

MEDITATION EXERCISES – BREATHING AND MORE

BREATHING

Breathing is a natural object of meditation. By putting your attention on your breath you expand your state of consciousness, begin to relax, and detach from ordinary awareness. Many forms of meditation use focus on breath as the main technique. In the Buddhist and yogic traditions there are many examples of people who reached enlightenment by doing nothing other than pay attention to the rising and falling of their own breath. It is interesting to note that the Latin root of the word “breath” means “spirit.”

One simple practice – paying attention to your breath (without even trying to change it) throughout the day – can bring many positive benefits to your mind, body and spirit!

CONSCIOUS BREATHING (Peace is Every Step by Thich Nhat Hanh)

Our breath is a link between our body and our mind.

Sometimes our mind is thinking of one thing and our body is doing another, and the mind and body are not unified. By concentrating on our breathing, “In” and “Out,” we bring body and mind back together, and become whole again. Conscious breathing is an important bridge.

As you breathe in, you say to yourself, “Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” And as you breathe out, say, “Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.” Just that. You recognize your in-breath as an in-breath and your out-breath as an out-breath. You don’t even need to recite the whole sentence; you can use just two words: “In” and “out.” This technique can help you keep your mind on your breath. As you practice, your breath will become peaceful and gentle, and your mind and body will also become peaceful and gentle.

DEEP (BELLY OR DIAPHRAM) BREATHING

(5 minutes a day can be calming and improve health)

- Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor (or lie down)
- Put one hand on your abdomen and close your eyes.
- Take a deep breath in through your nose and expel it slowly and completely through your mouth.
- You will feel your belly flatten.
- Let the next breath (and all subsequent breaths) come in through your nose. Feel your abdomen expand. Imagine a balloon inflating in your belly when you breathe in and deflating when you breathe out. The out-breath is longer than the in-breath, like a gentle sigh of relief.

- Repeat for several minutes.
- You might practice the exercise of 4 – 7 – 8 Breath: breathe in to the count of 4; hold your breath to the count of 7; and then exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound, to a count of eight. Using the muscles by your ribs, squeeze out all the air possible from your lungs. Continue this pattern for several minutes.
- Don't stop abruptly but slowly open your eyes and bring your attention to your surroundings.

BRIEF PROGRESSIVE BODY RELAXATION

Start with noticing your breath.....

Now breathe in deeply...hold it...breathe out slowly and completely.

Breathe in deeply...hold it...breathe out slowly and completely.

Again, breathe in deeply...hold it...breathe out slowly and completely.

Allow your feet and ankles to relax. Relax your legs and your hips. Stay mindful of your breathing. Relax your stomach muscles, and now your chest....Just relax. Let your arms grow limp....Relax your wrists, your hands, and your fingers....Keep breathing in deeply and out slowly.

Allow your shoulders to become heavy....Let all the tension drain from your shoulders....Relax your neck, your facial muscles, and even your eyelids....Just relax....Breathe in deeply....hold it....breathe out slowly and completely.

CENTERING PRAYER (USING A SACRED WORD)

The intention of the prayer is to be in God's presence. The idea is to shift awareness away from the thoughts that are like boats floating down the river of consciousness to the river itself. The river is God's presence, that loving life force in which we live and move and have our being.

Prior to beginning the practice choose a short phrase or prayer that is rooted in your belief system, such as "Peace," "Shalom," "Great Spirit," "the Lord is my shepherd," "Be still and know that I am God." Any word or phrase that has special meaning to you – that connects you with your heart and your grounding in the loving universe.

Sit quietly in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you exhale say your word or phrase silently to yourself. (or you could connect the phrase with your inhale and exhale - e.g. "you are beloved..... just as you are") Don't be concerned when other thoughts come to mind. Just acknowledge them and return calmly to your word or phrase.

Ideally you'll continue the exercise for 10-20 minutes, but even 5 minutes of this prayerful connection can leave you calm, refreshed and grounded.

MENTAL RELAXATION (Visualization)

Select a comfortable sitting or reclining position.

Close your eyes and think about a special place of beauty that you have been – or can imagine - a perfect place for mental and physical relaxation. (e.g. beach, forest, hot tub, garden, special room in your home, etc.)

Now imagine that you are actually in your ideal relaxation environment. Imagine that you are seeing all of its beauty (the colors, the images), hearing all the sounds, smelling all of the different scents. Just lie back and enjoy the beauty and stillness of your special place. Feel the peacefulness, the calmness, and imagine your whole body and mind being renewed and refreshed.

After 5 to 10 minutes, slowly open your eyes and stretch. You know that you may return to your relaxation place whenever you desire, and experience peacefulness and calmness in body and mind.

SITTING MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

- Our mind is often filled with an internal dialogue unrelated to the task that we are undertaking. Buddhism asserts the value of “mindfulness,” whereby you absorb yourself fully in each moment.
- Sit in your seat with your back straight and eyes closed. Become aware of your breathing- how breath comes in and fills your belly and how breath moves out into space. Keep about 25% of your attention on breathing and the other 75% on the feeling of spacious mindfulness. For the next few minutes, open your eyes and consciously be aware of the rich experiences of your senses every moment. Be attentive to the shapes, colors and textures of all you see, as well as appreciating the sounds and smells around you, and any sensations in your body.
- You will probably find that your mind tries to resist such discipline by thinking beyond the present moment into the past and future. Without being frustrated by this internal distraction, gently bring your mind back to the present moment – to notice what you’re seeing and hearing and feeling. Just let the thoughts all come and go, passing across the spacious sky of your mind, like clouds. Sogyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist lama, compares the thoughts that arise in meditation to waves that rise from the ocean. It is the ocean’s nature to rise. We cannot stop it, but as Rinpoche says, we can “leave the risings in the risings.”

PRACTICING MINDFULNESS (an awakening to life – a non-judgmental awareness of the wonder of the present moment)

Non-judgmental awareness opens the eye of the heart. When you catch yourself thinking about something, gently refocus your attention on your breath and body and on the reality of the present moment – whatever that might be.

Become engaged in something you whole-heartedly love – where you “lose yourself” in the activity – like gardening, cooking, playing or listening to music, dancing, creating art, walking in nature, yoga, etc.

Or just focus intentionally on the one thing you're doing at a time – e.g. driving, washing dishes, folding clothes, exercise, eating, taking a shower. Do this routine activity mindfully – with full attention. You are thus living mindfully - fully experiencing the present moment!

LOVINGKINDNESS MEDITATION

(Send loving phrases to yourself)

May I be at peace. May my heart remain open.
May I awaken to the light of my own true nature.
May I be healed. May I be a source of healing for all beings.

(Think of someone you love)

May you be at peace. May your heart remain open.
May you awaken to the light of your own true nature.
May you be healed. May you be a source of healing for all beings.

(Repeat 2nd stanza for as many people as you wish)

(Repeat 2nd stanza for a person whom you hold in judgment and have difficulty loving)

(Think of the broader community and world)

May there be peace on earth. May the hearts of all people be open to themselves and to all others. May all people awaken to the light of their own true nature. May all creation be blessed and be a blessing to All That Is.

MEDITATION – RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

Miracle of Mindfulness and other titles by Thich Nhat Hanh

Peace of Mind: How You Can Learn to Meditate and Use the Power of Your Mind by Dr. Ian Gawler

Meditation Express: Stress Relief in 60 Seconds Flat by Nancy L. Butler-Ross and Michael Suib

Open Mind, Open Heart by Fr. Thomas Keating

Pocketful of Miracles by Joan Borysenko, Ph.D. – (also check www.joanborysenko.com)

Let's Not Call It Meditation by Padme Nina Livingstone

Andrew Weil, M.D. - www.DrWeil.com

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