

PREPARATION FOR PRACTICE

There are certain practical steps that can be taken to facilitate regular practice.

These include:

- identifying a suitable time and place for daily practice, reserving that time for meditation and nothing else, making sure that those around us know we are not available during that time, and making a commitment to always practice at that time;
- making whatever changes are necessary in our lifestyle to assure we are neither excessively agitated nor tired when we sit down to meditate;
- and, meditating with others whenever possible so that our commitment is not an exclusively private matter.

Over time I have developed a 6 step **Preparation for Practice** that I recommend to all new meditation students. You are used to preparing yourself for other activities by thinking and planning. Prepare yourself for meditation in the same way. The idea is to memorize these 6 steps and go through them as the very first thing you do upon sitting down to meditate each day. They are:

1. Review your reasons for meditating, your motivation and purpose. It doesn't matter what brings you to the cushion, it's not about good or bad reasons, it's only about being consciously aware of why you are meditating, now, today. When feelings of restlessness and resistance arise during your sit, there is nothing better than having your reasons for practicing clear in your mind.

2. Decide what you hope to accomplish in this meditation session. Knowing and understanding the stages of meditation gives us a powerful tool to use in our practice. What stage are you in, and how can you best apply yourself to the practice today? What are the problems you have

encountered recently? What is a reasonable goal for today's practice in terms of your progress up to now? It is important that we have goals and that we maintain an expectation of progress. Goals help to provide us with discipline in our practice. It is most beneficial to set realistic expectations of ourselves, and then practice diligently to achieve them. In the beginning, the goal may be as simple as just not giving up and starting to daydream or fret before the end of the meditation period, or not becoming annoyed when mind-wandering or dozing happen.

3. Remind yourself to be satisfied with whatever you do accomplish.

Having just emphasized that meditation requires diligent effort and goals, now we need to remind ourselves that we must be gentle with ourselves as well. It is not possible to meditate every day and on every occasion be able to say that we have made progress compared to the day before, or even that it is the same as yesterday. Sometimes we experience plateaus where very little seems to change over many days or weeks of meditating, and sometimes we can't seem to achieve even the same degree of concentration and mindful awareness that we had two weeks or two months ago. It is always important to remember that there is no such thing as a "bad" meditation, except possibly where one just doesn't bother to make the effort. On a day when the mind is easily focused, we are enjoying the results of our previous training. On a day when dullness and agitation are obstacles to concentration, we actually have the opportunity for training the mind in a more powerful way. Mental training is much like physical training in that, when the resistance we work against is greatest, that is when the most benefit is obtained. Remember to remain relaxed, not to become caught up in expectations. Be diligent, but make sure the effort you make in being diligent is a joyful effort.

4. Resolve to practice diligently for the entire meditation session, regardless of how it goes.

Laziness and procrastination can become serious problems while we are sitting, especially when our practice is not going well. We may be tempted to daydream or plan, or spend time thinking about interesting ideas that arise that are more appealing than the meditation practice. Far too many problems are solved, projects planned, and fantasy conversations carried out by beginning meditators. Simply continuing with the practice, ignoring these temptations and not making judgments about how successful your attempts to concentrate may or may not be, can be one of the most powerful things you do to permanently overcome the problem of

resistance to practice. This is a good opportunity to discover just how very trainable the mind really is.

5. Prepare yourself for the difficulties and distractions you are most likely to encounter. You have already prepared yourself to deal with the possibility of reluctance to practice. Now it is time to prepare for other obstacles that may arise. Are there affairs in your work or personal life that are of concern and important to you, and therefore strongly present in your mind as you sit down to meditate? If so, acknowledge them and accept that they will probably intrude, and also resolve to set them aside for another time if they do arise. Are there conflicts, fears and animosities, or judgments and annoyances on your mind? Worries and regrets? Doubts? Do a quick scan of the state of your current situation to identify the things that may come up as distractions in your meditation. Acknowledge them and resolve to set them aside when they do come up. You may not succeed entirely, but like planting a seed, at least you have set in place the intention not to let them dominate your mind. The difficulties we are likely to encounter fall into five categories: 1) reluctance and resistance to practice; 2) concern with worldly affairs, pleasures and successes; 3) hostility and other negative thoughts and attitudes; 4) worries about the future and regrets about the past; and 5) doubt. These five pretty well encompass all of the serious *mental* obstacles to concentration that you will encounter. Don't expect to identify them all in advance during this Preparation, but this process of review and resolve will still help to prepare you for the ones you haven't thought of and expected.

6. Review your posture.

- Are your legs, knees and ankles comfortably placed? You may need support under your knees or some other aid to help you to sit comfortably, and don't hesitate to use these – it doesn't matter in the least whether you look like a yogi or not, but if you are not comfortable you will be spending a lot of time meditating on pain and discomfort. It is not necessary to sit cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. Sit in a chair if it works better for you.

- Are your back, neck and head in reasonable alignment, front to back and side-to-side?

- Are your shoulders even and your hands level with each other so that your muscles are in balance?
- Your lips should be closed, your teeth slightly apart, and your tongue against the roof of your mouth – this is the most natural placement for these body parts.
- Your eyes, whether open or closed should be angled slightly downward as though you are looking at something several inches in front of your nose, like when reading a book. Once again, this is the most natural position. The position of your eyes will change during meditation, but start out with them in this position, and then whenever you happen to become aware of your eyes for any reason, return them to this position. This will minimize feelings of tension in your forehead and face.
- With your lips closed, you will be breathing through your nose. The breath should be natural, not controlled or forced in any way. If during your meditation you should happen to feel like you are controlling your breath, or that it is not happening naturally, don't worry about it. If you don't actually *intend* to control your breath, that is all that matters. And there is absolutely no reason to intentionally control the breath – don't worry, it won't stop.
- Are you relaxed? Scan your body for any signs of tension, and let it go. All the action is going to happen in the mind, so the proper state of the body is like a lump of soft clay – solid and stable but completely pliant.

This will go a long way towards minimizing physical distractions during practice.

Sometimes a new practitioner will say “I seem to be spending a lot of time just doing the Preparation for Meditation, is this a problem?”. I ask them in return how the rest of their meditation session goes afterwards, and in most cases that answers their question. By the time the meditator has finished performing this little review, the mind is usually pretty well settled. The concern the meditator has, of course, is that while spending time on the Preparation, they aren't meditating. The goal at this point is to establish a consistent practice free from deliberate dissembling and

avoidance, so it doesn't really matter how much or how little time is spent on the Preparation for Practice, because the Preparation itself *is meditation practice*. The attention is intentionally directed towards and sustained upon the content of the Preparation as meditation object. This type of meditation is known as an *analytical meditation* because it involves discursive thought, and if mind wandering occurs it should be dealt with in exactly the same way as described for the meditation on the breath. By doing this every day, it comes to take very little time after a while.

Depending on the individual, the deliberate process of preparation for meditation will be useful all the way through *at least* the 4th stage of meditative training, and perhaps much longer, by which time one is no longer a beginner.