

## Brief Meditation Instructions

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These instructions are offered as a brief overview of the Insight Meditation Practice taught in our retreats. They are not a substitute for detailed instruction and support from an experienced teacher.

### General Directives

The basic insight practice is quite simple, developing concentration and mindful awareness at the same time. We work with a primary object, usually the breath, to establish concentration. We also attend to all other experiences with mindfulness, according to a simple method.

The basic practice consists of four points:

- 1) Become aware of the “dominant” event occurring in the whole body-mind process.
- 2) Acknowledge and anchor this awareness by “naming” the process at the very first awareness of it. Make a soft little whisper in the mind called “mental noting.”
- 3) Observe, resting full attention in it, all that happens within the process until it ends or until you return to the primary object.
- 4) Maintain a soft, gentle, persistent willingness. Do not try to make any experience come, stay, or be a particular way; do not try to prevent or push away any experience....

### Establishing Posture

Insight practice is usually done sitting in a firm and unmoving posture. You may sit in a straight chair, cross-legged on a *zafu* (round sitting cushion) or other firm cushion on the floor, or on a *seiza* (sitting) or prayer bench. Initially, while still establishing basic concentration, you may move to adjust an uncomfortable posture. Eventually you should sit as still as possible.

Sitting in a good posture, with a relatively straight spine, helps prevent stress on muscles. Holding the back straight is easiest when the hip bones are higher than the knee bones. If using a cushion, sit near the front edge so that all the buttocks, but none of the upper leg, is on the cushion. The simplest cross-legged posture is called Burmese style. Bend the knee of one leg and draw the heel in as close to the groin as you can. Bend the other knee, and pull that leg in as close to the first one as possible. Both knees should be resting on the floor. You can help leg muscles loosen up by practicing sitting outside of formal meditation time. While watching television, or talking with friends or family, simply sit cross-legged on your cushion.

Sitting benches throw the back into a good alignment, but ankles often are stiff at the beginning. This discomfort will lessen in time. If you meditate sitting in a chair, do not lean against the back. A chair that slopes slightly toward the front is most helpful. Putting blocks under the back legs of a chair, or obtaining a firm foam wedge for the seat of the chair, helps produce this slope. Both feet should rest firmly on the ground, one to two feet apart.

The shoulders should be over the hip bones, and the earlobes in line with the shoulders. It helps to tuck the chin slightly and have the back of the top of the head as the highest body point. Once seated, you can align the body and adjust the curve in the spine by pulling the navel forward or pushing it back. Check to be sure that the shoulders are hanging loosely, and are not hunched up around the neck.

When correctly placed, the bones will simply stack themselves on top of each other. You can then hold an erect posture with no strain or effort. Until posture is well established, check at the beginning of each sitting to be sure that you are not tightly holding the body in place and that the shoulders hang

loosely. Do not expect to have perfect posture immediately. You may play around with posture until it feels right.

### **Protecting the Practice**

Protecting the practice means keeping ourselves motivated to work at it. There are some time-honored ways to protect practice. You might reflect on the beauty of an ordered life, or on the merits of some aware person you admire. If you are religious, you might offer a short prayer of some kind. You might remind yourself of the high goal of getting in touch with yourself and ordering your life. If you work best with negative images, you might reflect on the shortness of life or the ugliness of a disordered heart. You might do a little loving-kindness meditation to soften your heart. (Loving-kindness is explained later on.)

One special protection is an act of surrender. This expresses our willingness to be with all meditation experiences as a healing offered us. Surrender opens us to accept whatever healing that practice brings about in us. It helps us maintain a soft gentleness that does not grasp after or push away any experience. If you are religious, you may want to surrender to some religious figure of your choice. But surrender to the practice itself is the main surrender needed. We need to be in a soft, willing acceptance of our meditation experiences.

### **Instructions for Doing Vipassana (Insight) Meditation**

Note: These are summary instructions and presuppose that you have taken a class in insight meditation. It would be difficult for someone to learn how to do the practice from these notes alone.

### **Working with the Breath**

Sitting in a comfortably erect posture, become aware of your body sitting. Then bring your attention to the place you have chosen to watch the breath. (You may choose one of three places: upper lip, chest, or diaphragm.) Hold awareness at this place without moving it around, and feel all of the sensations of the breath there. As soon as you notice that an inhalation is starting, softly note “in” by silently whispering the word in your mind.

When you become aware that an exhalation is starting, softly note “out.” Put all your awareness in the sensations of the breath at the place where you are watching until the exhalation ends. Continue in this way to experience inhalations and exhalations of the breath. Try to note at the very beginning of each inhalation and exhalation. However, do not anticipate the start of the breath; that would make the note a command to the body to breathe.

Make the mental note “loud” enough to help hold you on target, but not so loud as to draw attention away from the sensations. Remember that the note should be a very soft whisper in the mind, using no more than five percent of available mental energy. You may make a very short note at the beginning of the breath, stretch it out across the whole breath, or choose something in between. Do whatever most helps you stay focused.

Be in very close touch with all the sensations of the breath at the place you are observing. Do not “look down at” the sensations from above, or at an image of them. Put your awareness “inside” the sensations themselves. Make no attempt to control the breath in any way; let it flow just as it does by itself. Smooth, bumpy, long, short, even, irregular--all are okay.

If there is a pause between breaths, move awareness to feeling the whole body sitting. Note “sitting” and feel the body until the next breath starts. If the pause is long, add awareness of a place where part of the body is touching. This may be buttocks on seat, hand on leg, or any other place you can feel a touch sensation. Note “touching” and feel its sensations. If the pause is very long, go back and forth

between “sitting” and “touching” until the breath starts again. Do not try to make pauses in the breath occur.

Sometimes working with the breath is very difficult, such as when you have a head cold. You may then use sitting-touching as the primary object, holding awareness on each for about the length of a breath.

### **Working with Awareness of Temperature**

If awareness of temperature change draws attention from the breath, immediately focus full awareness on that sensation. Note it with a descriptive word, such as “coolness,” “burning,” “warm,” or “freezing.” Do not try to hold onto breath awareness; instead, put all the awareness inside the feeling of temperature.

If the experience ends, or if attention wanders to something else, go back to the breath. If the awareness continues, repeat the note about every five or ten seconds--often enough to hold attention firmly, but not so often as to distract from feeling the temperature sensation. After a minute or so, go back to the breath. If the same awareness draws attention again, work with it again for several minutes. So long as it keeps drawing attention, you can keep going to it.

### **Working With Movement Sensations**

Sometimes the body will feel like it is moving. When such sensation is strong enough to draw attention away from the breath, sink awareness into that experience. Immediately note it with an appropriate word, such as “floating,” “swaying,” “vibrating,” or “bouncing.” Let go of the breath, and put full attention inside the movement sensation. Do not check to see if the body actually is moving. If it is your experience, it is “real” for the practice and you work with it.

Repeat the noting as explained above. Also follow those instructions on returning to the breath. When working with movement, add the intention to still the body when returning to the breath. This is to leave room for another experience to surface. If actual movement is occurring, it will almost certainly again claim attention. However, go out to work with movement whenever it draws you.

### **Working With Touch Sensations**

When a body sensation becomes strong enough to draw attention from the breath, work with it. As soon as you become aware that attention has moved to it, sink awareness into the experience, letting go of the breath, and note it with an appropriate word describing the sensation. Some examples are “itching,” “crawling,” “cramping,” and “tingling.”

Gerunds, words that end in “ing,” are often the best notes because they capture the feeling of an ongoing process. You can use generic words like “moving” or “touching” if a more descriptive word does not easily come to mind. Do not look hard for just the right word to note body experiences. Over time, a vocabulary will build automatically to note different kinds of experiences.

Follow the instructions above on repeating the note and on returning to the breath. If a touch sensation is particularly intense, you may return to the breath more frequently to rest the mind. You can also place the sensation along the edges of awareness for a while, and deliberately focus attention on the breath. Sometimes making the area of sensation being watched either larger or smaller makes it easier to stay with the sensation.

Once we start to work with body sensations, we try to sit as still as possible so that we are not cutting off experiences as soon as they arise. Do not move on the first impulse; see if you are willing to settle back and be with the experience a little longer. However, this practice is to be done very gently. Do

not over-control, tense up, or otherwise fight an experience. When you reach the end of willingness, make whatever adjustment is needed, go back to the breath, and begin again. Willingness will gradually grow.

### **Working With the Other Senses**

In awareness practice, we note and attend to our own experiences only. When the body is cramping, tingling, or itching, we can properly say that is our experience. However, the different kinds of seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting we experience are only simple experiences of these senses. The bird is chirping, the car is roaring, and so on. These are not your experiences; you are just hearing.

This makes work with the other four senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting—easy compared to body sensations. We have only one way of noting each of them: “seeing,” “hearing,” “smelling,” and “tasting.” Use the guidelines given for body sensations for attending to these experiences, noting them, and going back to the breath.

Sometimes we have repetitious experiences. Someone may be running a lawn mower, and the mind keeps going to the sound. Or the same kind of visual imagery may occur repetitively. In such instances, note and work with the experience the first few times it draws attention. Then try to place it along the edges of awareness and stay on the breath to allow other experiences to surface. However, if it draws you strongly, go out to work with it again.

### **Working with Thinking**

Every meditator spends time lost in thought. Sometimes we can see thoughts come and go without following off after them, but at the beginning we are more likely to get lost in them. Do not be dismayed by this; it will improve with practice. Just persistently note “thinking” as soon as you become aware of it, and then return to the breath.

You may have noticed that sensations can keep continuing while you focus mindful awareness on them. Thinking is different; to keep a train of thought going, you have to get lost in it. Once we turn the bright spotlight of awareness onto thinking, it evaporates like mist.

You should immediately return to the breath after noting thought; remember, the thought will die when awareness is on it. If you “hang out” in the area instead of returning to the breath, you may not see the thought die because another thought will come quickly. Pretty soon you will be lost in thinking again.

### **Refining Work with Thinking**

We refine working with thought by noting the kind of thinking we do. This is not noting the content of thought, the story line of the thoughts, but just the type of thought. So you might use such notes as “remembering,” “planning,” “self-dramatizing,” “complaining,” and so on. When we do this, we start to realize where we spend most of our time running away—into the past or future, or just pushing away the present. We realize this without thinking about it; it comes from doing the noting.

### **Working with Mind States**

When a mind state draws attention from the primary object, let go of the breath and fully sink the awareness into the mind state. As soon as you notice the mind state, note it with an appropriate word such as “sadness,” “sleepiness,” “anger,” “fear,” and so on.

Do not go looking through the body for bodily experiences that go with the mind state. Do sit with an openness, though, to be aware of what is happening in the body. If a body experience comes into awareness, note it with an appropriately descriptive word. Treat it like all other body experiences.

You must be very alert to catch thought when working with mind states. As soon as a thought comes, see it clearly, note the thinking, and return immediately to the breath. Thinking thoughts associated

with the mind state invites it to stay around and grow stronger. You do not want to chase the mind state away, but you also do not want to do anything to encourage it to stay or intensify.

You can go back and forth between noting the mental and bodily sides of a mind state, as different experiences related to it occur. You should be noting something at least every five to ten seconds. So long as we are noting, we are not lost in the experience. We are both experiencing and observing at the same time.

After working with the mind state for a few minutes, take a breather back to the breath. If another experience draws attention to itself, work with it. If the same mind state calls you out again, go back to it. You can spend most of the sitting on the same mind state if it keeps drawing you to it, but remember to take breaks to the breath. This keeps concentration strong and makes space for other experiences to draw the awareness.

### **Working with Feeling-Tone**

All experiences have a feeling-tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. When feeling-tone draws the attention, sink full awareness into its quality of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality. Note it simply as “pleasant,” “unpleasant,” or “neutral.” If associated body experiences come into awareness, work with them also. When you are experiencing a lot of greed or aversion, becoming aware of feeling-tone is very helpful. This also assists work with intense sensations. Eventually you will see that reactivity is voluntary, and also that even intense feeling-tone will finally dim and change without your doing anything.

### **Working with Intention**

When you feel an impulse to move, be aware that this is an intention and note it as “intending.” Careful noting of intention often helps us counter it with a contrary intention so we can sit unmoving. Watching intention also shows us that, without our doing anything at all about it, intentions will eventually go away. This teaches us that urges will end whether we act on them or not.

If you make a voluntary movement, be sure to note the arising intention. Also note the actions of scratching, lifting, turning—whatever the movement—while paying attention to the sensations you feel while moving.

### **Working with Pain**

Pain can be intense physical sensations or intense, unpleasant emotions. For both of these, several methods help make pain more easily bearable.

For strong physical pain, practice putting it “around the edges” of awareness and focusing your attention on something else. This is not pushing it away or pretending like it isn’t there. That won’t work. You first have to “open” to full awareness of the pain, then can invite around the edges. If you work with this with sound first (explained above), you can get the knack of inviting something to stay around the edges of awareness. This will dull out the pain.

A pain in the body will draw your attention. When this happens, another thing you can do is to look at a larger part of the body—all around the painful part—when your attention is drawn to it. Paying attention to a larger area “spreads the pain out” some and makes it easier.

If you have strong concentration, try “diving into” the very heart of the pain with all your attention. When you can do this, you can hit the “off” button for the pain, and it will completely disappear.

For strong emotional pain, first open fully to it and acknowledge it by noting it. Then sink down into where you feel it in your body, putting the mental side of the emotion around the edges of awareness. It is much easier to be with the body sensations of a strong emotion than with the mental side.

## Walking Practice

Many people do walking practice only on retreat. It is not taught in all classes. If you want to do it, you can work from these instructions.

To do formal walking practice, choose a path 10 to 20 steps in length. You will walk back and forth along this path. Hold the hands however you wish, but do not move them around as that distracts you. Cast your eyes on the ground about two to four feet ahead; do not look around.

Divide the walking period into three parts at different walking speeds. At the beginning, take about one-third of the walking period for each part.

First, walk at near normal pace. As you walk, note either “step, step” or else “left, right.” Pay attention to the sensations in the moving leg. Do not actually look at the leg, but sink awareness into feeling the sensations.

When you reach the end of the path, stop. Note “standing” and feel the whole body standing. Then turn around. As soon as you start the turn, note “turning” and feel the movement of the body turning. Then go back over the path noting each step and feeling the sensations in the moving leg.

For the second part, go more slowly. For each step, note both “lifting” and “placing.” Try to feel how the sensations of lifting are different from those of placing. Keep attention on the sensations in the moving leg. Each time you reach the end of the path, note “standing” and “turning” as described above.

For the third part of walking practice, you may go as slowly as you can while still maintaining balance. Note four parts to each step: “lifting,” “moving,” “placing,” and “shifting.” Both feet will be flat on the floor during the shifting. After shifting weight, bring attention to the back leg and begin another step. You should fully complete one step before beginning the next. If you have trouble with balance, taking smaller steps will help. Stand and turn at the end of the path as described above.

If attention goes to other things while walking, try to make them “background” awareness, and hold the attention on sensations in the moving leg. Do not note other things while walking. If they keep drawing attention, stop walking to note and attend to them briefly. Then bring attention back to the leg, and again begin walking.

If you want to refine walking practice, add working with intention. You can observe and note the intention before turning, and before beginning to walk each length. During very slow walking, you may want to note the intention before each lifting movement. Do not note the intention for separate parts in the middle of a step.

## Loving-Kindness Practice

Loving-kindness practice is not part of insight practice. It is a different kind of meditation practice, often done by people who do insight practice.

Loving-kindness practice consists of making good wishes for ourselves and others. It may be offered for any being currently alive that you can image, including animals. You need not image them, but must have some notion of their appearance.

To do loving kindness, take a comfortable posture. You may sit, stand, walk, or lie down. Unless walking, it usually helps to close the eyes. Whenever you become uncomfortable, change your posture. You may take a few intentionally deep breaths to relax. Some people find it helpful to focus attention on the heart.

Many people begin loving-kindness practice with forgiveness, saying something like this. “I ask forgiveness of all beings whom I have hurt or harmed in any way. I freely forgive all beings who have hurt or harmed me in any way. I freely forgive myself.”

Next take a few minutes to recall things about yourself that you can celebrate. We ponder helpful choices we have made to stir up feelings of gentle caring for ourselves. If you can think of nothing else, be pleased that you have chosen to learn to meditate.

You may use any good wishes you choose. Usually four or five is a helpful number. Repeat each one as many times as your wish before moving onto the next one. Be sure to keep repeating the phrases; do not let your mind simply go empty. Use the same good wishes for everyone to whom you send loving-kindness during any one sitting. However, at other sittings you may choose different blessings.

Always begin with yourself, and end with “all beings everywhere.” Those to whom you send good wishes in the middle may vary. You may move outwards geographically—such as from yourself to all in the room with you, all in the city, the state, the country, the hemisphere, on earth, and so on. You may move out by emotional distance to benefactors (including parents), other family members, friends, colleagues, clients or students, acquaintances, people you don’t know but see at times, and so on. To work with a problem relationship, go from yourself to a benefactor, a friend, a neutral person (someone you do not know well enough to have feelings about), and then the problem person. Some people like to go through lists of friends and/or relatives in the middle part of loving-kindness practice.

Here is a set of traditional good wishes:

May I (all beings everywhere) be safe from inner and outer enemies.

May I (all beings everywhere) be strong and healthy in body.

May I (all beings everywhere) be peaceful and clear in mind.

May I (all beings everywhere) take care of myself (themselves) with happy ease.

Loving-kindness is not a part of awareness practice, but is a form of concentrative meditation. Some people do normal length sittings of loving-kindness regularly or occasionally. Others use it to help their awareness practice. Doing some loving-kindness “softens” the mind and makes practice more gentle. A few minutes of *metta* at the start of a sitting helps “protect” the practice by keeping us motivated.

### **A Simple Loving-Kindness Practice**

There is a very simple way to do loving-kindness practice. After recalling a few good things about yourself, simply repeat something like, “May I be safe, healthy, happy, and peaceful.” Keep repeating it over and over. If your mind wanders, go back to it as soon as you realize your mind has wandered. You can do this at any time—waiting in line, waiting to fall asleep, and so on.

You can send loving-kindness this way to other people—both those you like and don’t like—and anyone else. Just picture the person in front of you, think either about some of his or her good qualities or else that, like a human being, they want the same things you want. Then, just like you are speaking to that person, repeat over and over, “May you be safe, healthy, happy, and peaceful.”

### **Sharing Merit**

Merit is whatever makes us “shine within.” All acts of virtue, piety, goodness, spiritual practice, and the like, create merit. We can share it with any other being, living or dead. Some people choose to share merit after each meditation sitting.

If you want to share merit, you may use a simple formula like this. “May the fruits of my (generosity, virtue, spiritual practice) be for the good of (my mother, “Jane Doe,” all beings everywhere).” Simply name the meritorious action and the person(s) with whom you wish to share. You may also go through a litany, repeating the phrase a number of times naming a different meritorious action each time. The merit can be shared with the same or different people.