

How to Meditate

Tara Brach

You are traveling a path that has led to clarity, peace and deep realization for many people over thousands of years. May their awakening support and inspire you. And may the sincerity of your practice heal and free your spirit. ~ Tara Brach ~

Introduction

What is Meditation?

Meditation is commonly described as a training of mental attention that awakens us beyond the conditioned mind and habitual thinking, and reveals the nature of reality. In this guide, the process and the fruit of meditation practice is understood as Natural Presence. Presence is a mindful, clear recognition of what is happening—here, now—and the open, allowing space that includes all experience. There are many supportive strategies (called “skillful means”) that create a conducive atmosphere for the deepening of presence. The art of practice is employing these strategies with curiosity, kindness and a light touch. The wisdom of practice is remembering that Natural Presence is always and already here. It is the loving awareness that is our essence.

About the Author and IMCW

Tara Brach, Ph. D., is the founder and senior teacher of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, and teaches Buddhist meditation at centers in the United States and Canada. A clinical psychologist and author of *Radical Acceptance- Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*, she has taught extensively on the application of Buddhist teachings to emotional healing.

The **Insight Meditation Community of Washington (IMCW)** is dedicated to offering the teachings of the Buddha, instruction in Vipassana (Buddhist Insight Meditation) and other related spiritual practices that awaken our natural wisdom and compassion.

Part I: How to Establish a Daily Sitting Practice

Approaching meditation practice:

Attitude is everything. While there are many meditative strategies, what makes the difference in terms of spiritual awakening is your quality of earnestness, or sincerity. Rather than adding another “should” to your list, choose to practice because you care about connecting with your innate capacity for love, clarity and inner peace. Let this sincerity be the atmosphere that nurtures whatever form your practice takes.

A primary aspect of attitude is unconditional friendliness toward the whole meditative process. When we are friendly towards another person, there is a quality of acceptance. Yet we often enter meditation with some idea of the kind of inner experience we should be having and judgment about not “doing it right.” Truly- there is no “right” meditation and striving to get it right reinforces the sense of an imperfect, striving self. Rather, give permission for the meditation experience to be whatever it is. Trust that if you are sincere in your intention toward being awake and openhearted, that in time your practice will carry you home to a sense of wholeness and freedom.

Friendliness also includes an interest in what arises- be it pleasant sensations or fear, peacefulness or confusion. And the heart expression of friendliness is kindness — regarding the life within and around us with care.

Creating a container for practice:

It helps to have a regular time and space for cultivating a meditation practice.

Setting a time - Morning is often preferred because the mind may be calmer than it is later in the day. However, the best time is the time that you can realistically commit to on a regular basis. Some people choose to do two or more short sits, perhaps one at the beginning and one at the end of the day.

Deciding in advance the duration of your sit will help support your practice. For many, the chosen time is between 15-45 minutes. If you sit each day, you may experience noticeable benefits (e.g., less reactivity, more calm) and be able to increase your sitting time.

Finding a space - If possible, dedicate a space exclusively to your daily sitting. Choose a relatively protected and quiet space where you can leave your cushion (or chair) so that it is always there to return to. You may want to create an altar with a candle, inspiring photos, statues, flowers, stones, shells and/or whatever arouses a sense of beauty, wonder and the sacred. These are not necessary, but are beneficial if they help create a mood and remind you of what you love.

Set your intention:

There is a Zen teaching that says “The most important thing is remembering the most important thing.” It is helpful to recall at the start of each sitting what matters to you, what draws you to meditate. Take a few moments to connect in a sincere way with your heart’s aspiration. You might sense this as a prayer that in some way dedicates your practice to your own spiritual freedom, and that of all beings.

Set your posture:

Alertness is one of the two essential ingredients in every meditation. Sit on a chair, cushion, or kneeling bench as upright, tall and balanced as possible. A sense of openness and receptivity is the second essential ingredient in every meditation, and it is supported by intentionally relaxing obvious and habitual areas of tension. Around an erect posture, let the rest of your skeleton and muscles hang freely. Let the hands rest comfortably on your knees or lap. Let the eyes close, or if you prefer, leave the eyes open, the gaze soft and receptive.

Please don’t skip the step of relaxing/letting go! You might take several full deep breaths, and with each exhale, consciously let go, relaxing the face, shoulders, hands, and stomach area. Or, you may want to begin with a body scan: start at the scalp and move your attention slowly downward, methodically relaxing and softening each part of the body. Consciously releasing body tension will help you open to whatever arises during your meditation.

The Basic Practice:

Natural Presence

Presence has two interdependent qualities of recognizing, or noticing what is happening, and allowing whatever is experienced without any judgment, resistance or grasping. Presence is our

deepest nature, and the essence of meditation is to realize and inhabit this whole and lucid awareness.

We practice meditation by receiving all the domains of experience with a mindful, open attention. These domains include breath and sensations; feelings (pleasant, unpleasant and neutral); sense perceptions, thoughts and emotions; and awareness itself.

In the essential practice of meditation there is no attempt to manipulate or control experience. Natural Presence simply recognizes what is arising (thoughts, feelings, sounds, emotions) and allows life to unfold, just as it is. As long as there is a sense of a self making an effort and doing a practice, there is identification with a separate and limited self. The open receptivity of Natural Presence dissolves this sense of a self “doing” the meditation.

Knowing the difference between Natural Presence and “skillful means” or supports for practice:

Because our minds are often so busy and reactive, it is helpful to develop skillful means that quiet the mind and allow us to come home to the fullness of Natural Presence. These supports for practice help us to notice and relax thoughts and physical tension. They involve a wise effort that un-does our efforting!

You might consider yourself as a contemplative artist, with a palette of colors (supportive strategies) with which to work in creating the inner mood that is most conducive for the clarity and openness of presence. These colors can be applied with a light touch. Experiment and see what works best for you, and don't confuse these methods (such as following the breath) with the radical and liberating presence that frees and awakens our spirit. Regardless of what skillful means you employ, create some time during each sitting when you let go of all “doings” and simply rest in Natural Presence. Discover what happens when there is no controlling or efforting at all, when you simply let life be just as it is. Discover who you are, when there is no managing of the meditation.

Skillful Means: Our supports for practice

Presence is supported by a calm and collected mind, a mindful awareness and an open heart. The following strategies cultivate these capacities:

Establish an embodied presence—senses awake!

You might take a few minutes at the beginning of the sitting (or anytime during the sitting or day) to intentionally awaken all the senses. Scan through the body with your attention, softening and becoming aware of sensations from the inside out. Listen to sounds and also include the scent and the feel of the space around you in and outside of the room. While the eyes may be closed, still include the experience of light and dark, and imagine and sense the space around you. Explore listening to and feeling the entire moment-to-moment experience, with your senses totally open.

Choose a home base—a primary anchor or subject of meditation.

It is helpful to select a home base (or several anchors) that allow you to quiet and collect the mind, and to deepen embodied presence. Useful anchors are:

- The breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils.
- Other physical changes during breathing, e.g., the rise and fall of the chest.
- Other physical sensations as they arise, e.g. the sensations in the hands, or through the whole body.

- Sounds as they are experienced within or around you.
- Listening to and feeling one's entire experience, (i.e., receiving sounds and sensations in awareness).

Remindfulness—"coming back" and "being here"

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of moment to moment experience. We train in mindfulness by establishing an embodied presence and learning to see clearly and feel fully the changing flow of sensations, feelings (pleasantness and unpleasantness), emotions and sounds.

A metaphor offered by psychiatrist and author, Dan Siegel, is helpful. Imagine your awareness as a great wheel. At the hub of the wheel is mindful presence, and from this hub, an infinite number of spokes extend out to the rim. Your attention is conditioned to leave presence, move out along the spokes and affix itself to one part of the rim after another. Plans for dinner segue into a disturbing conversation, a self-judgment, a song of the radio, a backache, the feeling of fear. Or your attention gets lost in obsessive thinking circling endlessly around stories and feelings about what is wrong. If you are not connected to the hub, if your attention is trapped out on the rim, you are cut off from your wholeness and living in trance.

Training in mindfulness allows us to return to the hub and live our moments with full awareness. Through the practice of "coming back" we notice when we have drifted and become lost in thought, and we recall our attention back to a sensory based presence. This important capacity is developed through the following steps:

- Set your intention to awaken from thoughts—mental commentary, memories, plans, evaluations, stories—and rest in non-conceptual presence.
- Gently bring attention to your primary anchor, letting it be in the foreground while still including in the background the whole domain of sensory experience. For instance you might be resting in the inflow and outflow of the breath as your home base, and also be mindful of the sounds in the room, a feeling of sleepiness, an itch, heat.
- When you notice you have been lost in thought, pause and gently re-arrive in your anchor, mindful of the changing moment-to-moment experience of your senses.

It can be helpful to remember that getting distracted is totally natural- just as the body secretes enzymes, the mind generates thoughts! No need to make thoughts the enemy; just realize that you have a capacity to awaken from the trance of thinking. When you recognize that you have been lost in thought, take your time as you open out of the thought and relax back into the actual experience of being Here. You might listen to sounds, re-relax your shoulder, hands and belly, relax your heart. This will allow you to arrive again in mindful presence at the hub, senses wide open, letting your home base be in the foreground. Notice the difference between any thought and the vividness of this Here-ness!

As the mind settles, you will have more moments of "being here," of resting in the hub and simply recognizing and allowing the changing flow of experience. Naturally the mind will still sometimes lose itself on the rim, and at these times, when you notice, you again gently return to the hub—"coming back," and "being here" are fluid facets of practice.

The more you inhabit the alert stillness at the center of the wheel and include in mindfulness whatever is happening, the more the hub of presence becomes edgeless, warm and bright. In the moments when there is no controlling of experience—when there is effortless mindfulness— you enter the purity of presence. This is "Natural Presence." The hub, spokes and rim are all floating in your luminous open awareness.

Practice metta to soften and open the heart.

Metta practice, also called lovingkindness meditation, cultivates both a loving heart and a collected, settled mind. The practice uses specific phrases to send loving and kind wishes to yourself, loved ones, neutral persons, difficult people and to all beings everywhere, without exception. You might choose three or four of the below, or create whatever phrases resonate for you:

May I be filled with lovingkindness.

May I feel safe from harm.

May I accept myself just as I am.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be happy.

Spend a few minutes or more offering the phrases to yourself, taking the time to imagine and directly feel the experience the phrases invoke. Then do the same as you offer it to the others mentioned above. You can bring in the metta practice at the beginning, end or during any part of the meditation. For some people, it can be beneficial to emphasize metta as a primary practice—especially when there has been trauma or great self-aversion. This skillful means is a beautiful way to awaken the heart.

Developing concentration

Bringing attention to a primary subject or anchor can lead to a concentrated focus that naturally calms and collects the mind. This concentration can be deepened by intentionally aiming and sustaining a focused attention with your chosen anchor. When cultivating concentration, the anchor should be one that has a pleasant or at least neutral feeling tone.

Concentration supports mindfulness and requires a relaxed attention. There is often a subtle (or overt) sense of making an effort to sustain concentration, of striving to control the mind and make something happen. It is important to not become caught in a striving effort. It is easy to be seduced into trying to achieve something, such as staying with the breath for much of the sitting, and then evaluating what is happening as a “good” or “not good” meditation. Mistaking a focus on the breath for meditation is like fixating on the quality of your hiking boots, and not really being awake of the natural world you are inhabiting!

Concentration helps quiet the mind and without some quieting, mindfulness is difficult to sustain. It also can lead to states of rapture and deep peace. Yet without a mindful presence, concentration bears no fruit. The key to concentration is remembering your intention towards presence, and then focusing on your chosen subject for meditation with a soft, clear and relaxed attention.

RAIN—healing emotional suffering

The mindful presence that helps release emotional suffering is summarized by the acronym RAIN.

- **R-Recognize** - notice what is arising (fear, hurt, etc.)
- **A-Allow** - agree to “be with it,” to “let it be.”
- **I-Investigate** - in a non-analytic way, get to know how the body, heart and mind experiences these energies. You might inquire by asking yourself one or more of the following questions: “What is happening?” “Where am I feeling this in my body?” “What wants attention?” “What wants acceptance?” The “I” is also **Intimacy**: experiencing difficult sensations and emotions with a direct, gentle, kind attention; and offering compassion to the place of vulnerability.

- **N-Non-identification**, or not having your sense of Being defined by, possessed by or linked to any emotion. In other words, not taking it personally! The “N” is also **Natural Presence**, a homecoming to the loving awareness that is our essence.

Practice Self-Inquiry

Inquiry (questions like “What is happening?”) can bring attention in a direct way to the changing flow of experience and reveal the truth of impermanence and the empty (self-less) nature of sights, sounds, thoughts, emotions and feelings. Self- inquiry extends this process by turning awareness back on itself. Classical questions include: “Who am I?” “What am I?” “Who or what is aware?” “Who or what is listening to sound” “Who or what is looking out through these eyes?”

Self-Inquiry is best done when the mind is relatively quiet and senses awake. Ask a question and look back towards awareness, towards that which is aware. After asking, relax with an embodied presence, open, not in any way pursuing an answer with your intellect. By enrolling the natural interest, energy and receptive attention of inquiry, the very nature of awareness is revealed.

Part 2: Common Issues for Meditators

Getting lost in thought

At first, you may be surprised at how active and uncontrolled your mind is. Don’t worry - you are discovering the truth about the state of most minds! Accept and patiently “sit with” whatever comes up. There is no need to get rid of thoughts; this is not the purpose of meditation. Rather, we are learning to recognize when thinking is happening so we are not lost in a trance—believing thoughts to be reality, becoming identified with thoughts.

Because we are so often in a thinking trance, it is helpful to quiet down some. Just like a body of water stirred up by the winds, after being physically still for a while, your mind will gradually calm down. To support that quieting, at the beginning of a sitting it can be helpful to relax and practice Remindfulness—gently bringing your attention back again and again to your home base in the senses.

It takes practice to distinguish the trance of thinking - fantasy, planning, commentary, dreamy states - from the presence that directly receives the changing experience of this moment. Establishing an embodied awareness and letting your anchor be in the foreground is a good way to become familiar with the alive, vibrant mystery of Here-ness, of presence.

The Five Classic Challenges (called “hindrances” in Buddhist texts):

- Grasping: wanting more (or something different) from what’s present right now.
- Aversion: fear, anger, any form of pushing away.
- Restlessness: jumpy energy, agitation.
- Sloth and torpor: sleepy, sinking states of mind and body.
- Doubt: a mind-trap that says, “it’s no use, this will never work, maybe there’s an easier way”.

These are universal body-mind energies experienced by all humans. It is important to recognize that they are not a “problem.” The energies become “hindrances” because our conditioned habit is to ignore, resist, judge or otherwise try to control them. And yet when met with mindfulness and care, these same energies become a gateway to increased aliveness and spiritual awakening.

During sitting practice, if you encounter one of these challenging energies, it may be useful to name it silently to yourself, e.g., “grasping, grasping” or “fear, fear.” If it is strong, rather than pulling away, let your intention be to bring your full attention to what is arising. Feel what is happening as sensations in your body, neither getting lost in the experience nor pushing it away. As indicated through the RAIN acronym, investigate what is arising and meet the experience with an intimate, compassionate attention. When it dissipates, return to the primary anchor of your meditation, or rest in Natural Presence.

Sometimes the energy is too strong, and it is not wise or compassionate to try to stay present with it. This is particularly true if you have been traumatized and are experiencing deep fear or anger. If it feels like “too much,” shift the attention to something that brings a sense of balance, safety and/or love. You might open your eyes, remind yourself of where you are, listen to sounds, relax again through your body. You might bring to mind someone who loves and understands you, and sense their care surrounding you. You might reflect on the Buddha or the bodhisattva of compassion, Jesus, Great Spirit, your grandmother, your dog or a favorite tree. You might offer phrases of lovingkindness to places of vulnerability. Meditate on any expression of loving presence that helps you feel less separate or afraid.

If you encounter these kinds of difficult emotional energies regularly you might ask a teacher or therapist familiar with meditation to accompany you as you learn to navigate what feels most intense.

Physical pain

In addition to mental busyness and emotional challenges, it is inevitable that we all experience a certain amount of unpleasant physical sensations. If you are not used to the posture, there may be some discomfort in simply sitting still. In addition, as your attention deepens, you might become aware of tensions in the body that were ignored because of being preoccupied by thought. Or, you might be injured or sick, and become more directly aware of the natural unpleasant sensations accompanying that condition.

Meditating with physical discomfort is the same as the process of presence with emotional difficulty. Let your intention be to meet the unpleasantness with a gentle attention, noticing how it is experienced in the body and how it changes. Allow the unpleasantness to float in awareness, to be surrounded by soft presence. To establish that openness you might include in your attention sounds, and/or other parts of the body that are free from pain. Breathe with the experience, offering a spacious and kind attention. Be aware of not only the physical sensations, but how you are relating to them. Is there resistance? Fear? If so, let these energies be included with a forgiving and mindful attention.

If the physical unpleasantness is intense and wearing you out, direct your attention for a while to something else. It is fine to mindfully shift your posture, or to use a skillful means like phrases of lovingkindness or listening to sounds as a way to discover some space and resilience. You don't need to “tough it out.” That is just another ego posture that solidifies the sense of separate self. In a similar vein, you don't have to “give up.” Instead, discover what allows you to find a sense of balance and spaciousness, and when you are able, again allow the immediate sensations to be received with presence.

Part 3: Sustaining a Meditation Practice

Here are a few helpful hints for sustaining your sitting practice:

- Sit every day, even if it's for a short period. Intentionally dedicate this time of quieting—it is a gift to the soul!

- A few times during each day, pause. Establish contact with your body and breath, feeling the aliveness that is Here.
- Pause more and more—the space of a pause will allow you to come home to your heart and awareness.
- Reflect regularly on your aspiration for spiritual awakening and freedom—your own and that of all beings.
- Remember that, like yourself, everyone wants to be happy and nobody wants to suffer.
- Practice regularly with a group or a friend.
- Use inspiring resources such as books, CD's or web-accessed dharma talks.
- Study the Buddhist teachings (e.g., the 4 Noble Truths, the Noble 8-Fold Path).
- Sign up for a retreat—one day, a weekend, or longer. The experience will deepen your practice and nourish spiritual awakening.
- If you miss practice for a day, a week, or a month, simply begin again.
- If you need guidance, ask for help from an experienced meditator or teacher.
- Don't judge your practice -- rather, accept what unfolds and trust your capacity to awaken and be free!
- Live with a reverence for life—committed to non-harming, to seeing, honoring and serving the sacred in all beings.

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Resources

Recommended books

- Tara Brach: [Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha](#), 2003.
- Ven. Henepola Gunaratana: [Mindfulness in Plain English, Updated and Expanded Edition](#), 2002.
- Jack Kornfield: [The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology](#), 2008.
- Sharon Salzberg: [Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness](#), 1995.

Recommended Meditation CD:

- Tara Brach: [Radical Acceptance- Guided Meditations](#), 2007.

Web resources:

- [Insight Meditation Community of Washington](#)
- [Access to Insight](#)
- [Bhavana Society, Forest Monastery and Retreat Center](#)
- [Cambridge Insight Meditation Community](#)
- [New York Insight](#)
- [Spirit Rock Meditation Center](#)
- [Insight Meditation Society](#)