

“Basic” Meditation

For the vast majority of people, the first objective in meditation is to form the habit of practice, and the second objective is to allow the mind to settle.

The first objective is achieved like any other type of habit formation. We set an intention in an organized way, and follow through on the intention.

Pause for a moment and consider what is most convenient for you. Are there certain times in the day when you could reliably practice for 15 minutes or so? Perhaps in the morning, instead of making coffee immediately, you could sit quietly and practice. Perhaps you have a lunch hour during which you could set time aside. Perhaps the end of the day is convenient. Perhaps you have a schedule that is too hectic to allow a long period of silence, but you can find five minutes every hour? We have to be clear about our intention. If we really want to improve our lives then we may have to make some changes. Perhaps we are going to have to watch less TV, or drink less alcohol, or wake up a bit earlier. What is really more important to you? On the other hand, perhaps we truly have so many responsibilities that time for practice is hard to come by. Caring for children or elders (or both), working a demanding job, some things we can't set aside. We have to practice in whatever way makes sense for our lives. Meditation is not meant to be yet another task to get through as we hurry through the endless list. Decide what is possible and sensible for you, then set your intention to practice and do it. That is enough to start.

Once you have decided when to practice, the next question is which of the many thousands of techniques to try first. Because the main objective (at the beginning) is to allow the mind to settle, a concentration practice is usually the first type of practice to take up. A concentration practice simply means that we are focusing our attention on something, and when our attention wavers (as it always does sooner or later) we try to notice that loss of focus and then renew it. If we are focusing on a candle flame, when we notice our mind has wandered, we come back to the candle flame. If we are focusing on an image, when we notice our mind has wandered, we come back to the image. Simple, but not easy.

It doesn't really matter what our focus is, but because it is always with you and you can practice discreetly, I generally recommend using the breath. Here are two techniques to try. The first technique is to simply count the length of the in-breath and out breath silently, trying to make sure that they are even. If you naturally take about three seconds to breath in, take three seconds to breathe out. If you naturally take four seconds to breathe in. Take four seconds to breath out. When you notice you are distracted, start over. Simple, just keep the breath even. The second technique is to count the individual breaths. One full breath is one. The next full breath is two. The third full breath is three...and so on up to ten. If you make it to ten, go back to one. When you notice you are distracted and have lost the count or started counting automatically, go back to one. Simple, just count breaths.

I want to emphasize that we are **not** manipulating the breath in these techniques. We are simply being aware in some structured way such that we are more likely to notice when we have lost focus. When we notice we have lost focus, we renew the focus. The breath may very naturally deepen as we sit for a few minutes, but you may take shallow breaths occasionally as well. This is natural. Over the course of several months of consistent practice you will likely notice that your average breath does deepen, but we are not striving for better cardiovascular fitness as a goal, we are just using the breath as a focal point for our attention. Let the breath do whatever it does and just count. Simple...

But not easy.

Most people initially feel successful with techniques like these the first few times, and then feel that they are getting worse as the initial novelty quickly wears thin. Then, very often, the person will feel that they are not able to concentrate for more than a few seconds at a time and will wonder what is happening.

What is happening is that you are becoming aware of how quickly the mind jumps around. Something that has always been true, but that you just never paid any attention to before. All of the subconscious mental currents and cross currents that had been happening beneath the threshold of your attention are beginning to come to light. Don't worry, you will soon notice them settle if you keep with the practice.

As with any other skill we practice, whether it is a new language, a musical instrument, or golf, we are aiming for consistency and moderation at first. For most people, practicing intensively right out of the gate will simply be exhausting. More is not better in other words. Let yourself settle and relax into your practice and over several months you will notice increasing periods of silence. It will seem that there is more space between the thoughts of mental chatter, and there will be times of profound quiet that emerge. Again, as with all complex skills, progress is not linear. There will be times of emotional upset or perseverative thinking when you feel unsettled. There will likely be several variations on the initial experience I described earlier where you feel that your mind is noisier for a while as you encounter something that was previously unconscious. Don't worry about these events, just settle. The practice is a gift to yourself, a gift of deep settling and relaxation, try to treat it as such.

I should also mention sitting posture at this point. Many people wonder if they should sit in some special way, perhaps torture themselves with attempting to get into full lotus position with ankles on top of opposite knees? No, just sit in a comfortable way with reasonably good posture. Chairs are wonderful for this. You could also lie down, except that most people fall asleep in that position. The exact position really isn't all that important. There is nothing mystical about full lotus position, although if you are flexible enough for it, full lotus is wonderfully stable and grounding.

There are some traditions wherein concentration practices are the primary means of awakening, but I would say that when you feel confident that you are familiar with your mind and familiar with the quietude between thoughts, move on to other practices. If you are working with me directly I will likely introduce more emotionally and somatically oriented meditations following concentration work. Just keep in mind that a capacity to focus is foundational and thus we need to keep that foundation solid, but meditation is aimed at awakening, and the first hurdle to awakening is to wake up from the delusion of the constructed self. Therefore, my belief is that concentration practices set a solid foundation and can be returned to in order to keep that foundation solid, but that it makes sense to have practices that more directly deal with the personality, and then practices that point directly to non-dual awakening in order to promote speedier and healthier awakening. I will say more about these other practices in the essays on middle and later stages of meditation.