

Skillful Living Series

Meditation Basics



Venerable Tenzin Tharpa

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A fully ordained American Buddhist monk in the Tibetan Gelug Tradition, Venerable Tharpa is a teacher, author, and philosopher with over two decades in Tibetan Buddhist studies, half of which spent in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India.



Dear reader,

Thank you for your interest in this text series. I hope it brings to you the clarity and insight that you seek. In my writing, I endeavor to make the Buddha's teachings available to a wide audience, while also striving to convey to the reader the positive, life-affirming joy that permeates the Buddha's teachings, yet is often lost or overlooked in dry translations. For when understood properly, every aspect of the Buddha's teachings pertains to freedom and liberation: freedom from our daily self-imposed suffering, and liberation from mundane and unsatisfactory existence.

Tenzin Tharpa

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Meditation Basics

By Venerable Tenzin Tharpa

Meditation defined

Meditation can be defined as, *a method of mental cultivation with the purpose of developing and gaining control over the mind and its processes; a technique and/or practice that develops insight, wisdom, concentration, clarity, and mental/emotional stability.* Meditation is about exploring, learning, and gaining control of one's mind and emotions. A practice for transforming one's negative mental states into their positive counterparts. A method of self-inquiry and self-discovery that is both developmental and revelatory. A training aimed at becoming more aware and present, through which we gain understanding and clarity about ourselves, others, and our environment.

"Meditation is the process whereby we gain control over the mind and guide it in a more virtuous direction. Meditation may be thought of as a technique by which we diminish the force of old thought habits and develop new ones." ~ The 14th Dalai Lama

Learning to meditate

Anyone can learn to meditate. Meditation does not require a belief system or a commitment to any group or tradition. The technique can be as simple as closing your eyes and focusing on the inflow and outflow of the breath, which works to calm and stabilize the mind. All that is needed is a quiet environment, a comfortable seat, an alert posture, and a patient openness to exploration and improvement.

The aim of meditation

Meditation is often said to be a goalless practice; to *simply sit* without agenda; leaving one's worldly concerns, busyness, and endless striving behind. However, obviously, there is an objective. On a basic level, the goal of meditation is simply to become stable and healthy, leading to a more productive and fulfilling life. On a deeper level, the goal is to create a profound positive transformation of the mind and mental faculties, and of course, the highest goal is awakening itself, achieved through transcending dull, mundane, and delusional mental states. Some assert that meditation is simply about becoming calmer (profoundly calmer) and that the many sought-after qualities we seek are merely byproducts that arise from that calmness. The indisputable fact is, when we are calm, we are at our best.

"Meditation is a method for training our intelligence and warm-heartedness so that we will lessen our destructive emotions and act with more compassion and wisdom in daily life."

~ Dr. Alexander Berzin

The current popularity of meditation

Over the last few decades, meditation has gained great popularity, being widely accepted as a straightforward and practical technique for working with the mind and emotions. Again, meditation can be practiced at many different levels, from a simple daily practice aimed at cultivating contentment and mental/emotional stability; to higher levels of practice that can bring about mental discipline, euphoric bliss, and transcendent experiences. There are many types of meditation, including, sitting meditation, walking meditation, guided meditation, meditation that focuses on bodily sensation, meditation that develops concentration, and analytical meditation that develops insight and wisdom.

The benefits of meditation

Presently, meditation has been the subject of an explosion in scientific research. Current studies have compiled an exhaustive list of benefits concerning every aspect of life.

- Health benefits include *reducing*: stress, high blood pressure, depression, ADHD, and age-related cognitive decline; while *enhancing*: the immune system and overall health.
- Emotional and wellbeing benefits include *reducing*: reactivity, feelings of loneliness and/or social isolation, anxiety and worry; while *enhancing*: empathy, compassion, general happiness, and regulation of mood and psychological well-being.
- Personal productivity benefits include *reducing*: stress and anxiety; while *enhancing*: learning, cognitive skills, clarity, attention, resilience, memory, perspective, decision making, information processing, and creativity.
- Social and community benefits include *reducing*: selfishness, narcissism, aggression, contention, greed, and antisocial behavior; while *enhancing*: contentment, altruism, friendliness, personal responsibility, goodwill, and healthy social interaction.

What meditation is not

Some imagine meditation as abiding in a trance-like or un/sub-conscious state; this is mistaken. On the contrary, meditation is to dwell in a state of heightened awareness, that is clear, focused, and alert. Also, meditation is not about suppressing thought; instead, meditation is aimed at gaining control over the thinking process. By focusing on the breath, thinking is calmed and reduced, often leading naturally to a state of no thought. Meditation is also not about suppressing feelings or emotions; instead, it's about gaining emotional stability, maturity, and control. To become more emotionally skillful and effective when engaging with our community and environment; a practice aimed at reducing emotional reactivity while enhancing emotional and cognitive intelligence.

The two main forms of meditation

Generally, there are two common forms of meditation: *Calm Abiding Meditation*—which, as the name implies, is aimed at calming and stabilizing the mind; and *Insight Meditation*—a contemplative and analytical meditation aimed at attaining insight and wisdom.

1. **Calm Abiding Meditation:** often referred to as Mindfulness Meditation. Calm Abiding is considered a passive meditation and benefits the practitioner in two ways, by calming and stabilizing the mind—resulting in a more expansive awareness, and by developing one's mental faculties (concentration, focus, fortitude, mental/emotional stability, and control over habitual behaviors). However, the true aim of Calm Abiding is to achieve *Present Moment Awareness*—a mental state of focused attention that is neither lost in future worry or past regret; 'to be present', to be 'in the now'. In other words, Calm Abiding Meditation works to reduce mental distraction and/or mind-wandering, which is often the result of mental discontentment (for when the mind is discontent it searches for a new object of interest, desire, or comfort).

In this meditation, you'll be focusing on an *object of meditation* (your breath, a statue/image, candle flame, etc.) to place and hold your attention. When refined, this meditation leads to the attainment of *Single-Pointed Concentration*—the ability to stay focused on any given object for an extended amount of time. Calm Abiding Meditation aims at gaining control over the thought process (or more appropriately the *thinking* process). Here, a distinction needs to be made between *thought* and *thinking*. *Thought*, is a natural byproduct of the mind which arises naturally from mental imprints and internal/external experiences; whereas *thinking*, is the intentional and/or habitual act of operating those thoughts. In its best scenario, thinking is focused on achieving goals and/or finding solutions (creating, working, communicating, learning, or helping others). In its worst scenario, thinking can be an uncontrollable habit that often torments the thinker through relentless negative thinking, reflecting on useless past painful events, or projected future worries; imagining unwholesome actions, thinking badly of others, self-deprecation, and guilt. This type of uncontrollable, incessant, and often senseless habitual thinking is often likened to a hamster on a wheel, on which the rodent mindlessly never stops running. With practice, Calm Abiding Meditation can help to lessen or even eradicate these negative habitual aspects of the thought process, freeing the mind for more productive activities.

"The goal of meditation is not to control your thoughts, but to stop letting your thoughts control you." ~ Unknown

Through Calm Abiding Meditation you learn to shift your awareness from the *doing* mind to the *observing* mind. Often referred to as '*switching on*' (to engage the meditative mind). The *doing mind* is the ordinary mind that plans, analyzes, thinks, etc. Whereas the

observing mind is the open mental awareness that simply experiences, perceives, and feels without any conceptual filters, interpretation, or overlay; to simply sit as a witness to the present moment. Often meditators describe switching on as engaging a certain feeling, vibration, body awareness, or particular mental state. Switching on is unique and personal to each meditator.

Note: the terms *calm abiding* and *single-pointed meditation* pertain to both the meditative practice as well as their final attainment.

2. **Insight meditation:** An active contemplative and analytical meditation used to cultivate deep insight and wisdom. This meditation utilizes conceptual analysis to actively examine concepts, beliefs, and assumptions in the pursuit of wisdom. Simply put, Insight Meditation is contemplation within meditation. The ultimate aim of Insight Meditation is to gain an experiential realization of the true nature of reality. Often this meditation can include working with mental, emotional, and bodily sensations. In most traditions, Calm Abiding Meditation is seen as a preparatory practice while Insight Meditation being the principle practice; meaning, Calm Abiding sets the foundation for Insight Meditation.

Meditation Techniques and Sitting Positions

Which is the best meditation technique? The one that's most comfortable and productive for you. There are as many "*proper*" meditation techniques and sitting positions, as there are meditation teachers; therefore, it's safe to assume there is no single "*correct*" technique or position that applies to everyone. Meaning, you have the freedom to experiment and discover which techniques and positions work best for you. Choosing your own meditation technique will be based on many hours of experience and experimentation; while choosing your sitting position will be based on your level of flexibility and level of comfort sitting in that position.

An alert posture

The most important aspect of your posture is a straight, but not rigid, back. An alert posture, as if being pulled upwards by a string attached to the crown of your head, which helps to keep the mind energetic and attentive. The hips are rocked slightly forward to gently accentuate the inward curve of the lower back.

Sitting on a cushion

Choosing a cushion - Meditation cushions can be purchased at many yoga or health and wellness related stores. Cushions can be round, rectangle, and half-circle. Meditation cushions should be

firm for stability. A cushion with a six-inch (fifteen cm) elevation is very comfortable. The cushion goes under and elevates the buttocks raising the hips slightly higher than the knees allowing for blood and nerve circulation to the legs. Often an additional thin cushion (two inches / five cm) is placed in front of the main cushion to pad and protect the feet and ankles.

- *Cross-legged* - Sitting on the floor on a cushion with a straight/alert posture, with the legs comfortably crossed.
- *Relaxed position* - same as cross-legged position but with one leg laying in front of the other instead of crossing each other.
- *Half-lotus* - same as relaxed position but with one foot placed up on top of the thigh of the other leg.
- *Full lotus* - same as half-lotus but with both feet placed up on top of the thighs of the other legs.

Kneeling on the floor

Kneeling on a thin cushion or yoga mat on the floor and sitting back on your calves/heels while maintaining a straight/alert posture. Additionally, a cushion or *meditation bench* can be placed between or on top of your calves/heels

On a chair

Choose a stable chair (like a dining room chair). Sit slightly forward in the chair with both feet flat on the floor. If possible, try not to lean against the backrest. Rock the hips slightly forward to gently accentuate the inward curve of the lower back. Hands can be placed upon the thighs. I prefer this meditation position at my desk or a dinner table, where I can place my hands, one upon the other, in front of me on the table, giving me extra stability.

Various hand placements

In all these various seated positions, your hands can be positioned,

- Placed flat (palms downward) upon your knees or thighs
- Placed flat (palms downward, one upon the other, on a table
- Placed together in your lap, one upon the other
- Placed together in your lap, fingers interlocked
- Placed palms upright, right upon left, at the level of the navel, with thumb tips touching.

Instruction for Basic Calm Abiding Meditation

Our Meditation Toolbox

When teaching Calm Abiding Meditation, instead of offering one static technique, I prefer to share a *meditation toolbox* so practitioners can develop an adaptive meditation practice that fits their own unique mindset. Here, I present the following four techniques as either sequential steps within a single Calm Abiding Meditation session, or unique techniques that can be used independently.

1. **Calming meditation** - Begin by sitting on a cushion on the floor, or on a chair, with an alert posture—as if being pulled upwards by a string attached to the crown of your head. Hands are placed on the thighs, and eyes are partially or fully closed. The head is tilted slightly downward, the teeth slightly parted, the tongue is at the roof of the mouth lightly touching the back of the top teeth—helping to reduce salivation. Next, focus on the inflow-outflow of the breath (either at the chest or nostrils). Then simply try to keep your focus on the breath, and, when the mind wanders (which it inevitably does), gently and patiently brings your focus back to the breath—this is done over and over again, without judgment. This is training in focused attention and present moment awareness.
2. **Mantra meditation** - The next technique is to incorporate the silent recitation of a word or mantra to help focus and stabilize extra busy minds. The mantra is used merely as a placeholder to focus and hold the mind. I recommend using the word '*meditating*' as a mantra, which works well on many levels. It stabilizes the mind, reminds you of the practice at hand, while helping to anchor you in the present moment. In this technique, place your focus on the mantra instead of (or in concert with) the breath. Begin by saying the mantra silently to yourself then repeating it on each out-breath. Next, slowly begin to soften your recitation of the mantra until it becomes a whisper; while at the same time, start to let go of the mantra by reciting it less and less (or only as needed to limit mind-wandering).
3. **Noting meditation** (our main meditation) - Noting refers to making mental notes or labeling. Begin with calming meditation, focusing your awareness on the breath. When comfortable, silently say the word '*meditating*' once, to initiate the meditation (here, the repeated recitation of the mantra is abandoned). In this technique, when the mind wanders—note it (in this case noting it '*thinking*'). After noting it, return your focus back to the breath, and again, silently says '*meditating*' to again initiate the meditation. For more advanced meditators, physical and mental sensations, emotions, and experiences are also noting during meditation (noting a sound as hearing, noting a scent as smelling, or other

notes like sleepy, anxious, itchy, bored, sad, etc.). In other words, wherever the mind's attention goes, you contently accept it, notes it, and then gently brings your focus back to the breath (over and over again without judgment).

4. **Uninterrupted focus meditation** - Lastly, when your focus becomes stable, try to sustain an uninterrupted focus on the breath for one minute. If successful, try for a longer duration, two, three, four, or five minutes, etc. Some advanced meditators are able to sustain an uninterrupted focus for hours at a time. It's important to understand, that in Calm Abiding Meditation you are not actively trying to suppress thoughts or thinking, you are just watching the breath.

Instruction for Basic Insight Meditation

1. Begin with Calm Abiding Meditation to stabilize and focus your mind.
2. Once a level of stability has been achieved you can then enter Insight Meditation. Insight Meditation begins with the introduction of an *object of contemplation* (a word, concept, thought, or phrase), usually philosophical in nature or something related to your study or practice. Additionally, you can also introduce a problem or obstacle within your life that you may be trying to resolve or understand. For example, let's use the word/concept *happiness* for our object of contemplation. The word *happiness* is introduced/placed in the mind, you then simply sit with it. Often, after a period of time, the mind, by its own volition, will start to unravel the word, allowing for intuitive insight and wisdom to arise. Other times, questions may be introduced, like, *what is happiness?* Additionally, you can isolate the object of insight meditation from everything else by imagining placing it into a clear bubble in front of you, which creates a level of detachment, helping to separate the object of contemplation from other irrelevant factors, allowing you to explore it from every angle. There are no precise rules when engaging in Insight Meditation; sometimes a spacious approach is useful, other times a more conceptually active approach works best. You merely play with the mind, searching for insight while learning how this meditation best works for you. Any topic or question may be introduced during Insight Meditation. A few popular topics are:
 - Contentment - what is it? Is contentment the same as happiness?
 - Identity - what does it encompass? Who were you before you were named?
 - Free will - where do habitual patterns stop, and volitional choices begin?

When engaging in Insight Meditation, your meditative stability will inevitably waver, at which point return briefly to Calm Abiding Meditation in order to stabilize the meditation.

Once stabilized, you can then return to your Insight Meditation. Generally, a typical meditation session may consist of one-third Calm Abiding and two-thirds Insight Meditation. It is through the periodic alternating of the two meditation techniques that your Insight Meditation remains stable. Eventually, this may lead to the attainment of *the union of calm abiding and insight* in which both arise spontaneously in continuous inseparable union. The union of the doing and observing mind.

Other Forms of Meditation

The Buddha recommended practicing meditation in four positions, sitting, standing, lying, and walking.

Standing meditation - following the same basic technique as sitting meditation. Stand in a comfortable position, straight and alert but not ridged. Hands/arms can be at your sides or held at the chest—the right hand is held in a loose fist at the center of the chest with the left hand wrapped around it. I prefer standing in front of a high windowsill, table, or chest-high fence so I can rest my arms, one upon the other at chest height, this adds stability allowing for a deeper and more comfortable meditation. Both Calm Abiding Meditation and Insight meditation can be practiced during standing meditation.

Lying meditation - following the same basic techniques as sitting meditation. The traditional posture is practiced lying on your back, legs together and fully extended, and hands/arms at your sides; but I think any laying position can be used. In this meditation, the biggest challenge is to not fall asleep. Eyes can be closed or half-open. Both Calm Abiding Meditation and Insight meditation can be practiced during laying meditation. Body scanning is a popular technique. Begin at the feet and move your awareness up and through the body relaxing every muscle.

Walking meditation - This is a very popular and enjoyable meditation. A favorite practiced of those who find seated meditation boring or find themselves too anxious to sit for a prolonged period. There are many prescribed techniques for walking meditation. Some walk at a snail's pace, others so fast you can hardly keep up with the class. Some forms are formal and intricate, while others casual and simple. I always like to share simple techniques first, for they are easy to implement and remember, students can then move onto more intricate techniques if they wish.

Walking meditation follows the same basic technique as sitting meditation. However, additionally, you can also use the sensation of motion or the feeling of your feet meeting the ground as objects of meditation. Using the mantra also works well in walking meditation by substituting the mantra '*meditating*' with the words '*walking*' or '*stepping*'. The mantra can

be recited silently on every other step, or less if not needed. These various objects of meditation can be used alone or in concert with the breath.

- **Strolling technique** - This is a walking meditation for outside or where you have some room to walk normally. This simple method uses a strolling style walk. In this technique, no special technique is applied to the body, so it appears no different than regular casual walking, therefore it is a good technique for practicing in public spaced. Arms are at your sides, and eyes are looking forward. We begin with a casual and relaxed stroll, a bit slower than your regular walking speed. Let your arms swing naturally at your sides. Then simply follow the breath or your own chosen object of meditation.
- **Pacing technique** - Following the same basic technique as sitting meditation. This meditation is useful in small spaces and allows for a deeper walking meditation experience. Begin with very slow and methodical pacing in a straight line or circle. Hands are held at the chest—the right hand is held in a loose fist at the center of the chest with the left hand wrapped around it. Next, simply follow the breath or your own chosen object of meditation. For pacing in a straight line, any distance is OK. Generally, the shorter the distance the slower the pacing. Additionally, if pacing in a straight line, you need to learn how to turn.

Turning - at the end of your line, stop with both feet together and take three breaths while saying '*stopping*', once with each breath. Then slowly turn the right foot forty-five degrees to the right, while saying '*turning*', do the same with the left foot. Then turn the right foot another forty-five degrees, again saying '*turning*', and do the same with the left. This should complete the turn and you should now be facing the opposite direction. Now, stand still with both feet together, this time say '*preparing*' three times, once with each breath (preparing to walk). Then begin slowly walking your line again. When reaching the end of that line, again perform a turn. The turn can be alternated towards the right or left depending on your needs.

Loving-kindness Meditation

A form of insight meditation used to develop joy and the altruistic mind (a mind of compassion, generosity, and goodwill). There are many ways of practicing Loving-kindness Meditation; here I'll share my favorite method. This meditation can be practicing for a few minutes at the end of each meditation session; or one whole session of your daily practice; additionally, you can dedicate a full day, once a week, to the practice.

While assuming your chosen meditation position, begin with Calm Abiding Meditation. When you feel stable, begin by generating feelings of goodness. If you need, you can recall a past altruistic act and the goodness you felt from the experience. As you cultivate those feelings, envision yourself as a large precious jewel. Imagine the sun filling you up with warmth

and light, then, begin to radiate that warmth and light; increase the feeling until your light fills the room. Now imagine millions of light rays radiating out from you, going out and touching all sentient life. Imagine your light rays carrying your goodness to them. Imagine your light rays infusing them all with joy and well-being. Notice how your act of generosity doesn't diminish your own goodness but instead increases it; notice how goodness doesn't diminish when shared, but instead increases. Now feel the goodness and love from all of them coming back to you. Bask in the warm, healing light, and stillness of the experience. At the end of this meditation recite this blessing, sending it out to all sentient life.

May you be healthy; may you be prosperous; may you be well.

May you be present—free of future worry and past regret.

May you abide in constant appreciation—which is a great source of joy and contentment.

May you realize your own true nature—which is enlightenment.

~ Tenzin Tharpa

Guided meditation: Usually a group meditation in which a teacher instructs/talks practitioners through various steps of meditation. This may include new meditative techniques, working with intentions, goals, virtuous qualities, and different meditative topics.

Glance meditation: A form of insight meditation practiced while reading/studying. In this meditation you pause upon interesting passages, then reflects and meditates upon it in order to gain a deeper understanding.

The three-breath meditation

This is a meditation I love and utilize daily. It may seem overly simple, but I find it works well. Whether you're at your desk, waiting at a traffic light, or standing in line at the store, you can take a few moments to find the peace, space, and stillness that's always present within your busy day. Begin by straightening your posture; eyes can be open or closed; place your focus on the breath while taking a full comfortable breath; hold it for a few moments, then exhale slowly while silently saying the word '*meditating*'; exhale fully before beginning the next breath. Use this three-breath meditation to bring stability, patience, and contentment to any situation, creating small fresh starts throughout your day.

Recommended length of meditation sessions

For beginners, no set duration is prescribed, anywhere from a few minutes, up to twenty-minutes is fine. Advanced meditators may want to work slowly towards one-hour durations.

"The chief criterion for determining the length of one's meditation sessions is the quality of one's awareness during the practice. Five minutes of finely conducted meditation is worth more than an hour of low-grade conceptual chatter." ~ Dr. Allen Wallace

What to Expect From Your Meditation Practice

In the beginning, the effects of meditation aren't always apparent, for it takes a fair amount of practice before the mind and body become supple enough to experience benefits. This often leaves the meditator sitting impatiently waiting for *something* to happen. Once the body is supple enough to sit comfortably with no pain, and the mind has become supple enough to remain equanimous for an extended amount of time, then the true benefits begin to emerge. Many meditators claim, that after a good, long, comfortable meditation the mind feels wonderfully stable, healthy, and calm. It is at this point that meditation becomes a very pleasant experience that is deeply enjoyed, and establishing a consistent practice becomes much easier.

Initially, when first starting to meditate, the mind is thrown into a bit of chaos, for meditation is often counter to the mind's habitual workings. In the beginning, the mind feels starved of experience because it is accustomed to a constant stream of stimuli. Because of this, the mind begins trying to create its own experiences, generating images, sensory experiences, emotions, and of course a diverse assortment of thoughts. Distractions are also generated in the body—felt as itching, discomfort, or pain. Generally, these should be seen as inconsequential, for once you have established a stable practice, and the mind and body finally become comfortable, these distractions lessen and a base for actual meditative experiences is created. However, you should never push through pain or torment yourself by setting unrealistic practice goals, which will only create an aversion to practice. Benefits/experiences of meditation come sooner for some than others, for there are many factors at work: a person's temperament, background, attitude, lifestyle, environment, mental/emotional stability, and time constraints.

"Leave your front door and your back door open. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Just don't serve them tea." ~ Shunryu Suzuki

It's important to understand and accept that every time you sit to meditate, the experience is different. One day your session may be highly productive, the next day sleepy and unrewarding. One day you feel like you could meditate uninterrupted for hours, other times you have problems sitting for a few minutes. Regarding this, it's essential that your meditation practice be devoid of all judgment and concern. You must accept that each meditation session is new and unique from all others and that within each new meditation session, you must simply sit and explore the current condition of the mind without any wish for it to be different. Whether this session is anxious or sleepy is OK, you accept it and explore it, understanding that there are no good or bad sessions. With every mental state you explore, either productive or unproductive, you learn more about yourself. It's through this exploration of your mind and habits that you find antidotes to obstacles in your practice. Therefore, although some meditation sessions may be more challenging to work with, you should see them all as useful sessions.

Experiences arising from meditation

As you become proficient at meditation, various experiences can arise, experiences of intense wellbeing or bliss, experiences of both cognitive and sensory lucidity, experiences of no-thought or non-conceptuality, and even experiences of selflessness/egolessness. However, you must never become attached to experiences either by trying to recreate them from previous sessions or by continuously using a technique for attaining a specific experience. There can never be any kind of creating, projecting, grasping, or anticipation of specific results when meditating. It's for this very reason, that traditionally, experiences that arise from meditation are not shared with the novice. Meditation needs to be open, objective, and organic; with no striving, agenda, or preconceptions. Meditation must be fresh and new every time you sit down, and besides applying the basic meditation technique, you should sit as an open observer without trying to influence the meditation experience in any way.

Stillness/presence/emptiness

One resultant aspect of meditation is the discovery/realization of *stillness*. Stillness, also termed presence, emptiness, or '*the now*', can be understood as, the underlying peace, contentment, and wellbeing that is present within every moment. Stillness is a shift in perception that recognizes the inherent space that underlies our daily reality. It's reality prior to interpretation and judgment; the acceptance of the present moment just as it is. Stillness is the calm that is always present beneath your anxieties; the spaciousness that is always present beneath your busyness; the equanimity that is always present beneath your contention.

Experientially, to abide in stillness is to abide as the *observing witness* to the unfolding of the present moment; shifting your awareness from the *doing* mind to the *observing* mind. Best of all, stillness is one of the most pleasant, restorative, and therapeutic mental states that can be experienced. A state of mind that is available to everyone, in every moment.

Signs of success in your meditation practice

In the beginning, the measurement of success can be simply feeling more calm, stable, patient, and content. At higher levels, success can be seen as:

1. The attainment of *the mind of renunciation* (the resolute wish for liberation/freedom)
2. The development of deep inspiration, faith, and appetite for practice
3. Realizing the futility of mundane goals and self-occupied interests
4. Becoming less reactionary while recovering more quickly from negative mental states
5. Becoming more mentally and emotionally stable (more mature)
6. Seeing your negative emotions being transformed into their positive counterparts
7. Seeing that you are beginning to experience bliss and equanimity, not only when meditating, but throughout your day as well

Advice on Meditation

When first beginning to meditate, it is often hard for practitioners to sit and/or focus for any prolonged length of time. Therefore, the aim should be to slowly habituate yourself and get comfortable with this new practice of meditation. This is accomplished by engaging in short, frequent sections of five to ten minutes throughout the day. If it becomes tiresome, stop and feel good about the amount you've done. By keeping the practice short, light, and pleasurable, your meditation practice will become something you look forward to and learn to deeply enjoy. If you want to experience real benefits, it's important to develop a consistent practice, a least two sitting sessions daily, once in the morning and again in the early evening. Missing even one session can significantly set back any progress. For beginners, there is not much benefit to meditating more than twenty-minutes or so in a single session. It's said the best time for meditating is in the morning when the mind is clear and alert and the stomach is empty, making the mind lighter. But it's important to discover what works best for you. For myself, I'm a night owl and find early evening the most powerful time for my meditation.

"From meditation springs understanding, a wisdom that lifts us out of the mundane. Thus, knowing these two paths— the path of insight and improvement; and the path of ignorance and complacency—the wise choose to progress, to expand, to work towards becoming whole."

~ *The Buddha (An adaptation of verse 282 of the Dhammapada)*

All productive meditation begins with a proper intention and clearly defined aim

It's true; your mental disposition is the most important aspect to fruitful meditation. Therefore, generating a positive, alert, and appreciative attitude, while being crystal clear about your aim, is the first and most crucial aspect of each session. This is something that all meditation teachers know—that positive, open-minded, meditators who are clear in their aim, flourish in their practice; while more uptight, negative, or ill-tempered meditators, who lose sight of their aim, struggle for progress. Generating the proper mental disposition for meditation is easily accomplished by starting each session reciting and reflecting on specific aspirations and/or prayers (this aspiration is shared later in this text). Another tip is to smile while meditating. It doesn't matter if it is genuine, just applying the gesture will begin to influence your mood and meditation.

"Breathing in, I calm my body and mind. Breathing out, I smile.

Dwelling in the present moment I know this is the only moment." ~ Thich Nhat Hanh

Seeing meditation as a well-deserved timeout

Instead of seeing meditation as one more healthy chore on your long list of things to do, see it as a short timeout from your busy day. A chance to gather your thoughts and energy and revitalize yourself (even if it's for a few minutes), allowing for multiple fresh starts throughout your day.

Keep your practice personal

Always keep in mind that meditation is a personal practice that needs to be approached with a gentle, caring, and therapeutic attitude for any real progress to occur. This is your mind and your practice; it is vital at some point that you cultivate your own unique style and method of meditation based on many hours of personal experience and evaluation on the cushion. As our minds are unique to each one of us, so too must your practice and technique be.

"Meditation should be approached as an art form, the art of 'being'." ~ Tenzin Tharpa

Just let go

Probably the best advice pertaining to meditation is to, *'just let go'*, to let go of busyness, agenda, ambition, judgment, doubt, desires, etc. This includes the constant thirst for stimulation, excitement, and new experience. I remember hearing this adage when I first started meditating and now over two decades later, it remains the most concise, comprehensive, and penetrating advice for meditation practice I have ever come across.

How to maintain a consistent meditation practice.

Consistent daily practice is often the secret to success, bringing great stability to one's life. However, for some, it may feel constrictive. My advice for those who feel this way is to not follow meditation instruction rigidly, for every mind is profoundly unique. Try to approach your meditation with an explorative and fun attitude and don't be afraid to try new ideas and techniques.

Problems holding a consistent practice can also arise from how you view your practice. Instead of seeing your practice as a chore, see it as an oasis of peace, clarity, and stillness away from the chaos and concerns of daily life. Your own personal space known only to you.

Lastly, if you find meditation particularly difficult, this could mean two things. On the one hand, it could be a sign that you need a meditation practice. That for your health, and mental and emotional stability, your busy mind needs to learn how to calm down. That you need to cultivate some distance from the worries and complexities that prohibit you from sitting still for a handful of minutes. Conversely, sometimes when practitioners have difficulty establishing a consistent meditation practice, it's because their minds might not be ready. Often after working with the mind through other practices and/or study, practitioners are then more successful at keeping a consistent practice. It's important to know that meditation is not a requirement in

improving wellbeing. In fact, there are a vast array of practices to choose from, including mindfulness, study, mind training, contemplation, and non-seated forms of meditation (walking or standing meditation).

How to incorporate meditation into your daily life

- Make meditate the first thing you do every morning - even before getting out of bed, while your covers are still toasty warm, sit up and meditate.
- Meditate before each meal - a three-breath meditation, or five to ten-minute
- Meditate in the four positions everyday
 - 1) Sitting meditation - your regular seated meditation practice
 - 2) Standing meditation - when waiting in line or enjoying some sunshine
 - 3) Walking meditation - wherever your day takes you
 - 4) Laying meditation - every night when laying down to sleep, after saying your evening prayers. If practicing insight meditation, an excellent object of meditation is the days successes and projected successes for tomorrow, which creates a positive mental state aiding in a good night’s sleep.

Obstacles and antidotes to meditation

Traditionally, Buddhism asserts five faults and eight antidotes to those faults.

THE FIVE FAULTS	THE EIGHT ANTIDOTES
1. Laziness - sleepy, or slothful; busyness in useless activities; dwelling in discouragement	1. Confidence and faith in the benefits of meditation 2. A positive aspiration towards one's meditative goals 3. A joyful effort towards one's meditation practice 4. The wish to achieve pliancy and flexibility
2. Forgetting the instructions Losing the object of meditation	5. Being mindful and keeping the mind focused
3. Excitement and laxity	6. Introspective awareness—watching the mind
4. Non-application of the antidote	7. Apply the antidote at the proper moment
5. Over-application of the antidote	8. Abiding in a natural open equanimity

Note: According to Buddhism, meditation, mindfulness, stillness, and/or present moment awareness are not complete paths. Meaning, full awakening is not possible through them alone. Instead, meditation and mindfulness are tools used for cultivating insight and wisdom, which become the actual cause for awakening. For Buddhists, this insight and wisdom is specific, pertaining to the direct experiential realization of the Buddha’s teachings and/or the true nature of oneself and reality.

My Basic Meditation Technique

- 1) Establish a peaceful place and a comfortable seat, cushion, or chair
- 2) Sit comfortably, breathe, and begin to calm and soften the breath and mind
- 3) Establish and clarify your intentions and aim by reciting the below meditation aspiration

Meditation aspiration

With a deep appreciation for this precious life and a resolve not to waste it,
I now engage in meditation.

With a deep conviction in the vast benefits and importance of this practice,
I now engage in meditation.

With the wish to develop myself and uncover my full potential,
I now engage in meditation.

With the wish to gain mastery over my mind and emotions,
I now engage in meditation.

With the wish to free myself from ignorance, delusions, and afflictions,
I now engage in meditation.

With the wish to bring peace, contentment, and genuine happiness to my life,
I now engage in meditation.

With a mature resolve to persevere in spite of any obstacles that might arise,
I now engage in meditation.

~ Tenzin Tharpa

- 4) Look straight up at the ceiling and take three long deep breaths - this opens, stretches, and aligns the body.
- 5) Establish the proper posture and attitude by following this meditation checklist.
Recite and contemplate the following checklist, which lays the foundation for proper meditation practice. This checklist may then be repeated throughout the meditation session as needed to correct/restore proper alignment of the mind and body.

Meditation checklist

- 1) Posture - A comfortable alert posture as if being drawn up by a string from the head
- 2) Hips - Rock the hips forward to accentuate the gentle inward curve of the lower back
- 3) Joy - Cultivate appreciation for the present moment and the opportunity to practice
- 4) Acceptance - Sit as an open observer, without striving, judgment, or concern
- 5) Calmness - Slow the breath and mind establishing an effortless contentment
- 6) Awareness - Be present while establishing a clear, alert, and bright mental state
- 7) Switch on - Focus on the breath, switch on, and let go. When ready, silently say the word '*meditation*' to engage/re-engage the meditation session

~ Tenzin Tharpa

- 6) Begin Calm Abiding Meditation - applying the meditation toolbox
- 7) Begin Insight Meditation - once your calm abiding meditation has become stable, you may then wish to engage in Insight Meditation by introducing an object of contemplation.
- 8) Dedicating your meditation session - at the completion of each meditation sessions, you can dedicate your practice in order to cultivate an open and altruistic mind. While reflecting on the peace and stability gained through your practice recite,

Meditation dedication

As I arise from my meditation I feel joy that I have fulfilled my ongoing wish to develop myself.
May I sustain throughout the day the meditative equanimity that I have cultivated.
May my own peace, stability, and contentment extend to and nurture others.
May all beings benefit from any merit I may have gained.

~ Tenzin Tharpa

Q and A

Questions, answers, and comments by practitioners

Q: *When trying to meditate, my mind is so busy I'm not able to keep my focus on my breath. What advice do you have for a beginner like me?*

A: This is exactly what meditation is out to remedy. Don't despair, you're not alone, focused concentration is a challenge for all meditators. Try using mantra meditation which helps to stabilize focus or breathing stronger. Also, try shortening your sessions—doing multiple 5 to 10-minute sitting throughout the day. Like all skills, it takes a bit of committed practice to improve.

Q: *What can I do to hold off drowsiness during meditation?*

A: Lethargy or sleepiness is common for many meditators. Breathing stronger can help to keep the mind focused and more alert; opening the eyes, half or fully, works well; drink some coffee or tea, take a shower, or do some yoga/exercise before meditation; meditate on an empty stomach; switch to active insight meditation; envision a bright ball or light; meditate in a bright environment or outside; do shorter, 5 to 10-minute sittings throughout the day; alternate sitting meditation with walking or standing meditation; try getting more sleep or incorporate afternoon naps.

Q: *I feel very anxious when meditating and have trouble sitting for more than a few minutes. What can I do?*

A: Utilize mantra meditation which helps to reduce anxiety. Shorten your sessions—doing multiple 5 to 10-minute sittings throughout the day; bring joy and acceptance into your

practice—accept that you are anxious and that it is OK, then try to relax into that acceptance; drink some calming tea; find a calming environment to sit.

Q: *I have a very busy family life full of kids and distractions. How can I find the time, peace, and quiet to practice?*

A: You must be positive and imaginative. Often the best solution is finding a place outside of the house to meditate, meditation groups, a library, park bench, friends' homes, etc. Schedule daily 'you time' that everyone knows about and respects. Do short 5-10-minute sittings throughout the day. Also, see if you can make meditation a family practice—I recommend meditating as a family at the kitchen table for five minutes before each meal. Where there's a will—there's a way.

Q: *I have trouble maintaining a consistent practice.*

A: This is more challenging for some than others. The problem can pertain to how you perceive your practice. Instead of seeing your practice as one more healthy chore on your long list of things to do, see it as a short timeout from your busy day. A chance to gather your thoughts and energy and revitalize yourself (even if it's for a few minutes), allowing for multiple fresh starts throughout your day. In Buddhism, improvement is created through a threefold method of study-contemplation-meditation, with all three being indispensable; so, the importance of meditation should be properly understood within this threefold structure.

Q: *I've been meditating for a considerable amount of time and have not seen results.*

A: Often, day-to-day improvement and benefits aren't always obvious. Some results develop so slowly you might not notice them (calmness, resilience, reduced reactivity, etc.). For those who believe that they are not making sufficient progress, I recommend focusing on and combining the *Three Great Objectives*—study, contemplation, and meditation; and also, the *Three Excellences*—setting the proper intention, abiding within the proper mental state, and dedicating your practice. Make sure you're employing the *meditation checklist* during your sessions. There is an adage that says,

“To get the most out of meditation, you have to fall in love with meditation.”

I find this true; for when I am enthusiastic about my meditation practice (studying, investigating, trying different techniques, doing retreats) my practice flourishes. Also, keep your practice personal. This is your mind and your practice. Always approach your meditation with a gentle, caring, and therapeutic attitude. Lastly, explore other non-seated forms of meditation, walking or standing meditation, and mindfulness practices.

- Q:** I experience a fair amount of pain in my body (knees, back, hips, etc.) when I meditate. Should I push through the pain?
- A:** No. You should never push through pain or torment yourself by setting unrealistic practice goals, which will only create an aversion to meditating. Be patient and shorten your meditation sessions, your body and mind will slowly become more supple as they get accustomed to meditating. Challenging yourself to sit a bit longer while moving less is always productive, however, it should always be approached gently and caringly and only when you've had a fair amount of experience on the cushion.
- Q:** *I want to cultivate my mind and improve my practice, but I just never remember to practice. Any tips?*
- A:** This is one of the most reoccurring questions I'm asked. I guess the act of remembering is the first part of practice to cultivate. First, accept it, *yes, I'm forgetful*, and then get creative. Set alerts on your phone; tape notes up around the house; schedule your practice around other events, like meditating at the kitchen table for five minutes before each meal; find a meditation partner or group; or buy a parrot and teach it to say, '*Time to practice*'.
- Q:** *During my first week of meditation, I experienced mystical visions and felt my body's energy as I never had before. Have I reached enlightened?*
- A:** Initially, when first starting to meditate, the mind is thrown into a bit of chaos, the mind feels starved of experience, because it is accustomed to a constant stream of stimuli. This often leaves the meditator sitting impatiently waiting for *something* to happen. Because of this, the mind begins creating its own experiences, generating images, sensory experiences, strong emotions, and of course a diverse assortment of thoughts. Distractions are also generated in the body—felt as itching, discomfort, or pain. Generally, these should be seen as inconsequential, for once you have established a stable practice, and the mind and body finally become comfortable (tamed), these distractions lessen and a base for actual meditative experiences is created.
- Q:** *When I sit in meditation, I sometimes feel fear, negativity, and/or overwhelming emotions. Am I doing something wrong?*
- A:** Not at all. In meditation, we don't choose what arises. Instead, we sit with the breath and observe the present moment while trying to stay present with whatever arises. Meditation often amplifies whatever mood we bring to it; but then again, even ordinarily happy people have negativity arise in their meditation for no apparent reason. Meditation can sometimes work as a mirror or magnifying glass, uncovering insights into ourselves while also drawing out many of our insecurities. The first thing to do is to accept those feelings (if they're not too painful). Understand that although you might not like the experience, they are normal thoughts, emotions, and

experiences that we all share. Recognize that within your meditation you have a chance to work with those insecurities in a safe environment.

The secret is to go slowly. If the sensation is too strong, back out a little or maybe switch to a positive subject within insight meditation. Remember to always work with what arises in a gentle, nurturing, and therapeutic way. Accept that answers are not always readily available and sometimes we have to sit patiently for insights to come. Learn how to embrace and be comfortable within the mystery. Try focusing deeper on the breath or use the mantra. For if you can become *fully* present—deeply immersed in the present moment—you're liberated from past and future, and the emotions and negativities that may arise from them. Lastly, try switching to Loving-kindness Meditation when fear or negativity becomes overwhelming.

Q: *When I meditate for long periods of time (in retreat) I have trouble sleeping. Is this common?*

A: Yes, this is common in intense meditation retreats. However, within our day to day practice, meditation has been shown to be very effective in dealing with sleep disorders. Within intense meditation retreats, where practitioners may be meditating between eight to twelve hours a day, it is common to need less sleep. The fact is you are getting so much quality rest from your meditation practice your mind and body simply don't require a lot of sleep. So, if you can't sleep and laying there staring at the ceiling is driving you crazy, try this technique.

What is usually maddening here, is not your inability to sleep, but your inability to achieve your aim of falling asleep. So, eliminate the aim. Don't try to sleep. Instead shift your aim to resting. Occasionally apply the note or mantra '*resting*' which gives you permission to simply lay and rest. Hopefully you can adjust your mindset to actually enjoy this free leisure time. Accept the fact that although sleep may be favorable, mindful resting can also be rejuvenating if the underlying anxieties are removed.

----- Important Notes -----

- If difficulties in your practice persist, it's always a good idea to seek additional one-on-one advice from a qualified teacher.
- Meditation, mindfulness, and Buddhism were not intended as medical therapy. For those who suffer from mental, social, and/or emotional disorders, it's always best to work with a therapist or specialized teacher in the field. Currently, there are a growing number of therapists and specialized teachers that can instruct patients in meditation, mindfulness, and Buddhist practices.

- Lastly, if for any reason you feel vulnerable, unstable, or just a bit down, reach out to others. Be it family, friends, or professional caregivers, there are so many wonderful people in this world who wish to help others.