency. We do not need to fight with them or struggle against them or judge them. Rather, we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once they have arisen. The quicker we notice that we are thinking, the quicker we can see thought's empty nature.

Our thoughts are often seductive, and meditation may pass quickly when we sit and daydream; before we know it, the hour has passed. It may have been an enjoyable sitting, but it was not meditation. We need to be aware of this sidetrack in practice and remember that the kind of wisdom we want to develop comes intuitively and spontaneously from

silent awareness.

Although meditation is not thinking, it can be *clear awareness of thinking*. Thought can be a very useful object of meditation. We can turn the great power of observation onto thought in order to learn about its inherent nature, becoming aware of its process instead of getting lost in its content. In dharma teaching we speak frequently about the powerful impact of identifying with phenomena. Identification imprisons us in the content of our conditioning. One of the easiest ways to understand this imprisonment is to observe the difference between being lost *in* thought and being mindful *of* it.

The Buddha said that we are shaped, created, and led by our thoughts. If he was right, then it is important for us to watch our thought process closely to see where we get hooked, where we are seduced through identification into creating something that brings us unhappiness. It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They can drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and the impact they have on our destiny, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear powerful space of just seeing thoughts arising and passing, then it does not matter what species of thinking appears in the mind; they are all essentially empty of any substance at all, and we can see them for the passing show that they are. These all-powerful movers and shakers of the world that create us and lead us become little energy blips in our mind, with hardly enough power to create even a ripple. They seem like transparent dewdrops evaporating in the sun.

But there are many times when we are not simply watching thoughts come and go, either because we are lost in them or because we choose to think something through, perhaps as a precursor to action. In both cas-

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es it is crucial for us to discern wholesome from unwholesome thoughts in order to know which to give our energy to, because these thoughts do have karmic impact: they lead us. From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. Which thoughts will we invest in? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which to act on and which simply to let be.

It takes a great deal of alertness to stay aware of thoughts. They are extremely slippery. If you watch them in one place, they sneak in from another. But as practice evolves, two liberating things happen. First, our mind actually becomes quieter. Instead of being a rushing torrent, thoughts come less frequently, and we enjoy an increasing sense of calm and inner peace. Second, our observing power becomes quicker and stronger. We can see thoughts much more clearly and are taken for fewer unconscious rides. Without identifying with thoughts and giving them power, our mind abides in a natural state of ease, simplicity, and peace.

GUIDED MEDITATION: COUNTING THOUGHTS

As you sit, resolve to concentrate on the thought process for five minutes. Let your mind appear as a blank screen, and watch carefully for thoughts to arise. They may come as images, or words in the mind, or both together. Some thoughts may arise with a feeling or physical sense as well. Note experience as it appears.

For five minutes, experiment with counting your thoughts. After noticing and counting the thoughts, simply wait, looking at the blank screen, for the next one to arise. Remember that some thoughts are very subtle, like “It’s so quiet in here.” We count the thoughts not to form a judgment about ourselves and how much (or little) we think, but to observe the thought process with mindfulness, without getting lost in each

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story. Can you describe your experience?

Carefully note each breath as “breath.” As thoughts arise, note them simply as “not-breath.” This also helps us cut our dualistic fixation with the content of our thoughts. Whether lovely or frightening, they are all noted simply as “not-breath.” What kinds of thoughts predominate in your mind—words or pictures, those arising with a kinesthetic sense, or a combination?

If images are arising, can you note them as “seeing” and notice whether they are growing brighter, fading, breaking apart, moving closer, or staying just the same? Can you note the particular kind of thought, such as “planning,” “remembering,” “judging,” “loving”?

Observe the effect of various types of thoughts—for example, of a future-directed thought like “I’m never going to get any better.” What happens to your mood, to your body, as a consequence of this thought? What is the difference between simply observing it and getting lost in it?

Can you name an insistent thought with a label that reflects some compassion and humor? We call them the Top Ten tapes because they arise in the form of conditioned tapes in the mind. They play like songs on the radio, reflecting the same themes over and over again. Try giving them appropriate labels like “the Martyr tape,” “the I-Blew-It-Again tape,” “the Fear-of-the-Dark tape.” Be lighthearted about these labels. We can see these tapes as conditioned forces and don’t have to take ourselves so seriously. The repeated forces in the mind can be greeted in a friendly and openhearted way: “Oh, it’s you again, Mad Scientist tape. Hello.”

If a particular thought seems to be returning a lot, expand your field of attention to notice whatever emotional state may be feeding it. Unseen feelings are part of what brings thoughts back again and again. For example, anxiety often fuels future planning. At first the emotions may

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be half-hidden or unconscious, but if you pay careful attention, the feelings will reveal themselves. Use the sensations in the body to help guide the attention to whatever emotions may be present. You may find that watching tension in the chest uncovers sadness. Begin to note whatever emotion you see as a way of acknowledging them.

If there is a repeated physical pain or difficult mood, expand your field of attention to the thoughts, stories, or beliefs that may be feeding the difficult situation. When we are mindful, we may find a subtle level of self-judgment or a belief about our unworthiness, such as “I’m not as good as others. I’ll always be this way.” These thoughts actually help perpetuate pain or unhappiness.

Monday–Friday: Increase your seated-meditation commitment to forty-five-minute sessions in the morning and in the evening. Also include two periods of walking meditation, of any length, in the course of the day.

Weekend Challenge: Devote one full day (from sunrise to sunset) to contemplation on the body, the feelings, and the mind in silence. Create a schedule of alternating periods of seated and walking meditation with short breaks in the morning and afternoon and one two-hour lunch break. During break periods move carefully, paying special attention to sensations in the body and activity in the mind. This is a good opportunity to learn how to take your mindfulness practice off the cushion and into your everyday life.

You’ve done it!

Congratulations on completing the Commit to Sit challenge. But don’t stop here. The challenge now is to incorporate your newly cultivated

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wisdom, peace, and diligence into your busy life. Reflect on your efforts this month and think about how the process has unfolded for you in ways both expected and unexpected. Can you sense any change in your thought patterns and quality of attention? What commitments to meditation practice and ethical conduct would you like to keep? Take what you have learned about the practices and yourself and formulate a daily practice that works for you, and if you're still feeling adventurous, look into other kinds of retreats you might like to try.

6

S U P P L E M E N T A R Y
M A T E R I A L

GUIDED MEDITATION: COUNTING THOUGHTS

In the Buddhist tradition, mind and body are considered interdependent facets of our experience. A relaxed body helps relax the mind. The traditional meditation posture is designed to create a supportive physical structure for your awareness practice.

Many people experience some physical discomfort when they first begin sitting meditation. This is due partly to the unfamiliarity of the posture, and partly to the fact that the practice of awareness reveals more deeply held tension. We recommend that you sit comfortably and experiment until you find the posture that best supports your clarity and mindfulness.

If you sit on a chair, try not to lean your back against the backrest. Keep your spine as erect as possible without straining; your feet should be flat on the floor in front of you. Traditionally, Buddhist meditators have used a seven-point system to help them develop an optimal sitting posture on a cushion:

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1: LEGS

Cross your legs loosely in front of you, just at or above the ankles. Your knees should be lower than your hips and on the ground. If your legs go to sleep during meditation, try crossing them the other way around—you can sit with one leg in front of the other without crossing them at all. You can also kneel, turning your cushion on its side and placing it between your thighs and calves.

2: ARMS

Let your arms hang loosely at your sides. Now bend your elbows, and let your hands fall naturally onto your thighs. Don't use your arms to support the weight of your torso, or "hang on" to your knees to keep from falling backward. Some meditators prefer the so-called "cosmic mudra," a gesture that is formed by cupping your right hand in your left, palms up, with the second knuckles of your right hand roughly aligned with the first knuckles of your left. The tips of your thumbs should just barely touch each other, forming a triangle with your hands. If you're feeling sleepy, it can be helpful to keep your thumbs slightly apart, so that they warn you of an imminent nap attack by colliding with each other. In this mudra, your hands are resting loosely in your lap, close to your belly.

3: BACK

How you hold your back is the most important element of your meditation posture. Imagine that your vertebrae are coins piled on top of one another. Let your back find its natural erectness; don't strain. You'll find that the innate concave curvature at the small of your back helps to

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support your weight. As one teacher has suggested, “Imagine that your spine is a strong oak tree. Now lean against it.” Experiment with tipping your pelvis slightly forward and back to help find the natural curve of your spine.

4: EYES

Let your eyelids fall closed without squeezing them shut. If you find yourself dozing off, open your eyes slightly and let your gaze drop to the ground about six feet in front of you. Resist the temptation to let your eyes glaze—but at the same time, don’t focus fiercely on whatever’s in your field of vision. Let your gaze be soft.

5: JAW

Relax your jaw and mouth, with your teeth slightly apart. It’s said that your lips should be parted enough to admit a grain of rice.

6: TONGUE

Let the tip of your tongue rest behind your upper front teeth. This reduces the flow of saliva and hence the urge to swallow.

7: HEAD AND SHOULDERS

When you first take your seat, position your head by gazing levelly in front of you. You’ll find that this drops your neck very slightly forward. When you close your eyes, maintain this position. Be aware of your shoulders, and keep them relaxed.

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NOURISHING THE BODY TO SUPPORT THE
PRACTICE

Try to take one meal each day in silence.

Light evening meals are traditionally encouraged to support high energy levels.

Many practitioners appreciate a vegetarian diet during times of intense training.

7

WORKING WITH
AVERSION

Just as we respond to desire, we need not judge our fear, anger, frustration, contraction, irritation, annoyance, or the many other forms of aversion we experience. We simply note the moments of ill will, disappointment, or indignation as they arise. We keep noting these feelings, even labeling them—“anger, anger”—and watching our tone so that we’re not noting in an angry way. We simply take note of our experience as a means of recognition and acceptance.

As an experiment, you might see how many notes it takes until the feelings of anger or aversion dissipate. Five notes, ten notes, a hundred notes? As you investigate, you’ll be able to reinforce the understanding that these feelings, like all others, are impermanent. They’re going to change. You don’t need to be caught up in them. You don’t need to be driven by them. You can create the space in yourself to simply be aware.

Recognition without judgment—that’s the first way of working. The second way of working is to look at the associated feelings that may be feeding the anger or the ill will. For example, anger is often associated with a feeling of self-righteousness, which feeds it like an underground spring. You might find yourself saying, “Well, I’m perfectly right and I should be angry. You may notice the anger, but if you’re not also noticing

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the self-righteousness, the anger will continue to grow. It's being fed in a way that you're not seeing. Remember to investigate the associated feelings in just the same way as before, without judgment or condemnation. We simply see, simply notice.

In the case of anger, people sometimes feel that to give it up is to relinquish a source of power and energy for changing the world. But there is a greater source of power that harms neither ourselves nor others, and this is the power of compassion. Later, we'll discuss and investigate the nature of compassion, and how it works in our practice and our lives.

8

WORKING WITH SENSE
DOORS

According to classical Buddhist teachings, we experience the world through six “sense doors,” or perceptual gateways. They are: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mind.

The door of mind refers to our thoughts, emotions, and mental images. The Buddha taught that these six modes of perception define the totality of our experience—in other words, every moment of our lives involves experiences that are known by way of one of these sense doors. Further, the Buddha said that each experience received in this way is colored by a feeling tone, which is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Understanding our experience in these terms reveals the importance of bringing mindfulness to every moment of our existence. Without it, we become mere creatures of mental conditioning, constantly trying to manipulate our experience so as to increase our pleasure and minimize our pain.

9

WORKING WITH METTA

Throughout this twenty eight-day meditation challenge, we explore the possibilities of a mind free of the forces of craving, aggression, and delusion. One of the great fruits of such a mind is the power of unobstructed, unconditional lovingkindness.

The Pali word for lovingkindness is *metta*. Sometimes, *metta* is translated simply as “love.” In our culture, the notion of love has assumed a complexity that obscures its true nature. Typically the word *love* conjures up thoughts of passion or sentimentality. *Metta* is neither of these, and this distinction is crucial.

The practice of lovingkindness is, at a certain level, the fruition of all we work toward in our meditation. It relies on our ability to open continuously to the truth of our actual experience, not cutting off the painful parts, and not trying to pretend things are other than they are. Just as spiritual growth grinds to a halt when we indulge our tendency to grasp and cling, *metta* can't thrive in an environment that is bound to desire or to getting our expectations met.

In lovingkindness, our minds are open and expansive—spacious enough to contain all the pleasures and pains of a life fully lived. Pain, in this context, doesn't feel like betrayal or an overwhelming force. It is part of the reality of human experience, and an opportunity for us to practice maintaining our authentic presence.

10

WORKING WITH
HINDRANCES

Recognize sleepiness as something we experience in parts of each day. We practice meditation in order to wake up. By bringing awareness to the state of torpor, you can gain glimpses into those parts of your world you may be excluding from the totality of your awareness.

If you find yourself losing interest in your surroundings, wherever you are, focus on just one thing. “Just this sentence.” “Just this step.” Bring yourself back into the present moment by becoming mindful of those objects and events that are actually arising.

Surrender. Let your mind be as restless as it wants to, but stay with it. Like any conditioned phenomenon, the restlessness will change shape as you watch it.

Recognize doubt as a thought process. It takes form as a string of words. Drop below the words to your actual experience, and you’re likely to encounter the subtle fear and resistance from which doubt can arise.

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SEATED TIPS

Experiment with posture. Sometimes, very slight adjustments can ease discomfort.

You might also want to try different types of meditation cushions and benches, or see how it feels to sit in a chair

Use what might otherwise be considered “dead” time (for example, in your car, or waiting for someone to show up for an appointment) to focus your awareness on your immediate experience. If you find it helpful, use your breath as the primary object of concentration. This practice will help you to expand the sense of presence and connection you’re developing in formal meditation into your everyday activities.

12

MEDITATION SUPPLIES

The three most common types of meditation support are:

Zafus (zah-foos): The most traditional and widespread of the meditation cushion, the zafu is a flattened, round cotton case filled with kapok or buckwheat. It is generally about fourteen inches in diameter and ten inches in height. The crescent zafu is an innovation designed to provide extra hip support. Inflatable zafus are also available for traveling meditators.

Gomdens: These firm, rectangular cushions were designed for Western practitioners by a Tibetan meditation teacher. Although only six inches thick, their firm interior creates a higher perch than the softer zafu.

Meditation benches: These simple wooden benches provide an angled sitting surface—sometimes padded—with room underneath for legs. The meditator sits in a supported kneeling position, rather than cross-legged.

Other supports might also be helpful:

A zabuton (zah-boo-ton): This thick mat is placed under your cushion or bench. Zabutons soften the impact of hard floor surfaces on your legs and ankles.

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A support cushion: Made in sizes that fit zafus, gomdens, and benches, these small, flat cushions are placed under or on top of the meditation support to provide a little more height (or, in the case of benches, to cushion the seat). Some practitioners also use them to tuck under a knee.

A gomden raiser: These wooden platforms are made specifically for gomdens, raising them a couple of inches off the floor or zabuton. Tall meditators who use gomdens sometimes find them useful.

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7 SIMPLE EXERCISES FOR
TAKING YOUR PRACTICE
INTO THE WORLD

Use these exercises a few days each month to help you maintain clarity, compassion, and mindfulness throughout the full range of your experience.

EXERCISE 1

Practice acting on the thoughts of generosity that arise in the mind.

EXERCISE 2

Determine not to gossip or speak about a third party who isn't with you at the time.

EXERCISE 3

Pick a person in your life whom you usually ignore or feel indifferent to. Consciously pay attention to them and make them an object of your metta.

EXERCISE 4

Observe any desire that arises strongly in your mind. Note whatever emotions you feel associated with it (such as loneliness, fear, longing, boredom, and so on).

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EXERCISE 5

Use times of suffering or unhappiness as opportunities to pay particular attention. What are the sources of discomfort? Is an expectation not being met, or a desire going unfulfilled? Do you find, at the heart of the suffering, a sense of being out of control?

EXERCISE 6

Choose a simple activity and be as mindful of it as you can. Note the intention preceding each component of the activity. Note the experiences of following through on these intentions.

EXERCISE 7

When you find yourself waiting in line, stuck in traffic, sitting in a meeting, or otherwise “between worlds,” practice awareness of the breath or of sounds, sights, and so on.