

How to Meditate FAQ

A definitive guide for a gratifying practice!

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Establishing a Practice

How do I start a period of meditation practice?

It's helpful to begin by settling yourself and calling to mind your aspirations and intentions—perhaps to calm and steady yourself, to find balance and kindness, to live more fully aware and present. Let your own sincerity and heart be the energy that guides what unfolds.

How long should I sit each day?

Deciding in advance the duration of your sit can help support your practice. For many, a good time frame is between 15-45 minutes. If you sit each day, you'll gradually experience noticeable benefits (e.g., less reactivity, more calm) and be more inclined to increase your sitting time.

If you're just beginning a meditation practice, you might want to experiment with the length of time that you meditate. You might choose to meditate for just five minutes once or twice a day, and increase the time by five minutes a day until you reach a length of time that you can commit to on a daily basis.

Does it matter when I sit?

Sit every day, even if it's for a short period. Intentionally dedicating this time of quieting is a true gift! Morning is often preferred because it sets the tone for the day, and for some 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 sessions, perhaps one at the beginning and one at the end of the day.

It's also helpful to pause whenever you remember during each day. Establish contact with your body and breath, feeling the aliveness that is here. As you pause more and more—the space of a mindful pause will allow you to come home to your heart and awareness.

Do I need a special place to do meditation?

It's helpful to find a relatively quiet place where you won't be disturbed. It can also be helpful to use the same place each time because the association

of that place has the potential to help you to settle into your meditation more quickly.

That said, many people meditate on public transportation, in their offices at lunchtime, and in public parks. As part of the “art and science” of meditation, you can creatively experiment with what works for you and use that feedback to decide on an optimal meditation location.

Is there a particular posture I should use?

Similar to finding a meditation place, you can experiment with different postures. One posture is not better than another. Sitting in a chair is fine, as is sitting in a cross-legged posture. The important thing is to respect your body and do your sitting, standing, walking, or lying down meditation in a way that balances relaxation and alertness.

That said, here are some helpful tips for sitting posture:

- Sit in a way that allows the spine to be upright and relaxed, following its natural curves.
- Allow the shoulders to relax back and down.
- Place the hands on the thighs or in the lap (perhaps resting on a small cushion or towel) and allow the arms to relax.
- Allow the back of the neck to lengthen and the chin to slightly tuck in. Relax the face; allow the brow to be smooth, the eyes, jaw, and even the tongue to soften and relax.

Some of the Basics

How do I know what to use as an “anchor” or “home base?”

It is helpful to select a meditation anchor or “home base” (or several anchors) that allow you to stabilize and steady the mind and to deepen embodied presence. Remember that it is quite natural that your attention will be present with experience of the anchor for a short time and then will wander away from the anchor. When you notice this, gently shepherd your attention back into your body, re-relax and reconnect with the anchor. No need to judge yourself. This remembering and coming back over and over develops the muscle of mindfulness, and in time the mind will naturally settle and quiet.

Useful anchors are:

- The breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils.
- The rise and fall of the chest or the expansion and release in the belly. You can also put your hand on your belly and feel the breath in the palm of your hand.
- The experience of the whole body as you breathe.
- Other physical sensations as they arise, e.g., sensations in the hands or through the whole body.
- Combining the breath with sensations in the hands.
- Sounds as they are experienced within or around you.
- Listening to and feeling one’s entire sensory experience (i.e., receiving sounds and sensations in awareness).

Take time to experiment with different anchors to discover what works for you to be fully present. It is helpful to select sensations that are neutral or even pleasant because the mind will be more inclined to rest there.

What if I can’t follow the breath?

If you can’t follow your breath, you might use your hand on your belly as a way of further stabilizing attention. Alternately, you can choose another

meditation anchor, like sounds, body sensations, or the breath combined with body sensations.

Do I always keep the same meditation anchor?

It's helpful to use the same meditation anchor on a regular basis, but there may be times when you want to choose another anchor. For example, if you usually follow the breath but you have a cold or allergies that make breathing difficult, you could use sound or sensations such as those in your hands. Or if sound is your regular anchor but your mind is especially restless and needs more grounding, you could anchor your attention in the body or breath. Also, your practice may evolve naturally to include a different meditation anchor.

If your attention is relatively stable, you might choose to explore practice without a specific meditation anchor. Rather, simply be aware of prominent experiences as they arise from moment to moment—for instance, bringing mindfulness to a thought, to an emotion, to body sensations, to sounds.

What if I want to follow a thought? Can that be helpful? When do I go back to the breath?

It can be skillful and wise to dedicate time to reflecting upon particular ideas or life circumstances in order to understand them more fully. However, this is a separate process from formal training in mindfulness. When practicing mindfulness meditation, we are learning to recognize thoughts without becoming lost in their content. This gives us the capacity to later choose what thoughts to engage with, and to have increasing access to present moment experience.

The ability to choose is precious. While some thoughts serve us well, many are repetitive and often stir up fear and grasping. Especially when thoughts are compelling, we tend to go into a trance and forget they are thoughts—rather, we take the thoughts for reality. In mindfulness practice we learn to simply recognize that thinking is going on and then we relax, open, reconnect with our senses—relaxing back into awareness of our body, and reconnecting gently with our breath or chosen anchor. With practice, this pathway of awakening from thoughts and arriving again in full presence becomes increasingly natural and ease-filled. And in time, our lives become guided by the wisdom that “I am not my thoughts; I don't have to believe my thoughts.”

When do I use the lovingkindness and forgiveness practices?

The heart practices of lovingkindness, compassion, and forgiveness go together with mindfulness practice like two wings of a bird. They are a natural outcome of mindfulness. When we bring a gentle allowing attention to the present moment, we are cultivating the respect and appreciation of lovingkindness. When we bring mindful presence to physical or emotional difficulty, our heart opens in compassion. And moments of love and compassion soften and open us in a way that allows us to deepen mindfulness and enhance clear seeing. Love and wisdom need each other, belong to each other.

To strengthen these heart qualities further, it can be very helpful to take some time to practice the lovingkindness, forgiveness, and compassion meditations. Use them whenever you feel they will support your overall practice. Here is a link for more information on the formal heart practices: www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditations-meditations-that-free-the-heart/.

Challenges in Practice

My mind is always busy, lost in thought. How do I quiet it?

This is very common to see in the meditative process, it is natural and there is nothing wrong. Understand too, 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 lost in thought, it is helpful first to simply notice this fact. Then amidst the thoughts, here are several suggestions which can help to steady attention:

- Anchor your attention in the body or breath over and over. This is like tethering the busy thinking mind to the “here and now.” Even though it pulls away, you patiently and gently bring it back again and again.
- Commit to not judging the arising of thinking. Rather, respond to thoughts with acceptance and friendliness.
- When you find you’re lost in a compelling thought, mentally whisper “a story but not true.” Remember that your thoughts are real—they are happening—but they are not reality, they are just a mental representation. You don’t have to believe your thoughts!
- You can experiment by giving your busy, lost-in-thought-mind a way to cooperate with being present by silently whispering “Breathing in 1” with the in-breath. “Breathing out 1” with the out-breath. Follow with “Breathing in 2”, “Breathing out 2” up to 8, then counting backwards to one. The words are pointers to the direct feeling of the in-breath and out-breath connecting the mind and the body to steady and calm the mind. You can experiment with the words and pacing that work for you.
- Just like a body of water stirred up by the winds, after being physically still for a while, your mind will gradually calm down.

What can I do if I get sleepy?

Sleepiness is another very common experience in meditation which can have several causes. First, sometimes we are tired and just need more

sleep. Second, sometimes we are so accustomed to lots of stimulation and a fast-paced life that when our body gets still, the mind thinks, “Oh, it must be time to sleep!” The third cause is an imbalance in energy. You can be too relaxed without sufficient alertness so the mind begins to sink into sleepiness. To arouse energy you can pay more attention to the in-breath, sit up straighter, open your eyes, continue practicing with standing meditation, or shift to walking meditation. A fourth cause can be unconscious avoidance of a difficult experience that is close to awareness. One simply inquiry can be, “What would I have to feel if I wasn’t feeling sleepy right now?”

Whatever the cause, mindfulness can notice what sleepiness feels like in the body and mind and notice when it abates. And most important, notice if you’re judging the sleepiness. If so, see if you can let go of the judgment. Our habit is to judge our inner states, and that just interferes with a simple mindful presence.

I can’t sit still. I feel so restless. What can I do?

Physical restlessness is also very common as we practice, and like sleepiness can be an imbalance in energy. In this case, too much energy brings agitation, so more relaxation is helpful.

First, simply notice restlessness mindfully and let it be present without judgment. Then you might scan through the body and notice where there are areas of tightness, tension, or discomfort and intentionally relax around those areas, making room for rather than fighting the restlessness. You can also experiment with focusing your attention on the out-breath, even allowing it to be longer than the in-breath; relaxing with the in-breath, relaxing with the out-breath. Patience and kindness are key in relating skillfully to restlessness in the body or mind, so you can imagine how you would help a child who is feeling restless. You might silently whisper, “May you be at ease.” With gentleness, explore accepting your experience as it is.

If sitting feels too hard, switch to walking practice and bring the attention into the sensations of walking. You could begin with a moderate pace to match the energy and gradually slow the pace down. As with the busy mind and counting, you give the restless body a way to participate in the practice.

Most important, as with sleepiness, notice the tendency to judge what is happening, and let your intention be to let go of judgment, and simply witness your experience with acceptance, friendliness, and curiosity.

What if I get bored?

At some point(s) in meditation practice, everyone gets bored! It can be an amazing practice to explore your relationship with boredom. Otherwise whenever you are bored you will unconsciously open the refrigerator or go online. Boredom doesn't have to be feared, despised, or judged. You can embrace it as part of practice. How does boredom feel in the body? Can you breathe with it? Get interested in knowing it directly?

Sometimes when the mind settles a bit and nothing big is happening, we miss the stimulation and become disinterested. Can you bring your attention to the breath as if it was your last breath? Boredom can be the outcome of disconnecting from the life that is present right now. You can even have the paradoxical experience of getting excited when you start to notice boredom arising. And the excitement will likely make the boredom disappear!

When I meditate, sometimes I feel a lot of fear . . . how do I deal with that?

When we turn our attention inward we all experience a vast range of emotions—some quite pleasant and others quite challenging. You can bring the two wings of mindfulness—sincere interest and kind attention—to fear; recognize and name it “fear, fear” and experiment with allowing rather than judging or pushing it away. Soon you will notice that there are thoughts about the circumstances related to the fear (i.e., storyline often from the past or the imagined future) plus the immediate presence of physical sensations related to feeling the fear in the present time. At this point you can shift attention to the sensations (e.g., tension in the belly or shoulders, heat in the face, heart pounding) including them with embodied presence.

You can experiment with breathing with the sensations; relaxing around the tension; placing your hand on your heart and whispering a message of care, “This is hard and I am right here,” “May I feel at ease,” “May I remember love right now,” or whatever words or gestures are a compassionate expression of keeping yourself company. You can also bring to mind a person or pet or place that brings you comfort and/or evokes the felt-sense of loving presence—like calling on an ally to sit with you as you hold the fear together.

You will come to see that strong emotion is like a weather system that swoops in, stays for a while, and eventually dissipates. Embodied presence cultivates a wise and compassionate relationship with the emotion rather than judging, rejections, or drowning in the experience.

There are times when the emotion can feel like drowning and you don't feel grounded or resourced enough to be with it. Then it is very skillful and compassionate to step back and to shift the attention away from the storyline and sensations related to the fear. You might open the eyes, take several full deep breaths, and sense what is needed now to settle and calm the mind and body. It may be to reach out to a friend, to take a walk, have a cup of tea. Trust that you will find your own way to dance with fear.

When I meditate, I feel a lot of sadness—tears come. What can I do?

Like fear, sorrow and grief arise in practice as part of the human experience. As with fear, you can mindfully recognize the sadness and allow tears to flow and lovingly attend to the sensations as described above with fear. Scenes of loss may arise and you can intend to stay present, breathing with the sadness, holding yourself with loving presence, allowing the waves of grief to arise and pass through. If the waves feel too strong, remember that stepping back is a wise gesture of self-compassion.

What if I can't feel anything in my body?

Many people are somewhat disconnected from the direct experience of their body. Mindfulness of body and breath is a training and it takes practice to recognize sensations and open to the felt sense of what's going on inside you. Notice if you have judgment about not feeling anything in your body, and remember you are in good company. Also trust that it's possible to awaken embodied awareness. Start simply by scanning through your body and noticing where you feel neutral or slightly pleasant sensations like the contact where your clothes meet your skin, sensations in the hands or feet, coolness or warmth. Sometimes tensing and relaxing a body part helps to make the sensations more obvious—increasing the blood flow makes it easier to feel tingling, pulsing, heat, etc.

Often we cut off from body sensations and emotions because they are intense, unfamiliar, or unpleasant. Instead, see if it's possible to become curious about the life of the body, just as it is. Let your intention be to

befriend whatever you experience with a patient, gentle, and accepting presence.

How do I deal with pain—in my legs, back, etc.?

Bringing mindfulness to physical discomfort is similar to bringing presence to 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.

Sometimes I feel like giving up—that meditation will not help me. What if I give up? Can I start again?

You can always begin again! Many people feel like giving up when they begin a meditation practice. We want peace, calm, maybe even some bliss. When we find unpleasant emotions, thoughts, and sensations, we may feel impatience, disappointment, and self-doubt about our capacity to meditate. We may have many expectations about how meditation should be, and feel we are falling short or doing it wrong. This is called the challenge of doubt, but don't let it decide what you do.

If you can breathe, you can meditate! You cannot control what experiences arise in meditation, but you can learn how to skillfully relate to your inner life with mindfulness and lovingkindness. Most people don't learn to ride a bike on the first try, but they can have fun as they learn. See if you can

cultivate a sense of curiosity, fun, persistence, and gentleness as you explore meditation. Meditation practice is really a lifelong adventure. There will be ups and downs, challenges and treasures. Remember we are all in this together!

What is RAIN?

The acronym *RAIN* is an easy-to-remember tool for practicing mindfulness, one that you can access in almost any place or situation. It has four steps that will help you relate skillfully with difficult emotions that arise.

There are two versions of RAIN that you might find helpful:

1. *Basic RAIN*

- R - Recognize what is happening
- A - Allow life to be just as it is
- I - Investigate with kindness
- N - Non-Identification – notice the shift in your sense of your own being (identity) and rest in natural awareness

Here is a link to a detailed description of the four steps of Basic RAIN:
www.tarabrach.com/articles-interviews/rain-workingwithdifficulties

2. *RAIN of Self-Compassion*

- R - Recognize what is happening
- A - Allow life to be just as it is
- I - Investigate with gentleness
- N - Nourish with self-compassion

After completing the four steps in version 2, notice the shift in your sense of your own being (identity) and rest in natural awareness.

Here is a link to a fuller description of the RAIN of Self-Compassion:
www.tarabrach.com/selfcompassion1/

RAIN directly de-conditions the habitual ways we resist or react to our moment-to-moment experience. In difficulties, instead of lashing out or shutting down, having a cigarette or immersing in obsessive thinking, there's another way. We can learn to respond to even the stickiest situations from our natural intelligence and compassion.

Supports for a Regular Practice

It's hard to discipline myself to sit every day. What helps in developing a regular practice?

Reflect in a gentle, heartfelt way on what matters to you. Discovering your deep aspirations and intentions can inspire you to sit regularly. Make a commitment to sit every day even if it's for just a few breaths. It's also helpful to journal what you're feeling about meditation practice. This will help you to become mindful of the thoughts and feelings that interfere with a relaxed, open approach to meditating. A journal also helps you to track your relationship with sitting practice. You could share your sitting log with a teacher or a practice buddy.

Is it helpful to practice meditation with other people?

Yes, absolutely! Joining (or creating) a group to meditate with other people on a regular basis is a tremendous support for your meditation practice. It can create a sense of belonging and having company on the path of awakening, and the shared wisdom of a group can be of great benefit.

What are some other things I can do to support my meditation practice?

- Reflect regularly on your aspiration to live with a calm and loving heart, to embody awakening and freedom—your own and that of all beings.
- Remember compassion. Like yourself, everyone wants to be happy and nobody wants to suffer. Meditation can help.
- Use inspiring resources such as books, audios, or web-accessed dharma talks.

- Many people find guided meditations helpful; listen in or download from websites such as: (tarabrach.com, dharmaseed.org, insighttimer.com).
- 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.
- Find a “practice buddy” to share meditation experiences and offer support to keep practicing.
- 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 and to seeing, honoring, and serving the sacred in all beings.

You are on a great adventure that, like all great adventures, will have trials and tribulations. Remember that you are not alone—many people have come before you on this path of love and wisdom and are walking beside you now. May your practice be guided by your deepest aspirations.

Stay together, friends
Don’t scatter and sleep

Our friendship is made
of being awake. ~ Rumi

Compiled by Tara Brach, with the assistance of Dori Langevin (www.mainstream-mindfulness.com) and Jennifer Stanley (<http://bit.ly/1GpXGKR>).

For more information and meditation resources from Tara Brach, go to www.tarabrach.com.