

Welcome to this one-day meditation course, designed for absolute beginners (but also intended to be helpful to people who've already done some meditation, either on their own or with a teacher). The focus of this particular course is the practice of **mindfulness** – we also run courses based on another important Buddhist approach to meditation, the cultivation of 'loving kindness (sometimes called the 'Metta Bhavana'). We sometimes define mindfulness as "being aware in a particular way", namely:

- On purpose
- In the present moment
- Non-judgmentally.

1. The three qualities of mindfulness

a. Being aware on purpose

An image for awareness

You could liken awareness to light. Sometimes the light is dim, sometimes it is bright. It is what helps us to see clearly and to experience what is going on in a fuller way.

Aware of what?

There are many things that we can be aware of; for example, ourselves, other people and our environment. In terms of ourselves, we can become increasingly aware of our bodies, as well as our thoughts, feelings, emotions and motivations. We can become aware of what is coming in through the senses - sights, sounds etc. - and we can also be aware of how these things affect our state of mind.

With awareness comes choice

Over time we can see what our mind dwells on. What kind of thoughts, feelings and emotions occupy us? In meditation we can notice what we are thinking about and build a sense of where such thoughts will lead, in terms of the mental states that they will produce. This is the first step towards dropping the patterns of thought that lead us into negative mental states.

b. In the present moment

Moment by moment, we can cultivate awareness. This awareness isn't in the past and it isn't in the future. It is right here, right now.

Simplicity

To be in the present moment is to live simply. When we wash we feel the water on our bodies. When we eat we taste our food. We are with the experience we are having.

As the poet David Whyte says in his poem 'Enough':

*Enough.
These few words are enough.
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.*

*This opening to life
We have refused
again and again
until now.*

However, how often is this the case? How often, when we are doing a task, are we thinking about something else? This can lead to our energy being scattered, to a state of alienation or a sense of being separate from our bodies. How, then can we become more 'embodied', more alive to the present moment? A large part of the answer is that we can cultivate awareness of the body in general, and specifically of the breath. The body only experiences the present moment - it is thought that keeps leaping to the past or future.

If we are meditating and we begin to replay an argument that we had at work we emotionally respond as if we are actually present at work. We need to start by recognising this - thoughts, images and emotions come and go, so we can just allow them to do so.

The difficulty with being in the present moment is that our minds are always moving, looking for stimulation. If we find something boring, we wish to distract ourselves from it. There are many things in our lives that are potentially like this. We can sometimes experience our lives as an endless round of chores; things we need to get done before we can relax. If this is the case, then we might spend much of our lives running away from our present experience. If you recognise this, you could try giving yourself fully next time you perform a task that you would usually find a chore. If you are washing up, become aware of the sensations of the soapy water. Feel its temperature and, at the same time, watch your mind and emotions. Notice what 'story' you tell yourself about this experience.

c. Without judgment

Not judging our experience means that we bring a kindly attitude to whatever arises. Judgment tends to close down our experience; it limits us, fixes us and cuts us off from what is actually going on.

We judge our experience by having opinions about how we are. This leads to a tendency to want to experience something other than what is actually going on. This can happen both within, and outside of, our meditation practice. We will notice this happening when thoughts arise such as 'I can't do this', 'I'm no good, I keep on getting distracted', or 'My mind won't settle'. We may also get into thinking in a way that compares ourselves to others. It's important to recognise here that these thoughts always arise and pass away - we don't have to go along with them. We can acknowledge our thoughts, then gently and patiently bring ourselves back to the object of the practice (the body or the breath).

Our judgments come from our pre-conceived ideas about how things should be: 'I should be breathing deeply', 'My mind should be blank' or 'I should be more aware'. Instead of this, it is important to approach your experience with a sense of openness and curiosity. Our experience is what it is, this is our starting point and that is fine. What's more, every time we notice that our awareness has become absorbed in thoughts is a moment of awareness - so give yourself a pat on the back! In a sense, what is needed here is to befriend ourselves so that, when we bring ourselves back to the body or the breath, we do so with a sense of kindness.

2. Posture

We must first learn how to sit well for meditation. There are two main principles to posture:

- That you are upright and stable;
- That you are comfortable and relaxed.

Bearing this in mind you can sit in a chair or on the floor using cushions to find the right posture. On cushions you can use a cross-legged or astride posture. However you decide to sit, remember that the two principles above are the ones that count!

If you are sitting on the floor, consider:

- Cushion height;
- Knee support (if sitting cross legged) - remember that, ideally, the knees need to be lower than the hips;
- Hand support, to prevent the weight of the arms from dragging the shoulders down;
- Ankle support (if you are sitting astride the cushions and your ankles ache).

If you're sitting on a chair, consider:

- Back support
- Hand support
- Feet flat on the floor or cushion

3. Being and doing mode

We spend a lot of time doing, achieving and trying to change. A lot of our life is spent in doing this and that, in trying to get from 'A' to 'B'. We always want more, dissatisfied with how things are. We can be very goal-orientated and have unrealistic expectations of ourselves. This attitude can easily be carried into our meditation, where what we really need is just to **be** - being with our experience as it is. If we can learn to be with ourselves space opens up - we begin to appreciate life more and become more at ease with life's ups and downs.

The paradox of meditation

People often take up meditation in order to be more grounded or calmer, to get to know themselves, or to develop qualities like kindness, positivity, letting go and acceptance. How can meditation be used as an agent of these changes?

If 'not being calm' is '**A**' and 'being more calm' is '**B**', we may think we just need to try to move towards B. But the paradox of meditation is that **by just being present with A, B arises**.

This means that meditation is about learning to be more present in our current experience and trying not to judge what is going on, instead accepting it with a sense of kindness. We can apply last week's definition of meditation as 'being aware, in the present moment, non-judgmentally' to our body, thoughts, feelings and emotions. When we bring awareness to something and see it more fully and with a sense of kindness, we can understand that whatever we are observing is constantly changing. In the same way, we can see that our thoughts and emotions are **always** changing – our minds are intrinsically volatile. This opens up the very real possibility that we need never be stuck in a particular mental state. With practice, by being with what is arising, we can just see a given mental state come into being and pass away.

4. The bigger container

By being present and mindful of our experience we can experience a 'bigger container' of awareness. What this means in practice is that we learn to avoid 'closing down' into a single, narrow aspect of our experience. For instance, if I am sad and I am walking down the street, there is a much bigger context that I can choose to be part of – for example, the sensations of my feet pressing against the floor as I walk, the air against my skin, the sounds in the street and the many different faces of the people I walk past.

This is equally true of meditation. You may have some physical discomfort, for example a back ache, but this can still be held in the 'bigger container' of awareness. The discomfort is not the only experience you are having - there is the temperature of the room, the sounds outside, the smells, thoughts arising and passing away and, of course, the breath. As we acknowledge more of our experience we can develop a sense of expansion and spaciousness in our mind.

5. The Mindfulness of Breathing practice

The traditional meditation has a well-established structure which we'll be working through step by step. However, it's very helpful to prepare for the first stage by creating a firm foundation of awareness of our own bodies.

Starting with body awareness

It's really important that the starting point of the Mindfulness of Breathing is a period of body awareness, of exactly the sort that we've been looking at over the first two weeks. If our mindfulness is weak because we are 'living in our heads' and distracted by thoughts, we need to make a conscious effort to bring our awareness down into our body, preferably into our abdomen. Having taken up a suitable posture that is both relaxed and alert, we can spend a little while reflecting on how we are stably, safely supported by the whole mass of the Earth beneath us. We can also reflect that our upright spine is reaching up into space, encouraging feelings of spaciousness and expansiveness.

The breath emerges

From this well-established contact with your body in general, allow your breathing to come into the fore, perhaps starting with a few deliberately deep breaths. After doing this, however, you need not try to breathe in any particular way – you might consider that the breath 'breathes itself'. It comes in and goes out naturally and you don't need to change it. Remember one of the qualities of mindfulness is to be with your experience non-judgmentally, so however the breath is, that's fine. It may be long or short, shallow or deep, rough or smooth – the practice is just to notice exactly how it is.

Stage 1

You can now begin stage one of the formal practice. In this stage you allow your awareness to rest with the breathing and, as the outward breath reaches its end, you silently count 'one'. Your breath comes in again, then goes out and you count 'two'. Try to continue in this way up to a count of 'ten' then, after the subsequent breath, begin at 'one' again. Allow the breath to follow its own rhythm and try to keep the counting soft and light. Remember that counting is just an anchor in the practice that allows you to notice more fully a specific point in the breathing process (in this stage the ends of the out-breaths).

Counting and attitude

It can be interesting to notice how we are counting. What does our internal dialogue sound like? This can tell us a lot about how we are and how we are approaching the practice. For example, does the counting sound bored – are we feeling sleepy or dull, have we lost interest in the breath so that the counting has become mechanical? Alternatively, does it sound like a drill sergeant counting out press-ups – has our approach become tight and forced? Does the counting have a particular emotional sound to it – for example sad, frustrated, anxious or worried?

We can work with whatever we find in these observations. The internal sound of the counting should ideally be light, soft, kind and attentive, and this can give rise to the accompanying emotion.

Stage 2

In stage 2 the breath continues to follow its own rhythm, but we make the quite subtle change to counting at the beginning of the in-breaths. So we count 'one', breathe in and breathe out. Notice the slight gap between breaths, then count 'two', breathe in and breathe out. Again, we continue in this way all the way up to 'ten', then back to 'one'. The reason for the slight change of emphasis is that, whereas the technique for stage one has a calming, pacifying effect, placing our count at the start of the in-breath provides energy for or developing awareness of our breathing.

Stage 3

In this stage we simply let go of the counting, as it has served its purpose. Left alone with our breath, we try to experience all aspects of it from the point of view of the body. It's not just the obvious parts of the body, like the lungs and the rib cage, that are breathing – try to notice the much subtler effects of the breath in places like your back, legs or even fingers! As ever, if you find that your awareness has risen up to things that are happening in your head, make an effort to bring it down again, into the breathing body.

Stage 4

In the last stage we work to refine the focus of our attention and to make it more sensitive. Typically, we can do this by paying attention to the subtle sensation at the point at which the breath first enters the body (perhaps at the tip of your nose or the upper lip). It may seem difficult to hold this subtler awareness – the key is to stay with it in the context of a well-established background awareness of the whole body, steady and reassuringly solid.

As well as remembering not to force the breathing, it is also important to realise that we are not trying to block out sounds or blank our mind. We can't stop our sensory awareness or thoughts, but we can try not to let them occupy the centre of our awareness, leaving plenty of room for our attention to our breathing. Although the breath is the focus of the practice, to which we return again and again, this doesn't exclude the rest of our experience. At times we may find ourselves with other things like sounds, thoughts, feelings, emotions and images. This is entirely natural - we can just note their presence, then gently come back to the awareness of the breath.

Finishing the practice

To end the practice, you could stop making any effort and just sit with your experiences as they come and go. Allow your awareness to move slowly outwards - pay attention to the sounds outside and experience the weight of the body. As you finally bring the meditation to a close, try to resolve to carry into the rest of your life any awareness that you have cultivated during the practice. If possible, don't rush into anything immediately after the meditation.

6. Recommended reading

There are two very readable books, usually available in the Buddhist Centre's bookshop, that go a little deeper into the Mindfulness of Breathing:

Change your mind – by Paramananda (Windhorse Publications)

The Breath – by Vessantara (also Windhorse Publications)

If you would like to be led through the practices when you are alone, you could consider buying the led CDs – 'Body Scan' and the 'Mindfulness of Breathing'.