

Practising sitting meditation

The mindful sitting practice I describe here comprises several stages. To begin with, I recommend that you just do the first stage – mindfulness of breath – daily. Then, after about a week, you can expand the meditation to include mindfulness of breath and body, and so on.

Practising mindfulness of breath

1. Find a comfortable upright sitting posture on the floor or in a chair. Ensure that your spine is straight if you can.
2. The intention of this practice is to be aware of whatever you're focusing on, in a non-judgemental, kind, accepting and curious way. Remember that this is a time set aside entirely for you, a time to be aware and awake to your experience as best you can, from moment to moment, non-judgementally.
3. Become aware of the feeling of your breath. Allow your attention to rest wherever the sensations of your breath are most predominant. This may be in or around the nostrils, as the cool air enters in and the warmer air leaves the nose. Or perhaps you notice it most in your chest as the rib cage rises and falls. Or maybe you feel it most easily and comfortably in the area of your belly, the lower abdomen. You may feel your belly move gently outwards as you breathe in, and back in as you let go and breathe out. As soon as you've found a place where you can feel the breath, simply rest your attention there for each in-breath and each out-breath. You don't need to change the pace or depth of your breathing, and you don't even need to think about it – you simply need to feel each breath.
4. As you rest your attention on the breath, before long your mind will wander off. That's absolutely natural and nothing to worry about. As soon as you notice it's gone off, realise that you're already back! The fact that you've become aware that your mind has been wandering is a moment of wakefulness. Now, simply label your thought quietly in your own mind. You can label it 'thinking, thinking' or if you want to be more specific: 'worrying, worrying' or 'planning, planning'. This helps to frame the thought. Then gently, kindly, without criticism or judgement, guide your attention back to wherever you were feeling the breath. Your mind may wander off a thousand times, or for long periods of time. Each time, softly, lightly and smoothly direct the attention back to the breath, if you can.
5. Continue this for about ten minutes, or longer if you want to.

At this point you can stop or carry on to the next stage which is mindfulness of both breath and body.

6. Expand your awareness from a focused attention on the breath, to a more wide and spacious awareness of the body as a whole. Become aware of the whole body sitting in a stable, balanced and grounded presence, like a mountain. The feeling of breathing is part of the body, so get a sense of the whole body breathing.
7. When the mind wanders off into thoughts, ideas, dreams or worries, gently label it and then guide the attention back to a sense of the body as a whole, breathing as in Step 4.
8. Remember that the whole body breathes all the time, through the skin. Get a sense of this whole body breathing.
9. Continue this open, wide, curious, kind and accepting awareness for about ten minutes or longer if you feel like it. If certain parts of your body become uncomfortable, choose to breathe into that discomfort and note the effect of that, or slowly and mindfully shift your bodily position to relieve the discomfort. Whatever you choose, doing it mindfully is the important bit.

At this point you can stop or carry on to mindfulness of sounds.

10. Let go of mindfulness of breath and body and become aware of sounds. Begin by noticing the sounds of your body, the sounds in the room you're in, the sounds in the building and finally the furthest sounds outside. Let the sounds permeate into you rather than straining to grasp them. Listen without effort – let it happen by itself. Listen without labeling the sound, as best you can. For example, if you hear the sound of a plane passing or a door closing or a bird singing, listen to the actual sound itself – its tone, pitch and volume – rather than thinking 'oh, that's a plane'.
11. As soon as you notice your thoughts taking over, label the thought and tenderly escort the attention back to listening.
12. Continue listening for ten minutes or so.

At this point you can stop or carry on to mindfulness of thoughts and feelings.

13. When you're ready, turn your attention from the external experience of sound to your inner thoughts. Thoughts can be in the form of sounds you can hear or in the form of images you can see. Watch or listen to thoughts in the same way you were mindful of sounds – without judgement or criticism, and with acceptance and openness.
14. Watch thoughts arise and pass away like clouds in the sky. Neither force thoughts to arise nor push them away. As best you can, create a distance, a space, between you and your thoughts. Notice what effect this

has, if any. If the thoughts suddenly disappear, see if you can be okay with that too.

15. Another way of watching thoughts is to imagine that you're sitting on the bank of a river. As you sit there, leaves float on the surface and continuously drift by. Place each thought that you have onto each leaf that passes you. Continue to sit and observe them passing by.
16. Every so often your attention may get stuck in a train of thought. Your mind just works that way. As soon as you notice this, calmly take a step back from your thoughts and watch them once again from a distance, as best you can. If you criticise yourself for your mind wandering, observe that as just a thought too.
17. Now try turning towards emotions. Notice whatever emotions arise and whether they're positive or negative. As far as you can, open up to the emotion and feel it. Notice where that emotion manifests itself in your body. Is it new or familiar? Is there just one emotion there or several layers? Do you feel like running away from the emotion, or staying with it? Breathe into the feeling as you continue to watch it. Observe your emotion in a curious, friendly way, like a young child looking at a new toy.
18. Continue to practise for ten minutes or so. These subtle activities take time to develop. Just do your best and accept however you feel they've gone, whether successful at focusing or not.

At this point you can stop or carry on to choiceless awareness.

19. *Choiceless awareness* is simply an open awareness of whatever arises in your consciousness. It may be sounds, thoughts, the sensations in your body, feelings, or the breath. Just be aware of it in an expansive, receptive and welcoming way. Put the welcome mat out for your experience. Notice whatever predominates most in your awareness and let it go again.
20. If you find your mind wandering (and it's particularly easy to get swept up and away into thoughts when practising this), come back to mindfulness of breath to ground yourself before trying again. Become curious about what's happening for you, rather than trying to change anything.
21. Practise for about ten minutes, then begin to bring the sitting meditation to a close. Gently congratulate yourself for having taken the time to nourish your health and wellbeing in this practice, for having taken time out of doing mode to explore the inner landscape of being mode, and allow this sense of awareness to permeate whatever activities you engage in today.