

# How to Meditate

By Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche

The practice of mindfulness/awareness meditation is common to all Buddhist traditions. Beyond that, it is common to, inherent in, all human beings.

In meditation we are continuously discovering who and what we are. That could be quite frightening or quite boring, but after a while, all that slips away. We get into some kind of natural rhythm and begin to discover our basic mind and heart.

Often we think about meditation as some kind of unusual, holy or spiritual activity. As we practice that is one of the basic beliefs we try to overcome. The point is that meditation is completely normal; it is the mindful quality present in everything we do.

The main thing the Buddha discovered was that he could be himself--one hundred percent, completely. He did not invent meditation; there was nothing particularly to invent. The Buddha, "the awakened one," woke up and realized that he did not have to try to be something other than what he was. So the complete teaching of Buddhism is how to re-discover who we are.

That is a straightforward principle, but we are continuously distracted from coming to our natural state, our natural being. Throughout our day



everything pulls us away from natural mindfulness, from being on the spot. We're either too scared or too embarrassed or too proud, or just too crazy, to be who we are.

This is what we call the journey or the path; continuously trying to recognize that we can actually relax and be who we are. So practicing meditation begins by simplifying everything. We sit on the cushion, follow our breath and watch our thoughts. We simplify our whole situation.

Mindfulness/awareness meditation, sitting meditation, is the foundation of this particular journey. Unless we are able to deal with our mind and body in a very simple way, it is impossible to think about doing high-level practices. How the Buddha himself, having done all kinds of practices, became the Buddha, was simply to sit. He sat under a tree and he did not move. He practiced exactly as we are practicing.

What we're doing is taming our mind. We're trying to overcome all sorts of anxieties and agitation, all sorts of habitual thought patterns, so we are able to sit with ourselves. Life is

difficult, we may have tremendous responsibilities, but the odd thing, the twisted logic, is that the way we relate to the basic flow of our life is to sit completely still. It might seem more logical to speed up, but here we are reducing everything to a very basic level.

How we tame the mind is by using the technique of mindfulness. Quite simply, mindfulness is complete attention to detail. We are completely absorbed in the fabric of life, the fabric of the moment. We realize that our life is made of these moments and that we cannot deal with more than one moment at a time. Even though we have memories of the past and ideas about the future, it is the present situation that we are experiencing.

Thus we are able to experience our life fully. We might feel that thinking about the past or the future makes our life richer, but by not paying attention to the immediate situation we are actually missing our life. There's nothing we can do about the past, we can only go over it again and again, and the future is completely unknown.

So the practice of mindfulness is the practice of being alive. When we talk about the techniques of meditation, we're talking about techniques of life. We're not talking about something that is separate from us. When we're talking about being mindful and living in a mindful way, we're talking about the practice of spontaneity.

It's important to understand that we're not talking about trying to get into some kind of higher level or higher state of mind. We are not saying that our immediate situation is unworthy. What we're saying is that the present situation is completely available and unbiased, and that we can see it that way through the practice of mindfulness.

At this point we can go through the actual form of the practice. First, it is important how we relate with the room and the cushion where we will practice. One should relate with where one is sitting as the center of the world, the center of the universe. It is where we are proclaiming our sanity, and when we sit down the cushion should be like a throne.

When we sit, we sit with some kind of pride and dignity. Our legs are crossed, shoulders relaxed. We have a sense of what is above, a sense that something is pulling us up the same time we have a sense of ground. The arms should rest comfortably on the thighs. Those who cannot sit down on a cushion can sit in a chair. The main point is to be somewhat comfortable.

The chin is tucked slightly in, the gaze is softly focusing downward about four to six feet in front, and the mouth should be open a little. The basic feeling is one of comfort, dignity and confidence. If you feel you need to move, you should just move, just change your posture a little bit. So that is how we relate with the body.

And then the next part--actually the simple part--is relating with the mind. The basic technique is that we begin to notice our breath; we have a sense of our breath. The breath is what we're using as the basis of our mindfulness technique; it brings us back to the moment, back to the present situation. The breath is something that is constant--otherwise it's too late.

We put the emphasis on the out breath. We don't accentuate or alter the breath at all, just notice it. So we notice our breath going out, and when we breathe in there is just a momentary gap, a space. There are all kinds of meditation techniques and this is actually a more advanced one. We're learning how to focus on our breath, while at the same time giving some kind of space to the technique.

Then we realize that, even though what we're doing is quite simple, we have a tremendous number of ideas, thoughts and concepts--about life and about the practice itself. And the way we deal with all these thoughts is simply by labeling them. We just note to ourselves that we're thinking, and return to following the breath.

So if we wonder what we're going to do for the rest of our life, we simply label it thinking. If we wonder what we're going to have for lunch, simply label it thinking. Anything that comes up, we gently acknowledge it and let it go.

There are no exceptions to this technique; there are no good

thoughts and no bad thoughts. If you're thinking how wonderful meditation is, then that is still thinking. How great the Buddha was, that's still thinking. If you feel like killing the person next to you, just label it thinking. No matter what extreme you go to, it's just thinking, and come back to the breath.

In the face of all these thoughts it is difficult to be in the moment and not be swayed. Our life has created a barrage of different storms, elements and emotions that are trying to unseat us, destabilize us. All sorts of things come up, but they are labeled thoughts, and we are not drawn away. That is known as holding our seat, just dealing with ourselves.

The idea of holding our seat continues when we leave the meditation room and go about our lives. We maintain our dignity and humor and the same lightness of touch we use in dealing with our thoughts. Holding our seat doesn't mean we are stiff and trying to become like rocks; the whole idea is learning how to be flexible. The way that we deal with ourselves and our thoughts is the same way that we deal with the world.

When we begin to meditate, the first thing we realize is how wild things are--how wild our mind is, how wild our life is. But once we begin to have the quality of being tamed, when we can sit with ourselves, we realize there's a vast wealth of possibility that lies in front of us. Meditation is looking at our own back yard, you could say, looking at what we really

have and discovering the richness that already exists. Discovering that richness is a moment to moment process, and as we continue to practice our awareness becomes sharper and sharper.

This mindfulness actually envelops our whole life. It is the best way to

appreciate our world, to appreciate the sacredness of everything. We add mindfulness and all of a sudden the whole situation becomes alive. This practice soaks into everything that we do; there's nothing left out.

Mindfulness pervades sound and space. It is a complete experience.

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