

Some notes on practicing mindfulness of the breath.

Sitting Posture

The traditional sitting posture is the full lotus or the half lotus. In the full lotus, the left foot is placed on the right thigh, and the right foot is pulled onto the left thigh. With the half lotus, only the left foot is placed on the opposite thigh, the right foot remaining tucked under on the ground. This position, if you can manage it, provides a wonderfully stable base to help you sit still for long periods. For most people it will take time to achieve this, so in the beginning you can sit cross legged in the way that gives you the most stability. You can use extra cushions for support in various ways. The goal is to be able to sit still for the duration of the sit. Of course some people will need to sit in a chair. If so, it is better to sit with feet flat on the ground and without leaning on the back of the chair but use whatever accommodation you need.

The most important thing about sitting posture is to keep the back erect but without tension. Make sure your jaw and shoulders are relaxed. Eyes can be closed or slightly open with the gaze downward but unfocused. Chin just slightly down, as if a string were pulling up the back of your head. Hands are in your lap, right palm on top of left palm with the tips of the thumbs gently touching. All relaxed.

Mindfulness of the Breath

Meditation has two parts: in Sanskrit, *shamatha* and *vipasyana*; in Chinese, *zhi* and *guan*. *Shamatha* is calming and concentrating the mind. *Vipasyana* is insight or investigation. What we want to do is investigate the true nature of ourselves and of the world. If you try to discover this truth by just thinking about it, no matter how smart you are, you will only end up with some kind of intellectual theory. In order to attain a deep intuitive understanding we need the special mental skills developed in the practice of shamatha: calming and concentration. We need to develop calm concentration (samadhi) for this method to lead us to insight (wisdom) and awakening.

Counting the breath

We begin calming and concentrating our mind by focusing on the breath. You can sense the breath in different parts of the body: in the movement of

the abdomen; in the movement of the chest; in the sensation of the air passing through your nostrils. In the Chan (Zen) tradition it is most common to focus on the abdomen as the diaphragm moves to bring the air in and out of the lungs. Other traditions focus on the breath at the nose. I recommend the abdomen, but you can try both locations to see which work best for you.

In the beginning we count the breath as an aid in developing concentration. As you focus on the sensation of the breath, you will count each breath from one to ten. One inhalation and exhalation is one. The next is two, etc. When you get to ten, start over again at one. When you lose count simply go back and start again at one. If you find you have counted past ten, again simply go back and start again at one. This method helps you realize when you have forgotten to focus on the breath and your mind has wandered.

It is important not to feel failure or discouragement when you find yourself lost in thought. Instead you should congratulate yourself on waking up to your wandering mind and gently return to your practice of counting the breath. Each time you catch yourself distracted, it is a little insight, a little awakening that gradually strengthens your meditation.

Once you have made a little progress keeping track of the count, you can abandon the counting and simply keep your attention focused on the sensation of the breath. Start the sit counting the breath as usual but after a few minutes stop counting and intensify your concentration on the breath observing the inhale and exhale more closely. You will eventually be able to get a deeper concentration without the counting aid, but you'll first need to gain a certain amount of stability with the counting method.

Daily Practice

The all-important first step is to establish a daily practice. Without daily practice progress will be difficult. With daily practice, progress is guaranteed.

- Start with a short time and gradually increase it. Even a 10- or 15-minute daily sit is a good start.
- It's best to sit at the same time each day so it becomes a routine, like brushing your teeth. Ideal is in the morning before breakfast. But do it when it works best for you.
- Find a place in your residence that is quiet and where you are least likely to be disturbed. Some kind of little shrine or wall hanging will make that place special for you and help you make meditation a habit. Incense, candles, or flowers if you like.

- You might have a special pillow for sitting. Sit down with a feeling of joy and gratitude. When your meditation ends. Get up slowly and mindfully spend a few moments quietly reviewing your sit.