



Mindy Newman

*Developing a Daily Meditation Practice*

Week 1: Begin with the Body

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Hi, my name is Mindy Newman and I'm a member of the Meditation Teaching Faculty at the Nalanda Institute in New York City. I'm here to serve as the guest teacher for *Tricycle* magazine's Meditation Month. We will be focusing on the theme of developing a daily meditation practice. I think that this is really a very important theme to focus on because many, many people have the desire to be meditating daily. It's their New Year's resolution. It's a very important goal. They really struggle with doing it, though it sounds like something that should be extremely easy to do. You set aside the time every day. You sit down. You meditate for a few minutes. But oftentimes, what people find is that actually being able to sit every day is harder than actually participating in meditation.

In this series, each talk will be focused on a different obstacle that people face in trying to develop a daily meditation practice. Each talk will build on the previous one. At the end, hopefully you will have tools that are beneficial to you, that will really help you as you keep going. Work with whatever obstacles come up when you try to meditate on a daily basis; you'll feel more prepared to be meditating daily.

For the first talk, what we're going to focus on is the foundation in the body. A lot of time when people struggle with meditating daily, one of the big things they deal with is physical discomfort. They find the physical posture of meditating very painful or extremely uncomfortable. A lot of the time this happens because we have in our mind a vision of what we're supposed to look like when we're meditating. We're supposed to be in lotus position, on a cushion. But the reality is, for many people's bodies, this is not realistic.

What is actually important, in terms of developing a meditation posture, is finding a way to sit where you're relaxed but alert, and comfortable enough that you can sit for a sustained period of time without your muscles doing a lot of work. We actually want to rely on your skeletal structure to hold you upright and for your muscles to be able to relax deeply. When you're able to do that, there's a lot more physical ease and a lot more energy to sit for periods of time.

Let's start by building the posture from the ground up. You can go ahead and right away close your eyes in order to help you come into your physical body and feel sensation more. Meditation is really a physical practice. We think about the part where we're working with our minds, which obviously is what it's there for, but the body is the container for the meditation. By dropping down into the body now, we're really creating a stable container in which to meditate.

Start by bringing your awareness down to your feet. If you're seated in a chair, really let your feet relax deeply into the ground. You might find it helpful to move your feet around or wiggle your toes. Then really let your feet sink into the ground. By doing this right away, you're encouraging your body to work with gravity. If you're seated in a cushion, you're focusing on your legs, relaxing into the cushion. If you're seated in a chair, bring your attention up to your hips. Imagine that your legs are like two bags of sand that are being poured out of the hip joint, flowing down, loose and relaxed, all the way to the tips of your toes. When you do that, you may start to feel a kind of lightness in your legs.

As you come up to your hips and pelvis, it can be helpful to rock back and forth a little bit, move from side to side. Rock back and forth in order to find a way to sit so your pelvis is tilted slightly forward. You may feel a little bit of an arch in your lower back. If you're seated on a cushion, it's helpful to sit towards the edge so that when your pelvis is rocked forward, the cushion will actually become like a wedge shape.

Then from there, move the torso a little bit from side to side, and front to back to find the place in the middle where your spine is just floating above the pelvis. Feeling your legs relaxing down into the ground—pelvis tilted forward, spine just lightly floating up—you might roll the shoulders up and back a couple of times, or bring them up to the ears and drop them down, so they can release some tension. Then bringing your hands to rest, either palms down on your legs, or if you prefer, taking the palm of the back of one hand and placing it in the palm of the other, the thumbs lightly touching, underneath the navel. But the fingers really lightly touching and letting the palms and the hands relax.

Just like the legs, let the arms flow out of the shoulder joint. Flowing down from the shoulders all the way to the tips of the fingers. It can be helpful to move the head and the neck a little bit to loosen up the neck muscles. Then try and find that spot where the head is floating at the top of the spine. You may actually be able to feel a long line from your skull all the way to the tailbone. The tip of the tongue placed at the point where the roof of the mouth and the teeth come together so that the jaw releases.

Now that we've created the structure of the position, we're going to use a meditative exercise to explore it, to bring mindfulness to it, so that you can develop even more comfort and ease in this seated position. We'll begin by scanning the body from the top down. Starting with the face, bring your awareness to your eyelids, your eyebrows, your cheeks and jaw. You may notice that just by bringing awareness to some of these places, there's a softening that occurs.

As you bring your awareness down to the back of your neck, you can also bring it to your throat. Imagine that the larynx and esophagus could dilate like a fist clenched tight releasing the fingers, so that there is a lot of room for air and oxygen to flow. Bring your awareness to your upper back and especially the shoulder blades. See if you can imagine that they're releasing away from each other to the outer edges of the room. Imagine a spreading quality.

Then keep bringing your awareness down to your mid back and your lower back. You may find it helpful to sit against a wall, or to have a very firm pillow between your back and you to help support your spine if you're feeling a lot of discomfort. But if you're able to sit upright, just notice and allow the release to happen. As you come around to the front of your body, bring your awareness to the heart's center. To the ribs and abdomen. Somewhere in your torso, you can likely feel your breath moving.

Then, you're bringing your awareness down lower into your hips and pelvis. Scanning the legs. Noting the softness behind the knees. Bringing your awareness all the way down to your feet. Now bring your awareness to any places in the body where you're feeling some discomfort, some tension, or tightness. Just imagine that you're sending your breath there.

Up on a scale from one to ten with one being total ease, and ten being significant pain, if you're somewhere in the five to seven category, that's enough intensity that you can see if you can work with it by softening it. Anything above that, it's probably better to move and find a different position where you're not in pain. If you're in the five to seven range, see if you can just breathe into it.

[*Long pause.*]

Then take a step back in your mind and become aware of your entire body from head to toe. Notice how much more sensation you're experiencing now that you've brought awareness to your whole structure. Especially notice whatever sense of relaxed alertness you've been able to cultivate during this time. It doesn't need to be perfect. This is a process of cultivating a quality of ease. Just notice what you've been able to cultivate today.

Then finally, thank your body. Send a silent thank you to it for participating with you in this exercise. As you're ready, open your eyes. I hope that you'll try engaging in this practice daily if you can for the next week—before the next talk which will be on setting an intention for meditation—because with each week, we're going to build on the previous week's talk. By really trying, if you can, to experiment with this on a daily basis, you might find, that at the end of a week, you're feeling much more comfortable sitting in meditation. It will really help you as you move forward. Thanks.