

INTRODUCTION TO INSIGHT MEDITATION

AJAHN SUCITTO

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TO
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MEDITATION**

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Dedicated to Douglas and Margaret Jones
in acknowledgment of their long-term support and service.

Can you take 10-15 minutes to refresh your heart and mind?

What's offered below may help you with that ...

We call it 'meditation', but bear in mind, meditation is *not* about:

- **Trying to concentrate.**
- **Stopping thinking.**
- **Sitting cross-legged for hours.**

Instead, meditation *is* about:

- **Calming and steadying the mind.**
- **Restoring emotional balance.**
- **Understanding where compulsive habits begin and supporting a reset.**
- **Discovering inner depths.**

Although meditation is about cultivating mind (and heart), it uses the body as a frame of reference. For this, you *place* your attention on the felt experience of your body and *sense*, or 'listen to' it. This is **mindfulness**, a non-reactive attentiveness that can steady the energies, moods and thought processes that arise in your everyday life. Through this support, you can learn to feel these and let them pass, rather than get tangled up in them. This creates a 'no-stress' zone in your heart. So, although normally we might follow, add to or otherwise react to mental content, in meditation the aim is to let that be, and instead open and clean the mind's operating system.

This system has three aspects:

Intention: The ‘do it, get it’ directive aspect that sends the mind off in a particular direction.

Attention: The selective aspect. It’s what you place when you form a focus on anything.

Awareness: The receptive aspect of heart. This begins with ‘sensing’, an inner listening that, as it deepens, offers a fresh open space from which responses (rather than reactions) can arise.

The key feature in this meditative process is **mindfulness** – the ability to bear feelings, moods and appearances in mind without reacting to them. Because of this, mindfulness steadies your attention so that the ‘do-it’ reflex calms down and awareness comes to the fore. This allows you to notice and respond to what you feel, and think more carefully.

Because this is rewarding, it encourages the mind to firm up, get to the point and operate more clearly.

ESTABLISHING A FRAME OF REFERENCE

Here are some practices that use the ordinary post-ures of the body as themes for mindfulness. But first of all, find a quiet time and place and ...

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Circumstances never end, but you will one day. Who knows when? What do you regret or feel conflicted by? What do you need in the here and now? In the cultivation of the heart and mind, there is an opportunity to resolve problems by resetting how you think and feel.

MINDFULNESS OF BODY

Get settled. Sit in an upright position, or stand in a balanced way. Place your attention in a way that includes your body within the space extending at about

an arm's length around it. It's as if you're standing or sitting under a tree, quietly taking in the atmosphere. Be aware of how you can sense the overall impression of your body within that frame of reference, without focusing on any point in particular – just as you would while balancing, showering, or running.

While sustaining that mode of attention, relax any muscles you don't need (such as in the face, shoulders and hands). Let the weight of your body rest on your bones. Be aware of the skin, the sensitive sheet that's wrapped around your form.

You can establish mindfulness of the body in this way whether you're sitting, standing, walking or reclining. It will allow you to sense the body *externally*, (that is, in terms of sensations and temperature) as well as *internally* (that is, in terms of tension, relaxation, and vitality). The internal is especially relevant, as

the internal state of the body is connected to your moods and nervous energy. By holding this frame of mindfulness steady, you let the internal sense open, and this will help to bring your nervous system and mind-states into balance.

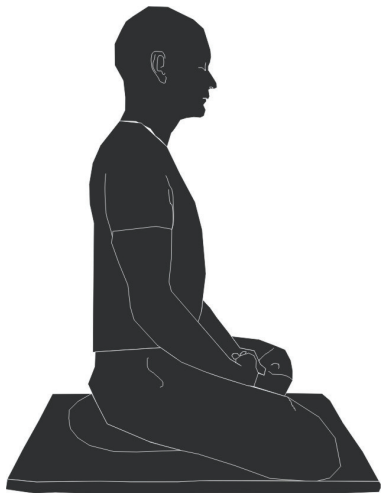
This allows you to address what you're feeling from a level and calm perspective.

Sitting

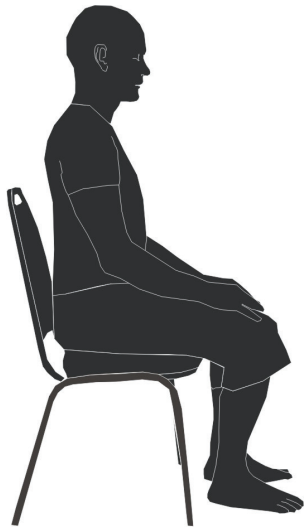
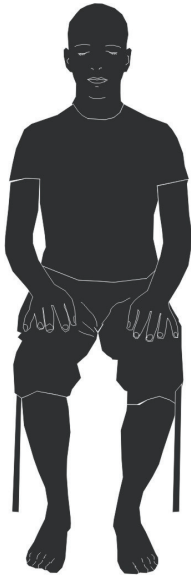
Sit tall in a chair or in one of the cross-legged ‘lotus’ positions. (See the accompanying illustrations.) The aim is to create a firm and broad support for the upper body. Hence even when sitting in a chair, the legs should be kept apart.

As you’re setting up your frame of reference, sense your lumbar region, and firm up there. This will support the curvature of the spine, and keep the abdomen open and relaxed. Let your arms rest slightly away from the sides of your body (enough that you can slide a hand between your arm and your ribs). This will help your shoulders to relax, and that allows your chest to open and the breathing to become fuller and calmer. Your hands can rest in your lap, or on your thighs.



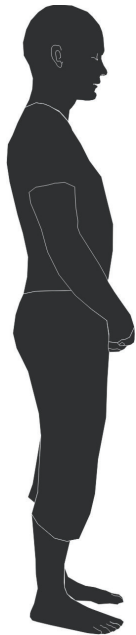
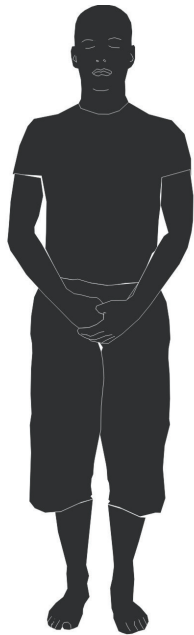


Bring your head into alignment with your upright body, so that it rests on the bones of your neck, like a ball poised on a fountain of water. Being receptive to how your face feels, relax the jaw, forehead and around the eyes. Allow three breaths to flow in and out like waves, descending deeply and rising again. Mindful of the body as a whole, open your awareness to that presence and how it feels.



Standing

This is much the same as sitting, except that your legs can take the weight off your back and transfer it to the ground beneath you. For this, you stand with the legs body-width apart. With the knees slightly bent, relax the leg muscles, including the buttocks. Feel all the way down to the soles of the feet. Placing and sensing as before, tune into the body in terms of balance.



Walking

Keeping the upright axis that standing has attuned you to, soften your visual focus. Drop the idea of walking to anywhere – your walking body will go somewhere whether you define that or not. Then find some space of ten paces (more would be ideal, if you have the room) in which to walk.

Be aware of how walking happens. This is through the muscles in the lower back and hip lifting the leg and turning the waist. As they do so, the swing of the waist (e.g. to the left) draws the (left) shoulder back a little to act as a counterbalance to the (left) leg as it lifts. This means you can walk slowly and fluidly without lurching forward – or toppling over.

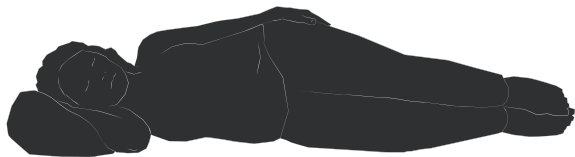
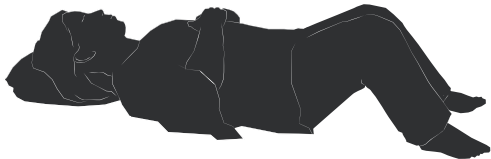


The balance that you could sense in standing is then maintained within a moving form. Maintaining whole-body awareness and a soft focus for your eyes, tune in to that poise and let the world open around you as you walk. You might pause at the end of your path and stand for a while before turning around. Or you might like to move up and down your path without a break. Either way, enjoy the flow.

Reclining

You can meditate while lying down, but you do need to maintain a formal posture with the body held quite straight, otherwise you're liable to fall asleep. Recline on one side, supporting your head on a pillow and hand; or lie on your back. Either way, widen your attention over the form of your body; extend awareness down through the soles of your feet and up through the body and the crown of the head. Hands can rest on your side, or (if you're on your back) on your chest. Be aware of your bodily form supported by firm ground and shielded by a canopy of space.

In any of these forms, the basic exercise is to keep your attention steady, your intention interested but not goal-oriented, and your awareness quietly receptive. Then you have a foundation to which the process of calm and insight can unfold.



PROBLEMS AND TIPS

- 1 Physical discomfort. Your posture has to be such that your attention doesn't shrink, get tense or keep fidgeting. It's OK to move and change posture while sitting, or to go from sitting to standing. When walking, do so in a natural, unhurried and easeful way. In general, sustain awareness of the body as a connected whole, rather than focus on local discomforts. Support this by bringing a balanced attitude to the practice.
- 2 Thinking, emotions and mental states will arise. This experience is the basis for insightful understanding, if attended with mindfulness and inquiry.

For beginners, it's a good idea to keep the eyes open, or half-open, with that arm's-length focus. Also, bring your attention more fully to the spine while relaxing

the face and hands. This will lessen the impact of thoughts and moods, while warding off sleepiness.

Another tip is to choose a word (such as 'peace', or 'gently'), or a syllable (such as 'aah'), and silently interrupt the train of thoughts with it. Sustain that 'support word' through the duration of a few (5-10) exhalations, or a similar number of footsteps if you're walking.

- 3 You may from time to time find your intention jumps to switch something on, or drink or nibble on something. You might feel a need to attend to business, or tidy or fix something. Allow any of these to happen but make an effort to hold off on following those impulses for the ten to fifteen minutes of the meditation period. Anchor your attention in the body.

The overall advice is to not engage with or reject the flow of mind; don't think about it. Instead *contemplate* it. This means stepping back from the

details (imagine stepping back from a painting to get a better perspective) while still bearing it in mind.

You could imagine the mind-flow to be a flock of birds, or a river, or a downpour. The main point is to experience it as a flow of changing energy.

This gives you the opportunity to contemplate impulses and attitudes that may have acquired the force of habit. They may be well-intentioned or non-problematic – but do they have to be compulsive? If you don't get involved in them, they arise and subside. Maybe you could look into your mind in that light, and give yourself a chance to moderate or reset some habits.

- 4** Through any and all of this, there's an opportunity to tune in to the qualities of spacious attention and non-reactive awareness. These provide a peaceful template within which to settle the heart.

CLARIFY THE VIEW

THE BASIS FOR INSIGHT

The above practice of mindfulness helps you to step out of circumstances for a while and let the mind and heart settle so that you can get a clear view on them. This view is called ‘insight’.

Insight offers a realization that releases the heart from cramped frames of reference (my hair, my job, my relatives), trapped emotions (I feel anxious, overwhelmed, stressed) and compulsive reactions (got to do it, make that better, get rid of those). Contemplating these, with careful attention to how the mind is operating, puts things in a perspective that allows them to arise and pass. What remains is a non-reactive awareness. Therefore, afflictive habits don’t get fed by reactivity, and in time can fade out altogether. So this change of view has a lasting transformative effect.

Shift the perspective

The first step in that change of view is the contemplative shift of attention that I described previously. That is, you lift your attention from the process that you're in to one of monitoring it. Notice that you can do that – it's like shifting your attention from cooking food to assessing it in terms of outward appearance, texture and flavour. In the case of the heart and mind, this shift allows you to disengage from your thoughts and feelings and contemplate them. There is 'knowing': you're aware and you're conscious that you're aware.

You can sustain that balanced knowing by first silently asking 'Who (or what) is aware of my mind?' and then lingering in the awareness that comes to the fore.

Explore and inquire

As this viewpoint gets established, explore the flow of mental and emotional phenomena. What are the underlying moods? Restless...? Anxious...? Eager...? Irritated...? Can you be *with* them, rather than be involved *in* them?

Notice any aversion and fascination; contemplate any uncertainty, happiness, complaining, or exuberance as it arises. By sustaining the frame of attention, you can let these arise and pass.

Let go of what you don't need: including the future, and even of coming to a conclusion. Instead acknowledge any underlying assumptions that get you engaged and stressed, such as 'I shouldn't be this way', or, 'this shouldn't be happening', or, 'the event or the person that I'm being affected by shouldn't be the way it is.' The same attitude brings 'I should be, I have to do, I

should have.’ How do these assumptions affect your mind and heart? How do they feel in your body?

How much of this process of interpretation supports a balanced knowing? And what ideas tip you over into complexity and agitation?

Without trying to get rid of them, consider the effects of your attitudes and interpretations, and whether you need to keep them running right now.

Imagine: what would it feel like if the ideas about what you are and should be (and do) weren’t there? Let that impression be felt and help to reset your perspectives.

Feel, steady and respond

By disengaging from assumptions and attitudes, a response can arise from steady clear awareness. To know just this is wisdom! In simple terms, wisdom is about waiting for the reactions to pass and then finding

the most direct and whole-hearted way to relate to yourself and your current situation.

This comes when you avoid all 'shoulds', ideologies and assumptions and meet the flow of internal and external phenomena without bias. Follow this with an inquiry into what in all this drives or stresses you. Step back from that push and attune to where you're steady (your body can provide that). Realizations that release you from stress arise from that balanced openness.

Realization

One thing you realize when you put aside underlying assumptions is that all things change. Neither the flow of mind nor the stream of circumstances come to a stable conclusion; they just change. A sight may trigger a feeling and a response, and these initiate further feelings and responses. One train of thought leads to

another; one emotion generates further emotions. It's the same for everyone. None of these really define you, and they need not drive or restrict you.

From this point of view, the incomplete and unresolved nature of what is experienced encourages us to handle our doubts, hesitation, and impulsiveness with sensitivity and clarity. Notice for example that whereas trying to arrive at a conclusion causes stress, and resisting the flow makes you stiff and unresponsive, a contemplative relationship to experience keeps your awareness steady.

Inquire into what arises: 'How does this affect me? What do I take a stand on? Where are my resistances or compulsions? What are the results of getting stuck in fixed views? What obstructs my being in harmony?' In this way, we encourage a sensitive and fresh approach, one that feels fitting and brings internal flow and

external circumstances into harmony. For example, you may realize that work never finishes – until you stop. Then you reassess your workload. Or you may realize that you have to accept your moods with a kindly attitude but without adopting their narratives.

You fully realize that people are different: therefore, we can't always agree with or like each other – but we can sustain an attitude of respect and non-judgement. And if circumstances aren't going the way we'd prefer right now, maybe it's time to bear with them and let things unfold. Remember the next moment is an unknown, and this means there's an opportunity for change.

In ways like this, your personally-generated wisdom can give you the space to see more clearly.

RESOURCES

This may all seem simple... and as a map it is. The snag is that all meditation maps have to be used with reference to the uneven territory of each individual's mind, body and heart. We all have to find the way that works for us, and extra resources are valuable

GOODWILL

The first of these resources lifts our motivation and attitude towards a friendly, or at least tolerant, perspective. Especially in a society where competition, worrying news and hard deadlines dominate our day, we need to not create more stress through finding fault with ourselves and others. Even more intimately, coming to terms with physical discomfort, irritable moods and an anxious or despondent heart requires a steady attitude of goodwill – or at least, non-aversion. So let's trace the development of that.

- 1** As you did with pause and reflect, begin with recollection. Recollect that what your mind and heart are experiencing arises due to causes and conditions, such as the pressure of work or the lack of fellow-feeling in your environment. The only way to bring this to an end is by introducing a cause for goodwill.
- 2** Bring to mind any occasion, far in the past or recent, where someone has related to you with kindness or sympathy. Whether it was just a few kind words or an expression of concern, pick up the effect in your heart and hold it there while you let three long breaths move through.
- 3** This may create an opening to recollecting the acts of service and care, or even of small courtesies, that are common in the human world. Small or great, their effect, if lingered on, touches the heart. ‘They didn’t have

to do that, that was a freewill gesture of kindness.’ This helps dispel the gloom of cynicism. Again, let some breaths move through the state of uplift; they help to steady the impression and let its energies spread.

- 4 You can pick any number of these events until the heart feels uplifted enough to not be weighed down, defensive, or prickly. Then linger in the gentle energy and perspective of a heart that has (even temporarily) released the effects of ill-will. And if you feel the heart movement to offer gratitude or goodwill to another person, sustain that. (Yes, breathe it!)
- 5 As it brightens, the heart can in this way meet such stuck impressions as ‘I’m not good enough’, ‘I am to blame’, ‘I’m not welcome.’ Feel, don’t think about any of these, and don’t try to dismiss them. Instead, keeping your whole-body frame of reference, allow them to speak; don’t go into their narrative, but feel the

mind- (or heart-) state. It's like holding your fingers on a throbbing pulse.

The quality of steady presence will form you into a compassionate listener. Recognizing that the psychology of self-criticism is a common one in a competitive world, bring others to mind and also offer them some compassion. Stay with that state for a few breaths.

- 6** Spend some time quietly appreciating the skills of others and of any time when others have expressed appreciation of yourself. Stay with that for a few breaths.
- 7** In situations that you'd like to be different but feel powerless to change, return to the steady presence of your body, and, recognizing that all things change, let your emotions arise and pass through. This shift from gloom and despair towards equanimity is also a huge support for the heart. Breathe that too!

BREATHING

It follows on that, if you want your mind to be firm but not rigid, and if you want your heart to be comfortable without sinking into daydreams or media, then mindfulness of breathing is a good theme to cultivate.

It's a matter of using the whole-body reference and sensing the energy associated with the rhythmic flow of breathing.

Start by placing attention. Use the simple question: 'How do I directly know I'm breathing?' Then linger and sense any impressions of breathing that arrive. If you find you're trying to control your breathing, widen your attention and imagine breathing to be like a breeze. You don't have to 'get it right', or make it clearer than it is.

As you get any sense of breathing, mindfully linger in that impression. Be with it as it changes through the

process of a) an out-breath b) an in-breath and c) an entire cycle of breathing out and in.

You may find this is easier if you a) find an area of your body (such as the abdomen) that comfortably experiences breathing and b) you firm up your attention at the end of the inhalation, and the end of the exhalation. Keep bringing your mindfulness to those points when your attention goes elsewhere.

In this way, you pause from mentally drifting or driving off somewhere and instead get your awareness to hover over the bodily process of breathing. Notice that you don't have to *do* breathing, it happens independently of your mind. However ... if you expand your awareness of what breathing feels like, you will sense a gentle and fluid vitality that calms the mind and lifts the heart.

The inhalation has a brightening effect and the exhalation has a calming effect. And by generating

these effects, the vital energy of breathing attracts the heart and encourages you to linger and savour the experience more deeply. It's like sitting by a fire in the evening.

Use this meditation to break compulsive trains of thought or surges of emotion without aversion or struggle. It's like popping soap bubbles by breathing into them.

Over time, your heart's interest and ability to stay with the breathing will increase and give rise to a comfortable firmness. This provides both the inner replenishment that cancels the need for outgoing energies, and the firmness to resist the push of mind-stuff. Then you can review drives, habits, attitudes and assumptions with insightful wisdom, rather than complicate matters with judgement or fascination. Admittedly, this meditative composure does take time to develop, but

if you get comfortable and settled in the practice, you may find the occasion and the interest to extend your meditation period.

FURTHER

There's more to learn, if you so choose, but if you can follow this line of practice, you're on your way....

However, meditation only works if you do it regularly. Find a regular time in your day for 10-15 minutes of meditation (or a couple of sessions if you can manage it) and you'll get results. It takes about the same time as drinking a leisurely cup of coffee. But getting to know and care for yourself will definitely take you to a better place.

There's plenty of guidance available in books and videos, but I'd also recommend meditating with other

people. It supports the practice in real life terms – and that's where we're at.

Meanwhile, you can follow this thread through **forestsangha.org/teachings**

Or, drop in to one of the monasteries mentioned on that site.

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