

## **Brief Instructions for Sitting Meditation**

From “The Issue at Hand” by Gil Fronsdal

Take a comfortable and alert posture, either on the floor or on a chair. Gently close your eyes and establish a sense of presence within your body. It is often helpful to start a period of meditation with two or three deep breaths to establish a clear connection with the body and the breath, and to shed some of the surface preoccupations of the mind. Then, direct your attention to simply but consciously noticing the physical sensations of breathing in and breathing out without trying to control or manipulate your breath.

As you become familiar with your breathing, rest your attention in the area of your body where the breath is clearest or easiest to attend to. This can be the rising and falling of the abdomen, the movement of the chest, or the sensation of air passing through the nostrils. To help maintain the connection between the physical sensations of breathing and awareness, people often find it useful to gently, silently label the inhalations and exhalations as “rising” and “falling” or “in” and “out.”

Because mindfulness of breathing develops our capacity to be settled and aware in the present, we give some priority to maintaining an attentive focus on the breath during sitting meditation. Whenever you become lost in preoccupation with the surface chatter of the mind, gently, without judgment, reestablish your attention on the breath.

However, when some other sensation or experience becomes so strong that you find it difficult to remain attentive to the breath, let go of the breath and allow the stronger sensation to be the center of attention. You may find it useful to distinguish between the foreground and background of awareness. Initially, place your breathing in the foreground of awareness, allowing all other sensations and experiences to remain in the background. As long as you can maintain the breath in the foreground without straining, let the background experiences simply be. When some physical, emotional, or mental experience displaces the breath in the foreground, take this as the new resting place for your awareness.

As an aid to remaining mindfully focused on an experience that has come to the foreground, you may find it useful to gently and softly name it with a mental tone. Sounds can be labeled as “hearing, hearing,” burning sensations as “burning, burning,” joy as “joy, joy,” and so on. What is important is to sense, feel, and remain present as fully as possible for whatever experience is being noted. Maintain an open awareness of it for however long it remains in the foreground of attention, noticing how, if at all, the experience changes. Once an experience is no longer predominant, or it is sufficiently acknowledged to no longer demand your attention, return your attention to the breathing.

Another way to describe mindfulness practice is to say that you consciously and clearly rest your attention on the breath until something strongly distracts you from it. When this occurs, the so-called “distraction” becomes the focus of the meditation. Actually, mindfulness practice has no distractions, only something new to pay attention to. Nothing is outside the scope of mindfulness meditation. The full range of our humanity is allowed to unfold within the light of our mindfulness. Physical sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, mental states, moods, and intentions are all included.

Throughout your meditation, keep the attention soft and relaxed while alert and precise. If you can distinguish between the ideas, concepts, images, and stories associated with some experience on the one hand, and the immediate and direct felt-sense of the

experience on the other, let mindfulness rest with the direct experience. Notice the physical or mental sensations that are actually, tangibly arising in the present. Notice what happens to them as you are mindful of them. Do they get stronger, weaker, or stay the same?

Notice also your relationship to your experience. Do you notice aversion, desire, appreciation, judgment, condemnation, fear, grasping, pride, or any other reaction? The realization, for example, that a painful physical sensation is different from your reaction to it can help you find balance in the midst of discomfort. It is also important to be mindful of when your reaction to an experience is more pronounced than the experience itself. When it is, your reaction can become the resting place of awareness. Do not participate in your thoughts or stories but simply and silently be aware of what is actually occurring in the body and in the mind.

As we learn to be alertly and calmly present in our meditation, a deeper intimacy with ourselves and with the world will arise. As we cultivate our ability to remain mindful without interfering, judging, avoiding, or clinging to our direct experience, wellsprings of insight and wisdom have a chance to surface.