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FIVE PRACTICES TO CHANGE YOUR MIND

Basic Buddhist meditation practices can transform the way you think and the way you view the world. Here, five teachers offer introductory methods for changing your mind—and your life.

Barry Magid, Gil Fronsdal, Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Peter Doobinin, and Judith Simmer-Brown

Leave yourself alone!
Zen teacher Barry Magid describes the practice of just sitting.

Imagine sitting down in front of a mirror. Your face automatically appears. There is no effort required; the mirror is doing all the work. You can't do it right or wrong. The Zen Buddhist practice of "just sitting" is like that. When we sit, our mind automatically begins to display itself to us. Our practice is to observe and experience what appears moment after moment. Of course, just as when we look in a real mirror, things don't stay that simple for long.

We notice how our faces or our bodies look in the mirror, and we immediately have an emotional reaction and form judgments about

what we see. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that Paul Cezanne was capable of painting a self-portrait with utter objectivity, of looking at his own face with no more reaction than "a dog which sees itself in a mirror and thinks, 'Here is another dog.'" For the rest of us, it's not so easy to simply observe who we are. Looking in the mirror, we are tempted to use it as a makeup mirror to touch up the parts of our self-image we don't like.

Our minds are never what we want them to be. That's part of why we sit in the first place. We are uncomfortable with ourselves as we are. The greatest dualism we face is the split between who we are and who we think we ought to be. Sometimes that gap fuels our aspiration to follow Buddhist teachings, sometimes it simply fuels our self-hatred, and all too often we confuse these two notions of self entirely.

Just sitting means sitting still with all of the aspects of ourselves that we came to Buddhist practice in order to avoid or change—our restlessness, our anxiety, our fear, our anger, our wandering minds. Our practice is to just watch, to just feel. We watch our minds. Minds think. There's no problem with that; minds just do what they do. Ordinarily we get caught up in the content of our thoughts, but when we just sit, we observe ourselves just thinking. Our body's most basic activity is breathing: No matter what else is going on, we are breathing. We sit and breathe, and we feel the sensation of our breath in our bodies. Often there is tension or even pain somewhere in our bodies as well. We sit and feel that too and keep breathing. Whatever thoughts come, come. Whatever feelings come, come. We are not sitting there to fight off our thoughts or try to make ourselves stop thinking.

When we sit, we realize how unwilling we are to leave anything about ourselves alone. We turn our lives into one endless self-improvement project. All too often what we call meditation or spirituality is simply incorporated into our obsession with self-criticism and self-improvement. I've encountered many students who have attempted to use

meditation to perform a spiritual lobotomy on themselves—trying to excise, once and for all, their anger, their fear, their sexuality. We have to sit with our resistance to feeling whole, to feeling all those painful and messy parts of ourselves.

Just sitting means just that. That "just" endlessly goes against the grain of our need to fix, transform, and improve ourselves. The paradox of our practice is that the most effective way of transformation is to leave ourselves alone. The more we let everything be just what it is, the more we relax into an open, attentive awareness of one moment after another. Just sitting leaves everything just as it is.

May We All Be Happy...
Metta meditation instruction from author and teacher Gil Fronsdal

May all beings be happy.
May they live in safety and joy.
All living beings,
Whether weak or strong,
Tall, stout, average, or short,
Seen or unseen, near or distant,
Born or to be born,
May they all be happy.
—From the *Metta Sutta*, Sutta Nipata I.8

Metta, or lovingkindness, is one of the most important Buddhist practices. Simply stated, metta is the heartfelt wish for the well-being of oneself and others. When describing metta, the Buddha used the analogy of the care a mother gives her only child. Lovingkindness is also understood as the innate friendliness of an open heart. Its close connec-

tion to friendship is reflected in its similarity to the Pali word for friend, *mitta*. However, metta is more than conventional friendship, for it includes being openhearted even toward one's enemies, developed from insight into our shared humanity.

Metta practice is the cultivation of our capacity for lovingkindness. It does not involve either positive thinking or the imposition of an artificial positive attitude. There is no need to feel loving or kind during metta practice. Rather, we meditate on our good intentions, however weak or strong they may be, and water the seeds of these intentions. When we water wholesome intentions instead of expressing unwholesome ones, we develop those wholesome tendencies within us. If these seeds are never watered, they won't grow. When watered by regular practice, they grow, sometimes in unexpected fashions. We may find that lovingkindness becomes the operating motivation in a situation that previously triggered anger or fear.

To practice lovingkindness meditation, sit in a comfortable and relaxed manner. Take two or three deep breaths with slow, long, and complete exhalations. Let go of any concerns or preoccupations. For a few minutes, feel or imagine the breath moving through the center of your chest in the area of your heart.

Metta is first practiced toward oneself, since we often have difficulty loving others without first loving ourselves. Sitting quietly, mentally repeat, slowly and steadily, the following or similar phrases: *May I be happy. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease.*

While you say these phrases, allow yourself to sink into the intentions they express. Lovingkindness meditation consists primarily of connecting to the intention of wishing ourselves or others happiness. However, if feelings of warmth, friendliness, or love arise in the body or mind, connect to them, allowing them to grow as you repeat the phrases.

As an aid to the meditation, you might hold an image of yourself in your mind's eye. This helps reinforce the intentions expressed in the phrases.

After a period of directing lovingkindness toward yourself, bring to mind a friend or someone in your life who has deeply cared for you. Then slowly repeat phrases of lovingkindness toward them:*May you be happy. May you be well. May you be safe. May you be peaceful and at ease.*

As you say these phrases, again sink into their intention or heartfelt meaning. And again, if any feelings of lovingkindness arise, connect the feelings with the phrases so that the feelings may become stronger as you repeat the words.

As you continue the meditation, you can bring to mind other friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers, animals, and finally people with whom you have difficulty. You can either use the same phrases, repeating them again and again, or make up phrases that better represent the lovingkindness you feel toward these beings.

Sometimes during lovingkindness meditation, seemingly opposite feelings such as anger, grief, or sadness may arise. Take these to be signs that your heart is softening, revealing what is held there. You can either shift to mindfulness practice or you can—with whatever patience, acceptance, and kindness you can muster for such feelings—direct lovingkindness toward them. Above all, remember that there is no need to judge yourself for having these feelings.

As you become familiar with lovingkindness practice during meditation, you can also begin to use it in your daily life. While in your car, or at work, or in public, privately practice metta toward those around you. There can be a great delight in establishing a heartfelt connection to everyone we encounter, friends and strangers alike.

Wisdom Arising

Sri Lankan monk Bhante Henepola Gunaratana on training the mind's eye with Vipassana meditation

Vipassana, or Insight meditation, is a way of training the mind to see things in a very special way as they happen. Seeing without using eyes is a special way of seeing. We train the mind to use our innate wisdom without using words, concepts, logic, or interpretation. In this training, concentration and mindfulness are united. Then wisdom arises and disintegrates what appears to be integrated. Our wisdom eye registers the constant flux of events that is taking place in every moment in our lives. Although this unbroken flux of events is what life is, one cannot be fully aware of this truth without paying attention to what is happening to one's mind and body every waking moment. With developed insight, our mind can be fully aware of the evolving, processing, and dissolving of everything that happens to us.

So we train the mind to see things as they happen, neither before nor after. And we don't cling to the past, the future, or even to the present. We participate in what is happening and at the same time observe it without clinging to the events of the past, the future, or the present. We experience our ego or self arising, dissolving, and evaporating without leaving a trace of it. We see how our greed, anger, and ignorance vanish as we see the reality in life. Mindfully we watch the body, feelings, sensations, perceptions, and consciousness and experience their dynamic nature.

Watching impartially opens the mind to realize that there is no way that we can stop this flux even for a fraction of a second. We experience the freshness of life. Every moment is a new moment. Every breath is a fresh breath. Every tiny little thing is living and dying every fraction of a

second. There is no way that we can see these momentary existences with our eyes. Only when the mind is sharp and clear, without the clouds of craving, hatred, and confusion can our mind be fully aware of this phenomenon. When we don't try to cling to these experiences, we experience great joy, happiness, and peace. The moment we try to cling to any part of our experience—however pleasant or peaceful—joy, peace, and happiness disappear. The very purpose of Vipassana meditation is to liberate the mind from psychic irritation and enjoy the peace and happiness of liberation. Nevertheless, if we cling to peace or happiness, that instant that very peace and happiness vanish. This is a very delicate balance that we should maintain through the wisdom that arises from Vipassana meditation.

Awakening, Step by Step

Insight Meditation teacher Peter Doobinin introduces walking meditation.

Walking meditation is a practice through which we develop concentration and mindfulness. We learn to cultivate mindfulness of the body while the body is moving. We learn to be awake. Walking meditation is a particularly important practice in that it enables us to make the transition from sitting meditation to being awake in our daily lives, in our work, and in our relationships. In the end, that's what it's all about.

Walking meditation is a simple practice. You choose a straight path—indoors or outdoors—roughly fifteen or twenty steps long. You walk from one end of the path to the other, turn around, and walk back. You continue in this fashion, walking back and forth, focusing your attention on your feet. Your posture is upright, alert, and relaxed. You can hold your hands at your sides, or clasped in front or behind. Keep your eyes open, cast down, and slightly ahead. You can experiment with your

pace, perhaps walking quite slowly or at a more regular speed, in an effort to find the pace at which you're most present. As you walk, direct your attention to the sensations in the feet, to the bare experience of walking. Try to feel one step at time. Be fully, wholeheartedly aware of the physical sensations involved in taking each step. Feel your foot as it lifts, moves through the air, places down against the ground. In particular, pay attention to the touching down of the foot, the sensations of contact, and pressure. Remember that you're feeling each step, you're not thinking about the foot, or visualizing it.

You'll find, of course, that it isn't always easy to stay focused on the meditation object, the sensations in the feet. The mind wanders, drifts. Your job is to notice when you've strayed, when you're lost in thought. Be aware that you've wandered. And return gently to the physical sensations, the lifting, moving, placing of the foot. Just keep bringing your attention back.

As you walk, cultivate a sense of ease. There's no hurry to get anywhere, no destination to reach. You're just walking. This is a good instruction: just walk.

As you walk, as you let go of the desire to get somewhere, you begin to sense the joy in simply walking, in being in the present moment. You begin to comprehend the preciousness of each step. It's an extraordinarily precious experience to walk on this earth.

You can start by practicing walking meditation for ten minutes a day. Gradually, you can expand the amount of time you spend on this formal walking meditation.

In addition to this kind of formal practice, you'll want to practice walking meditation in "real life" situations. You can practice "informally" just about anywhere, walking along a city sidewalk, down the aisle in the supermarket, or across the backyard. As always, the objec-

tive is to pay attention. Pay attention to your feet. Or pay attention to your whole body—the felt experience of your body as it's moving. In this informal context, you're aware, to some extent, of what's going on around you, but your focus is on your walking. Practicing in this way, you begin to live more mindfully. This is when meditation practice takes hold and assumes a new relevancy. Being awake is no longer reserved for the times you spend in formal sitting meditation; it is the way you live.

Hot and Heavy, Cool and Light

Naropa University's Judith Simmer-Brown on the Tibetan Buddhist practice of tonglen

Tonglen, literally "giving and taking," is a Tibetan practice for cultivating compassion, the Mahayana path of the bodhisattva. The great master Atisha brought Tibetans this practice from India in the eleventh century. Tonglen reverses the pattern of self-cherishing that is the knot of our personal suffering. Using breathing as the basis, tonglen opens our hearts to those things we would rather avoid and encourages us to share what we would rather keep for ourselves. The practice shows that there are no real boundaries between living beings—we are all interdependent.

We begin tonglen by taking our seats in meditation with good posture, very simply and naturally. We ask, why would we want to do this practice? Fundamentally it is vast and choiceless. We recognize that the purpose of our human life is huge, to grow larger hearts and open minds, and we celebrate that we can do this in this moment. We are ready for transformation. Glimpsing this motivation begins the practice.

Then we become aware of our breathing, in and out, and establish the flow of the practice. On the in-breath, we breathe in thinking, "heavy, thick, hot," and on the out-breath, we breathe out thinking, "light, bright, cool." At first it seems only like words, but it is good to develop a literal sense of this. My teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, suggested that we think of ourselves as air conditioners. We breathe in the stale, smoky, fetid air of the room around us, and we breathe out fresh, clean, cool air. We gradually purify the room. When we breathe, we are breathing with every pore of our bodies, in with "heavy, thick, hot," and out with "light, bright, cool." Do this for roughly one-third of the twenty-minute session, or until the texture is established.

Next, we breathe with a continuing sense of the texture we have established. But now we open our thoughts and emotions to all of our personal material. It is good to start with those who spontaneously arouse our compassion. Is there someone we know who is sick or in emotional turmoil? We begin with that person's face before us and breathe in their heavy, thick, and hot suffering, sharing with them our own light, bright, and cool energy. Be quite tangible with the texture. Whatever suffering we see in them, we breathe it in; whatever sanity and kindness we see in ourselves, we breathe it out to them. When we are ready, extend beyond our loved ones to more difficult people. Are there people we see as threatening or as problematic in our lives? We allow their faces to come to us and then breathe in their suffering and extend to them our sanity and kindness. We are practicing embracing what we would normally avoid, and sharing what we would normally hoard. Do this part of the practice for seven to ten minutes.

We conclude the practice by extending it out beyond our familiar world. One way to do this is to move geographically. We begin in our immediate neighborhood, with the family next door with the two

babies, to the college student on the other side who takes terrible care of her lawn, to the elderly woman across the street who recently lost her husband. We move to those people we encounter on our daily routines—our coworkers and our boss; the grocery checker and stock boy; the employees at the cleaners, the gas station, and the video store. Then we extend through our community, to the hospital, the shelter, the jail, the nursing home, including everyone suffering there. And we extend to our state, region, country, and world, our minds going to the painful situations there that are described in the newspaper—the wars, famines, epidemics. We also include the CEOs, the political leaders, and the people of privilege. We extend this practice until the twenty-minute session is over. Then we conclude with a simple session of meditation again.

Body as Path: The Buddha's instructions on the practice of mindfulness meditation

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying in the Kuru country. Now there is a town of the Kurus called Kammasadhamma. There the Blessed One addressed the monks, "Monks."

"Lord," the monks replied.

The Blessed One said this: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and distress, for the attainment of the right method, and for the realization of nirvana....

"There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in, and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings... mind...mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

"And how does a monk remain focused on the body in and of itself?

"There is the case where a monk—having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building—sits down, folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful, he breathes out.

"Breathing in long, he discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out long, he discerns that he is breathing out long. Or breathing in short, he discerns that he is breathing in short; or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short. He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the entire body and to breathe out sensitive to the entire body. He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily fabrication and to breathe out calming bodily fabrication. Just as a skilled gymnast or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns that he is making a long turn, or when making a short turn discerns that he is making a short turn; in the same way the monk, when breathing in long, discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short... He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily fabrication, and to breathe out calming bodily fabrication.

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in and of itself, or externally on the body in and of itself, or both internally and externally on the body in and of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that 'There is a body' is maintained to the extent of knowledge and remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by [not clinging to] anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself."

From the *Satipatthana Sutta*, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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MEDITATING WITH EMOTIONS

Drop the story and find the feeling.

Pema Chödrön

We all have emotional experiences that feel terrifying, and in order to experience our natural state, we have to be willing to experience these emotions—to actually experience our ego and our ego clinging. This may feel disturbing and negative, or even insane. Most of us, consciously or unconsciously, would like meditation to be a chill-out session where we don't have to relate to unpleasantness. Actually, a lot of people have the misunderstanding that this is what meditation is about. They believe meditation includes everything except that which feels bad. And if something does feel bad, you're supposed to label it "thinking" and shove it away or hit it on the head with a mallet. When you feel even the slightest hint of panic that you're about to feel or experience something unpleasant, you use the label "thinking" as a way to repress it, and you rush back to the object of meditation, hoping that you never have to go into this uncomfortable place.

Ponlop Rinpoche said, "In the process of uncovering buddhanature, in the process of uncovering our open, unfixated quality of our mind, we have to be willing to get our hands dirty." In other words, he was

saying that we need to be willing to work with our disturbing emotions, the ones that feel entirely dark. But Ponlop Rinpoche added something really important to this statement. He said that without having a direct experience of our emotions, we can never touch the heart of buddhanature. We can never actually hear the message of awakening. The only way out, so to speak, is through. But what does this word "experiencing" mean? And how can we experience emotions? How can we experience this negative, disturbing, unsettling stuff that we generally avoid? How do we get our hands dirty with them?

Ponlop Rinpoche says, "It's only by really tasting your experience of emotions that you get a taste of enlightenment." Buddhanature and the natural state are not just made up of happy, sweet emotions; buddhanature includes everything. It's the calm, and the disturbed, and the roiled up, and the still; it's the bitter and the sweet, the comfortable and the uncomfortable. Buddhanature includes opening to all of these things, and it's found in the midst of all of them.

Because we perceive dualistically and have this black-or-white thinking where we label things either "good" or "bad," we shut down when strong energy arises. We associate this strong energy with different thoughts—memories of the past or fantasies about the future—and then this somewhat indescribable thing happens, which we call "feeling an emotion." Emotions, in essence, are just pure energy, but because of dualistic perception we identify the emotion as "me," and it gets very locked in.

The energy gets frozen. Trungpa Rinpoche once said, "Emotions are composed of energy, which can be likened to water, and a dualistic thought process, which could be likened to pigment or paint. When energy and thought are mixed together, they become vivid and colorful emotions. Concept gives the energy a particular location, a sense of re-

lationship, which makes the emotions vivid and strong. Fundamentally, the reason emotions are discomforting, painful, frustrating is that our relationship to the emotions is not quite clear."

This is to say that energy itself is not a problem. We always associate our emotions with thoughts—we're scared of something, or we're angry at somebody, or we're feeling lonely or ashamed or lustful in relationship with either ourselves or somebody else. Our emotions have a lot of mental conversation—and, in my experience, it is often hard to discern between what is the thought and what is the emotion. In any given sitting period, in any given half hour of our lives, there are a lot of things that come and go. But we don't need to try so hard to sort it all out. We don't have to attach so much meaning to what arises, and we also don't have to identify with our emotions so strongly. All we need to do is allow ourselves to experience the energy—and in time it will move through you. It will. But we need to experience the emotion—not think about the emotion. It's the same thing that I've been talking about with the breath: experiencing the breath going in and out, trying to find a way to breathe in and out without thinking about the breath or conceptualizing the breath or watching the breath.

I often describe this as having a "felt sense" of our emotions. This term "felt sense" may not really be the right term for you. For instance, you could have an experience of dread; you likely carry a story line about being afraid of something that's about to happen. But if there is a way that you can interrupt the conversation through your meditation training, even for a few moments, then you can have an actual experience of dread—a nonverbal experience. You can allow yourself to become physically aware of dread. Feel it; feel the clenching and tightness. It can even go deeper than that: you might have a textural experience of dread as tingly or hot, a coldness or sharpness in your chest.

One of my first experiences of really feeling an emotion was very interesting. I was in a period of a lot of distress that I couldn't get away from. This happens in our life, frequently. The person who was triggering me wasn't going away. It was at Gampo Abbey, where I live. And we had to live with each other and in pretty close quarters, and what was being triggered were old memories and conditioning. This is often the case with strong emotions. There's a lot locked in us. It can be quite irrational. It's like we're dogs who hear certain sounds and freak out. We see a certain facial expression, or someone treats us in a certain way, or there's just the right tone of voice, or someone reminds us of something, and out of the blue there's this whole felt sense of dread or anger or deep sadness. Usually we're not even aware of it; we're simply reacting the way we always have.

In this particular instance, what was being triggered for me was a feeling of helplessness, because this woman disliked me intensely and wouldn't talk to me about it. The situation was bringing up feelings of powerlessness, of not being able to get things under control, of not being able to make everything all right. I couldn't get her to like me, and I couldn't even get her to talk about it. There was no way that my usual strategies were going to work, so I was just naked with this recurring dread. I met her in the halls constantly; she'd walk by coldly, and boy, it would bring up what felt like centuries of conditioning and perceived hurts.

I thought to myself, "This is my big chance. Maybe if I really go into this, I won't ever have this issue come up again in this lifetime or any other lifetime." So one night I went to the meditation hall. I sat all night long because I was in so much pain and I didn't know what else to do. I didn't think much at all, because I was in so much pain. Sometimes pain completely knocks thoughts out; you're sitting in the pain, and it's like

you're speechless at all levels.

As I sat, I began to have this quality of experiencing what I was going through with this woman. I had a body memory of being a very little child, but it wasn't like I was remembering a traumatic experience or anything. I just realized—at a cellular level—that my entire ego structure, my entire personality, was designed never to go to this particular feeling. I began to experience a deep feeling of inadequacy, like I wasn't OK. I realized that what I was experiencing was a complete death to ego.

From that felt experience, I began to realize the power of getting sidetracked with words, of getting sidetracked with thoughts about our emotions. We get completely sidetracked with our strategies, which are always designed to move away from the felt experience. So whether it's a humdinger of an emotion, a kind of core pain to our ego structure such as mine was, or whether it's any strong emotion or even a milder emotion, it's so easy for us to get stuck and wrapped up in the story and thoughts around the emotion. From there, the emotions escalate and enslave us.

You have to get dirty with your emotions. Meditation allows us to feel them, live them, and taste them completely. It gives us a lot of insight into why we do the things we do and why other people do the things they do. Out of this insight, compassion is born. This insight also begins to open the doorway to buddhanature and the complete, open spaciousness that's available when we're not blocking our feelings. Once I was able to allow myself to have a felt sense of my emotions, it was completely liberating.

As Ponlop Rinpoche said, "Until you begin to really relate with the unfavorable or the unpleasant things as part of your meditation—they're not the whole thing—but until you start working with them, you don't really have the quality of being on a path of awakening."

One of the things that causes us to get so lost in our emotions is that we attach our stories to them. I discovered quite a while back that the escalation of emotions—where you're really in the river, swept away, losing all your perspective, totally carried away by loneliness and anger and despair—is fueled by the story line. Our emotions are like the stone thrown into the water, without the rings. An emotion, without the story, is immediate, sharp, and raw. The direct experience of the emotion creates no ripples. But with the story line, the ripples get bigger and bigger and go out farther and farther, and actually turn into waves and hurricane-velocity winds. The story line really churns things up. You know how you might put on music in order to make yourself cry? You play a particular song, and you just milk the sadness. Our story lines are like that, except we don't need music. We have our mind and our thoughts, and they can rev up the emotions. But if we use our emotions as the object of meditation, as our friend and support, it's like standing on the bank of the river and observing.

At Gampo Abbey, there are flagpoles on the cliffs above the ocean. We keep experimenting with putting flags out there, because that's the point of flagpoles. Sometimes the weather is very calm, and we experience these lovely flags in the stillness of slight wind. Other times there are incredibly high winds, and the flags get shredded in a very short time. The image of the flagpole and the flag is a great one for working with thoughts and emotions, because the flagpole is steady and holds, and then the winds are whipping the flags all over the place, tearing them to shreds—that's usually our predicament. We are the flags, and the wind is just whipping us around. We're just whipped here and there and all over the place. And our emotions are escalating, our thoughts are all over the place. But using thoughts or emotions themselves as the object of meditation is experiencing life from the perspective of the flag-

pole. At Gampo Abbey, we never have to get new flagpoles. Even with hurricane-velocity winds, the flagpoles stay up on the cliffs.

Finding the Feeling

This exercise involves giving your friendly attention to the experience, or the felt sense of an emotion. We're trying to get at a nonverbal experience.

Set your timer for 20 minutes. For a few minutes, sit and get in touch with your breathing. Just settle and breathe. Feel your breath going in and out, and try to get a sense of spaciousness in your breath.

When it feels like 5 minutes have passed, allow yourself to bring up a memory that carries with it a strong emotion. Perhaps a strong emotion that feels more immediate has already surfaced. If so, work with the first strong emotion that shows up for you. Perhaps it isn't a so-called negative emotion; perhaps it is joy.

First, what does the emotion feel like? Find its texture and its color. Feel where it is located in your body. Is it sharp, is it dull? Is it in your heart or in your belly? You're looking for a felt answer. It's like saying, "What does a toothache feel like?" You don't have to describe it to yourself in words, but you want to know that feeling.

If thoughts come up and distract you, just note that and come back to experiencing. Come back to just finding the feeling.

After a few minutes, what does the felt sense of the emotion feel like? It's said that all experiences arise and subside. Is that your experience? Thoughts can cause the energy of emotions to freeze or dwell for a long time. If we let go of the thoughts, the energy can move. Is that your experience?

If you're describing your felt sense of the emotion with a word, what does "pleasant" or "unpleasant" or "painful" or "tight" feel like? What

does this word you've used to describe the emotion feel like? Maybe you're even using a word like "tingling" or "tense." What does that feel like?

Breathe in and out. Feeling it. Experiencing it. Resting in the experience.

If you're experiencing a strong emotion, you might want to breathe more deeply so that a sense of space and openness and friendliness can come in and support you. If you're feeling absolutely nothing at all, just a blank neutral state, breathe in and out and simply note: What does blank and neutral feel like? What does numb feel like?

If you're feeling resistance to doing this at all, experience that. You can keep asking yourself the question: What is this? Whether it's boredom, resistance, overwhelm, pain, pleasure, or drowsiness, try to get at the experience by asking yourself: What is this? You're not looking for a verbal answer, you're looking for an experience. What is this?

Now, really try to locate the strong emotion in your body. A way to use emotions as a support, as a friend, as a helper on the path of awakening, is by using the way that the emotion is affecting your body as your object of meditation. Rather than using your whole body as the object, the easiest thing is to just zero in on one part, to find the feeling in the body. For instance, your body temperature is rising, you're sweating, your palms are moist, your stomach is in a knot, your brow is furrowed. Choose one of those things. Mingyur Rinpoche was once working with a student who had severe depression, and he asked her what it felt like. She said, "It feels like molten lava throughout my whole body." He said, "OK, we're going to use that feeling as the support, as the friend for your awareness. Instead of focusing on the whole body, just focus on your big toe." So if you have an all-over feeling of some kind, focus on that feeling in one part of your body, if that's easier for you.

Sit with the feeling until your timer goes off. When it rings, rest in the experience of whatever came up for you. Sit in the home base of your being, the vast spaciousness of your mind, the open dimension of you.

After you practice with finding the feeling, it's very common that the rumblings of the unpleasantness—the clenched stomach or the sharpness in the heart—are still there. The timer going off doesn't mean that the feeling will go away. But there can be the feeling of having a lot of space around the emotion. We might feel less smothered by the emotion.

In this meditation exercise, we're training for real life. Strong emotions will come in our life, and through meditation we learn to give these emotions space so that we can feel more settled when they do arise.

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3

DROPPING DISTRACTION

How to let go of the terrible, no good,
very bad habits that dictate your day.

Leo Babauta

Digital distractions plague all of us to varying extents, preventing us—myself included—from doing the things we want to do. This is a guide for anyone who *wants* to devote time to practice…but ends up fooling around online or playing iPhone trivia games (is that just me?) instead.

Recognize When it Happens.
One of the insidious things about the distraction habit is that we often don't even realize it's happening. It sneaks up on us, like old age, and before we know it we're addicted and powerless.

But we're not really. The power we have is our awareness, and you can develop it right now. Start paying attention to what sites you visit, how often you're looking at your phone, how long you're spending in front of a screen all day.

When I wanted to quit smoking, for instance, I developed an awareness of my smoking urges. I carried around a pencil and a small scrap of paper, and put a tally mark on it each time I had the urge to smoke. I could still smoke, but I'd have to put a tally mark first.

This built my awareness muscle, and it allowed me to insert a small

space between the urge and my subsequent action. Into that space, however small, I could eventually fit a choice. That was where the power came in.

See What's Going On.

Once you're aware of the distractions and urges, you can start to examine their causes. After hours of following temptations online the other day (I was learning about two new interests, programming and cycling), I stopped and asked myself, "What's this all about?"

It was about fear—the fear that I didn't know what I was doing and was going to screw it all up. But it actually doesn't matter even if I *do* screw it up. My value as a person isn't tied to my successes or failures.

On the flip side of fear, my distractions are also often about fantasies: I really hope that I'll be a great programmer or start doing century bike rides or Ironman triathlons. In reality, I don't have time to do any of that. So I have to let the fantasies go, because they can't come true unless I'm willing to devote my entire life to one of them for a year or two.

Take Action.

So you're building awareness and you've examined your causes. If you haven't yet, take a few minutes to walk around your office or house—or better yet, get outside—and contemplate these things for a few minutes. This article can wait.

Now there are further, concrete steps you can take to rid yourself of digital distractions and focus on what you want or need to do. Consider taking one or more of these actions:

Close as many browser tabs as you can. Bookmark some if you like, or save them with a "read later" service like Instapaper or Pocket. Let the

others go.

Block your favorite distractions for a few hours. Games, social media, news sites. You don't really need to go to them that often.

Write down the times you're going to check email and other messages. Want to process email for 20 minutes at 10 a.m., 1 p.m., and 4 p.m.? Write that down. Stick to it.

Get away. Go outside for a walk. Ride your bike. Go for a run. Take the kids to the park.

Find a place with no WiFi, or turn off your router.

Delete social media accounts and any distracting apps on your phone—whatever you tend to turn to when you want a bump of distraction.

Of course, there are other things you can do. Go on a retreat. Practice mindfulness in bits throughout the day. Take a day off from looking at any screens. The possibilities are endless.

Consider What's Important.

We try to do everything, but then we're not really focusing on anything. We're not going to make any of our little fantasies come true if we pursue all of them at the same time. Decide: What is the one thing you want to pursue right now? Can you focus on that for at least a month? If not, maybe it's not that important to you.

In the big picture, what's truly most important to you? Pick three to four of the most important things in your life. How much of your time is devoted to these things? Can you cut out other things to focus on them? Can you give your most important things your full attention?

In my life, my writing, my family, my health, and my learning are my four most important things. And no, I don't always devote my full attention to them. I often need to step back and remind myself what's important.

Fall In Love All Over Again.

In Pico Iyer's book *The Art of Stillness*, he says that "sitting still is a way of falling in love with the world and everything in it." This is absolutely true, and it makes clear why distractions can be so harmful: they're turning us away from the miracle of life all around us.

Sit still for a few minutes and pay attention to what's around you. Notice the quality of the light. Appreciate any people who might be nearby. Notice the quality of your thoughts, the sensations of various parts of your body, the loveliness of your breath as it comes in and out.

Fall in love with life all over again. And then devote yourself to it completely.

HOW TO FORM THE MEDITATION HABIT

Meditation is perhaps the most important habit to maintain if you want to change other habits. It's a pretty simple habit to form, but the doing is everything:

Commit to just two minutes a day.

If you want the habit to stick, start simply. All you're committing to is two minutes each day. You can go up to five minutes if you're feeling good about it, and increase it over time—slowly.

Pick a time and trigger.

Not an exact time of day, but a general time, like right after you wake up or during your lunch hour. The trigger should be something you already do regularly, like drink your first cup of coffee, brush your teeth, have lunch, or arrive home from work.

Find a quiet spot.
Sometimes early morning at home is best, before others in your house are awake and making noise. Or it could be a spot in a park or on the beach or some other soothing setting. It really doesn't matter where as long as you can sit without being bothered for a few minutes.

Sit comfortably.
Don't fuss too much about how you sit, what you wear, what you sit on, and so on. I like to sit on a pillow on the floor with my back leaning against a wall, because I'm very inflexible. Others use a meditation cushion or bench, but my opinion is that any cushion or pillow will do, and some people can sit on a bare floor comfortably. Don't go out and buy things you don't already have.

Focus on your breath.
As you breathe in, follow your breath in through your nostrils, then into your throat, then into your lungs and belly. As you breathe out, follow your breath out back into the world. If it helps, count: one breath in, two breath out, three breath in, four breath out. When you get to ten, start over. If you lose track, start over. If you find your mind wandering (and you will), bring it gently back to your breath. Repeat this process for the few minutes of your meditation.

That's it. Practice for two minutes, every day, after the same trigger each day, and after a month you'll have a daily meditation habit.

Originally published on "Zen Habits," a blog by **Leo Babauta**. This work is uncopyrighted. www.zenhabits.net.

4

EVERYDAY MEDITATION

A Nine-Minute Daily Practice

Joseph Goldstein

Recently I was thinking about some close friends who are younger than I am, raising families, with busy lives in the world. I could appreciate that it might be quite some time before they would be able to sit a long retreat. So I started wondering if there was a way for people in those circumstances to integrate some kind of meditation technique into their daily activities that could really touch the transformative power of the practice. On longer retreats it's easier to access meditative depths, but when we're otherwise intensely engaged, it can be quite a challenge.

The foundation of the Buddha's path to liberation is known as right understanding, and it consists of two main strands. One is the understanding and application of the teachings on the law of *karma*—that is, that our actions have consequences. Seeing this, we undertake the practice of generosity and the practice of the precepts. We take care with what we do so that we're creating conditions for happiness rather than suffering, both for ourselves and others. This strand is frequently talked about, and it covers a lot of what people who are committed to the path usually practice.

But in the context of one's daily life, the second strand is more difficult to work with. This is the basic understanding of *anatta*, or "no-self"—the absence of an inherently existing self. In Pali, the language of

the oldest written Buddhist teachings, the belief in some core notion of self is called *sakkaya-ditthi*; this is sometimes translated as "personality belief." It's said to be the most dangerous of all the defilements, more dangerous than greed or even hatred, because these are rooted in this mistaken belief. This wrong view of self is central to how we go about in the world, and all kinds of unskillful actions come out of it.

Of course, the Buddha is talking about the unwholesome effects of acting out of this wrong view—this personality view—not only in terms of one life, but of many lifetimes. It's an extremely powerful conditioning force. And the aim of the practice, central to everything we're doing, is to free the mind from this misconception.

So the question then arose: how can we really address this issue as laypeople caught up in our day-to-day activities? Quite spontaneously a nine-minute-a-day plan came to me, a way to "turbo-charge" our ongoing practice by doing three short meditations a day, each three minutes long. Each of these sessions targets a particular area of identification where the mistaken sense of self is created and strengthened.

Session I: Who Is Knowing?

During the first three-minute session we simply sit and listen to sounds, in whatever surroundings we find ourselves. It makes no difference whether we're on a noisy street or in a quiet room. As we open and relax into the awareness of the various sounds, we ask ourselves a question: "Can I find what's knowing these sounds?" Clearly, we're aware of them. But can we find *what* is knowing? When we investigate, we see there's nothing to find. There's no *knower*, even though knowing is happening.

This seems a very straightforward way of loosening and hopefully breaking the identification with the knowing as a knower. All that's going on is just hearing. There's no "I" behind it. No knower can be found.

So that's the first three-minute exercise: listen to sounds, see if you can find what's knowing them, and then explore the experience of not being able to find a knower, even though knowing is still there.

Session II: Breaking Identification with the Body

The second three minutes helps break through the very deep identification with the body. For this there are two exercises that could be alternated, or the time could be divided between them.

The friends I had in mind had both lost one parent recently, so the focus of one session is to reflect on anyone we know who has died. If we were with them during that process, what was happening as they were dying, during their last days? Or if we don't have this personal experience, we can reflect on the great sweep of generations over time, that birth inevitably ends in death. Really try to take in the truth of the body dying, take in what our bodies are and what happens to them. This is something that will come to pass for us all.

The idea of this exercise is to reflect on dying in as vivid a way as possible, and to apply it to our partner, to our children, to our friends—seeing that this is what naturally happens to all of us. It isn't morbid, but rather a way of keeping front and center the truth that we all die. This can serve as a powerful reminder that our body is not "self." It is simply going through its own process. One day, it's going to decay and die—that's nature. It's just how it is.

The other exercise for loosening identification with the body is carried out in motion. When I walk somewhere, for example, if I'm mindful and really feeling the body moving, I notice that I'm simply experiencing sensations in space— pressure, motion, lightness. That's all that's happening. There's not the sense of a solid body, and certainly not the sense of an "I" that's doing the walking.

When sensations in space are being known, through the act of walking or any other movement, we begin to get a sense of the body as a fluid energy field. This can be illuminating—it can free the mind from being caught in the notion of the solidity of the body.

These two approaches are a good way of weakening the identification with the body as being self.

Session III: As the Thought Arises...

The last area where we get caught a lot in terms of self is the identification with our thoughts. We have thousands of thoughts a day, most of which are casual and low-key. Often we're not even aware of them. And almost all have to do with self—our activities, our future projects, our memories, and the imagined events that involve us.

During an earlier retreat, I noticed that this more subtle stream of thought is like a dream state, and the thought arose, "*I'm just dreaming myself into existence.*" Reflecting on this in the time since then, I see that we're continually dreaming ourselves into existence because we're not aware of thoughts as they're coming through. So the sense of self is continually being reinforced.

For the third three minutes, then, we simply watch for thoughts arising and passing, as we often do in meditation, but with a further turbo-charge: we pay more careful attention so that we're right there, *precisely* as the thought arises. If the awareness is sharp, we'll observe a thought arise and vanish in the moment. That experience repeatedly weakens the identification with thought. We discover that there's hardly anything there, just a wisp. In our normal lives, with our usual level of attention, we're not conscious of this. But for three minutes we can bring in enough focus so that we actually see it.

This is what I call "the nine-minute-a-day, turbo-charged path to

enlightenment." It's important to add, though, that nine minutes a day by itself won't be enough. It needs to be built into the foundation of a daily meditation practice, together with the cultivation of the first strand of right understanding mentioned earlier: the awareness that our actions have consequences. If this nine-minute-a-day program is combined with other aspects of a daily practice, then I believe it can really enliven our understanding of how to apply the teachings in the midst of a very busy life.

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NO NEED TO DO ZAZEN, THEREFORE MUST DO ZAZEN

If we practice with an idea of gain, we're on the wrong path.

Elihu Genmyo Smith

No need to do zazen. No need to practice. Therefore, we must do zazen, must practice. Do you see this? Do you see this no-need? Unfortunately, much of the time many of us live in a world of needing and not needing. I need this, I don't need that. And we believe this viscerally as the truth of who we are and what the world is. All sorts of consequences come from this: consequences of suffering, stress, and harm. This is not something new. Many of you are familiar with the exchange between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu, in the commentary to the first case in the *Blue Cliff Record*. The Emperor asks Bodhidharma, "I supported the ordination of monks, built and supported temples. What merit is there from this?" Bodhidharma answers, "No merit."

When we do things primarily for gain and loss, and are attached to gaining and losing, right there we give away our birthright. We give away who we are into a world of having more or less, likes and dislikes. We believe ourself lacking, or needing to gain, needing to improve. We turn zazen into something that is going to improve us and change us.

Yes, we sit still, and body-mind quiets; cause and effect, there are so-called present and future effects of quieting body-mind. But if that is the limit of our zazen, then to that degree we limit who we are. That is a zazen of gaining, a practice and life of trying to improve and get something else that already misses who we are.

Dogen Zenji emphasizes practice from the beginning being in realization, clarifying the misunderstanding that realization is a result of practice, the misunderstanding that this true dharma eye of the wonderful treasure of nirvana comes from doing something and therefore accumulating and improving. Despite the fact that we offer the merit of the chanting, of incense, for the well-being of others…no merit. No merit. No need. You lack nothing. See? But you don't believe it.

The Buddha says all beings are the wisdom and perfection of Buddha. What is that? This is "no need for zazen." This is who you are. You don't believe it sometimes. No need for zazen; therefore we must do zazen. Not should, must! We must be who we are. This is the zazen I encourage all of you to must be. That is the life we must be.

What is this "must be" life?

Hearing this "no merit," Emperor Wu is confused. He has spent a fortune, put much effort into this, been praised by many people for his wonderful activity and the results. So Emperor Wu asks Bodhidharma, "What is the fundamental principle, what is the holy truth?" Bodhidharma responds, "Vast emptiness, no holiness." This is the truth of our life, the truth of zazen. This is the truth; the truth of Buddha teaching, buddhadharma. Despite our wanting to hold on to beliefs about better and worse, what conditions should be and what conditions should not be, what conditions mean—vast emptiness, no holiness. This is "must do" zazen.

So Emperor Wu asks Bodhidharma, "Who are you? Who is this in

front of me?" Bodhidharma shows once more, "Don't know."

Please see what sort of bargains we sometimes slip into our zazen, into our practice, and release those, empty our hands of those. It is fine for those to appear, but open the hands and release those. Must do zazen isn't "I must do zazen in order to get away from this condition, in order to get this better." Vast emptiness, no holiness. Otherwise we believe stories of gain and loss. We truly believe them, and in a sense we reinforce them. We make them all the more true for us, so the more we try to improve, the more we try to run from the beliefs of lacking, the more we carry them along. Despite the fact that we think we have escaped them, to that extent we have brought them here, even if temporarily, we don't see them, don't feel them. Because in gain, loss, likes, dislikes…to that extent we miss this that we are, this no need for zazen. No need for zazen, so we must do zazen. What did Bodhidharma do when he left Emperor Wu? He went and sat in the cave for nine years. Some of you have been to these caves in China. No need to do zazen, so he sits for nine years. This is zazen of no merit. This is what we are talking about.

You lack nothing. You lack nothing, therefore you practice. Therefore you must realize and manifest this no-lack, this realized life, this awakened life that you are. Manifest the wisdom compassion functioning that you are. To paraphrase Dogen Zenji, if you want to be such a person, as you are such you must do such. You must do this person that you are, then you will be this person that you are. Instead, often we try to do something else, and then we wonder why we are not who we are. Despite the fact it is not so, we believe we are not who we are. So if we believe we are not, that much we are not.

You lack nothing. You lack nothing of the wisdom and perfection of the Buddha, right at this moment. Hearing, breathing, you don't differ even one drop from hearing, breathing Buddha. Not even a hair's

breadth. And yet we can be far away. So it is important and valuable to clarify. Clarifying, this noneed manifests. We are who we are.

The Buddha said, "Do not believe something just because I or some great teacher said it." Test it for yourself. This is exactly zazen. Taste and test for yourself. Of course you must do your own zazen. No one can do it for you. The only reason to speak is to refine and clarify testing. If you are testing with the zazen of needing to do, of gaining and losing, then don't let that slip by without seeing the gaining and losing, the needing something and lack of something, because it will keep you from what you are.

Suzuki Roshi always emphasized no-gain zazen. Where gaining appears—not out there with someone else, but for us—where there is a belief of lack, please be attentive to that and practice skillfully with that; so gaining and lack doesn't blind you, like the merit Emperor Wu was carrying around burdened and blinded him. Test it.

You have to do the right tests. If my car didn't start, the battery sputtered, and I said, "Okay, I'm going to test it," and then I took an air gauge to the tires, you'd say, "What's the matter with you? That is not the problem." We have to clarify: "How do you test the car?" Similarly, we have to clarify how to test.

The Buddha is saying, "You are this." He doesn't say, "I have something extra that I am going to give you." Trust in yourself, trust in who you are. Sit down, breathe, be listening right now, hearing right now. Be intimate. But you have to do it for yourself. If you try to figure it out, that will not do. It is like a car needing a new battery and we keep it on the seat. It won't start the car. You have to connect it to the electrical system. Then the electrical charge flows. You have to connect it into the correct system. Thinking about it and trying to fit it into our thought pattern isn't going to do it. Nothing wrong with speaking and thinking, but it

only goes so far. Similarly, nothing wrong with keeping things on the seat next to you; just use it when it is needed. So the Buddha says, don't believe it because you heard the words, or have memorized it; test it. Do the correct, appropriate, skillful testing. Do the zazen of no-need-to-do-zazen. Then you will be the zazen of must-do-zazen; the practice life of no-need-to-practice, must-practice. You will be the wisdom and perfection of Buddha that you are, manifesting compassion as your life. It is not something else.

We need to be clear on what we are doing. Then the zazen that we do is the zazen of no-need-to-do-zazen, the zazen of practice that is in realization from the very beginning. One moment zazen, one moment Buddha. You are the one-minute Buddha, the thirty-minute Buddha, the all-day Buddha. You have always been this, from the beginning. Since you are such a person, not someone else, be such a person. Here is Bodhidharma's vast emptiness, no holiness.

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THE MINDFULNESS SOLUTION

Many point out the pitfalls of mindfulness. But the problem is in the approach, not the practice.

Andrew Olendzki

A lot of concerns have been voiced lately about the possible harmful effects of meditation practice. The pendulum is swinging back against the story that mindfulness is universally beneficial, and researchers are increasingly cautioning us to look honestly at the cases where people have suffered significant psychological stress and even trauma when engaging in rigorous meditation practice. I would like to push back a little against this pushback, arguing that an important distinction is to be made between means and ends.

It is to be expected that serious psychological transformation involves some level of discomfort and difficulty. Indeed, learning how to tolerate exposure to discomfort and gaining the ability to confront and overcome difficulty has a lot to do with what makes a person grow in new ways. The knack is to know how much of this is healthy, even if painful, and at what point it may become unhealthy. The Buddha offers the analogy of a physician healing a wound—much pain is involved with its cleaning, probing, and bandaging, but all this is necessary to

the healing process. No Buddhist would want to see people suffer, however, and in situations of real psychological harm intensive meditation is clearly contraindicated.

It is useful to distinguish between mindfulness as a mental state on one hand and the unskillful pursuit of this state on the other. Consider the case of a person plunging into the jungle, in search of a beautiful and healing flower, he gets torn up by thorns and battered by branches in the process. The problem is not that the flower itself is harmful; what is harmful is only the means of pursuing it. A similar confusion exists when researchers (or media reports of research) say "Mindfulness can be harmful" when what they really mean is something like "Going into prolonged situations of silence and isolation, with unrealistic or uninformed expectations, under the inadequate guidance of an unsuitable teacher, when one has a history of psychological fragility, can be harmful."

Mindfulness is a *sankhara*, a mental/emotional/behavioral state that arises and passes away in a moment in conjunction with consciousness and other functions such as feeling and perception. Co-arising with such factors as trust, equanimity, nonattachment, and lovingkindness, it is an inherently healthy state. Mindfulness itself is always healing and never harmful; mindfulness meditation is the practice of cultivating this benevolent quality of mind, moment after moment.

There are many other sankharas arising in the mind that are not healthy, not helpful, and not skillful. These "flavor" consciousness with states such as anger, fear, hatred, cruelty, restlessness, delusion, greed, and other afflictive emotions. When this happens we are suffering, and it is this very suffering that the entire Buddhist path is intended to heal.

Meditation alone, understood as the training of attention to focus upon a chosen object and holding it there over multiple mind-moments,

whether on a fixed target as in concentration practices or a moving target with insight practices, can create the conditions for healthy or unhealthy mind states to occur.

The critical question becomes one of skillful means. What are the best ways to use attention training to abandon unhealthy states and cultivate healthy states? For some people, going into a retreat environment of sustained silence provides a wonderfully supportive setting for this. For others, these are exactly the wrong conditions, and such an environment has the opposite effect. There are even those of us for whom it starts out one way, winds up the other, or fluctuates, often between being the best and worst of worlds. But when things go wrong, it is not because of mindfulness; rather, it is due to the lack of mindfulness.

Here is a simple four-part model that can help clarify the course of meditation training, derived from the Abhidhamma:

Wandering Mind

The mind in its natural state is uncontrolled and free to wander. Its wanderings are never random; they follow a path blazed by bodily sensations, sensory cues, and internal habits that are largely outside our conscious awareness. Also known as the default mode, this describes our mind as we walk down the street, notice things that move or make a sound, reflexively step around obstacles, and generally daydream about the past and future.

Focused Mind

Here we decide to meditate and so sit down on a cushion with our backs straight, deliberately place our attention on a particular object, and try to hold it there with steadiness. We may repeat a word internally, focus on bodily sensations as we breathe, or in some other way harness the

mind and direct it consciously and intentionally. Of course it will still wander off the chosen point, but when this happens we notice it, let go of wherever we were headed, and gently return attention to the primary object, repeating as necessary.

Afflicted Mind

Quite often, even when the mind is successfully focused on a single object, various unpleasant and disturbing emotional states will manifest. Perhaps it is some form of restlessness, agitation, or turmoil; or a subtle or intense yearning for gratification; or annoyance at a sound, a recurring thought, or an uncomfortable bodily pain. These afflictions can be minor incidents to be explored with interest and then abandoned, or they can flare up, grab hold of the mind, and rage out of control to inflict real suffering and even cause mental harm.

Mindful Mind

At other times when the mind is focused, an emotional attitude of mindful equanimity arises. In these cases the awareness feels soft, tranquil, trusting, and gentle, and at the same time light, agile, alert, capable, and clear. Evenly "poised in the middle" (a translation of the wonderful word *tatramajjhattata*) between attraction and aversion, it is able to regard anything under its view with profound equanimity, neither favoring nor opposing what is happening in the moment. With mindfulness thus established, the mind is capable of gaining insight and can begin to see things as they actually are.

Recognizing that a wandering mind can easily get entangled with suffering and cause harm to ourselves and others, we undertake the training of a focused mind. What we see as we look inward with growing stability and clarity is an afflicted mind, besieged by all sorts of un-

helpful mental states. The appropriate strategy here is to notice them, understand that they are harmful, and abandon (not suppress!) them. We access a mindful mind only occasionally and fleetingly at first, but eventually the afflictions diminish in frequency and intensity and mindfulness becomes established.

When in this process we get lost in the wilderness of afflictive emotions, by all means let's find skillful remedies to extricate ourselves from the difficulty and get back on track. But let's also understand that the flower of mindfulness is never the cause of these difficulties but remains their best solution.

Andrew Olendzki, PhD, is the former senior scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and the author of *Unlimiting Mind*.

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PRACTICING WITH THE FIVE HINDRANCES

Geri Larkin, Lama Palden,
Ajahn Amaro, Michael Liebenson Grady,
Sharon Salzberg

The Five Hindrances are negative mental states that impede our practice and lead us toward unwholesome action. All of us have no doubt experienced how sensual desire, anger, sloth, restlessness, and doubt can overtake our minds—not to mention our meditation practice. These negative mind states have enormous potency, and it is difficult to pry ourselves loose from their grasp. In fact, sometimes we take perverse pleasure in indulging them, which of course makes them doubly difficult to overcome. We nurture desire for an inappropriate person; we brood over an argument with a friend; we content ourselves with an outmoded routine or relationship; we obsessively second-guess even the smallest of decisions; we allow ourselves to be consumed with doubts rather than resolving them.

One of the goals of meditation practice is to realize how we support the hindrances and, through this insight, to dismantle them. In this special practice section, five teachers answer questions about some of the most common ways the Five Hindrances manifest in our everyday lives. Through honest examination, skillful action, and compassion we can

transform these hindrances into newfound equanimity.

The First Hindrance: Sensual Desire
Q&A with Geri Larkin

I always desire what I don't have: friends, food, lovers, material possessions. It seems like I never have what I want at any moment, that I'm always thinking, "What if...?" How can I learn to satisfy this desire with what I do have?

My experience has always been that it's an enormous relief just to admit to myself that I'm obsessed by a desire for something. First, I can stop trying so hard to pretend that I don't want something that, in fact, I do want. Second, most of the time something I think of as an overriding desire is often more a moment of "wishful thinking." Often seeing our desire simply as what it is - a desire - allows it to drop away, or at least loosens our hold on it.

The few times when that hasn't worked, though, gratitude or metta practice has made me sane again. Instead of getting caught up in the desire, I literally start to list all of the things I'm grateful for, starting with the fact that every time I breathe out, my body breathes back in. I suddenly notice all the different colors in my teacup, the sound of the chickens outside. I call a friend, pull out an old journal to remember a former boyfriend. Then I sometimes try a lovingkindness meditation, or chanting, for everyone else caught in the bittersweet cycles of desire.

I am in a committed romantic relationship, but I still feel desire for other people. How should I handle these feelings?

Four kinds of misfortune come
to those who commit adultery:

bad karma,
disturbed sleep, and
a bad reputation
are already known.
There is also the risk
of being reborn in hell.
—The Still Point Dhammapada

Desire happens; it doesn't make you a bad person. People are attractive. They flirt. We fantasize. There is no doubt more than one soul mate for each of us. On the other hand, a solid relationship where two people can take refuge in each other as great spiritual friends, helpmates, and lovers is well worth defending. But how, in the face of desire for someone else?

A powerful antidote is focusing our attention on devotion to our mate. During the Buddha's lifetime, one of his best friends was King Pasenadi, whose wife, Mallika, was completely devoted to him. When Pasenadi was thrown into jail, Mallika covered her body with honey to provide him with sustenance. Cherishing our mate is a warrior's weapon against falling into a relationship with the wrong person (yes, that is anyone who is not our mate). It reminds us how much we love this person who shares our bed and how important she or he is to us. Our devotion might take the form of cooking fresh vegetables for dinner instead of microwave stir-fry. Or putting fresh sheets on our bed. Or going for an evening walk together. Taken singly, these actions are little things; writ large, they are a love poem.

If that doesn't work, Buddha reminded the nuns and monks studying with him that everyone gets sick, ages, and dies. In one case, Buddha made this point by conjuring up a vision of a beautiful woman and making the vision visibly age right in front of a group of her admirers.

They got his point: Everything is impermanent, even beauty. Even desire.

Geri Larkin is the founder and guiding teacher of Still Point, the first Zen Buddhist temple in Detroit. She is the author of *Love Dharma: Relationship Wisdom From Enlightened Buddhist Women.*

The Second Hindrance: Anger
Q&A with Lama Palden

I often find myself torn between lashing out at someone and trying to remain equanimous. I know it's ideal not to explode in anger, but sometimes it still seems like the right thing to do—or like it would be "good" for me to express how I feel, directly. Is it ever right to let anger show?

When we are angry it may be important for us to communicate what we feel. But how we do this is critical. Simply blasting other people with our anger is not skillful or kind. We may think, "Well, they're so thick-headed, I need to yell in order to get through to them." But it's difficult for people to take in what another is saying if they are being yelled at, because their defenses are instantly mobilized. They're just as distracted by the reactionary thoughts going through their heads as we are by the force of our anger.

If we allow ourselves to calm down before addressing the situation, we can let go of our own defensiveness and anger. As we all have experienced, it is not possible to think objectively when we are in the throes of strong emotion. We need space to think clearly, to see what is really bothering us, and then to decide what it is that we actually want—and need—to communicate. We should take the opportunity to think through what is going on within ourselves, and imagine what the other

person might be feeling as well. After we've given ourselves this critical distance from the situation, it's possible to articulate what we want to say much more accurately and effectively. It is also more likely that we will be heard if we can deliver our message without triggering the other person's defenses—or our own.

It's understandable to feel better immediately after an initial catharsis: we've dumped our painful feelings onto another. But it's not long before we feel worse, as our minds and bodies fill with the poison of anger, resentment, and, possibly, guilt or regret. We may try to cope with this miasma of feelings by going over the whole story in our minds again and again, talking about it with our friends, justifying our position and securing their support, planning our next attack, but these defensive strategies ultimately bind us further to suffering. When we feel that someone "deserves" our angry attack, we are indulging in hurting them in order to eradicate our own hurt—and hurting to get rid of hurt never works.

We suffer because we do not understand the openness of our true nature. This is the ignorance that the Buddha taught is the root of all suffering. The radiance of true nature is generated by compassion. The fortresses we construct around ourselves to ratify our position not only separate us from the person we're angry with —but they also separate us from ourselves. The more we are cut off from our true nature, the more we suffer, and the less likely it is that others will listen to us. If we take the time to shift to a place where we can actually rest in openness and lovingkindness, our suffering diminishes. Anything that we feel needs to be communicated will naturally be articulated more effectively from this place.

Lama Palden is a licensed psychotherapist and a founder of the Sukhasiddhi Foundation, based in Marin County, California.

The Third Hindrance: Sloth, Torpor, and Boredom
Q&A with Ajahn Amaro

When I find myself with a free evening before me, I frantically try to fill it with activity rather than spending it alone. How can I learn to face an evening with nothing to "do"—and enjoy it?

Our sense of self is continually formulated by the things that we do and our interactions with others. When we find ourselves with nothing to do or no one to be with, our ego has nothing familiar by which to define itself.

However, we can transform our fear of this emptiness. Boredom and loneliness depend on investing in the sense of self. And, ironically, the harder we try to solidify our image of me through activity, the more we create the conditions for boredom to arise. If the sense of self is clearly understood as empty, solitude becomes a cherished companion. Try quieting the mind and then dropping the question "Who am I?" into it. A gap opens up after the question and before the thinking/self-creating habit can produce a verbal answer. Explore that gap and how it changes your experience of selfhood.

Sometimes I keep participating in something just because it's comfortable, even though I'm not getting anything out of it: my relationship, job, even meditation practice. Is there a way to transform these feelings of sloth and apathy into newfound interest, or are they signs that I really am ready for a change?

We easily take refuge in the familiar because we enjoy the sense of belonging it brings; however, it is unwise to make a change reflexively every time these feelings arise. If we just sugarcoat our apathy with a new

situation, we will never come to any real sense of fulfillment.

The Buddha recommended that in order to benefit from our engagements we need to ask ourselves, "Does this thing still have any genuine benefit for myself and others, here and now, or do I just keep at it out of habit?" Just that simple knowledge of the true effects of our actions is usually enough to guide us as to whether or not to proceed. If a change is needed, we shift our situation, guided by mindfulness and wisdom; if patient endurance is needed instead, that, too, will arise.

When I'm going through a difficult period, I often find myself doing everything I can to avoid the source of the trouble. I tend to become apathetic and even drowsy. Where can I get the courage to confront my problems?

From suffering, of course! If we can simply recognize that we're distracted and that it's because we're avoiding something, that's half the task.

Compulsive activity, blaming others, taking refuge in drugs or alcohol, and submitting to feelings of dullness in meditation are some of the ways that we evade our internal problems. These latter two are often caused by a desire to avoid feeling, because the litany of self-criticism is so painful.

The courage to confront the source of our problems usually arises from desperation. If we truly wish to be free of our difficulties, our heart has no other recourse than to acknowledge the core issue (even if we have studiously avoided it for decades!) and accept its connection to the

suffering we are experiencing.

The other main source of assistance, when the heart is enmeshed in delusion, is the helpful perspective of our friends. Delusion has the unique ability to mask itself from its originator, thus it is often only from the "outside" that it can be recognized, and this recognition arouses the bravery needed for us to look squarely at the truth.

Ajahn Amaro is co-abbott of Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California.

The Fourth Hindrance: Restlessness and Worry Q&A with Michael Liebenson Grady

As soon as I'm in one place, or with one person, I want to be somewhere else, or with someone else. How can I learn to be satisfied with my current situation?

We are conditioned to seek happiness outside of ourselves. If only we could be in a different place, or with a different person, then we would be happy—or so we think. This conditioning generates a lot of restless minds interacting with one another, which in turn creates enormous disconnection. We need to be mindful of the state of mind that is driving our restlessness.

As soon we begin to feel even a little bit bored, many of us react by distracting ourselves with activity—any activity, however mindless: we turn on the television, call a friend, do the dishes. We may also feel we're missing out on something better than whatever it is we're doing. Both of these reactions ultimately stem from either aversion or greed. We need

to learn to recognize our insatiable craving for new experiences. Being ashamed of our cravings doesn't help, but justifying or denying them doesn't help, either. Instead, we should learn to be with our situation as it is rather than moving away from it.

Acknowledging the feeling of boredom and then paying attention to our discomfort help bring the mind back to what is happening now. No doubt it can be difficult to be content with the present moment. But when we learn to open to the feelings that underlie restlessness, then meaningful connection with ourselves and others becomes possible.

Even though the circumstances of my outer life appear stable, inside I'm always second-guessing my decisions, worrying about what I've done in the past and what I should do in the future. Sitting practice brings me temporarily into the present moment, but as soon as I'm off the cushion, the worries flood back in. What can I do to prevent this?

To begin with, we should cultivate a friendlier relationship toward our worrying mind, rather than making an enemy of it. The nonjudgmental quality of mindfulness practice allows us to open to painful mind states such as anxiety without rejecting these energies or rushing in to try and fix them. With this attitude, we can then ask ourselves, "How can I work with this worry energy in a skillful way that will allow me to understand its nature?"

Our awareness that the mind is getting caught up in worrying indicates that we are on the right track. But it's important not to stop at this level of awareness. Do we feel aversion to worry? Do we react by getting caught up in the other hindrances of discouragement, impatience, or self-doubt? With practice—both on and off the cushion—we can begin to taste the inner freedom that comes when we let go of our habitual reactions of clinging to pleasure and avoiding pain.

Sometimes, though, we are so caught up in our reactions to worry that we can't seem to find the mental space to observe it. At these times, we can use skillful means to bring attention to the first foundation of mindfulness: the body. During sitting practice, focus your awareness on the sensations that arise from contact with the seat or floor. This will help bring the mind back into the present, and produce calm and inner balance. This practice sounds so simple—and it is! And yet, bringing awareness to the body at the times when we're experiencing difficult emotions is often the last thing that we would think to do. With practice, working with the touch points becomes a very accessible and reliable resource for allowing us to be more present wherever we are and under any conditions.

Michael Liebman Grady has been practicing Vipassana mediatation since 1973. He is a guiding teacher at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center.

The Fifth Hindrance: Doubt
Q&A with Sharon Salzberg

I make a point to keep sitting every day, but lately I've been asking myself what good it's doing me, apart from the value of sticking to my commitment and the supposed benefits of spending time in silence and alone. How can I reinvigorate my faith in the practice?

Doubt and faith in our meditation practice often arise and pass away depending on what we are using as criteria for success. The first step is to try to move away from incessantly evaluating what's going on in our practice. We need to be willing to go through ups and downs without getting disheartened. When doubt arises, try to recognize it as

doubt, and realize that it is a constantly changing state.

If that doesn't help, you might need to seek clarification about the meditation method you're using, and perhaps make a change in your practice. You shouldn't hesitate to ask a teacher or fellow practitioner about that. But in most cases, the doubt is simply a reflexive sign of our impatience.

This example is sometimes used to describe practice: It's as though you're hitting a piece of wood with an ax to split it. You hit it ninety-nine times, yet nothing happens. Then you hit it the hundredth time, and it breaks open. But when we're hitting the wood for the thirty-sixth time, it doesn't exactly feel glorious.

It's not just the mechanical act of hitting the wood and weakening its fiber that makes for that magical hundredth moment, just like it's not the physical act of sitting on the cushion that leads to realization—though both are certainly necessary. It's also our openness to possibility, our patience, our effort, our humor, our self-knowledge. These are what we are actually practicing, no matter what happens or doesn't happen to our problems, our moods, our sense of "being in the moment."

Every so often I meet someone who seems perfectly congenial on the surface, but something in me just doesn't trust them. This doubt ends up evidencing itself in my behavior, and sometimes causes hurt. When is it worth noting these feelings of doubt, and when is it best just to let them go?

It's important to note a feeling of doubt that arises in a relationship. If we immediately attempt to let it go, we are automatically discounting our intuition. If you allow yourself to acknowledge the doubt and investigate its constituent feelings without judgment, a lot will be revealed.

You may notice that at its root are sadness, envy, competitiveness,

or perhaps even echoes of a time in the past when you didn't trust your intuition—with unfortunate consequences. In looking quietly at the doubt, you may decide it is largely a result of your projections onto the other person, or feelings of your own inadequacy, or jealousy.

As a result of this inquiry, you may resolve to behave differently. Or you may decide that there really is a disquieting element to the other person's behavior that you don't want to ignore. If it is the kind of relationship where you can communicate your feelings, it is worth trying to skillfully convey your discomfort to this person, and to listen to their response. If the relationship doesn't allow for that, it is good at least to be aware of how your doubt might be clouding the ways you interact with that person, so that you don't cause unnecessary hurt.

Sharon Salzberg is cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts.

8

TANGLED IN THOUGHT

How to beat your mind at its own game

Kittisaro

Practices For Radical Reflection

ONE

Sit in a comfortable position, and bring your attention to the present moment. Take a few long, mindful breaths. Consciously savor the bodily sensations of breathing in. Relax and let go as you mindfully breathe out. Letting go with each out-breath, steady awareness on the sensations of the body. Notice the changing nature of sensations. Holding those sensations lightly, rest in the spaciousness of awareness. Consciously think a thought related to the present moment, like "I am sitting" or "I am aware." Choose an ordinary thought that isn't emotionally charged. Think the thought slowly and mindfully. Notice the silent moment before the thought appears. Be mindful of the inner words as they fluctuate, vibrate, and dissolve. Contemplate the quality and texture of the inner voice as it manifests and changes. Be aware of the ending of the thought. Be mindful of the space after the thought, before the next thought arises. Mind the gap. Savor the moments between thoughts. Although thoughts begin and end, ask the question "What remains?"

Repeat the process again and again. Slow the thoughts down, so that the ephemeral nature of concepts is clearly recognized. In this

practice, remember we are not thinking in order to arrive at an answer. Rather, we are consciously thinking to reflect on the nature of thought, noticing how it arises and ceases within the stillness of awareness. Contemplate how each thought is insubstantial and empty of solidity. What is the mind like when there is no thought? Extend the spaces between thoughts.

Consider how each word and phrase dissolves into silent inner listening. Sense how the inner listening—awareness, the knowing—is spacious without boundary. Like lightning in a night sky, concepts appear and then vanish.

TWO

Link a simple thought to the breathing. A quiet thought like "In" as you breathe in, and "Out" as you breathe out. Or "Let," while breathing in, and "Go" while breathing out. It can be any thought that helps you stay present. Notice the thought dissolve into listening. Relax on the out-breath and sense the subtle relaxation of volition as the thought disappears. Practice letting the mind rest quietly between thoughts. Hold the thoughts more and more lightly, perhaps just having a quiet thought on the out-breath, "Let go," and abiding in inner silence until the next breath. Practice letting thoughts subside, sitting with the body breathing.

THREE

Ask the question "Who is thinking?" Notice how the attention turns inward to look for the sense of me. Stay with the feeling of doubt. Notice how the question stops the thinking mind. Linger with the sense of silent questioning. If the mind throws up an answer, notice that thought in its changing insubstantial nature, dissolving back into listening.

The question "Who?" is held lightly and sparingly. If the feeling of doubt is too coarse and uncomfortable, balance it with the thought "Let go," reflecting how all thoughts are ungraspable. Remind the heart to rest in its own spacious awareness. "Who" can be combined with a variety of endings, depending on what is appropriate: "Who is worrying? Who is practicing? Who is suffering?" and so on. The ending is not so important, but "Who" encourages the heart to question the primal split of subject and object, in here and out there.

To empty the sense of things out there, use the question "What? What is it?" The ordinary habitual mind might be telling us it's good or bad, painful or pleasant. Slowly think the thought "What is it?" Let the question lead you to the undivided stillness of listening.

Think the thought "What remains?" or "What never waivers?" While noticing the flickering, ever-changing nature of the thought, silently ponder the womb of awareness within which all phenomena appear.

FOUR

An obstacle to this practice is the assumption that thought itself is the problem. Thinking, tainted with delusion, complicates and obscures reality. The Buddha still used thought, but without papanca.

In a daily activity, like walking or eating, quietly think a thought, noting the activity. It can be a simple word or phrase—"Walking," "Eating." Let the word dissolve, directing attention to the activity. Practice being with the activity in inner silence. Notice how often the mind wants to think and discriminate. Without judgment, just patiently recognize that, allowing each thought to return to stillness. Is it possible to be with activity, with less and less thought, enjoying the silence?

FIVE

How is it when the heart is silent? Notice how the complicated walls of the mind dissolve when conceptualization is absent. Undifferentiated, the senses merge and things are just as they are. Practice inviting opinions about yourself or the present moment, thinking them slowly: "I'm great; I'm a basket case; It's easy; It's difficult." Let each concept, seemingly so true and real, be known as evanescent, continually vanishing into unmoving, sky-like awareness. Notice the shimmering stream of vibrating sensations, sights, sounds, and perceptions. How can thinking capture reality?

As the Buddha says in the Lotus Sutra, "This reality cannot be described. Words fall silent before it."

Kittisaro, a former monk in the Thai forest tradition, is cofounder, with Thanissara, of Dharmagiri, a hermitage in South Africa.

9

SEEKING OTHER POSTURES

A longtime meditator rediscovers instructions for the walking body.

Mary Talbot

In spite of being a daily walker, I have always regarded walking meditation as a sort of punctuation to, or respite from, the work of sitting; nothing on the order of the sober mind training and investigation to be undertaken on the home base of the cushion. This willful delusion could be a hangover from my earliest forays into zazen, where *kinhin* really was a respite—but also, it seemed to me, a mad, macho dash around the zendo for which I was ill-suited, even as a teenager. Nor was I ever tolerant of the extreme slow motion of Burmese-style vipassana walking. On the contrary, it sent my kleshas into a tailspin, and just made me want to hurry up and sit down.

This isn't to say that walking to grocery store or the recycling bin doesn't give me infinite chances to be mindful of the breath and the contact of my soles on the pavement. And there have been those revelatory times on retreat when the walking path became the best place to be. But through lo these many years, only sporadically did I experience my walking body as the locus of refreshment and concentration that I thought was normally and primarily accessible with glutes planted on

the floor. It hasn't been part of a daily practice, where I set my mind and heart to it, bowed and gave it the respect it's due. I've known I was missing out, or rather, that I wasn't letting myself in.

As with most things that seem hard to undertake, or beyond my ken, it's usually desperation and the demands of age that force me to really try. Last year, a collusion of physical and emotional shifts shoved me off the cushion and into a series of other postures where I undertook to meditate. In an attempt to jumpstart a better walking practice, I looked for guidance, and came upon a set of instructions for walking meditation online, attributed to Ajahn Mun, the founder of the Thai Forest tradition. The translation is attributed to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who is quite sure he never did translate them, and a search of Ajahn Mun's biography and the companion volume, *Patipada*, both written by the Thai master Ajahn Mahaboowa, turn up no such text.

Regardless of who uttered these lines, their simplicity and forthrightness were what I needed, and re-oriented me to how very *available* walking meditation is, and what an act of reverence to the dhamma. Another hangover, one many of us nurse through a lifetime, is the din of interior voices telling us we're not capable of something, that it really isn't within our grasp. I felt that way for a long time about my own breath, and it took me years to comprehend that I wasn't doing it wrong, as some of those voices insisted. That playing with and manipulating and sending my breath into all kinds of real and imagined places was my prerogative. And that's how I learned to meditate. These little instructions, which are nothing new, re-inspired me to collapse the Cartesian distance I'd erected between my pacing body and my fussy mind, and to find another way of accessing what Ajahn Lee called a safe home for the mind. They're like a plainspoken voice that says, "Do it, out of compassion for yourself."

Walking Meditation Instructions

The key technique for walking meditation is to be mindful of walking and aware of the touching of the feet to the ground. Before starting walking meditation, the practitioner should prepare a walking path. The walking path should not be shorter than seventeen steps long. The walking path must be clean and smooth. The direction of the walking path, when part of practice, is from the east to the west. Other directions are acceptable if a suitable direction cannot be found, except avoid the direction from the north to the south and from the south to the north.

Before starting walking meditation, the practitioner stands at one end and puts the right hand over the left in front of the body. Having thus composed the body, they should then stand still and bring awareness and attention to the body. Then raise one's hands together (a gesture of respect) and with the eyes shut reflect for a few minutes on the qualities of the Buddha, the dhamma and the sangha. Then bring the hands down and decide on how long you are going to walk. Focus the eyes down on the ground/floor about six feet in front of you or at a suitable distance for each individual. Don't look around.

While walking, practitioners mindfully note this arising and passing away of feelings as the soles of the feet lift off or touch onto the ground. Keep the full attention on sensations that arise through walking. Walking quick or slow depends on each practitioner. If the mind wanders a lot, walking slowly is suitable. Then bring the mind back to the sensations at the feet and continue walking. While walking the mind may become calm and tranquil. Stop and stand to allow the mind to experience this calmness and tranquility.

Another way to do walking meditation is to use a mantra like bhud-

do [awake]. This technique of practice is like the sitting meditation as mentioned earlier. The practitioner mentally repeats buddho with the breath while walking. Be mindful on the breaths as you repeat the mantra, buddho, all the time. This technique will help calm the mind. However, it is not suitable for beginners because the breath is a subtle meditation subject. Walking meditation combined with the breath with the word buddho is fit for one who has attained a certain degree of stability and calmness beforehand.

Mary Talbot is *Tricycle*'s editor-at-large.

10

SAVASANA FOR DEEP RELAXATION AND DISCOVERY

How corpse pose can help with the difficult task of letting go.

Lauren Krauze

The end of the year arrives quickly, and often we feel a sense of urgency. Our pace quickens, both individually and collectively. In order to maintain balance during this time, we must slow down and prioritize rest. The sustained periods of darkness in the winter present many opportunities to move inward and engage in relaxing practices.

Savasana, a yogic practice that encourages rest and relaxation, is a Sanskrit word that combines *sava* (corpse) and *a*sana (seat or connection). In the practice of yoga, savasana is often the last posture during which practitioners lie down and rest.

This simple practice can have profound effects. Physically, savasana allows the body to recuperate from physical exertion and intense mental concentration. The practice, however, also has deep spiritual implications; in savasana, practitioners assume the position of a corpse and invite the experience of death through means of deep relaxation. In the Tibetan Buddhist practice of *phowa* (*samkranti* in Sanskrit), practitioners consciously prepare for death through acts of meditation and devotion. Savasana is more passive. There is very little effort. Through

the complete release of the body and mind in savasana, a person can practice the difficult and necessary task of letting go.

To prepare for savasana, choose a quiet room with low lighting where you will not be disturbed. Ensure that the room temperature feels comfortable and there are no drafts. Consider playing ambient or atmospheric music at a low volume. Set up a yoga mat on the floor or lie down on a soft carpet.

Create a thick roll with several towels or a heavy blanket. Lie on the back, place the roll underneath both knees, and extend the legs. Separate the feet six-to-eight inches apart and let the feet fall out to the sides. Place a pillow or another blanket underneath the head. Move the arms a few inches away from the sides of the body and turn the palms face up. You can also cover yourself with a blanket. Close the eyes.

Begin to slowly scan the body to identify areas of tightness. Start with the toes and progress to the top of the head. If you find an area of tension, linger there and silently invite relaxation. For example, if you sense a holding in the abdomen, silently suggest "abdomen, relax."

Once you complete the scan, let go. Relax. Don't follow the breath. Don't watch the mind or observe the body. Don't consciously practice anything. This is savasana. Remain in the posture for at least 15 minutes and as long as 30 or 45 minutes. Setting a timer can be helpful.

The practice of savasana helps us welcome a state of rest while we're awake; however, if you find yourself falling asleep, let it happen. This is often a sign that the body needs more sleep in general. You may find that after an adequate night's rest, you can incorporate periods of deep relaxation into your practice without falling asleep.

To come out of savasana, emerge slowly. First, take a few deep, slow breaths. Make small movements. Wiggle the fingers and the toes. Reach the arms over the head and stretch the arms and legs in opposite direc-

tions. Bend the knees and roll onto the right side into a fetal position. Stay here for as long as you feel comfortable. Then, lift up to a seated position.

In my experience of savasana, I'm still very much aware of my physical and mental state during the first few minutes. I shift. I twitch. My mind replays conversations from earlier in the day. Then, my body gradually begins to feel very heavy. I sometimes experience a sensation that feels like I'm floating away. I'm not asleep, but I'm also not actively engaged in a conscious awareness practice. After savasana, I often feel rested, calm, and refreshed.

Tibetan Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche wrote that at the moment of death, the luminosity of the mind is revealed. It is free from all darkness. This season, practicing savasana may help us move deeper into the darkness, experience deep relaxation, and perhaps discover something brighter.

Lauren Krauze is a writer and yoga teacher living in New York City.