

Introduction to Meditation Mindfulness of Breathing Homework

This summary is adapted from the work of Insight Meditation teacher Gil Fronsdal.

At the heart of meditation is the practice of mindfulness, the cultivation of clear, stable and non-judgmental awareness. During this introductory course, the basic instructions will be given sequentially, each week building on the previous one. The first week focuses on the basics of meditation and on mindfulness of breathing. The second week discusses mindfulness of the body and expands the area of attention to include all our physical experiences. The third week introduces mindfulness of emotions, the fourth week mindfulness of thinking.

Meditation practice is simply developing our ability to pay attention to our immediate experience. We are often distracted by our thoughts - the content can be pleasurable or stressful. Mindfulness practice is learning how to overcome pre-occupation so that we can see clearly what is happening in our lived experience of the present. In doing so, we find greater clarity, trust, and integrity. Mindfulness relies on an important characteristic of awareness: awareness by itself does not judge, resist, or cling to anything. By focusing on simply being aware, we learn to disentangle ourselves from our habitual reactions and begin to have a friendlier and more compassionate relationship with our experience, with ourselves and with others.

Being attentive is a skill that grows with practice. It develops best if we set aside any self-conscious judgements or expectations of how our meditation is

developing. The practice is simply to relax and be aware of what is happening in the present.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Mindfulness meditation usually begins with awareness of breathing. This is an awareness practice, not an exercise in breathing; there is no need to adjust breathing in any way. We simply attend to the breath, getting to know it as it is: shallow or deep, long or short, slow or fast, smooth or rough, coarse or refined, constricted or loose. When we get distracted by thoughts or emotions, we simply return to the physical sensations of the breath.

Because of the mind's tendency to be scattered and easily distracted, we use the breath as a kind of anchor to the present. When we rest in the breath, we are countering the strong forces of distraction. We train the mind, heart, and body to become settled and unified on one thing, at one place, at one time.

Mindfulness breathing is a powerful ally in our lives. With steady awareness of our inhalations and exhalations, the breath can become an equanimous constant through the ups and downs of our daily life. Resting with, even enjoying, the cycles of breathing, we are less likely to be caught up in the emotional and mental events that pass through us. Repeatedly returning to the breath can be a highly effective training in letting go of the identification and holding which freeze the mind and heart. It also develops concentration.

Mindfulness Exercises for Week 1

You will benefit most from this course if you practice daily during the week.

During the first week please try the following three practices:

1. Sit one twenty-minute session of meditation each day. Begin and end each sitting with a minute of conscious reflection. Clearly remind yourself that you are devoting yourself to being mindful and present. Consciously let go of any concerns, remembering that you will have plenty of time to take them up again later. At the end, reflect on what happened during your meditation session. There is no need to judge what happened; you just want to strengthen your mindfulness through a brief exercise in reflection.

2. Choose one routine physical activity that you do most days and experiment with doing it mindfully. This means doing just this one activity while you are doing the exercise - not multi-tasking. Let go of any concern about the results or in finishing quickly. Remain in the present as best you can. When the mind wanders, simply come back to the activity. Activities you might choose include brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, driving or walking.

3. For one half-hour period during the week, maintain sustained attention on your posture as you go about with some normal activity. Without straining, assume a posture that is alert and upright. Notice what happens to your mood, thoughts, feelings, presence, and degree of mindfulness as you do this exercise.

4. Practice mindfulness in conversation. You can learn a lot about yourself if you pay attention to how you are in conversation. Discover how little you really listen. Listening can be considered a synonym for mindfulness. The qualities you need to

really listen well are the same qualities needed to be mindful. So you can experiment in a conversation with people to be in more of a listening mode, be a good listener as opposed to a good speaker. Do you notice that you interrupt? Do you notice that your opinion is more important than what you're hearing? What's going on there?