

MIND PRACTICE: HOW TO DO IT

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If you are reading this you want more detail on how to actually do Shamata Meditation. The sales pitch is over. These are the details for those of you who cannot find an authentic local center.

When to Meditate

It is considered important to meditate daily or at least with uniform regularity and this is why: Regular meditation is like taking our daily temperature; each meditation session, no matter how brief, samples the state of our mind. You sample it. You see how it is. If there is no regularity, then we have no way to measure how calm or wild our mind is. If we sit a lot one day and none the next two days it is very difficult to gauge (remember) just how we are doing. And consistently watching your mind is very much a part of meditation. It is the whole point here: sampling and starting to know the mind.

For me it is best to sit some each day, preferably in the morning, only because intervening distracting events of “great importance” have not yet arisen and caused me to skip meditation that day. I am brilliant finding excuses to skip meditation.

How Long to Meditate

Sit for a comfortable length of time. It can be as short as five minutes or as long as you enjoy it. When I say “enjoy” here, I am aware that practicing meditation is just that, “practice,” and practice is not always enjoyable. The point here is to not force yourself to practice longer than you can stand so as not to form a habit of hating your meditation sessions. At least think of it as you would schoolwork or having to study. Consider the long-term results you are looking to achieve and act accordingly. You have done this before in other areas, like schooling, lessons, etc.

I can remember times when I forgot to meditate and I sat up in bed for a minute or two before I went to sleep, just to keep that mind-sampling going, and also to keep me going. When I was beginning, I typically did two meditation sessions a day, one in the morning and one in the evening.

Expectations

“Don’t have any expectations” is easy to say, but hard to adhere to. The fact is that you don’t know what the results of meditation is like, so your expectations are by definition not going to be correct, so try and not imagine what you can’t know yet anyway. I can tell you from experience that my expectations of meditation have been and continue to be my greatest stumbling block to making any progress. They were simple mis-takes on my part. I do it all the time.

Experiences

And the worst thing (most detrimental) of all is to have a really good meditation and then look for that to happen again on the next day, week, month, or years. That is the killer. It is like having

one good breath and trying to hold it. Sooner or later life will knock the breath out of you so you can breathe again. Let it go; breathe out.

Instead, it is far better to accept whatever the day brings, even if it is dull, down, and dreary, than to cling to the past. Meditate with the dullness or anxiety you have on hand rather than compare what you have to what you did have before. Meditation is always about the “now” and never the “then.” A major rule is “Don’t prolong the past.” Forget about it. Comfortably accept just how it is right now for you, good or bad and meditate in those conditions. You can’t have the same meditation twice because meditation is not about the “experience” itself, but always about your awareness in the experience, how you handle it. That is the way to move forward.

The mind can be seen as a pendulum swinging from being too excited to calm down on the one hand, to being too slow to wake up on the other. The time you want to right in the middle and “just right” is about zero movement of the pendulum. Progress in meditation involves letting that pendulum itself zero out and come to rest in the middle. That is letting the mind rest and this takes time. Remember: you are building a habit. You are practicing here.

The Posture

Before we launch into the ideal details for meditation posture, it is important for you to be comfortable. If the whole idea of Shamata Meditation is to let the mind rest naturally, that means you rest. It took me at least ten years to understand that when they said “rest,” they actually meant regular old rest, like: relax. You have to relax and let your mind rest. Give it up. Here is a poem about that:

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,
But you can let the mind rest.
Just let go,
And don’t mind the rest.

If you can sit in the perfect yoga posture for meditation, that is wonderful, but if you cannot relax into it, not much will happen. And you don’t need a lot of special stuff to meditate. A quiet place with perhaps a blanket under your legs to protect those sharp ankle bones and a pillow to sit on will do it. If you want to get fancy, you can order a square zabuton cushion to go under you and a zafu (round cushion) to sit on. Just Google or go to <http://www.samadhicushions.com/>.

I spent years studying various kinds of cushions, but I will save that for another post. Just be comfortable. If you are sitting where it is cold or drafty then wrap a blanket or a shawl around your back and legs. Sitting on a straight-back chair is perfectly fine too.

The Posture

What follows is the traditional posture, but don’t let it scare you. You can always start out by just sitting in a way that does not take all your attention, but let’s you relax. You need your attention for the practice. Traditionally there are seven points to the posture, often called in the Kagyu tradition the “Seven Point Posture of Vairocana (emptiness).” Here they are:

(1) Cross-legged. If you are one of those rare human beings that can sit in “full lotus” position, with each foot resting on the opposite thigh, that is best. The rest of us can sit cross legged, but with both legs on the floor, one in front of the other. Again: sitting on a straight back chair is fine also.

(2) Abdomen-In: Pull your belly in a bit and tighten your anal sphincter and urethral muscles for just a few seconds, and then relax them slightly. This prevents energy loss.

(3) The Back: Sit up with your lower back straight and hold that position, gently. There is congruence between a straight spine and the subtle inner energies that run along the spine. When the spine is straight, the energy flows most freely. Do your best.

(4) Hands: If you are a beginner, place your thumb on your palm at the base of your ring finger and close your hand into a loose fist. Place fists palm-down on the corresponding knee and slightly above the knee depending on the length of your arms. Straighten the arms out, but not so much that they hurt.

If you are already accustomed to sitting then an alternate hand position is to place your two hands palms up against your abdomen and just below the navel, right hand on top of the left, with the tips of the thumbs barely touching.

(5) The Gaze: Direct your gaze to a spot on the floor a foot or two in front of you. Hold that gaze, gently.

(6) The Chin: Tuck your chin up close to your throat, just a bit, like you were making a double-chin.

(7) Tongue: Place your tongue up against the roof of your mouth, just behind your front teeth. This will help to control the saliva. The teeth can be slightly closed, but not clenched and the lips very slightly parted.

Sitting in Meditation

That is the posture. Now try to arrange yourself in that posture and sit comfortably. It may be a little like rubbing your forehead and patting your tummy at first, so don't strain yourself. If you can't do it yet, then relax and just sit normally until you can manage everything.

To begin, just sit there for a minute and relax until you begin to feel thoughts rise. At that point take a deep slow breath, breathing in. Follow the air as it comes in all the way doing to your lower abdomen. And slowly breathe out. Now breathe normally but keep your attention on the breath going in and going out.

Continue breathing like this for the duration of your meditation period. Thoughts will come and you will probably be distracted. This is not only normal, but to be expected. When you are distracted to the point of being carried away, that is, you find that you have forgotten to focus on the breath but are thinking of lunch or an appointment you have later on, just catch yourself and let that thought go. Then, very gently bring your mind back and focus (rest it) on the breath. Don't spend one millisecond feeling sorry or worrying that you are not performing properly, because you are. This is normal. This is the practice. Gently drop the thought, any thought about the thought, any worry about your behavior, etc. and refocus on the breath, gently. Continue following the breath.

Try to remain relaxed but not too relaxed, and certainly not tense. My teacher uses the analogy of holding a raw egg. If you hold it too tightly it will break, and if you hold it too loose it will fall and also break, so you have to hold it just right, tenderly. This is mindfulness.

If you are uncomfortable and have physical pain, try to ignore it. If it persists, shift your position to see if that helps. You are free to find the happy medium, which some days might be giving up and stopping altogether. You don't want to be sissy, but you also don't want to associate meditation with physical pain. Be reasonable. This poem:

TESTING THE REST

Learning to rest the mind,
Really puts my practice to the test,
So sometimes I just need to take a break,
And simply get some rest.

I received this instruction from an authentic source (Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche) and I have been given permission by my root lama to teach this to others, as his teacher did before that all the way back down the lineage. If and when you can, it is worthwhile to meet a certified teacher in person and get these instructions and the blessings that go with the instructions that stretch back over one thousand years or more. The authentic blessing is very special, so do make an effort to get it sometime.

There are lots more to say, but this is plenty for now.

Michael Erlewine

Graphic: By Sange Wangchuk and Michael Erlewine. This is the seed syllable "AH."

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