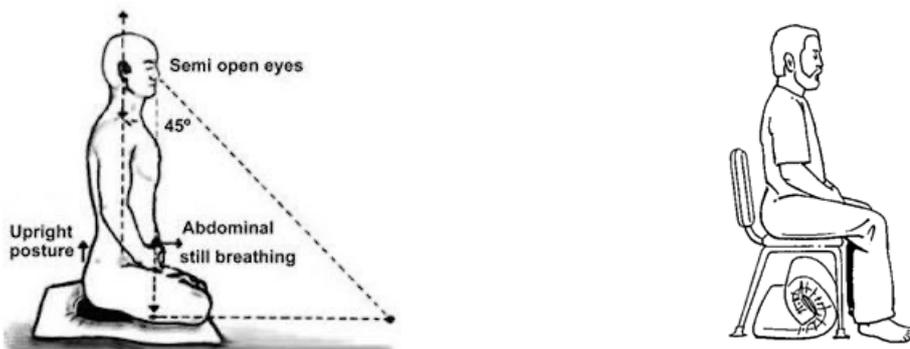


Week 1 – Watching the Breath

Watching the breath is a core practice of meditation. We use it to centre ourselves, slow down our thoughts and to become aware of our surroundings.

Sitting Position

Find a comfortable location and position to meditate. Traditionally sitting meditation is done sitting on the floor on a pillow, but for many westerners who are not used to this type sitting, they find it very uncomfortable. Sitting in a chair is fine. Whether sitting on the floor or on a chair, its important that you can sit comfortably in an upright position. Imagine a string connected to the very top of your head which is pulled very gently up, so as to straighten your spine. Your hips should be open and relaxed, angled slightly down. Hands should rest cupped in each other on your lap. Your eyes should be relaxed and half-closed but not fully closed (or you will fall asleep). Your mouth and jaw should be relaxed.



If you are sitting on a chair: sit on the front of the chair, feet without shoes flat on the floor, without using the back of the chair (if possible).

Remember: Posture = Straight + Relaxed

Starting the practice

Bring your attention to the edge of your nostrils. Breath in slowly in a deep and relaxed manner. As you breath in, become aware of expansion of your lungs. Try to feel your lower abdomen expanding with air. After you have completed a deep breath in, then open your mouth a little and slowly exhale by relaxing. All the time your focus should remain on your hands resting in your lap. This pattern repeats over and over.

Do not force the breath, and don't try to control it with counting. Rather just become aware of your breath going in and out. Sometimes it will be a deep breath, and sometimes it will be more shallow, and that is fine. Simply watch what is happening, and don't get involved with it.

Dealing with thoughts, feeling and emotions that arise

As you watch your breath you will notice that thoughts arise in your mind. When they do, gently bring your attention back to your breath. It can also help to label them, then let them go. If you realise you are thinking about something, label it 'thinking' and let it leave your mind.

When you first start meditating, you will find thoughts are your biggest source of distraction - what Buddhist call our monkey mind. Tame your monkey mind by detaching from the thoughts, labelling them, and letting them go. Its harder that it sounds, because even us thinking about mediation is thought! But with practice, you will learn how to allow thoughts to pass by you, without engaging with them.

You will also experience feelings and sensations. You might get sore from sitting, or you might hear a noise. You might become sleepy. Again, when this happens and you become aware you are focusing on a feeling or sensation, then gently bring you focus back to watching the breath or label it 'feeling' and allow it to depart. If you feel sleepy, open your eyes a bit more, straighten up you posture and refocus on watching your breath.

The final class of things you will experience are emotions. After you start to developing your meditation practice, you will become aware of emotions as well. Again, try not to dwell on them. When I started practicing meditation, I had a lot of problems with frustration. I became annoyed at myself because I struggled to concentration. I was very judgemental of my own skill. The secret is to observe this, but not to engage with it. Label it 'Anger' or 'Frustration' and bring you mind back to practice.

You will notice I say 'gently' in these instructions. One of the most destructive emotions we have is self-judgement. So part of this practice, is to refrain from criticising how well you are meditating, or for that matter how well someone else is or is not doing the practice.

Practice

- Get into the meditation position, noting feet, bottom and back position. Visualise a thread coming from the top of your head, pulling you very gently up. Hands cupped in your lap and your eyes relaxed and half-closed looking down at 45°.
- Start breathing in via you nose and out through your month, watching the breath.
- As thoughts, feels or emotions arise, label them. Observe what happens when you do this.
- Continue doing this for 10 minutes
- After 10 minutes, open your eyes and bring your attention back to the room.

After you complete the exercise, reflect on:

- How did the start of the exercise go? Did you have any issues breathing in through your nose and out of your month, and in remaining relaxed and aware?
- What thoughts, feeling and emotions arose?
- When you labelled these, what happened?
- How was it to keep doing this for 10 minutes – how did you find it?
- How do you feel afterwards?