

Handout #1

The Seven-Point Meditation Posture

Based on material from Kathleen, McDonald, *How to Meditate*, Wisdom Publications, 1984.

1 Legs

If possible, sit with your legs crossed in the vajra, or full lotus, position. In this position, each foot is placed, sole upward, on the thigh of the opposite leg. This position is difficult to achieve, but one can train the body to do so over time. This position gives the best support to the body and mind. It is not, however, essential.

An alternative position is the half-lotus position where one foot is on the floor under the opposite leg and the other foot is on top of the opposite thigh.

A third alternative is simply sitting in a cross-legged position with both feet resting on the floor under the opposite thighs.

Sitting on a firm cushion that raises the buttocks higher than the knees can help you greatly to keep your spine straight. It can also help you to sit for longer periods of time without having your feet and legs fall asleep or get uncomfortable pins-and-needles.

If sitting on a cushion on the floor is not possible, one can use a low meditation bench. It is also perfectly acceptable to meditate while sitting on a chair. The most important thing is to find a suitable position in which you are able to be comfortable.

2 Arms

Hold your hands loosely in your lap, right hand resting in the palm of your left, palms upward, thumbs lightly touching, forming the shape of a teardrop, or flame. Your hands should be resting about 2–3 inches below the navel. Shoulders and arms should be relaxed. Arms should be slightly akimbo, leaving a bit of space between your arms and your body to allow air to circulate. This helps to prevent sleepiness during meditation.

3 Back

Your back is most important. It should be straight, held relaxed and fully upright, as if the vertebrae were a stack of blocks effortlessly resting in a pile. This helps your energy to flow freely and contributes greatly to the clarity and alertness of your mind in meditation. The position of your legs can contribute greatly to how easy it is to maintain a straight back; often the higher is the cushion under your buttocks and the lower are your knees, the easier it is to keep a straight back. You should experiment to see what works for you.

4 Eyes

In the beginning, it is often easier to concentrate with your eyes fully closed. This is totally fine. As you gain some experience with meditation, it is recommended that you learn to leave your eyes slightly open to admit a little light and that you direct your gaze downwards, not really focusing on anything in particular. Closing the eyes completely may create a tendency toward sluggishness, sleep, or daydreaming, all of which are obstacles to clear meditations.

5 Jaw and Mouth

Your jaw and mouth should be relaxed with your teeth slightly apart, not clenched, lips lightly touching.

6 Tongue

Your tongue should rest lightly on your upper palate, with the tip lightly touching the back of the upper teeth. This reduces the flow of saliva and the need to swallow. These automatic bodily actions can be hindrances to deepening your concentration as they can become distractions.

7 Head

Your head should be just slightly inclined forward so that your gaze is directed naturally toward the floor in front of you. If your chin is held too high, you may have problems with mental wandering and distraction. If you drop your head too far forward, this can bring mental dullness or sleepiness.

Handout #2

Scanning the Body

Calming the mind:

Focus your attention on your breathing. Breathe naturally. Become present in the moment and place where you are. Just focus the mind on the rising and falling of your shoulders and chest as you inhale and exhale gently. Allow your mind to settle and become calm and present, ready to engage in meditation.

Motivation:

Create an altruistic motivation for the meditation session. Think that you are meditating not just for your own individual benefit, but you are taking the time now to meditate and develop your mind to become a wiser and kinder person, able to be of benefit to all beings.

The main body of the meditation:

Focus your attention on your physical body. Find the most suitable sitting position for meditation, with your spine straight and erect, a position in which you can be aware and awake, but not stiff or rigid.

Focus your attention on the lowermost point of your body, where your body is in contact with the earth. Feel the substance and earthy character of your body. Concentrate for a moment on that contact, on the weight and substance of this physical form. Pay attention to the character of your mind, your consciousness, while focusing here.

Now slowly and mindfully move your attention upward through your body. Pay close attention to every aspect of your body, your physical sensations. Note areas of tension, and relax them. Note sensations of coolness or warmth. Note places where one part of your body is touching another.

Move upward, through your legs ... your hips, your hands in your lap. Note the curves of your body's silhouette.

Move upward ... your belly, your waist, the curves of your arms.

Continue to move upward ... the rising and falling of your chest with your breathing ... the curves of your shoulders.

Keep moving upward ... slowly, mindfully. Pay special attention to your shoulders, neck, and jaw. If there is tension there, relax those areas.

Move still upward ... the tilt of your head ... until you reach the crown of your head.

Allow your attention to rest at your crown for a moment. Pay attention to the character of your mind, your consciousness, while focusing here. Is your mind's character different while concentrating here than it was when you were focusing on the lowermost point of your body? What differences can you note?

Now slowly move your attention back downward through your body, in the same way. Move slowly, mindfully, noting everything about your body as you move your attention back downward.

Bring your attention all the way back down to the cushion or floor, where your body is in contact with the earth. Again focus your concentration at this point and note the character of your consciousness when focusing here. Again, note the nature of your mind-state when concentrating here and any differences from your mind's state when concentrating at your crown.

Dedication:

Finally, dedicate your positive energy and insights to the well-being and happiness of all living beings.

N.B.

As you engage in this exercise, you can learn much about your mind and your body and how they can work together. You may notice differences in your mind's tone or character when you are focusing on different parts of the body, e.g., a lighter, airy tone when focusing at the crown, or a more grounded, stable character when focusing at earth level. These insights may be useful in managing your own mental states.

Handout #3

Counting the Breaths

A good technique for building concentration.

Calming the mind:

Focus your attention on your breathing. Breathe naturally. Just focus the mind on the rising and falling of your shoulders and chest as you inhale and exhale gently. Allow your mind to settle and become calm and present, ready to engage in meditation.

Motivation:

Create an altruistic motivation for the meditation session. Think that you are meditating not just for your own individual benefit, but you are taking the time now to meditate and develop your mind to become a wiser and kinder person, able to be of benefit to all beings.

The main body of the meditation:

Start by focusing your attention at the opening of the nostrils. Pay attention to the very subtle sensations as you breathe in and out through your nose. You can feel certain sensations as the air passes, as the small hairs move, cooler sensations as you inhale, warmer as you exhale. Don't follow the air into your body or out into the surrounding environment. Place your attention on the sensations associated with the breath at the opening of your nostrils. Your job is to keep your attention firmly placed on those sensations only.

As you inhale and exhale, mentally count each inhalation and exhalation together as one. Count from one to ten, concentrating on those sensations. When you reach ten, begin again at one.

If you become distracted, if the mind wanders to other things and moves away from the point of concentration, then begin again at one. Even if you never get past two, it is not a problem! The point is to train your mind to focus on one point only; this concentration can take some practice to attain.

Once you start to attain some mastery over the technique, then once you reach ten, count backwards from ten to one. Then start again, counting from one to ten.

Dedication:

Finally, dedicate your positive energy and insights to the well-being and happiness of all living beings.

Handout #4

Bare Attention Exercise

Composed by Ven. Connie Miller, based on material in *What Is Meditation? Buddhism for Everyone*,
by Rob Nairn, Shambhala Publications, 1999.

Calming the mind:

Find a quiet place and ensure that you will not be disturbed. Sit on a comfortable seat or cushion with your back straight. Focus your attention on your breathing. Breathe naturally. Use one of the breathing meditations you have learned (counting the breaths, nine-round breathing) to settle the mind and bring it to a state of deeper focus and concentration, ready to engage in meditation.

Motivation:

Create an altruistic motivation for the meditation session. Think that you are meditating not just for your own individual benefit, but you are taking the time now to meditate and develop your mind to become a wiser and kinder person, able to be of benefit to all beings.

The main body of the meditation:

Start by focusing your attention at the opening of the nostrils. Pay attention to the very subtle sensations as you breathe in and out through your nose. You can feel certain sensations as the air passes, as the small hairs move, cooler sensations as you inhale, warmer as you exhale. Don't follow the air into your body or out into the surrounding environment. Place your attention on the sensations associated with the breath at the opening of your nostrils. Don't follow your breath into your body or outward into the surrounding environment. Think of yourself as a gatekeeper, just watching the breath flow past as it enters and exits the body, keenly observing everything that arises in this area of focus.

In the beginning, if you find it helpful for concentration, you can mentally note "In" and "Out" with each inhalation and exhalation.

Use the breath as an anchor for your attention. If your mind is especially scattered and distracted, place more emphasis in your meditation on the element of concentration, focusing your mind more firmly on your breath.

Distractions are normal. Your attention may be distracted by a thought, or by external sounds or sensations in your body (itching, pain). As soon as you wake up to this and realize that it has happened, simply take note, such as "thinking" or "sensation". Don't get upset or disturbed. Don't judge. Then very gently disengage from the thought or distraction and return your attention to the breath.

When you gain a deeper level of concentration and focus, loosen your concentration slightly and place greater emphasis on the element of mindfulness in your meditation. Allow your

mind to be attentive and observant of whatever comes to notice – regardless of what it is. Don't identify with the mental elements arising. Simply observe them, like a tourist. Allow them to arise as you observe them, and pass away, without getting involved. Just be aware.

As you gain greater mastery over this kind of meditation, each time the mind wanders from the breath, begin to note specifically how and where it has wandered. To thoughts of the past? To present thinking or fantasizing? To future planning? What kinds of thoughts tend to attract the mind's attention? What does this indicate about the delusions that play a role in your life?

Do this for ten minutes and then take a short break. Then do one more ten-minute spell and end your meditation session.

Throughout the day, check whether or not you are being mindful – do you always know what you are doing while you are doing it? Meditation is not an isolated activity. It is an integral part of our lives.

Dedication

Dedicate all the positive energy you have created through the practice of mindful meditation to becoming a better and better person who is more at peace in life and who can bring more peace and well-being to others in every moment of every day.

The Four Noble Truths of the Buddha

The First Noble Truth: Truth of Suffering

“There is suffering.”

Suffering pervades our existence in cyclic existence (samsara). There are many ways to describe and subdivide types of suffering. One way is the three sufferings:

1. suffering of pain
2. suffering of change
3. pervasive compounded suffering

The Second Noble Truth: Truth of the Cause of Suffering

“There is a cause of suffering.”

All the various mental afflictions as well as the actions of body, speech, and mind arising from those mental afflictions (karma) are the causes of our suffering. It is said in the Buddha’s teachings that there are 84,000 afflictions, but we can summarize them in the six root afflictions:

1. ignorance
2. anger
3. attachment
4. pride
5. doubt
6. wrong view

The Third Noble Truth: Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

“There is a state of complete cessation of all suffering and its causes, which is nirvana.”

As the mental afflictions and the karmic imprints arising from negative actions are adventitious, rather than intrinsic to the pure nature of the mind, it is possible to completely purify the mind of these negative aspects and to develop the mind fully to its enlightened state.

The Fourth Noble Truth: Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering

“There is a path of practice that leads to great nirvana (enlightenment).”

This path can be described and discussed in various ways. One of these is by means of the three principal aspects of the path to enlightenment:

1. renunciation
2. bodhichitta
3. wisdom of emptiness