

# Meditation Instructions

The meditation begins at 7:30, so come in and sit down. If you are late, please be as quiet as possible. There are many styles of meditation, and here are guidelines about what we offer here. If you are accustomed to some other practice, remember that you can do whatever you want in the privacy of your own mind.

Sitting cross-legged on a zafu (cushion) that rests on a zabuton (mat) is a traditional meditation posture, but sitting on a chair is more comfortable for many of us. You can choose what works for you.

Take a pose that is erect and dignified without being rigid, balanced between earth and sky. Place your hands where they are most comfortable for you, perhaps in your lap or on your thighs. Keep your head balanced at the top of your spine.

Sit in a posture that allows you to be comfortable and relatively still but not so relaxed that you fall asleep. You want to be both alert and at ease. Mindfulness meditation practice typically begins with focusing on the breath, but then the attention is turned to whatever else is happening in the body and mind.

Begin with paying attention to your breath. How do you know you're breathing? Where in your body do you feel it most clearly? You might notice the breath coming into your nostrils and passing out again. You might instead feel the rising and falling of your abdomen. Or you might simply be aware of your whole body sitting and breathing. Each time your mind wanders, gently return to the breath. Paying attention to breathing helps focus and calm your mind so that it can more easily stay present in the moment.

In addition to the breath, you can be mindful of other experiences inside you as they call your attention — various sensations in your body, your moods, your thoughts as they come and go. One moment you might notice a breath, the next you're aware of an itching in your back or arm, then a sound, then a thought, then the breath again. The key to being mindful is remaining aware of any of these experiences as they arise, without getting lost in the story or thoughts connected with any of them.

Some meditators find it most useful to keep a focused concentration on the breath, acknowledging the other experiences and then returning to it. Others prefer a more open and choiceless awareness, being fully with whatever presents itself. It can also be helpful to begin the meditation period by being with the breath until the mind settles down, and then open the space of mindfulness to all the other experiences as they arise of their own accord.

Most people find that soon after they begin to pay attention to their breath or to some sensation in their body, without even knowing it, they're gone, lost in their thoughts. This is not bad. It's just the way it is. The eye sees. The ear hears. The mind thinks. Thoughts are not the enemy, and the mind can be trained.

How we respond when we realize the mind has been wandering is critical to the process of developing mindfulness. If you get lost in a thought, patiently bring your attention back to the moment, remembering that you're sitting and breathing. It's important to do this with kindness, because reacting with frustration or annoyance only strengthens those qualities. You're in the process of training your mind, and just like training a puppy, patient repetition works better than punishment. Rather than feeling aggravated because you've been lost, you can appreciate that you've woken up from the dream.

Each time you return your attention with patience and kindness to the moment, you strengthen those qualities as well as your ability to remain present. Over time you will find negative patterns naturally unwinding and wholesome attitudes increasing.

The sitting period will last about 40 minutes. As it ends, the teacher will lead some chanting; if you don't know the words, you can make your hearing be part of your meditation. The bell will then ring three times, and the formal period ends when the last ring dies away.

This meditation practice is not aiming at any particular state of mind and heart. Whatever you experienced during the session was perfectly fine. It is impossible to fail at meditation. Each moment of mindfulness is a step toward peace.

Insight Meditation Community of Berkeley  
James Baraz, Teacher