



Breathing

Breathing is a deceptively easy technique. You need a quiet spot to sit or lie down and all you do is close your eyes and turn your attention to your breathing. You become aware of each exhalation and each inhalation. You pay attention to how the air feels as it enters your nostrils, fills your lungs and leaves again. That's all.

Each time your attention wanders from your breath, bring it back. Each time you are distracted, return your attention to your breath. Notice what draws your attention away, store it in memory, and return your attention to your inhalations and exhalations.

You may find yourself becoming aware of your own heartbeat and pulse, of the points in your body where you feel tension and discomfort. That is good. If you want to, you can imagine that your breath travels directly to those areas that feel uncomfortable and eases the discomfort.

If you find yourself too excited or distressed to sit quietly and observe your breath, a simple yogic breathing exercise might help. Fill your lungs slowly, bottom to top, inhaling as though every cell in your body is breathing. Inhale until you feel you can inhale no more. Then, exhale as slowly as you inhaled. Repeat this long slow breath three to five times and you should be feeling calmer and more focused.

You may wish to begin every meditation session with this exercise. Not only does it calm you, but it helps you cleanse your lungs of toxins and relax. My yoga teacher liked to suggest that when someone is yelling at you, you lie down on your stomach and rest your forehead on your forearms because it forces you to breathe properly and calm down. It should also stop the yelling since the yell will be dumbfounded.

In a natural progression from simply paying attention to your breath, is centering. You have

already centered yourself somewhat by becoming aware of your breath. You have turned your attention away from the outside world and its demands upon you. You have even begun to turn inward by focusing on your breath.

Now, after acknowledging and breathing to any physical discomfort, turn your attention away from the physical self and still farther inward toward the still center of your being. Perhaps your center is represented by a light, flame or a pool. Perhaps it is simply a sense of great stability and peace. You may find the core of your being at your heart center or hidden deep within your mind. Whatever or wherever it is, let it draw you to it. Let consciousness of all else float away. If there is a real need for your attention in the physical world, you will know. For now, let go of all of it: family, work, friends, illness, chores. There is always time for those things.

Once you have found this inner center, rest there. Each time your attention wanders, bring it back. Observing this core self is restful and healing. Sometimes, answers to the problems that plague us in our daily lives come unlooked for in the midst of meditation. This should never be the goal of meditation, however, or its positive effects will be minimized.

The goal of this meditation is to be at one with your true self. By visiting this core regularly you may soon discover that the difficulties of life seem less difficult and that the small annoyances of life annoy you less. You will begin to feel more whole and less scattered.

It may take a while to find your own core self, but you will find it if you work with your favorite technique regularly.



External Object

Some people feel a little bit silly when they try this technique because it entails paying close attention to ordinary, inanimate objects. Yet mastery of this technique can teach us exactly how intimately we are tied to every feature of our physical world.

Before beginning your meditation, choose the item you will meditate upon: generally a natural object is best (stone, flower blossom, flame, etc.), but in some eastern cultures a kind artwork called mandala is used.

Whatever you choose, place it where you can see it easily from where you are sitting and it is not surrounded by distracting clutter.

It is a good idea to begin by using the breathing and centering technique outlined in Technique 1. When you feel more or less calm and centered, focus your attention on the meditative object (we will use candle flame as our example). Breathe deeply and evenly with your gaze on the flame.

Observe every detail of the flame: its colors, how it moves, its personality. As you do this, imagine that you love this flame. Imagine your heart reaching out to embrace it, to caress it. Imagine that the flame is actually inside your heart, at the core of your being.

Imagine the flame loving you in return. Eventually, you may lose all sense of distinction between you and the flame. The concepts of 'I' and 'it' will lose meaning for you and you will find yourself experiencing a sense of unlimited being, unconnected to ego and physical perception.

You may find that your eyes lose their sharp focus on the flame after a while and that your eyes want to close. That's fine. Just keep the image of the flame alive in your consciousness and mentally set aside all distractions while you meditate.

Note: If you are concerned you might meditate for too long and forget to pick the kids up or go to work, you can set a kitchen timer or your own internal timer. To set your internal timer: as you begin paying attention to your breath, repeat to yourself a few times, "I will wake in 20 minutes energized and ready to meet my obligations," or some such thing. Your subconscious will bring you to normal consciousness at the appropriate time.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness may be practiced anywhere, any time because it entails paying close attention to what is going on, what you are doing, in any given moment. Practicing mindfulness can help you experience every moment more fully.

Start by setting aside a few minutes for the simple breathing meditation you have done before.

Then, embark upon a chore, like cooking, or cleaning or checking the spark plugs. The trick is to think about each dish or spark plug individually and pay attention to every step in the completion of the task without thinking ahead to the next chore on the list or back to the concert last Saturday.

If you notice your mind wandering, acknowledge it and bring your consciousness back to the task at hand. Now is eternal. All else illusion.

Zen master's will often assign a student to a task the student hates because it both forces them to pay attention and discourages them from placing too much value on any given experience.

The aim of this meditation is to be always present in this moment, right now, without the intrusion of guilt, dread, dreams or triumph.

This moment we are living right now is richer than we realize. There is depth and meaning in the most hated of chores and the lion's share of life takes place on the slopes between ecstasy and despair.

Also, the only moment we are guaranteed is this one. People who go through terrible traumas often find that they pay more attention to the little moments of living because they have learned how easily those moments can disappear.



Movement

Most of us spend most of our time ignoring our bodies unless they hurt. It is theorized that one of the reasons bodies break down is because we don't pay enough time with them. Our bodies are inescapable partners we have as long as we live and maybe we need to treat them as friends instead of strangers.

Yes, bodies need healthy food and good exercise, but in order for us to be comfortable with our bodies we need to get to know them the way we would a new acquaintance (and, eventually dissolve the perceived boundaries that separate 'us' from 'them').

One way to do that is movement meditation. It is also another good way to practice being present in the moment.

Music helps because it focus both body and mind on beauty and calls forth a response physically as well as aesthetically.

Play soothing, beautiful music that speaks to you in a space with some room for movement. I usually begin with some yoga exercises as I listen but this is not imperative. There is no need to know any 'dance steps'. Somebody else's body created them for its own expression. Your partnership with your body will generate its own language of movement.

Sit or stand in the middle of the space and close your eyes while you listen. Don't feel obligated to move, just listen until you feel some part of your body want to move. Perhaps you will begin to sway gently, or a hand might lift in a graceful arc. Your body wants to be graceful and move joyfully to the music.

Little by little more and more parts will get into the act — just be sure to open your eyes once the feet get involved.

Don't try to plan your movements and don't worry if you don't feel like doing much moving at all at first. Over time, with your willingness, your body will respond and you will begin to feel at home in it, at last.

When you become tired, stop and just listen to the music, paying attention to how you feel and how your body feels.



Expanding Sensual Awareness

Most of us spend most of our time ignoring our bodies unless they hurt. It is theorized that one of the reasons bodies break down is because we don't pay enough attention to them. Our bodies are inescapable partners we have as long as we live, and maybe we need to treat them as friends instead of strangers.

This technique celebrates all the senses and helps us to connect ever more vibrantly to the world around us. To use this technique to its greatest effect, find an isolated but beautiful place to sit and be still. This can mean a garden, wilderness, art gallery or cathedral. I particularly like to use this technique in nature.

Begin, as always, by paying attention to the breath. You can start with your eyes closed.

As you inhale, follow your breath all the way in to the point where it turns and you begin to exhale. As you exhale, follow the breath all the way out to the point where it turns and you begin to inhale again. Be mindful of this rhythm: inhale, turn, exhale, turn until you feel centered and at peace.

Now, begin to expand your awareness to include the sounds your breath makes, the sounds around you. Be aware of every sound you hear, but don't let your attention focus on any one sound. Allow them all to be equally important, whether you hear the crackle of a worm dislodging a dry leaf, or the barking and splashing of a dog in the river, or the scolding of a squirrel in the tree above your head.

Expand your awareness further to include touch. Do you feel your clothing against your skin? Are breezes ruffling your hair? Is a twig poking into your ankle? Notice it all. Let each sensation be equal in importance with every other and with all the sounds you hear.

You can expand your awareness still further by opening yourself to smell and taste, and, finally, to sight.

Expand your awareness one sense at a time without allowing your attention to be drawn to any single stimulus. For instance, as you open your eyes, keep them still with a soft focus. Do not concentrate on any one thing, but be aware of everything in your field of vision.

Allow yourself to be. It's likely to take practice to avoid the seductions of individual stimuli, yet the practice is worth it. Every time you notice the seduction has succeeded, loosen your focus on that stimulus and gently stretch out your consciousness to embrace all the others within your perception.

You will feel renewed.



Breath Walking

In this meditation you link the rhythm of your breath to the rhythm of your walk. This kind of meditation concentrates the mind amazingly.

It helps you relax.

It boosts your energy and the flow of life force.

It increases your circulation, and helps you become conscious of your link with the universe.

Begin by paying attention to your breath, watching how your body moves with the breath and noticing how it feels to breathe.

After getting centered using the breathing meditation, rise and begin walking slowly.

Make your inhalation last four leisurely steps and your exhalation last four leisurely steps.

Walk this way for at least ten minutes and work up to twenty.

Medicine Walk

A variation on this for use in nature is a bit more strenuous but very rewarding.

As you walk slowly, consciously set your foot down heel first and roll it forward until your whole foot is in contact with the ground.

Bring your other foot forward, heel first, and as you transfer your weight, roll the first foot forward onto the ball of your foot and do not pick it up until the other foot is planted securely.

Continue alternating feet this way and as you do, expand your senses as you did in the Sensual Awareness meditation. Now, however, if something draws your attention, pause and give it your full attention. Take in every detail before continuing.

When your walk is done, contemplate all that drew your attention and see if there is a message in it for you.

Walk in beauty.