



Hello again, and welcome to *Meditation Illuminated*. In this session, we’re going to introduce you to the practice of meditation itself, and in the process, hopefully, make it easier for you to understand the distinction between attention and awareness. You’ll learn to focus your attention while maintaining very powerful, peripheral awareness.

First of all, let me explain the use of a term. Many of you will be familiar with it, but I have found that a lot of people aren’t: “the meditation object.” When I say “the meditation object,” I’m referring to what we anchor our attention to. In this particular case, we will anchor our attention to the sensations of the breath at the nose. We will call the breath at the nose “the meditation object,” but what we mean is that it is the anchor that we will keep bringing the attention back to whenever it varies, and then try to sustain for as long as possible.

I want to say something about meditation objects in general. There are many things that are suitable as meditation objects. Each meditation object has certain advantages and disadvantages compared to others. Let me say why we use the breath at the nose. For one thing, it’s always present—we don’t have to do anything. We can be in the state of completely passive observation, watching a phenomenon as it arises and passes away and repeats itself over time, because a breath and the sensations it produces happen completely automatically.

Another advantage of the sensations of the breath as a meditation object is that it is a fixed meditation object—it repeats constantly. While it’s not a single thing—like a *kasina* or a *Buddharūpa* would be—nevertheless it has a constancy that gives it the particular advantages of a fixed object.

At the same time, no two breaths are the same, so it also has the advantages of a changing meditation object. We use a meditation object’s changing nature to help us remain engaged with the sensations of the breath and to minimize the tendency of the mind to be drawn to distractions, which leads to the mind forgetting and wandering.



These are the reasons that we use the sensations of the breath at the nose as a meditation object, but if you prefer something else, it could be sensations of the breath at the abdomen, an icon, a kasina, a flame, or a rock. It doesn't matter. If there is something else that you're used to using as a meditation object, go ahead. It's not a problem. For this session at least, as I'm guiding you through it, I encourage you to try to use the sensations of the breath at the nose.

As a matter of fact, one of the things I'm going to do is to guide you through an exercise that takes you out of the everyday state, in which attention is spontaneously moving from one thing to another, or being captured by one thing or another, or alternating with many things as you multitask. We will guide you through a process that takes you from this constantly, spontaneously moving attention to a place where your attention is focused—more or less exclusively—on the sensations of the breath at the nose.

If you'd like, close your eyes and actually do this as I describe it. I call it a four-step transition from everyday mind to the focused, meditative mind.

In the first step, what you do is close your eyes. This removes a large source of distraction. With your eyes closed, the main things that you are conscious of are sounds and various sensations in your body. Perhaps you are aware of odors in the background. The other continuous presence in your mind, at least until you reach an advanced state of the practice, is a constant stream of thoughts, emotions, ideas, and memories.

Close your eyes. Open up your awareness to include all of these things—everything that's there. Now you're going to apply just one single restriction to the movements of attention. Open up your awareness. You're aware of sound. You're aware of sensations in your body. You're aware of thoughts coming in and going. Notice how your attention moves from one thing to another in peripheral awareness.



Now you apply one restriction. Of everything in peripheral awareness that the attention may be drawn to, the only one that you don't want it to go to are thoughts about the past, the future, or what's happening somewhere else. In other words, just be fully present.

In this state of being fully present, and not allowing yourself to be taken out of the present by thoughts of the past, future, or somewhere else, I want you to notice the distinction between peripheral awareness and attention.

In our last discussion, Matthew pointed out how vision is a great metaphor for attention and peripheral awareness. If you put your visual focus on one thing and leave it there, you will have a very strong peripheral vision in which you see all kinds of other things. You'll notice, though, that your visual focus needs to be fairly stable for that to happen. You'll also see that, as your attention moves from one thing to another, everything else remains in awareness. It's very similar to vision. You can look at one thing. You can look at another thing. You can look at another thing.

If the movements of attention are rapid, peripheral vision is somewhat limited. Your eyes don't dwell on one point long enough for a clear perception of peripheral objects to emerge. Something similar is happening in your mind with attention. If attention moves too rapidly, then you're not going to have clarity of peripheral awareness.

Now, as you sit here observing how the mind works—how you are aware of many things, but your attention is moving from one thing to another—notice what's happening. Notice that the more attention settles down, the clearer your peripheral awareness is. Do this until you feel fairly comfortable with just staying in the present. Your only obstacle, the only problem you're dealing with, is the tendency of the mind to seize on something, to think about something in a way that takes you out of the present. Just bring yourself back to the present whenever that happens.



In the process, you'll discover much more about attention and peripheral awareness. Next we'll move to Step Two. What we will do in Step Two of this process is restrict the movements of attention. We're going to restrict the movements of attention just to the sensations of the body. We're not going to shut anything else out—sounds in the background or odors—if those are there. We allow them to be there in peripheral awareness. Then, in our peripheral awareness, we have all these various sensations in our body, but we're going to allow attention to focus on any of those sensations, as long as they're sensations within the body.

Whenever you find your attention starting to go to a sound, you bring it back to the sensations in the body once again. Whenever you find your attention starting to go to a particular thought, emotion, or feeling that happens to arise, bring it back to the sensations in your body. Practice doing that.

You don't have to limit yourself, in this step, to spontaneous movements of attention. Although, it's very interesting to watch how your attention moves spontaneously. You can direct your attention specifically to the sensations in your left foot. Something you might notice is that when your attention was elsewhere, you were barely aware of the sensations in your left foot; but having allowed your attention to dwell there, you then intentionally move your attention to the rise and fall of the abdomen with the breath. You'll notice that the sensations in your left foot continue in peripheral awareness.

Thus, another interesting thing that you discover in this process is that wherever attention goes, the object of that attention tends to become a stronger component of what is present in peripheral awareness. We have a way of increasing the strength of our peripheral awareness.

Once you've played around with attention moving within the sensations of the body, and you've practiced maintaining peripheral awareness of thoughts and other mental objects, and of sounds and odors, (while allowing attention only to focus on sensations in the body), now you're ready



to move to Step Three. We're going to further restrict where we allow attention to go, but at the same time maintain a powerful peripheral awareness.

Something you will have noticed in Step Two, where attention was restricted to sensations in the body, is that the strongest and most significant sensations in your body were the sensations related to the breath. Otherwise you're sitting there quite still, but with each breath the abdomen rises and falls. There's a movement of the chest. There's a movement of air in and out of the nose.

Allow your attention to move wherever it will and explore any of these breath sensations, but when it goes to other sensations in the body, bring it back to the breath sensations. If it goes to sounds, smells, thoughts, feelings, or memories, bring it back to the sensations that are produced by the breath, regardless of where they occur in the body.

Once again, now you will develop a more refined sense of the distinction between peripheral awareness and attention. You're restricting attention a little bit more and at the same you're your peripheral awareness has to expand to include more of what used to be the field you allowed your attention to wander in. Stay in Step Three. See what it has to teach you. Further develop your ability to keep your attention anchored on the sensations of the breath while you remain aware of everything else.

When you feel comfortable with this, you're ready to move to Step Four, which is to focus your attention on the sensations of the air as it enters and leaves the nostrils. Where you feel this varies considerably from one person to another. Some feel it on their upper lip. Some feel it primarily on the rim of their nostrils. Some feel it inside the nostrils. For some, the most sensitive area is a very small area, maybe the size of a pencil eraser. For others the area in which they most clearly feel the sensations of the air moving in and out may be as large as a silver dollar, or even larger. It could be that where you feel the sensations of the in-breath more clearly is not the same location as where you feel the out-breath more clearly. For example, for some people, they



feel the in-breath more clearly on the rim of the nostrils, while they feel the out-breath more clearly a little bit higher up in the nose—it doesn't matter.

Find out for yourself where you can most clearly perceive the sensations produced by the movement of air in and out of your body, and now that's what you want to restrict your attention to. But, at the same time, retain a high level of peripheral awareness of sounds, other bodily sensations, thoughts, and mental objects that come and go in your mind.

Now you have reached the point where you have your attention anchored to our meditation object, sensations of the breath at the nose. You've brought yourself to this point without allowing peripheral awareness to collapse because you've been maintaining both extrospective awareness of external phenomenon, and introspective awareness of thoughts and other mental objects as they arise and pass away. You are now in the meditative state.

Granted, initially this is going to be fairly unstable, but there's a little trick that can help you to stabilize this. It's called counting. Once you've brought yourself to this place of locating where the sensations of the breath are most sensitive, following the in-breath and the out-breath, now you reach that point where you start to be at risk. Your mind says, "Okay, seen this, done this, ready to move on to something else, think about something else, or pay attention to something else." This is where counting really, really helps. What you want to do is to try to count ten breaths. It doesn't have to be perfect attention to every moment of the entire breath cycle. That will come later.

Initially, so long as you were conscious of most of the in-breath and most of the out-breath and didn't lose count, then you're doing fine. See if you can sustain your attention on the sensations of the breath at the nose for ten consecutive breaths. What you'll probably find is that you can't reach ten. When you find that you've either lost the count, or there was a breath, or a substantial part of a breath cycle that you weren't conscious of because your attention had gone elsewhere,



start over. Do this until you reach ten consecutive breaths, or if you’ve been trying for quite a while and you still haven’t succeeded, settle for five. That will be enough.

If you can keep your attention on the breath for five consecutive breaths, then getting to that point will have given you the benefits of counting. It helped to stabilize your attention on the breath past the point when ordinarily your mind would have said, “Enough of this. Let’s go find something more interesting.”

As time goes by, it will become easier and easier to do ten breaths. Now some people have been taught, or some people may spontaneously decide that counting ten breaths worked so well, why don’t I just keep on counting? If you’d like to try that, go ahead, but I do want to tell you that what you’re going to discover is very quickly the counting becomes automatic. You’ll be up to breath number twenty-seven, except you were completely unaware of the last five breaths. Your mind just kept on counting even while your attention went elsewhere.

That’s why I say the value of going beyond counting ten breaths is a situation of very rapidly diminishing returns. It’s better that, once you’ve successfully counted ten breaths, you try to follow the breath and maintain your peripheral awareness without the attention wandering. When it does wander, just bring it back to the breath. If this becomes too much of a problem, if your mind becomes too unstable, then go back and do another round of counting. That’s fine.

I’ve introduced you to the basic practice, and I’ve given you a method, a four-step transition followed by counting, to help you get into the meditative state. What is really important is that you develop a very consistent, daily habit of doing this, because meditating sporadically on and off is not going to produce the kind of results that we’re describing here. Therefore it’s very important that you develop a regular daily practice.



There are also certain things that you can do to improve the quality of every practice session. It's what I call the six-part preparation for meditation. Before you begin to meditate, you prepare your mind for what this meditation session is going to be about.

The first is motivation. You examine your reasons for meditating. The second is setting certain goals for yourself, based on how your meditation practice has been going. You will know that there are certain obstacles that you need to focus on and that you need to try to overcome. You will know that there are certain techniques that you're still a bit weak with, skills you still need to improve. For the goals, just identify the particular problems in your practice that you're going to deal with. So we have motivation and our goals.

The third is expectations. We've just motivated ourselves and set up some goals for ourselves. This is a very good thing to do, but it's also dangerous, because we can become attached to our goals, and we can allow the motivation to become a source of disappointment or frustration. This third preparation for meditation reminds us of the danger of expectations and to let go of them. We based our goals on how our last few meditation sessions have gone, but this next session may be totally different, in which case we have to be ready to completely let go of whatever expectations that we have.

Sometimes the session is going to be tremendously better than you expected it to be. Other times it's going to be tremendously worse than you expected it to be. Very often it's not going to go the way you expect it to do. As a matter of fact, I would say, in general, for somebody who sits and meditates every day, their daily sits turn out to be different than they expected more often they turn out the way they expected. In our preparation for meditation, having raised our motivation, having set our goals, the next thing is to remind ourselves to drop all expectations, and to be prepared to adapt our self to whatever comes up, practice according to what's happening in your sit today.





The fourth of the six parts of this preparation is diligence. Make a commitment before you begin your practice that you are going to do the practice for the entire time. For all of the stages of meditation, what you actually do are very simple actions. The main thing that you do is set strong intentions. Set the intention to be diligent, resist the temptation to allow yourself to pursue an attractive and interesting thought, or to decide: “Oh, today’s sit is too hard. I think I’ll just let my mind daydream until the clock runs out”—things like that. This fourth preparation to meditation is to make that commitment to be diligent. You’re going to actually do the practice for the entire period.

The fifth preparation is to review potential distractions—reflect for a moment on what’s going on in your life. What are the emotionally disruptive things? What are the problems that you have that your mind will gravitate towards and want to find solutions towards? In this way, you will prepare yourself by trying to identify these distractions in advance and saying to yourself: “I know this is likely to come up, and when it does, I’m going to let go of it and come back to the meditation object.” It’s going to be much easier to deal with these distractions. It’s going to be easier to recognize when they’re present. When they’re capturing your attention, it’s going to be easier to let go of them. Now, you’re probably not going to accurately identify all of the potential distractions that are going to come up, but simply having gone through the process of reminding yourself that there are certain things that are likely to come up, informing the determination that you are going to let go of them and go back to the practice, this is going to help enormously, even with the ones that you didn’t predict in advance.

The final preparation for meditation is to examine your posture. Whether you’re sitting on a chair, whether you’re sitting on a cushion, whether you use zafus and zabutons, or whether you use Japanese benches, whether you’re standing or lying down, it doesn’t matter. The important thing about your meditation posture is that it be as comfortable as possible for the entire period that you’re going to sit without the need to move and without producing excessive pain.



Things that cause meditation to be uncomfortable are [things that cause] your body to be out of balance. When your body is in balance, there's very little pain. What you want is, you want your legs to be in balance, whether you're cross-legged, sitting with your feet on the floor: you don't want your legs to be in different positions. If they're in different positions, different muscle groups are going to have to maintain a different area of tone, and sooner or later you're going to experience an ache because of it.

You want your torso to be straight, side-to-side, and front to back. The same principle of balance applies to your shoulders, your arms, and your hands, whether you have your hands crossed, hands resting one on top of each other in your lap, whether you have them on your knees.

You want your upper body to likewise be in balance, your spine straight, not the imaginary ruler straight. Human spines don't do that. Our spines are curved. But we want to find the natural position in which our spine is straight, not leaning to one side or the other, and where our body weight is more or less centered over an imaginary line that goes through our torso. So our head and our neck is aligned with our chest and torso, right down to our balanced legs, and our arms and shoulders are in an appropriate position.

The position of your eyes should be a natural one. Because we're meditating on the breath of the nose, sometimes there will be a tendency to make your eyes try to look at your nose. This is not a natural position. It will become uncomfortable. The other thing that sometimes happens as people meditate with their eyes closed, their eyes tend to roll up. That also becomes uncomfortable after a while. Part of a successful meditation posture is to allow your eyes to go into a natural position, which is actually as though you were looking at something that were about this distance in front of your face.

As far as your mouth, your teeth, and your tongue, the most natural position that will be most comfortable and will also reduce the amount of salivation and how often you have to swallow, is



with your lips closed, your teeth partly open, the tip of your tongue touching the back of your upper teeth, and the body of your tongue touching the upper palate.

Once you have completed this preparation, go ahead and begin the four-step movement from everyday mind to meditative mind, with the counting.

Let me reiterate this six-part preparation for meditation:

1. Remind yourself and reinforce your motivation for practice.
2. Identify which goals you will probably be working towards today in your practice.
3. Remind yourself to let go of any expectations related to those goals, and be willing to go with the flow, whatever happens.
4. Commit to be diligent through the entire meditation period.
5. Try to identify in advance which are the distractions that are most likely to disturb your practice today.
6. Go through your posture. Make sure everything is comfortable, everything is in balance, and you're ready to start meditating.