

Thoughts (!) on Sitting Meditation

Sitting meditation enables us to get intimately acquainted with the difference between awareness and thinking. Normally we get caught up in all kinds of thinking - judging, memory, planning, stories, often without realizing it. In meditation we just witness whatever comes up and let it pass, returning attention to the present over and over (and over and over...). As in most meditation traditions, the first object of awareness we use to come back to the present is the sensation of the breath, which is always available, no matter how agitated or peaceful we become.

Seated, with posture that is upright and relaxed (as discussed in class), and closing your eyes, bring attention to the sensation of the breath as it is naturally occurring, without trying to manipulate it or change it at all. You may notice air flowing through the nostrils, a tingling in the throat, movement in the chest, or movement of the belly in and out. It can be helpful to start with the most noticeable sensation and stay with it. Notice in as much detail as you can each in-breath, out-breath, and the spaces between them. Eventually, you will notice that you are thinking. Generating thoughts is what minds do. Whenever you notice that the attention has wandered off, whether it is after a few seconds or 10 minutes, just notice that you were thinking, and gently bring the attention back to the sensations of the breath. It doesn't matter how quickly or how often the mind wanders off, or how long your attention is elsewhere. Each time we notice the thinking, let it go, and recall our attention to the breath, we reinforce the habit a little more. With patience, the mind will gradually settle down. It may help at first to count three outbreaths, starting over at one whenever you notice thinking (or make it to three).

Meditation is not about trying to relax, or transform yourself; it is simply developing a new habit of letting go of thinking and being present. Relaxation may be a frequent side effect (not always!), but it is not the "goal". There is no need to judge your performance. Every time you sit, it's worthwhile, no matter how calm or agitated the mind may be. Doing formal practice each day can make a huge difference in how we experience our lives. Witnessing the activity of the mind without automatically reacting to it, we can develop a new relationship to thinking, one that allows for more choices in responding to what arises in the mind.

It is so important to be patient and nonjudgmental with the mind. We have reinforced the habit of attending to whatever the poor crazy mind cooks up for many billions of moments. It takes a while to learn to let go of this habit. Jack Kornfield writes in *A Path With Heart*:

"...meditation is very much like training a puppy. You put the puppy down and say "Stay." Does the puppy listen? It gets up and it runs away. You sit the puppy back down again. "Stay." And the puppy runs away over and over again. Sometimes the puppy jumps up, runs over, and pees in the corner or makes some other mess. Our minds are much the same as the puppy, only they create even bigger messes. In training the mind, or the puppy, we have to start over and over again.

"...frustration comes with the territory. Nothing in our culture or our schooling has taught us to steady and calm our attention. One psychologist has called us a society of attentional spastics. Finding it difficult to concentrate, many people respond by forcing their attention on their breath...with tense irritation and self-judgment, or worse. Is this the way you would train a puppy? Does it really help to beat it? Concentration is never a matter of force or coercion. You simply pick up the puppy again and return to reconnect with the here and now."

"What we need is a cup of understanding, a barrel of love, and an ocean of patience."
St. Francis de Sales

"If we see that we have no mindfulness... that we have little well-being, that is not confusion, that's the beginning of clarity." Pema Chodron