



Meditation Techniques

Principal Meditation

As we start, it's a good idea to designate a specific place for meditation that is clean, quiet, and free from interruption. Try to return here to meditate at about the same time every day. At the beginning of the meditation period, even when alone, we might light a stick of incense or ring a bell. Over time, these rituals "entrain" us, helping us to more quickly return to desired states of consciousness. Initially, twenty minutes is a good length of time to set aside. Later, you might find that you like to meditate until you "feel finished".

There are certain features which all meditations have in common. First we sit upright and still, with our hands clasped, the left fingers resting on the right, with the thumbs gently touching. This hand position is called a "mudra", and it's actually an informal but useful biofeedback technique: if your thumbs are pressing too hard, you are probably too tense or straining; if the thumbs drift apart, your mind is wandering. Although sitting in the full or half lotus posture is preferable, it is not mandatory. The important thing is to find a position that is straight, stable and comfortable, to facilitate alertness and permit a deepening of stillness.

Breathing Meditation

The beginning and eventually the end of all meditation training is breathing meditation. The salient features are sitting still, being very relaxed and very alert, and attending to the physical sensations of breathing. No attempt is made to control the rate or depth of breathing. We just get out of the way and let "it" breathe. This state of relaxed alertness has been likened to that of a cat, sitting by a mouse hole, hour after hour after hour. Very still, very relaxed, but paying complete attention to the hole where the mouse might appear. In this way we attend to the physical sensations associated with breathing. These might be the feeling of air entering and leaving the nostrils, the excursions of the diaphragm, or the movement of the chest wall.

Now our hypothetical cat doesn't look away from the mouse-hole. If you try to distract him, you'll only get a dirty look before he gets back to his business. In our case, this return of focus is the critical feature of concentration meditation. Our minds will wander from the experience of breathing. Perhaps we will become lost in a scenario of some anticipated event, or in a memory, or rehearsing something we need to say to our partner, etc. etc...When we realize that our mind has wandered, we simply let go of the distraction and return our attention to breathing. No judgment, no big deal. The mind is simply doing what it does, generating thoughts, and we're just doing what we do, letting them go, again and again and again. We sometimes think of the practice as "doing reps", acknowledging that each distraction is an opportunity to practice letting go.

It is important to note that we are not trying to suppress anything. Any experience that comes to attention is okay. Our meditation practice is just to let go, releasing ourselves from distraction. This serves an important function. By "discounting" the significance of competing experiences (thoughts, memories, fantasies) in lieu of the focus, it is possible for the emotional hold over us to diminish with time. 🌸

Listening Meditation

The Development of Listening

There are three listening meditations. These are learned sequentially, in order to develop experiential skills and train developmental stages.



When we set ourselves to begin this meditation, we need to take the position that there are no good sounds, just sounds coming into existence and then disappearing (as does all experience). This first stage of development is learned by listening with bare attention. By this we mean listening to all sounds that are present, without labeling. Not labeling means sounds that instead of thinking to ourselves, “there’s an airplane”, “that’s a car”, or “birds singing”, we just observe the presence of each sound without verbal or visual comment. This includes listening to sounds coming from far away, nearby sounds, and internal sounds. Focusing on listening means keeping the process of listening more vivid than other events vying for our attention. Simply put: we listen, completely investing ourselves in listening, becoming listening.

As with breathing or other concentration meditations, we will find ourselves from the distraction and return to listening. It may take us six months, or even longer, to become highly skilled at listening without labeling.

The second developmental stage of these listening meditations is to use the presence of the “sounds heard” to point to “what is there” where the sound was. A good way to get a feeling for what this task requires is to utilize a bell for guidance. Here, one strikes a bell and listens to the reverberations. We focus on the sound of the bell and listen as the reverberation decay, until no bell sound is left. Maintaining a stable focus on the sound will allow us to “detect, see or listen to” what is there where the sound has been. Keeping our mind exactly there where the sound was. Thus, using sounds as a reference point, we attempt to observe what was exactly there where the sound has been. Or, on the other side, we can observe what is exactly there just before the sound appears. Sounds are always coming and going, but what part of the listening experience doesn’t change? Persisting in this way will eventually allow us to have a direct experience of “no sound” or the “ground of listening”.

The third stage of the development of hearing occurs after we have established the foundations of listening with bare attention and listening to no sounds. This third stage is called “observing the source of the hearing”. Sounds are heard and the absence of sound is experienced, but what is the source of the hearing? This is a difficult exercise exercise and it is facilitated by utilizing sounds and the absence of sound to provide points of reference for turning our awareness around to observe its source. The injunction is to “turn the light of awareness around and directly time, and with any observer the source of awareness”. * This suggestion can be applied at any type of meditation. However, working within the scaffolding of the listening meditations provides the structure to clearly move through these three stages. 🌸

*See *Sermons by Bassui, The Three Pillars of Zen*, by Philip Kapleau

Hua T’ou Meditation

The second state of the listening meditation, described above, is an example of Hua t’ou meditation. In these types of meditation we try to observe what is there before an event or what is there after it is gone. In our meditation group we have been practicing hau t’ou with respect to thoughts or thinking. Hua t’ou literally means, “head and tail”. You might say we’re trying to observe what’s exactly there, just before the thought pokes its head out and what’s there exactly where the thought was? We’re trying to solve a classic Buddhist question. thoughts change, sounds change. What doesn’t change?

Other meditations we do in our Dharma Family group meditations are: **shikantaza, Kinhin, body scan, and nose tip/breath counting.** 🌸