

Shamatha/Calm abiding instructions and notes.

There are many forms of meditation. Some involve mantra or repeated word forms, some staring at an outside object such as a candle, some involve directing your awareness in a formulated manner.

Meditation of calm abiding is quite different to these other forms of meditation. The practice is designed to bring your body and mind into full harmony, to quieten the mind naturally over time, through repeated practice and not using any kind of force, and to improve and deepen your level of concentration.

It is the gate through which you gain the solid basis of a calm, stable, concentrated bodymind able to further investigate the reality in which you live (internally and externally).

The practice has a solid foundation in neuro-physiology which I will explain at the end of this introduction for those who are interested. But first here is how to undertake the practice:

1) Choose a quiet place where you feel comfortable.

Notes: This can be a spot in your home where you will not be disturbed, somewhere in the garden or in nature.

2) Sit in a way that your back muscles hold you upright and erect without strain and without external support if possible.

Notes: This can be seated on the floor cross legged or seated on a chair such as a dining chair for example. It is important that the least strain in your body comes from your posture, thus if you sit on the floor for many people it is advisable to use some cushions or folded blankets to raise the backside a little bit - anything from 10 - 30 cm is usual - and if you sit in a chair it is important that your hips are not lower than your knees - also do not use the back of the chair to lean on if possible.

Many of us are somewhat habituated to slouch a little bit from sitting at desks, lounging in sofa's etc. When you first start the practice some back pain is often encountered. Do not hurt yourself but also do not give in too easily to the pain. You will soon start to strengthen your back muscles. It is important in posture to stick your chest out a little bit to maintain a strong and healthy back. This might give a sense of widening from the breastbone or shoulders - that is OK. Make sure your clothing does not hinder you - you might want to open your trousers to allow your belly to move freely. Remember no one is watching you - except you!

It may take some experimentation to find the right position for you - and as your back strengthens and posture improves this position will change as you practice.

3. Once seated in a quiet place, upright and comfortable take a few deep breaths to centre yourself and start quieting yourself.

4. The core of the practice:

i) Breathing and Relaxing.

Breathe in *paying attention to bodily sensations as you breathe and calming the body as you breathe*. Breathe out *paying attention to bodily sensations and calming the body as you breathe*.

Notes: Do not intellectualise where you pay attention to or try to "follow the path of the breath in

the body" or any other such thing - these are fabrications. Pay attention to the actual sensations in your body, wherever they are. *Do not interfere with the natural breathing pattern, just pay attention to the sensations in the body as you breathe.*

ii) *Thoughts: Let thoughts be.*

Notes: Do not try to suppress them yet do not follow them. Let them arise and fall like waves coming up on the beach and flowing back into the sea. Artificially forcing quiet on your mind is another form of fabrication. It may make you feel OK but it will be a subtle form of self-hypnosis and contrary to the core of this practice which is seeing things as they are. Thoughts will happen - a lot at first: expect to notice how busy your mind is all the time - you just started paying attention to yourself and much that was going on automatically in the background will progressively come into your awareness.

When we say "do not follow thoughts" what is meant is this: Usually one thought triggers another. For example you might experience the thought "What shall I have for dinner tonight?" - usually the mind is then triggered into further thinking, such as, "Oh I fancy cheese on toast. Damn .. we have no cheese at home. I'll have to go to the supermarket after work. Oh that will be bothersome, it's always so busy at that time. etc. etc. etc."

The aim is to be *aware* of thought happening without allowing this *follow-through* of habituated thinking to continue. Do not expect to achieve this from the moment you start the practice. Depending on the initial internal conditions of your bodymind, the time you invest in the practice and the external conditions of your day-to-day life, it can take from some hours of practice to some months before having the experience of a single thought with no "follow through" thinking.

Do not force your mind into silence and do not fall into the trap of criticising yourself for having follow-through thinking occur. This is just natural! It is your current conditioned state - and this is what this practice will gently, in time, and safely, unravel.

iii) Always return to the sensations in the body as you breathe and calming the body as you breathe.

Notes: Thoughts will occur. You will suffer "follow-through" thinking so notice when it has happened and your mind has wandered from the sensations in the body as you breathe and calming the body as you breathe, then return the focus of the mind to those sensations and calming the body. When you notice you have got caught in a "train of thoughts", you can, at the beginning, make a mental note of this if you wish: just say "thinking" to yourself in your mind. It is not encouraged to do this for an extended period as it will be a new habit, but for some beginners it helps to "kick-start" the practice.

This returning of the attention to the bodily sensations and calming the body is the *first stage of training in calm-abiding meditation*. If you force quiet on your mind and avoid this stage you will never progress beyond a mild hypnotic calming trance. This trance can bring peace and relief yet it will not deeply change the way your bodymind works.

Only by *repeatedly failing* to keep the attention on the sensations in the body as you breathe and calm the body, then by *noticing/becoming aware* you have done so, and then *gently* (and without self-criticism - just another form of follow-on thinking), returning the attention to those sensations and calming will you train yourself in the first skill in concentration: maintaining the focus on an object (the bodily sensations).

iv) *Time: How much you benefit from this practice is deeply correlated to the time you invest in it.*

Notes: You probably spend at least half an hour to an hour looking after your bodily hygiene. Why not start by aiming to spend the same amount of time on this "mental hygiene"?

Sitting twice a day is recommended for the best results. The ideal times are after you shower in the morning and before you eat breakfast and some time in the evening that is neither too close to dinner (likely to induce sleepiness) nor too close to your bedtime (also likely to induce sleepiness and sometimes can cause interruptions to sleep).

To begin you can start with as little as ten minutes per session but this is not recommended. A minimum of twenty minutes is recommended because it takes the human bodymind about ten minutes to "get into" anything. Thus if you begin your practice with twenty minute sessions you will likely spend ten minutes getting into it and ten minutes doing it. If you are comfortable starting with thirty minutes you will be doubling the time of actual practice over twenty minute sessions. Of course everyone is different but this general rule holds fairly true for the vast majority of people.

If two times half an hour is more time than you can find in one day then one times half an hour will be more useful to you than two times fifteen minutes.

Mini-sessions/toilet meditation: Despite what has been said above the more time you practice the more you will benefit. Take time out a few times a day to sit for just five minutes if you can. The collective total time practicing all adds up. If you work in a stressful workplace or one where you can not go without distraction then "toilet-meditation" is a useful adjunct to the longer session(s): go to the toilet a few times a day, sit there and do this meditation practice. When you return to your desk or work situation you will be a) more aware of the moment, b) more aware of what is driving you c) more responsive to the real needs of your work and d) more efficient in your work.

Walking meditation: Sometimes when you are walking along everything will be on autopilot. Your mind will also be on autopilot, thinking repetitive thought patterns. Instead you can pay attention to the bodily sensations of walking: your feet touching the ground, the muscles in your legs, body, arms, neck moving and be aware of the outside world without judging, just quietly aware. You can incorporate walking meditation into your regular practice (this helps when you sit for a long time as it gives relief to the legs and improves bloodflow. After 30 minutes or an hour of sitting walk for five or ten minutes before continuing to sit). You can also do walking meditation when you are walking anywhere.

5) Summary of the practice:

Sit comfortably: spine erect but comfortable, a sense of being awake and aware.

Breathe in and out naturally: paying attention to your bodily sensations and calming bodily tensions.

Let thoughts be: without following them and without suppressing them.

When you find you have got caught on the "thought-train" return awareness to bodily sensations and calming the body: do so without guilt.

Remain aware and awake: if you feel sleepy it is often because your body posture has leant forward and your breathing become shallow.

Try and find as much time in the day as you can practically find to undertake this practice and undertake the practice on a daily basis.

6) The Neuro-Physiology at work behind the scenes.

In the western world we are trained from an early age to identify with our intellect and thinking. We

all, to a greater or lesser extent, "live in our heads". The furniture we use, the ways we use it and the habits of body and mind we accumulate add to this imbalance.

This practice of paying attention to bodily sensations as we breathe in and out, and calming the body as we do so, whilst learning not to identify with thoughts has a strong backing in Neuro-Physiology.

One of the most important features and reasons for the success of the practice is that it re-embodies us: that is to say that it reconnects our body and mind - our bodymind.

The brain has twelve pairs of nerves that enter directly into the brainstem bypassing the spinal cord. Most of these nerves serve functions in the head and face: smell, hearing, sight, etc.

The tenth "Cranial" nerve, the Vagus nerve or "wanderer", exits the skull through the Jugular foramen, a hole in the base of the skull. It is one of only two of these pairs of Cranial nerves that enters the body.

the Vagus nerve has branches that connect to the ears and larynx and it plays a significant role in speech and language comprehension through these.

It then travels down the neck inside the back of the throat and enters the chest cavity. It provides feedback to the brain from the lungs and heart including blood pressure, oxygen and carbon dioxide content of the blood (via the Aortic receptors).

The Vagus also provides feedback to the brain from all the internal bodily organs in our abdomen and plays a pivotal role in controlling the stomach and the pancreas. It has strong links to all of the main nerve plexuses (groups of nerves like mini-brains) in the body.

It is clear to see that with connections to language and thinking (through the branches to the ears and larynx), breathing and heart (including bodily stress-levels) through the branches to the lungs, heart and Aortic receptors, emotions and feelings which actually arise in the body when we become aware (through the strong links to abdominal organs and especially stomach - hence the expressions such as "gut feelings"), that the Vagus nerve is the information super-highway that links body and mind into one: bodymind, that links the physical to the intellectual through it's expression of feeling, animal instinct and involvement of language.

This practice revitalises and fully activates the Vagus nerve in a very direct manner. It is the principal Neuro-Physiological mechanism through which the practice works due to the nerve's connections to the functions the practice changes: bodily and mental stress levels (or level of calm), thinking, awareness of the bodymind as one connected entity - as opposed to the sense of the body being separate from the mind. Additionally, and over time, many other positive changes will occur to brain function and Neuro-Chemistry as a result of this practice. Scientific research has begun to document these quite widely.

Sit, breathe, relax!

vipassanaforum.net

© 2010-2015