

1. The Purpose and Aim of Buddhist Meditation

- *calm and insight*

There are two great stages of Buddhist meditation, which we can call Calm and Insight, or Serenity and Clarity.

Calm:

In the first stage we calm the mind, quieten it, bring it to stillness. We do this by concentrating our attention on something, allowing our mind to become concentrated or absorbed. Another aspect of this stage is the cultivation of positive emotions, specifically of goodwill or friendliness towards oneself and others.

Insight:

With this basis of tranquillity, concentration, and positive emotion, we reflect on our experience in order to see or understand more clearly how things work. For instance, a classic Buddhist meditation is to reflect on impermanence – to see how everything in our experience changes over time. However, there are many things you can reflect on, as we'll see towards the end of the course.

The two meditations you'll learn on this course

You'll learn two meditations on this course, the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Development of Loving Kindness. Both of these come under the heading of the first great stage – Calm. (You need to have a thorough and deep basis in the first stage before moving onto the second stage). However, they can also be used as reflection as Insight practices, as we'll show towards the end of the course.

Practice

Meditation only works if you do it. This may seem an obvious point, but it's worth making because many people attend these courses wanting to make their lives better in some way, and hoping that meditation will help them to do that. But then they don't get round to doing it very much, if at all. This is a great pity, and we're keen that you do get the most from the course, which means practicing.

It's better to do a little every day rather than trying to meditate for longer periods every now and then. We recommend that you begin your practice with 10-minute meditations, and extend that period – to 15, and then to 20 minutes, over the duration of the course. We also hope that you'll continue to meditate once the course ends, and one way of ensuring that will happen is if you practice during the course.

2. More on the First Great Stage of Meditation

- *becoming absorbed in the breath*

Levels of concentration:

The first Great Stage of meditation, which we have called Calm, is actually a continuum, from the first faltering steps we make, in which our mind is easily distracted, to very deep absorption, in which nothing can distract us. The Buddha spoke of levels of absorption, and although it's unlikely that you will reach the deeper levels during this course, you may have some experience of the earlier levels.

The first level of absorption:

This begins when our mind becomes a little stiller than usual – our thoughts are less frenetic, and less frequent. There are gaps in our thinking, in which we're awake and alert, concentrated on the sensations of the breath, without any thoughts at all. Any thoughts that do occur are fairly easy to let go, so that we can come back to the breath once again.

This absorption in the sensations of the breath is very satisfying and enjoyable – it feels good! There are two aspects to this – a quiet, calm feeling of satisfaction, and also, perhaps, a more exhilarating feeling, an upsurge of joy and delight.

The second level of absorption:

If you notice this happening, you may want to simply enjoy it, or you may want to go a bit deeper – into the second level of absorption, in which you have no thoughts at all, just a very vivid experience of being joyously alive.

To move from the first to the second level you simply turn your attention from the sensations of the breath to the feelings of pleasure in your body. By doing that the pleasure will intensify, and that will be so absorbing that your thoughts will drop away completely, and all you will experience is a concentrated happiness.

The danger of goal orientation

The danger of describing these levels of absorption is that you may now try to attain them, and trying to attain them is a pretty sure way not to experience them! There is a useful idea called *the paradox of meditation*. Everyone who learns to meditate does so because they want to make their life better in some way. They have a goal of some kind - greater happiness, less stress, the ability to concentrate, enlightenment! - that they are trying to get to. But how do we get there?

The paradox of meditation is this: if you want to get from A to B, you have to really be at A. That is, simply be with your experience, just as it is. If you're distracted, just notice that you're distracted. If you're feeling anxious, just notice, and be with, your anxiety, all the while bringing your mind back again and again to the breath. In this way, relaxing into your actual experience, not trying to change it, B tends to come to you.

Which means that all you have to do is practice patiently, learning to be with your experience, whatever it is, bringing your mind back to your breath over and over again. It's as simple as that.

A secular parallel – 'flow'

The secular idea of 'flow' recognises that absorption, just as described above, can occur whenever we are fully engaged in a wide range of activities (not necessarily, but certainly including, meditation). This idea is associated with the work of the Hungarian) psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi - a name to be conjured with.

3. Mindfulness of Breathing

- *bringing your awareness to the physical sensations of breathing in the body*

Preliminary stage:

Close your eyes and take time to notice any sounds in the room.
Feel your weight on the cushion or the chair.
Let go of any tension in your shoulders, jaw and face.
Check in with how you are feeling emotionally or energy-wise.

Stage 1:

Place a count at the end of the out-breath.
Start the count at 1 and count each out-breath until you reach 10.
If you lose your place, start at 1.
Remember that your main focus is the breath (not the count).

Stage 2:

Place the count at the beginning of the in-breath.
Start the count at 1 and count each out-breath until you reach 10.
If you lose your place, start at 1.
Remember that your main focus is the breath (not the count).

Stage 3:

Let go of the count and stay with the sensations of breathing.

Stage 4:

Take your awareness to a place where the breath enters or leaves the body.
Examples are the nostrils, the lips or the throat.
Follow the sensations of breathing at this place.

4. Home Practice

We suggest that you gradually build up the meditation in the days between classes, like this:

Week 1:

Stages 1 and 2.

Week 2:

Stages 1, 2 and 3.

Weeks 3 to 6:

Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4.